

Andrea Sangiacomo

An introduction to friendliness (*mettā*)

Emotional intelligence and freedom in the Pāli discourses of the Buddha

University of Groningen Press

An introduction to friendliness (*mettā*)

Andrea Sangiacomo

An introduction to friendliness (*mettā*)

Emotional intelligence and freedom in the Pāli discourses of the Buddha

University of Groningen Press

Published by University of Groningen Press
Broerstraat 4
9712 CP Groningen
The Netherlands
http://www.rug.nl/library/ugp/

© 2022 Andrea Sangiacomo

second edition 2023

Typesetting: LINE UP boek en media bv | Mirjam Kroondijk

ISBN (Print): 978-94-034-2943-4
ISBN (ePDF): 978-94-034-2941-0
ISBN (ePUB): 978-94-034-2942-7

DOI: 10.21827/618a51bdd6187



An introduction to friendliness (mettā). Emotional intelligence and freedom in the Pāli discourses of the Buddha by Andrea Sangiacomo is licensed under Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International. To view a copy of this license, visit http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/.

Admirable friendship, admirable companionship, admirable camaraderie is actually the whole of the training. When a mendicant has admirable friends, companions, and comrades, he can be expected to develop and cultivate the outstanding eightfold path.

SN 45.2

Foreword

Chiavari, Winter 2021

Friendliness (*mettā* in Pāli) is an emotional and intentional attitude of goodwill and non-aversion towards all sentient beings, including oneself.[1] It is rooted in both feeling and understanding. In the Pāli discourses of the Buddha, friendliness is repeatedly stressed and encouraged for its numerous benefits. It supports and develops a form of emotional intelligence and provides an ideal pathway to explore deeper aspects of one's experience and their philosophical implications.

Friendliness is best understood not in isolation, but rather in the broader context of the Buddha's teachings. In that context, it plays an essential role as a catalyst for the unfolding of the whole Buddhist path. Friendliness, then, can be a particularly interesting thread to follow in order to unpack the

1 The Pāli term *mettā* is often rendered as 'loving-kindness.' Etymologically, the word *mettā* is connected with *mitta*, which means 'friend' and hence the rendering with 'friendliness' seems more appropriate.

meaning and practical implications of the core teachings conveyed in the discourses. This introduction can function both as an entry point to explore the role of friendliness in the landscape of the discourses, and how that same landscape unfolds from the perspective disclosed by friendliness.

Friendliness is approached here in order of progressive refinement, by tackling it from the perspective of seven related topics. Each topic addresses how to develop skills that support friendliness, and then complements this practice with a philosophical reflection on the meaningfulness of these methods, and their potential for fostering one's understanding of experience in general. For each topic, excerpts and selected readings from the discourses are provided to offer further background, support reflection, and inspire practice. All translations of the discourses are original. These translations aim to strike a balance between faithfulness to the original Pāli versions, readability, and a degree of experimentation with making these ancient texts alive and more immediately perspicuous for one's practice. Pāli keywords and concepts are often included in brackets within the translations,[2] in order to ease comparison with other renderings or refer directly to the original versions, and sometimes to make more apparent the subtle way in which the discourses play with language and semantic variations. Comments in the footnotes discuss rationales for the translations, provide cross-references to other discourses, and introduce more details about specific passages, as needed.

The way friendliness is treated in this introduction aims at intertwining three methodological desiderata: (1) the need to build (to some degree at least) a meditative practice in order to gain a closer and more direct acquaintance with what the discourses of the Buddha talk about; (2) the need to integrate meditative experience and techniques with philosophical investigation in order to gain a deeper understanding of what they can teach about the nature

2 When Pāli terms are imported and integrated into the English prose (as is often the case for proper names), they are spelled without diacritic signs as regular English words.

of experience, and how they can contribute to construct that same experience; and (3) the need to engage with the letter and meaning of the discourses themselves, without necessarily having to depend on standard or traditional interpretations.

These three threads are often disconnected. Friendliness is most often approached from a purely practical point of view, or in the context of self-help guides. Sometimes it becomes the subject of more historical and exegetical studies about the early strata of the Buddhist tradition. It is difficult to single out any recent extensive attempt at exploring friendliness with a philosophical interest in what it can reveal about the structure of experience. Recently, meditation and contemplative practices received more attention from philosophers, and especially cognitive scientists, although this interest is mostly mediated by contemporary meditative approaches and rarely based on a sustained investigation of the earliest Buddhist sources.[3] Addressing these three desiderata together in a systematic way is one of the most innovative aspects of this introduction.

The philosophical component at stake here is not evoked in order to import into the discussion any Western view about what philosophy is or how it works. In the present context, 'philosophy' is a way of referring to the importance of sustained reflection on the meaning, scope, grounds and consequences of any experience (including the experience of friendliness cultivated in meditation) for the purpose of reaching a deeper understanding of

3 Among those who tried to use philosophical analysis (especially inspired by Western existentialism and phenomenology) as a tool to clear the Buddha's path of practice, Ven. Ñāṇavīra Thera (1920-1965), was perhaps the most profound. See his *Clearing the Path (1960-1965).* Path Press Publications, 2010. For a more contemporary example of how this dialogue can be developed, see Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind. Cognitive Science and Human Experience.* Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press, 2016 (Revised edition, first ed. 1991). For a discussion about limits and problems of contemporary Western attempts at integrating Buddhist meditation and philosophical discourse on the nature of cognition, see Evan Thompson, *Why I Am Not a Buddhist.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020. For a broader discussion on philosophy and meditation, see also the essays in Rick Repetti (ed.), *Routledge Handbook on the Philosophy of Meditation.* London and New York: Routledge, 2022, especially chapters 6 (by Peter Harvey) and 10 (by Christopher Gowans).

it. Conceived in this way, philosophical engagement takes central stage in this introduction to friendliness; in turn, it shows how friendliness naturally supports and encourages this sort of philosophical engagement. It might not take too much effort to appreciate to what extent philosophy (in this sense) is also central in the discourses themselves.

In the discourses, what today is called 'meditation' is envisaged as the 'development of the understanding' (*citta bhāvanā*). This clearly entails two aspects: understanding and development. Without development (which includes training, application, and perseverance), the understanding cannot grow. But without understanding, there would be nothing to develop. While trying to combine both aspects in a potentially virtuous circle, the approach taken here emphasizes the need for starting meditation from the point of view of a certain understanding of experience, for the sake of developing this understanding further and making it deeper.

Combining a focus on meditation practice, philosophical reflection, and textual analysis is challenging. Someone might even think that it is an impossible task, and this is the reason why such an approach has been hardly developed so far. Exceptions aside, today's Western philosophy is strongly focused on semantics and logical argumentation, and its practice is mostly about reading texts and reacting to them (commonly by writing other texts), with an emphasis on analyzing what, why, and how texts express certain ideas in linguistic form. It might be pointed out that, throughout the history of Western thought, several canonical figures (Augustine, Descartes, Malebranche, and Husserl, just to name a few) did engage with, and write (types of) meditations. However, a skeptical interlocutor would quickly point out that these Western meditations were in fact nothing but verbalized reflections, often directly concerned with theological or metaphysical topics. It takes little to show that Buddhist meditation (especially in its early form) does not ascribe any privileged role to language or verbalization (albeit it does

not exclude it either), and arguably has little to say about theology and metaphysics.

If one considers the idea of combining meditation practice, philosophy, *and* the reading of ancient texts, the challenge becomes even greater. One would expect that ancient texts need to be studied in their original context (or, at least, with respect to *some* historical context), which requires again a good deal of linguistic analysis and philological care. Moreover, a historical approach should be fair to the texts themselves, demonstrating what they meant for a specific audience who engaged with them at a certain time (be that close to or remote from the root texts themselves). A purely philosophical approach seems to dispense with this attention for context and rather aims at engaging with some form of decontextualized 'core' that texts would convey regardless of who their audience is. Meditation practice, in itself, seems yet another business, ultimately unconcerned with both historical and philosophical issues and the textual battles that surround them.

These difficulties are real, but this introduction aims to show that they can be met in a way that proves to be fruitful for all parties involved. To begin, the opposition between meditation and philosophy has to be contextualized in today's cultural pressures and dynamics, where science (especially hard science) is regarded as the almost unchallenged standard and pinnacle of knowledge in current Western culture.

On the one hand, Buddhist meditation (especially in its modern declensions) has been presented akin to a scientific investigation of the human mind, which nonetheless would entail a shutting down of thinking processes, and thus leave no space for philosophical reflection. Since the second half of the twentieth century at least, the attempt to popularize practices derived from Asian traditions has rebranded them as natural allies of more scientifically oriented academic fields (both akin and competitors of academic philosophy), such as psychology, cognitive science, and neurosciences, by also

downplaying anything that is presented as spurious or unnecessary (including philosophical speculation).

On the other hand, professional philosophy embraced scientific practices as much as possible. This trend might be traced back to the late nineteenth century, when some German and British philosophers initiated the so-called 'analytic philosophy.' In looking for a standard of clarity and rigor to bring to philosophical research and discussion, analytic philosophers (as many others before them) often looked upon the sciences for inspiration. Today, academic philosophy has normalized this approach, from the acceptance of general 'scientific standards' used to assess research and performance to a struggle for argumentative and methodological rigor, openness to more empirical investigations, and a keen interest in topics connected with scientific fields or practices.

Today, two non-scientific alternative ways of engaging with experience (Buddhist meditation and philosophy) seem to interpret and present their own practice in such a way as to seek legitimization and recognition based on the criteria provided by what is perceived as the accepted authority in current Western society, namely, science itself. In doing so, they sometimes compete with one another, in a more or less antagonistic way. From this perspective, the opposition between philosophy and meditation is shaped by historical circumstances and dynamics relatively recent in Western culture, but surely not essentially rooted in the nature of either philosophy or meditation, as such.[4]

4 Western scientific debates on meditation did not reach a unanimous definition of what 'meditation' is. Current research tends to consider 'open monitoring' (paying attention, in a non-judgmental way, to any cognitive phenomenon as it arises) and 'focused attention' (deliberately sustaining attention on a chosen object for a prolonged period of time) as the two main ingredients of meditation (see further discussion in Antoine Lutz, Amishi P. Jha, John D. Dunne, and Clifford D. Saron, 'Investigating the phenomenological matrix of mindfulness-related practices from a neurocognitive perspective,' *American Psychologist,* 70 no. 7 (2015): 632–658. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0039585). Karing Matko and Peter Sedlmeier, 'What is Meditation? Proposing and Empirically Derived Classification System,' *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, October 2019, article 2276, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02276, have provided an empirical classification of twenty major meditation techniques practiced by various traditions (including Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity). Based

Second, it is true that history and philosophy have been often regarded as somehow different, if not at odds with one another. Giambattista Vico, in his *New Science* (1744), already noted that philosophy and philology (which would overlap with history) have been kept apart for too long, with unwelcome results, and he made a plea for their harmonious reunion. Nonetheless, the problem seems to stick to current academic practices despite the more or less successful development of a whole field of history of philosophy. Without pretending to do justice to this issue here, it might be observed that today it should be uncontroversial that Vico was right that one cannot engage in either of the two activities without somehow also drawing from the other. Philosophy ignorant of history and philology is severely limited in its hermeneutic abilities, and often has to rely on rather awkward and inventive devices of dubious efficacy. History and philology, nevertheless, cannot entirely dispense with philosophical inspiration, since without that they would not be able to make sense of the reasons, motivations, implications, conceptual problems, and potential solutions that their texts and audiences felt relevant (or not). Hence, they would be again unable to really understand what their objects of study are concerned with or what motivates them. Remaining within the limits of the uncontroversial, the solution should be simply that of finding different ways to combine *both* philosophical reflection and historical analysis. Surely, one can decide to give more prominence to one or the other and fine-tune all sorts of different mixtures of the two (in fact, of the two spectra covered by them) depending on one's ambitions and goals. In any case, it is the opposition between historical and philosophical approaches that

on their empirical research, they concluded that 'open monitoring' and 'focused attention' do not neatly capture the variety of meditation practices, nor do they provide a fully satisfying understanding of what meditators value as most essential. They also observed that 'it appears shortsighted to define meditation based on purely cognitive or attentional dimensions. We suggest that all meditation techniques have a somatic component and meditation is inherently embodied.'

should be regarded with suspicion, surely more than any attempt to combine them.[5]

Based on these considerations, it is possible to justify the methodological approach taken in this introduction as aimed at recovering the alliance between meditation practice and philosophical reflection, by rooting this attempt in a direct reading of ancient Buddhist texts. Since the emphasis here is on philosophy rather than on historical reconstruction, any explicit engagement with the context of the discourses themselves will remain marginal. This, however, is not a mark of absence or neglect, but simply a way not to overload the reader with too much information. From today's point of view, studying the Pāli discourses in their historical context is hardly a novel enterprise, and the primal goal of this introduction is not that of providing new historical materials. By taking stock of current historical knowledge about the discourses, their context, and their reception within subsequent traditions, this introduction emphasizes their philosophical cogency and interest, which is something that has been rarely appreciated.

New perspectives might arise from this approach. First, it might be possible to reconsider those Western authors who wrote meditations, and then investigate more seriously in what sense they actually practiced a form of mediation as well as how their practice could relate to other forms of meditation, like the one described in the discourses. Second, if meditative practice and philosophy were deeply integrated with one another in the ancient Buddhist texts, as described in this introduction, then one might want to reconsider whether they could ever be dissociated in later Buddhist debates. If such a dissociation happened, then one will have to understand why this happened. However, insofar as meditation practice remained foundational for

5 For an excellent reconstruction of this methodological problem and a plea for a 'middle way' that combines philosophical concerns for truth with a historical quest for uncovering its context, see Frederick Beiser, 'History of Ideas: A Defense.' In Herman Cappelen, Tamar Szabó Gendler, and John Hawthorne (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Methodology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, 505-524, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199668779.013.29.

Buddhist philosophy, this would also urge today's philosophers, who are keen to engage with Buddhist thinkers, to take more seriously into account meditation practice as a genuine and integral part of Buddhist philosophy proper. No matter how interesting these perspectives might be, exploring them falls entirely outside the scope of the present work. They are left to the reader as potential avenues for further enquiries.

Although deepening the philosophical dimension of friendliness is central to this book, the approach used for engaging with it does not follow the dialectical style most common in today's academic philosophy. Typically, this involves presenting one interpretation or view against others in order to establish a degree of novelty, originality, or preferability that the defended view might have. While useful in certain contexts, this approach does not seem needed here, where the purpose is rather that of introducing the practice of friendliness itself, and some basic texts that underpin it, to a reader who might be philosophically inclined, but not necessarily interested in studying friendliness from a dialectical point of view. Here, there is neither an attempt nor interest in defending this approach to practice and the philosophical interpretation resulting from it against other approaches or interpretations, or claiming that this might be better, truer, or newer than others. In fact, it is not clear how establishing any of these qualifications could make the reflective practice of friendliness any better, and hence these and similar concerns are left aside.

This introduction does not assume or presuppose any preliminary background knowledge about ancient Buddhist thought or practice. For this reason, prominence is given to how to start a practice and reflect on its experience, while gaining some familiarity with root texts in the early Buddhist tradition. Engaging with these texts can in turn contribute to make both practice and understanding sharper and deeper. However, this introduction (unlike popularization works) does not attempt to translate in any simpler terms some ideas, concepts, and practices that are conceived by specialists in

a more technical and purer way. There is no monopoly of the practice of friendliness by any specialists of it, hence no need to translate this specialist approach in more layman terms. More importantly, there is no amount of simplification that can make dispensable a sustained and direct engagement with practice and reflection. The practice is the same for everybody. What changes is only the degree of commitment that one decides to invest in it and the degree of understanding that one is able to develop on this basis.

More generally, in terms of envisaged audience, this book is addressed to people who have some interest in exploring how a meditation practice could unfold in the context of the Pāli discourses of the Buddha, and who also have an interest in deepening the broader meaning and philosophical implications that this practice can have. This includes a relatively wide range of people, from university students to meditation practitioners. Readers might not have any direct familiarity with meditation practice yet, nor with the study of philosophy as such, or they might already have some. In either case, this introduction delineates not only how practice can be guided by a direct reading of the discourses, but also how it can be used to philosophically reflect and deepen the way in which one interprets one's experience, by cultivating a clearer, more lucid, more serene, and more friendly knowledge of it.

Ideally, one would learn meditation from an experienced meditator, who can act as a 'good friend' (as the discourses would say), in providing guidance, helping to discuss details of the practice in a tailored way, sharing experience and understanding. Even in this scenario, some degree of self-study might be beneficial, and this introduction provides materials for fostering this aspect. However, in less ideal scenarios, one might also compensate for the lack of available experienced 'friends' by fostering one's own responsibility and commitment to seriously trying to figure out what this practice is about and how best it could be undertaken. Once again, this introduction provides information, suggestions, and challenges for supporting such a commitment.

In its basic form, friendliness is the ability of understanding any painful or unpleasant aspect of experience as a mark of vulnerability and fragility, which demands care, listening, and the ability to stay with it as a good friend would do with someone asking for help. Friendliness has the intelligence to see that the opposite attitudes (aversion or the desire for being distracted from the unpleasant) actually contribute to produce, increase, amplify, and sustain all forms of unpleasantness. Hence, friendliness points to a way for escaping from any unpleasantness (any problem) by learning how to stay with it, without having to run away.[6]

This introduction has been written for the sake of helping to teach friendliness. Friendliness can have revolutionary potential when considered from the point of view of how education is ordinarily approached. In its various forms and shapes, teaching and educating often endorse two dogmas. The first dogma is that aversion to the unpleasant can create a desire for improving oneself and one's performance. The second dogma is that in order to learn, one needs to imitate some model. The first dogma is just a corollary of the even more profound and pervasive belief that unpleasantness should be avoided and whatever is pleasant should be pursued. In a teaching context, this usually takes the form of creating some sort of punishment (it can be a physical punishment, it can be social shame, and it can be a low grade), the perspective of which will be understood by learners as unpleasant; and this might be complemented by various forms of pleasant rewards. In order to avoid punishments and seek rewards instead, learners will strive to do better, to do more, and to do otherwise. Aversion to the unpleasant creates the craving for something more pleasant.

6 In Buddhist circles, especially if inspired by later Mahāyāna traditions, it might be more common a reference to *compassion* (Pāli *karuṇā*) rather than friendliness. In the early discourses, the difference between the two is not sharp, but it is more a matter of emphasis. One way of spelling it out is by taking friendliness as a general sensitivity to the *possibility* of suffering (vulnerability is a *potential* to be harmed, a form of structural fragility), regardless of whether one is actually suffering or not in this moment. Compassion, instead, is a way of facing and confronting an instance of actual suffering and its explicit manifestation.

However, this way of interpreting experience is based on a fundamental blindness to the fact that one of the main reasons why people might fail to produce good results, to fully engage with a matter, to learn it well, or to become skillful in a task, is usually because of forms of aversion (including lack of interest, boredom, annoyance, and harsh self-criticism) or craving (including ambition, competitiveness, and desire for recognition). One cannot learn much when one hates the subject, but also when one is so attached to and thirsty for it that it becomes an extremely personal affair, surrounded by rigidity and defensiveness.

The second dogma is also based on the ordinary way in which human beings often work and learn, namely, by imitating others. In some cases, this is fine and even needed. But when imitation becomes the main method of teaching, it not only creates a basic sense of uncertainty (because whether and to what extent one's performance matches the model will always be a matter of interpretation, and all interpretations are uncertain to some degree), but it also reinforces and fosters the same forms of aversion (towards one's current condition) and craving (towards identifying and embodying better and better the model provided), which is doomed to always remain unfulfilled to some degree.

Friendliness dispenses the education process from the need to rely on the dynamics of aversion and craving. It also allows for the use of models as nothing more than points of reference, without charging them with any further normative and emotional aspect. Cultivating friendliness does not directly lead to mastering particular tasks or competencies, but it does remove the main stumbling blocks that will prevent any task or competency from being fully understood, learnt and practiced. Friendliness trusts the ability of each one to be able to do good as soon as the main hindrances to this ability have been subdued. For this reason, teaching friendliness is not just a topic among others, but it might become the beginning of a revolution in the way of teaching any subject and skill. Success arises not from a desperate

struggle but as result of a natural flourishing of what human beings can do when they are not harassed by the forces of aversion and craving, nor entangled in the ignorance about how this whole process works.

The ultimate purpose of this book is not that of introducing a particular historical version of Buddhism, or a particular school, tradition, lineage, technique. In fact, this is not an introduction to Buddhism as such, but more of an introduction on how to use some key teachings preserved in the early Buddhist texts in order to open up a new way of experiencing reality. In doing so, this introduction will hopefully contribute to a renewal of pedagogical practices in today's educational systems, including higher education and universities, which have neglected for way too long how to properly cultivate and teach friendliness, emotional intelligence, and freedom.

This book grew out of an annotated reader prepared as a teaching support for an online workshop on friendliness organized in early 2021, mostly for students of the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Groningen. The bulk of the text was written between December 2020 and January 2021, and polished throughout the spring of 2021. A round of further revisions took place between February and April 2022, when it was adopted as a reader for a bachelor course on ancient Buddhist philosophy, and finalized for open access publication, while the meditation workshop ran for a second time. The resulting version benefited substantially from the exchanges during the workshops and the course, and from the helpful feedback received from students and other readers. Thank you.

This work unfolded during the long, uncertain, dark, brave months of the global Covid-19 pandemic, which so poignantly remembered to us that all living beings (humans included) are subject to become sick, that they did not go beyond sickness. While this always remains true, it is possible to go beyond any aversion for this predicament, and thus allow it to cease to be a problem. This book is dedicated to all those who might consider trying this option.

Note to the second edition

This second edition makes a number of minor corrections and improvements. However, it may also be helpful to add four general points to help the reader better understand the scope of this work and its context.

First, while the historical and contextual discussion here is kept to a minimum, this book is conceived as the second volume of a trilogy. The first work in this trilogy is now published and available as *The Tragedy of the Self: Lectures on Global Hermeneutics* (https://doi.org/10.21827/63cfc0e9db70). This series of lectures aims to provide a theoretical, hermeneutical and historical framework for better assessing the place of the Buddha's early discourses in a cross-cultural reflection on the nature of selfhood. While this *Introduction* remains a standalone work, the interested reader can also refer to *The Tragedy of the Self* to broaden the scope of their inquiry.

The second point concerns the ideal of awakening. In this *Introduction*, the early discourses are presented from the point of view of the soteriological agenda that they themselves set, namely that of achieving full awakening. Awakening, however, should not be seen as an end goal, or as a point at which everything is achieved and nothing else remains. Although the discourses often suggest this idea, it is more fruitful to see awakening as a new

starting point—in the same way that waking up in the morning is not just the end of the dream period, but more importantly the beginning of a new day. Linking awakening with the abandonment of greed, aversion and ignorance—and the sense of appropriation and desire for control that constitute the ordinary sense of self—it becomes clear that this breakthrough is in fact the beginning of a whole new way of experiencing reality and exploring its possibilities, although these further developments are barely touched upon by the discourses themselves. There is probably a pedagogical reason for their silence, namely that very little of these further developments would make sense to someone who is still completely dominated by the usual habits based on greed, aversion and ignorance. Therefore, for any further exploration to make any sense at all, these habits must first be abandoned (at least to some extent), and it is with this first and yet crucial step that the discourses are particularly concerned.

In fact, the way in which awakening is presented in the discourses is itself a pedagogical tool to be used and ultimately dissolved as the practice matures. The starting point for the discourses is in the midst of what they take to be ordinary experience: completely dominated by attitudes based on aversion and greed, and mostly shaped by ignorance (or deliberate avoidance) of the unsustainability of this whole construction. They assume that ordinary people interpret experience on the basis of dualistic notions (such as 'me' and 'other', 'good' and 'bad') and provide a critical examination of how these notions are applied and what their consequences are. By progressively refining these dualistic views, the practice implied in the discourses also consumes the very grounds for holding them, erases boundaries and dualities, and ultimately brings the practitioner to the brink of an entirely different horizon—beyond 'good' and 'bad', 'mine' and 'other'. The reason for proceeding in this way is pragmatic: chances are that the ordinary person will not understand (or will easily misunderstand) a more non-dualistic perspective if it is presented immediately, as it would be too much at odds with ordinary assumptions and

habits. The latter must therefore first be deconstructed in order for any other view to make sense. The whole meditative practice described in the discourses is aimed at this kind of deconstruction.

The third point is that this *Introduction* does not offer any substantive criticism of the teachings attributed to the Buddha. People familiar with the dialectical approach most common in academic training might see this as a lack of critical engagement, or even as a sign of implicit dogmatism. The purpose of this *Introduction*, however, is to show how the Buddha's discourses constitute an extremely profound, lucid and consistent critique of the usual and mostly implicit way of conceiving and experiencing reality. It is assumed that the reader will disagree with, resist and find challenging these early Buddhist views. The critical attitude fostered by this *Introduction* is not one of objectifying Buddhist teachings as an external element to be viewed from the outside and ultimately criticised. Rather, this *Introduction* aims to provide the reader-practitioner with a mirror (the *Dhamma* itself) to reflect upon oneself and one's ordinary patterns of thought, behaviour, views and aspirations. The aim is not to convince the reader of the validity of Buddhist doctrine, but rather to use the contemplative practices of early Buddhism as a catalyst for meta-reflection on the reader's own attitude to these materials, and thus indirectly to themselves. The kind of critical inquiry pursued here is thus not an objectifying critique of something external, but a subjective inner critique—namely, an inquiry into the structures, limitations, and potentials of one's own way of experiencing and interpreting reality.

The fourth and final point is terminological. Although it is now explained more explicitly in the reflections on §1, it is worth emphasising that the term 'intentionality' and its cognates are not meant here in the narrow sense of the voluntary, deliberate and conscious pursuit of a certain course of action (as in the sentence 'I did that *intentionally*'). Rather, 'intentionality' is understood in its broader philosophical and phenomenological sense as that which is about something (or as the quality of any phenomenon characterised by

some form of 'about-ness'). From this point of view, mental intentions or attitudes are 'intentional' not necessarily because they are conscious or under the control of a conscious subject (sometimes they are, often they aren't), but more specifically because they are directed towards a particular object or content of experience, namely because they are 'about' that object or content (as in the sentence 'I want *that*').

Groningen, Spring 2023

Contents

p. 27

0. Preliminaries

Readings from AN 8.41, 8.53 & 11.15, Ud 2.10

p. 73

1. Space

Readings from MN 10 & 62

p. 109

2. Hindrances

Readings from DN 2, MN 10, 19 & 75, SN 46.2

p. 159

3. Actions

Readings from MN 10, SN 36.6, AN 3.65, Sn 1.8

p. 199

4. Vulnerability

Readings from MN 37, SN 56.11, AN 5.57, Iti 1.27

p. 241

5. Boundlessness

Readings from MN 10, SN 22.55 & 41.7, AN 3.100 & 5.27

p. 275

6. Composure

Readings from MN 14, SN 22.5, AN 5.28, & 9.41

p. 309

7. Freedom

Readings from MN 137, SN 22.95, AN 9.36, Ud 3.10

p. 349

Afterword

Reading from Sn 4.15

p. 373

Appendix

p. 379

Further readings

Note on texts and translations

All references and readings from the discourses of the Buddha are derived from the main collections of the *Suttapiṭaka*, abbreviated as follows:

DN = *Dīgha Nikāya* (Collection of Long Discourses)
MN = *Majjhima Nikāya* (Collection of Middle-Length Discourses)
SN = *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Collection of Connected Discourses)
AN = *Aṇguttara Nikāya* (Collection of Numerical Discourses)

The *Khuddaka Nikāya* (Minor Collection) includes several smaller sets, which are referred to in their own right, among which:

Sn = *Suttanipāta* (Anthology of Discourses)
Ud = *Udāna* (Inspired Utterances)
Iti = *Itivuttaka* (Sayings)

Discourses in DN and MN are identified by their individual number only (counting from the beginning). For instance, DN 2 should be read as '*Dīgha Nikāya*, discourse number 2.' Discourses included in the other collections are identified by providing, first, a reference to the number of the 'chapter' in which the discourse appears, and then to the number of the discourse itself in that chapter. For instance, SN 56.11 should be read as '*Saṃyutta Nikāya*, chapter 56, discourse number 11.'

Pāli texts are consulted in the *Mahāsaṅgīti Tipiṭaka Buddhavasse 2500: World Tipiṭaka Edition in Roman Script*, edited and published by The M.L. Maniratana Bunnag Dhamma Society Fund, 2005. This edition can be consulted online (together with several alternative translations and parallel versions) at https://suttacentral.net/

0. Preliminaries

Abandoning aversion

What is this all about? Any preliminary answer to such a question will inevitably remain somehow abstract and sketchy, simply because nothing has been explained yet that could contribute to nuance and qualify the answer itself. However, if one can cope with this level of abstraction and bear the sketchiness, then the answer can be formulated in just two words: *abandoning aversion.* Abandoning aversion is a blueprint, a seed, a general direction. Everything that follows in these pages is nothing but a way of making this answer more understandable, meaningful, and practical.

Looking back (towards the *why*) one can find a far-reaching and uncommon account of how experience is constructed and how it is shaped by feelings, perceptions, and intentional attitudes. This account reveals that any problem can be a problem only insofar as it is experienced somehow unpleasantly. In turn, this unpleasantness can be problematic only insofar as there is some form of aversion towards it. Abandoning aversion is allowing any problem (the essence of any problematicity) to dissipate and dissolve altogether.

Looking ahead (towards the *how*) one can discover the milestones of a well-rounded path of practice. This path cultivates understanding and emotional intelligence together. The key method is a close observation of the attitudes that shape one's way of looking at experience and the strategies for abandoning these attitudes when they prove to have unwelcome results, substituting them with preferable and more fruitful ones. Friendliness encapsulates the core of this path in just one word.

Looking around (towards the *where*) one can realize that this sort of practice is not some special activity that is supposed to be kept in its corner, well-compartmentalized and neatly separated from other aspects or components of life. Abandoning aversion has a transformative consequence on the whole of one's experience, and it is best understood as an encompassing lifestyle. It cannot be stressed enough that the practice that unfolds from

here cannot be reduced to any special technique, although it will necessarily rely on specific methods in order to develop, sharpen and deepen the attitude that it aims to cultivate.

Looking at the ground (towards the *where from*), this introduction will illustrate the points just mentioned by directly referring to the Pāli discourses of the Buddha. Despite the gulf between today's Western world and the ancient north-Indian culture of roughly twenty-five centuries ago where the discourses originated, they still provide an astonishingly precise, extensive, sophisticated, and insightful guidance to this territory.

Looking up (towards the *for what sake*) one might hardly imagine the sense of relief, contentment, satisfaction, happiness, enthusiasm, love, friendliness, compassion, freedom, lightness, humor, and serenity that all these words attempt to trigger, falling short of their aim like little waves breaking on a cliff. Ordinarily, all of this is rarely encountered, hard to experience, and impossible to sustain for more than a few miraculous and scattered moments. However, it does not have to be this way. If one dares to be more ambitious (indeed, to cultivate the greatest ambition), it is possible—through education and training—to gain a steadfast and even unshakable access to what ordinarily would be unimaginable.

Motivations and conditions

Friendliness is an emotional and intentional attitude of goodwill and non-aversion towards all sentient beings. It is rooted in both feeling and understanding. Friendliness is something one feels and experiences as a pleasant perception in the sphere of thought and in the body as a sense of relief, openness, or as a smiling and caring way of looking. At the same time, friendliness stems and grows from a degree of understanding and a clarity of vision about the fundamental aspects of the existential condition shared by all living beings, human and non-human, oneself included.

In the Pāli discourses of the Buddha,[7] the practice of friendliness is repeatedly stressed and encouraged for its numerous benefits. In general, it supports and develops a form of emotional intelligence capable of balancing between an acknowledgment of the most difficult aspects of experience and the cultivation of a sense of happiness nourished by goodwill. This provides an ideal pathway to explore deeper aspects of one's experience, and how they are constructed and shaped by different factors. Friendliness contributes to the development of easiness and relief with respect to both external and internal contents, it supports calm and tranquility, and it leads to a sharpening of insight and vision into the workings of experience and the nature of freedom.

In the discourses, friendliness is not presented as a default emotional state, but as something that can (and should) be deliberately cultivated and developed, through a wise use of attention, dedication, right effort, and playfulness. This cultivation takes the form of a meditative practice, which encompasses both formal and informal contexts. In this sense, an attitude of friendliness can be regarded as a skill, an ability to relate with one's experience in a certain friendly way, and this skill can be trained by repeatedly practicing it and trying to figure out what are the most effective ways, given

7 The Pāli discourses (*Suttā*) constitute one of the three main divisions of the set of canonical scriptures of the Theravāda school, together with the monastic code (*Vinaya*) and the 'higher teachings' (*Abhidhamma*), which offer a scholastic systematization and interpretation of the themes presented in the discourses. Today, the Theravāda school is the only ancient school still surviving from a number of other schools that arose in the first centuries before the common era. Currently, it is most present in South-East Asia (Sri-Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos), and also increasingly visible in the West. While these ancient schools differed with respect to their 'higher teachings,' they basically shared the same common ground of discourses. In this sense, the discourses can be regarded as a pre-sectarian, shared heritage and their approach should not be conflated with the specific interpretation provided by the Theravāda tradition itself. Ancient forms of Buddhism are sometimes contrasted with later forms (usually referred to as Mahāyāna Buddhism) that began to spread, especially in north-east Asia, around the first or second century of the common era and that had a wide diffusion in China, Korea, Vietnam, Japan, and Tibet. For instance, what is today encountered as *Zen* Buddhism originated in China (as the *Chan* school) and then took root in Korea and Japan. These more recent forms of Buddhism also come with expanded collections of texts, which usually include and preserve the older discourses within their corpus. Interestingly, the emphasis on the cultivation of friendliness (or its close companion, compassion, *karuṇā*) is perhaps the most important aspect shared by all schools, older and newer.

one's own current situation, to encourage, sustain, develop and bring this attitude to complete fruition.

In order to undertake this practice, two important preliminaries need to be accomplished. First, one needs to establish a right way of envisaging the reasons for investing time and effort in cultivating friendliness. The best way of establishing this view is to acknowledge that there are areas in one's life where one is more vulnerable to suffering, stress, or uneasiness, either at the level of thought or at the physical level, with regard to oneself or to one's relationship with others. Acknowledging this condition, one can realize that if it is possible to relate to this vulnerability in a more skillful way, (at least) some of that suffering, stress or uneasiness can be softened or even removed. The right way of looking is thus based on the acknowledgment that there is some degree of vulnerability in one's experience *and* that something can be done about it. One is not hopeless; more friendliness can help. In time, and as practice matures, one will appreciate that friendliness itself is just a way of deeply exploring and unpacking the more subtle and profound implications of this initial view.

Alternatively, one might also consider that if only one thing could ever be achieved, this should be a lessening, if not a complete overcoming, of aversion and all feelings or attitudes based on it. Aversion is what sets oneself against something else, be that an external circumstance, a situation, other persons, or one's own state or condition. Aversion is nourished by and in turn supports fear, which again fosters a sense of defensiveness, constriction, and closure. The more one observes aversion, how it works, and the effects it produces, the more one can notice how painful this all is, and how deeply it affects one's own understanding, judgments, and behaviors, by steering them in ways that are inherently unpleasant, often unbeneficial, and always negatively biased. Aversion is not only an impairment on one's way of acting, it is also a cognitive hindrance towards a more serene and freer understanding, an obstacle for genuine knowledge. Friendliness is the opposite of aversion

and it arises out of its relative absence. The cultivation of friendliness leads to the overcoming and abandoning of aversion. Since aversion is deeply entrenched and rooted in a number of other emotional structures and ways of interacting with experience, the lessening of aversion has a profound transformative impact on the overall way in which one faces, interprets and understands experience. Aiming at this improvement might be a powerful incentive for undertaking a steady cultivation of friendliness and a skillful way of making one's goal both precise and practical.

As a second preliminary, one needs to arrange one's own environment in such a way that it will be *sufficiently* suitable for practice to develop. Ideal conditions are not necessary, nor is it relevant to figure out what they might be. The basic and sufficient requirements concern *enough time* and *space* for practice to unfold. In the beginning, time allocated for formal practice will be relatively little (one can begin with perhaps one hour a day, maybe divided into two formal sessions, or even less), but it will expand quite naturally, as one will begin to feel the need for devoting more time to practice to develop it further. Hence, one will have to decide how to best create and then protect the necessary time. Maybe one might decide to wake up earlier in the morning, or to eliminate some forms of entertainment. Experimentation and trials will teach what is the best way to go. What remains essential is a relatively firm commitment to practice in a continuous way, every day, no matter what external conditions are or impose. There will be times in which external conditions will make practice absolutely impossible, but one should let these external conditions do their best for this to happen. And even when this happens, one will remain committed to reestablish the continuity of practice as soon as possible.

Practice needs space too, both physical and in the domain of thought. Physical space is any sufficiently quiet corner where one can sit (and possibly walk) for a sufficiently long span of time, without being interrupted or disturbed by anything or anybody else. In the domain of thought, having enough

space means being free from gross and overwhelming problems. Sometimes problems just happen and are already present, beyond one's wishes or hopes. To some extent, some problems will always be there. It is up to one's self-awareness to recognize when they become so overwhelming as to impair one's ability to fully devote themselves to anything else, including practice. Friendliness can at some point help with the way in which one deals with problems, but in order for practice to get off the ground, existing problems need to be confined below a certain threshold of disturbance. If this is not the case, one should first seek a more immediate solution to alleviate and even partially solve them.

However, in many cases, problems do not just happen, they are the result of unskillful ways of acting, which create vicious cycles that quickly get out of hand. Indulging in coarse forms of immoral behaviors (like killing any living beings, stealing, verbally or physically harming or harassing others, deliberately lying, or using drugs or other intoxicating substances) are the most common and evident ways in which one supports the best conditions for problems to arise.[8] Reflection can reveal many more, often subtler unskillful actions that one would be best off without. Creating sufficient mental space for friendliness practice to develop entails a commitment to refraining

8 This is the reason why the discourses present moral training and restraint as a necessary basis for any further development. Traditionally, this has been codified in several sets of training rules or precepts (the most elaborate of which is the *Vinaya*, the code of conduct for fully ordained practitioners). The five precepts (abstaining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and intoxicants like alcohol or drugs) are usually considered to be the bare minimum (§3, AN 3.65). For someone who never reflected on the importance of moral training, they represent the necessary starting point. At a more advanced stage, the eight precepts (the *uposatha* precepts, AN 8.41 below) might offer a more solid basis. They entail abstaining from killing, stealing, any intentional sexual act, lying, intoxicants, consuming solid food after mid-day, any form of entertainment, and indulgence in unnecessary sleep. Notice that speech is a particularly delicate aspect of moral training and the precepts about refraining from lying is often articulated further in abstaining from false speech, from harsh speech, from divisive speech, and from frivolous speech (AN 10.176). Precepts are training rules in the sense that they invite to refrain from acts that are inevitably based on attitudes of greed, aversion, and ignorance (AN 10.174). By abiding by the precepts, one is thus training in restraining (and ultimately overcoming) these unskillful bases for action (see also §3, *Reflections*). Precepts, however, are not obligations or duties, but rather freely endorsed commitments, which witness one's resolve to monitor one's intentions and decide to not let them unfold in certain directions.

from these unskillful actions at all costs. No matter if at times one might perhaps fail in some respect, this intention of refraining from the unskillful is essential and needs to be constantly protected, supported and reminded. What is needed is not perfect moral behavior since the start, but a strong commitment to pursue the value of moving in that direction and make all needed effort to progress towards it. This effort is not a violent act of willpower. As one refrains from unskillful actions, problems actually diminish, and the feeling of greater space around one's existence creates a more comfortable environment, in which happiness and contentment naturally arise. There is a profound beauty in cultivating a degree of moral virtue and integrity, and this beauty provides essential nourishment for further development. As friendliness matures, this commitment to refrain from immoral conduct will naturally grow into a fuller understanding of how harmful these unskillful actions are for both oneself and others. Eventually, one will feel and see that indulging or even just entertaining the intention of acting in these ways is simply impossible to sustain anymore.

Having established a degree of right view about the reasons why one engages in friendliness practice and having created sufficiently good conditions for it to unfold, everything is ready to start. Formal practice is the devoted period of time in which one more directly and deeply supports the arising, consolidation, and development of friendliness. Informal practice is any other time during day and night in which one keeps reflecting more loosely on (or just observing) how an attitude of friendliness can inform one's current situation and tasks, and how friendliness could help carrying out those tasks in more skillful ways. It has to be expected that the intention to focus on friendliness, both during formal and informal times, will repeatedly slip out of the thinking process and of one's experience. Noticing this change, remembering one's intention to cultivate friendliness, and re-establishing this same intention more directly, over and over again, *is* how friendliness is actually cultivated, made firmer, and allowed to grow.

Cultivating friendliness is more akin to learning a language or learning to play a musical instrument, rather than mechanically repeating a set of established motions. Practice will naturally evolve and change all the time, even if in some periods one might have the impression of having reached a plateau, or perhaps even fallen behind. This means that there is no ultimately valid instruction or technique that one can simply follow and repeat forever. Adaptation, exploration, playfulness, ingenuity are all qualities both needed and to be developed in the cultivation of friendliness. The practical guidelines provided in the following notes are thus to be understood as nothing more than entry points for beginning one's practice and have some sense of the direction towards which one should advance. The most important aspects and insights will be those that will be discovered autonomously as practice matures.

On the approach used in this introduction

This introduction explores friendliness by moving through seven main topics. The first two topics (recollection of the body and working with the hindrances) provide the foundations and could in themselves be considered as an autonomous and complete practice. In fact, anything else will just be a deepening of what is already entailed by them. They should be fairly accessible, although they will require a certain degree of time and dedication in order to be mastered. Topics three and four (non-aversion and vulnerability) introduce friendliness in a more explicit way. Topic four is perhaps the most important of all, since it is at this point that wisdom can genuinely arise and transform one's way of looking at experience. This topic might be difficult for some since it entails an ability to face themes (like death) that are usually ignored or avoided. And yet, these issues are inevitably present anyway, and nobody is exempt from having to confront them. Friendliness might be a powerful resource to face vulnerability and listen to what it might teach. However, this cannot be forced, and if one does not feel ready or sufficiently

grounded for taking this step, it is best to wait and first gain a sufficient degree of strength and well-being in order to be fully prepared and equipped to deal with what would initially look unpleasant or disturbing. Nevertheless, it cannot be stressed enough how crucial this topic is and how profound its transformative potential could be. Topics five, six and seven (boundlessness, composure, and freedom) offer suggestions for deepening practice. They provide hints towards further degrees of refinement and introduce what a more advanced practice might look like; this would then require some further degree of commitment, time, and dedication to fully develop. The goal here is to offer an initial glimpse into subtler ways of experiencing and understanding the vaster territories that wait ahead.

Each topic is explored under three headings. *Directions* offer some general guidelines about key focal points in practice. These might be considered like meditation instructions, although it might be more helpful to regard them as ways of pointing out those spots and areas in one's experience that (from the perspective of developing practice) are more relevant and interesting to look at. These directions can be memorized beforehand (maybe even breaking them down into smaller parts) and then applied during a formal session. The effort to memorize and remember what to do is part of practice. The indications provided build up from one topic to the next, and subsequent steps always rely on some familiarity acquired with the previous. What is added later should not be interpreted as something necessarily different or new. Most often it is just a matter of further refining some aspects that were already implicitly present but unnoticed during initial stages of practice, and about developing their potential further. For this reason, it is not necessary to rush through the topics, or even move forward constantly. Sometimes, it might be best to simply remain at an early stage, consolidating and exploring it in greater detail.

Meditating is an action which, like any other action, entails a teleological structure. Sitting to meditate has a goal, which one needs to understand

beforehand to some extent. Understanding the goal enables the practitioner to assess both the unfolding of a meditation session and of one's practice over time, interpreting its details, distilling feedback from them, and to adjust or improve based on this assessment. The goal of meditating might be relatively broad, but it is helpful to have more precise, specific, and concrete goals each time one sits to meditate. These specific goals might be fairly simple, for instance: observe how long attention can be maintained on the body, find ways to extend that period, or develop one's ability at better analyzing what is going on in one's thinking process. Each of the following topics introduces one group of specific goals and ways of breaking them down even further. Learning how to master each topic thus entails learning how to progress in a certain direction and gaining fluency in it, by realizing which intermediary smaller steps are needed at each time. In the beginning, this is supposed to be challenging. When one can easily overcome the challenge, it will be possible to push practice further, either by adding more subtleties or by exploring new dimensions.

This goal-oriented approach to meditation is in line with a pivotal component of the Buddha's teachings, namely, *right effort* (*sammā vāyāmo*, the sixth factor of the eightfold path).[9] In a nutshell, right effort is the ability to assess what are the elements or factors in one's experience that are most problematic, and find ways of abandoning them, while also detecting the elements or factors that are most beneficial or worth generating, and finding ways of cultivating, sustaining, and developing them as much as possible. Right effort entails the ability to monitor one's experience, judge what sort of actions need to be undertaken, interpret the feedback that one receives

9 See SN 45.8: 'Mendicants, and what is right effort? Here, Mendicants, a mendicant strives, supports the understanding, arouses energy, endeavours, generates desire for the non-arising of unarisen non-virtuous bad realities, ... for the abandoning of arisen non-virtuous bad realities, ... for the arising of unarisen virtuous realities, ... for the staying, non-confusion, growth, fructification, development, fulfilment of arisen virtuous realities.' Non-virtuous realities are most standardly exemplified by the five hindrances, while virtuous realities by the seven awakening factors (see §2).

from their implementation, and become more sensitive, ingenious, flexible, and playful in one's practice.

Some lineages and traditions might de-emphasize this idea of goal-oriented practice. Especially when introducing meditation to Westerners, they might warn against seeking particular goals or applying particular methods and rather encourage a sense of spontaneity, ease, openness, non-doing, relaxation, 'just be' or the like. The underpinning rationale behind this approach is the assumption that seeking goals is engrained in the Western culture in such a way that it usually creates tensions, if not anxiety and blockages of various sorts. Disabling this attitude is thus a way of finding some release and preventing that meditation practice itself becomes assimilated to the ordinary anxious attitude.

While this approach might work to some extent or be beneficial in certain situations and given certain conditions, it cannot be considered to be a genuine solution to the underpinning problem. In fact, the problem is not seeking goals per se because any sort of action (including meditation) entails acting for the sake of some goal. Even assuming that one might practice for the sake of relinquishing all activity, this practice would remain entirely shaped by the teleological structure of action in general. The actual problem is *what* sort of goals one seeks, and *how* one seeks them. Right effort is a way of bringing greater sharpness to one's understanding of this issue by discerning those forms of activity that are best avoided from those that need instead to be cultivated and fostered. And the best way of learning how to practice right effort is by deliberately attempting to practice it continuously over time. The method adopted here takes right effort as its explicit guide and suggests how to implement it throughout, step by step.

Directions are expanded by including some *Refinements.* These illustrate ways of adding more details, depth, or possibilities to practice. Cultivating friendliness, as all other meditative approaches presented in the discourses, has more to do with an art than with a technique. The purpose is to become

skillful in mastering a process, which also means to learn what the different possibilities and alternatives are and what is most suitable at different moments. Before approaching these refinements, it is advisable to have spent sufficient time with the basic directions and having established a sufficiently clear and solid understanding of what they point at. Refinements can then be used to explore further dimensions of that domain or to introduce variations and alternatives that might be helpful to keep practice alive, interesting, engaging, and evolving. Hence, refinements also counter a certain inertial attitude that might arise at some point or a tendency to mechanically repeat certain motions and schemes due to the momentum they acquired over time. Freedom and playfulness are key in the cultivation of this approach. Nonetheless, since these notes have only an introductory character, they tend to mention only some of the most important points, without overwhelming the reader with more details.

Three general remarks apply to the whole of practice and are worth remembering throughout. First, at any time during formal or informal practice, attention can be more or less stable, and the strength of this stability (even its quality) will change (hopefully increase and improve) as practice matures. A common concern is to decide how much stability one needs, especially during formal sessions. A safe bet is to aim for stability that is sufficient for being able to work with a chosen object. This level of attention does not necessarily or always require filtering out the experience of anything else beyond the chosen object, although sometimes this might happen. However, it does require that, despite any degree of background experiential noise, one is capable of not losing the thread of one's meditation. Losing the thread will naturally and inevitably occur anyway as part of the practice. This simply means that one should notice the disruption and re-establish the thread thus interrupted. A sufficiently robust attention is a mode of attention that is relatively less frequently disturbed, and not frequently dragged away by external factors or internal distractions, even when they occasionally arise.

However, as it will inevitably become clear, paying and sustaining attention is *not* a natural attitude; it is rather a skill to learn. Learning how to pay and sustain attention is one of the key abilities that is developed through meditation. Hence, discovering that one might not yet be able to do that, especially in the beginning, is precisely what one should expect. Reflecting on the nature of distraction and attention, wonderous insights might arise. For the moment, it is enough to appreciate that experiencing distractions is not only normal, but it is the starting point for any practice. Distractions, in fact, are not the problem. What matters is understanding more fully their significance and implications.

Second, it is possible to play with and finetune both the pace and the intensity of one's practice and attention. At times, it might be good to proceed slowly; at other times, one might move more quickly through some stages and spend more time on others. Sometimes more effort is required, sometimes relaxation and less effort are essential. There is no fixed recipe. One of the purposes of practice is to encourage self-observation and a direct sharpening of one's own sensitivity towards what is most needed at any moment. Wise reflection after any session, and an overall thread of awareness about how practice unfolds, are an important asset in developing this sensitivity.

One cannot expect practice to develop without actually practicing it in a sufficiently constant and continuous way. Intermittent practice will yield only intermittent results. Continuous practice requires time, both from the short-term perspective of even just one session, and in the medium- and long-term. The long-term might indeed be very long and, according to the discourses, it might encompass many lifetimes. Ironically, most of this time is spent sidetracking, yo-yoing, and simply trying to figure out what practice is, how to practice, and why to practice. Once this right view is established, everything starts to flow comparatively more smoothly, without further sidetracks. In any case, it should be clear since the start that what one can gain or derive

from this practice has some degree of proportionality with what one invests in it, and the first and most important investment are time and dedication.

Third, it is very important to learn how to export to informal periods some of the most valuable insights and attitudes that one has learnt during formal sessions. Each session is (even just slightly) different, and each is an occasion to learn something new, maybe small, maybe very relevant. It would be of great benefit to impress in one's memory what has been learned and recollect it between different sessions. Recollection might again be interrupted and disrupted in many ways, and yet one can still hold the intention to recollect as best as one can. This will not only bind formal sessions to one another, creating more continuity, but it will also contribute to consolidate important aspects that are learned throughout the journey, which will then feed back into the process of development.

Needless to say, the approach presented here does not pretend to be the only, best, or truest for cultivating friendliness. It simply suggests one possible way in which practice can unfold, based on a reading of the discourses themselves. Experimenting with alternative approaches might be helpful, perhaps even needed at some point. Nonetheless, in the beginning at least, it might be better to allow enough time to become familiar with one approach and learn the fundamental intuitions at the basis of it, before trying to switch to something else.[10]

10 Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism. Teachings, History and Practices.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013 (second edition), chapter 11 (especially pp. 318-344) offers a fair overview of the most common methods and approaches developed by various strands of the Theravāda tradition, which are often conversant (either by endorsing or by seeking alternatives) with perhaps the most influential commentarial work in that tradition, Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* ('The Path of Purification,' composed in the fifth century CE). These approaches tend to focus on the aspects of 'tranquility' (*samatha*) and 'insight' (*vipassanā*) by giving different emphasis or precedence to one over the other. In that context, *mettā* is often seen as an ancillary practice. The most common method to develop it, based on the commentarial tradition, consists in generating friendliness towards oneself (usually by triggering it with images or verbalizations), and then gradually extending this feeling to others, progressing from persons that are close and beloved, to more problematic cases, until one is able to extend the same feeling towards all persons and living beings. Friendliness is thus mostly used to counter habits of aversion or self-hatred.

Reflections provide ways of articulating a philosophical exploration of the sort of experience cultivated and nourished during practice. Reflections do not offer an exegetical interpretation of the texts of the discourses, nor a historical contextualization of practice within the discourses themselves; they are neither a commentary nor an accidental addendum. Rather, they freely exploit topics, themes, suggestions and key insights pointed out by the discourses in order to interpret the sort of experience that emerges from practice, and thus constructing a certain meaning of it. This sort of exploration provides one instance of how it is possible to create and sustain a hermeneutic circle between a certain way of observing and dwelling in one's experience (cultivated through practice) and the understanding of this same experience. Experience comes with some understanding of it, and deepening this understanding affects the experience, which in turn let the understanding change as well, hopefully making it deeper and clearer. This reflective aspect is not a dispensable component of practice, which is in fact best understood as a 'development of the understanding' (*citta bhāvanā*). And yet, getting a sense of how this is supposed to work might not be easy or obvious, especially given the stark opposition between theory and practice, pure speculation and pragmatic activity, that has been built and defended from many sides in contemporary (and less contemporary) Western culture. The sort of meditation presented in the discourses is in fact a reflective practice or meditative reflection, something that combines both theoretical and practical poles. The discourses deny the very legitimacy of divorcing these dimensions.

Readings offer a handful of selected texts from the Pāli discourses of the Buddha, which present, reflect or expand on some of the key aspects connected with a certain topic. They are not meant to provide some sort of textual backup for what has been discussed or for the approach presented here, but rather illustrate how the discourses introduce a certain topic and how they invite to explore it further.

Before getting into the readings, it might be helpful to reflect on one's attitudes towards these texts. Textual references can be used (and they have been used) as a way to foster ideals of orthodoxy, sometimes via the appeal of a direct access of the most original sources, other times via the mediation operated by established traditions, schools, lineages, and interpretations. The Pāli discourses are an old and important corpus of texts, but they are only a fragment of an almost unfathomably vaster ocean of other texts that have been accumulated through the multimillennial (and multilingual) history of Buddhism. References to a particular body of texts like the Pāli discourses might be sometimes used to stress differences between this or that tradition, school, lineage, or approach. Often this takes the shape of claiming some form of superiority of one tradition over the other (or just considering this more complete than that, closer to the origins, or closer to the truth). It might also invite some shallow relativism, in which all texts say basically the same thing, everything is the same, differences do not matter.

One of the beauties of the Pāli discourses is that they can be used to avoid all of these attitudes. The discourses were committed to writing around the first century before the common era. Before that time, they existed as orally transmitted teachings, passed through different lineages of reciters for some three-hundred years. In fact, the discourses were never conceived as a written body of knowledge, to be processed thoroughly and completely by readers. They were rather preserved as a *hearing* experience, committed to memory, to be recited, rehearsed, and investigated by someone who most probably could retain and know only a handful of them, and yet should be able to reconstruct the whole teaching on that basis. The ancient language they use, Pāli (which is relatively close to Sanskrit), is an artificial literary language based on some northern-Indian Prakrit dialects, some of which might have been close to the language actually spoken by the Buddha. The Buddha himself was most likely a historical figure, who seems to have lived in North India around the fifth century before the common era. However, much of

what we know about him is transmitted by the discourses themselves. Hence, the Buddha is also somehow a legendary figure, whose teaching is inseparable from the literary means that have been used to transmit it.

All of this suggests that there is no direct and immediate reading of the discourses, but any reading has to be mediated and constructed as an interpretation. Obviously, there are many interpretations available, which are not necessarily mutually compatible with one another, nor do they necessarily all have the same degree of historical plausibility. The discourses oppose resistance against both dogmatism (assuming that there is only one correct reading, which conforms to the truth, whatever this is) and skepticism (assuming that there is ultimately no correct reading, or that all readings are equivalent). They demand interpretation, and all interpretations are (more or less skillfully, reasonably, and soundly) constructed; hence, uncertain to that degree. This situation might become a very serious problem if one wants to access some definitive core of textual authority and use it to defend a certain approach or view against rival approaches and views. If one has this intention, nothing will be more frustrating than engaging with Buddhist texts, older or newer.

However, reading the Pāli discourses might also be a very good occasion to learn that one does not *need* to appropriate any canon of texts, endorse any authority and fight to defend it (or demolish it, for that matter). The discourses are more skillfully used as tools, catalysts for reflection and practice, to be progressively consumed and dissolved in the process of interpreting, applying, refining and engaging with them. Because of their peculiar style (dense, terse, both synthetic and precise, primarily concerned with how to implement the teaching), they naturally demand from the reader to see them not as something that might contain any inherent truth in their linguistic or semantic form. They ask to be used as recipes or musical sheets, which need to be translated into something else and made more alive in order to make sense and allow one to verify what their intended meaning (taste) could actu-

ally be. For this reason, working with the discourses does not commit one to make any firm and resolute choice about what should count as the 'true word of the Buddha' or not, which traditions got it right, and which ones got it wrong. This is just another game, which is not very much worth playing, and surely not needed to develop friendliness.

A healthy relation to practice: the ideal of mendicancy

Sometimes there might be a perception of meditation practice as somehow setting oneself against others. It might become *my* practice, which *I* need to develop on my own, leaving behind everybody else. Or it might be seen as something not worth engaging with in the first place, because the time spent on a meditation cushion seems taken away from other tasks and activities through which one might make a more genuine, immediate and sizable difference in others' lives.

This opposition can be constructed in many ways. Meditation might be seen as something focused on one's own individual development, hence as a more or less selfish activity that does not bring any genuine benefit to others. Or the fact that meditation does require a degree of physical seclusion and solitude might be interpreted as implying that one has to completely forget about the rest of the world and make sure that it does not disturb one's practice. The discourses themselves illustrate at length the *process* that leads to awakening, but they say relatively little about what happens after awakening is achieved. Characters often just drop from the story once their goal has been realized. Awakened individuals are not engaged in social businesses; hence, one might think that awakening is a fairly solitary affair, an individual or private goal, with little impact on one's surroundings. Historically, in many Buddhist cultures, social norms and customs solidified a conventional distinction between those who devote themselves to practice (the ordained community of monks and nuns) and lay supporters that provide for the material needs of the former. Today, especially in the Western world, meditation

is perhaps most commonly associated with the idea of taking a retreat, a more or less long period of time spent in some more or less remote location, in which a strict schedule is followed and one can devote oneself to meditation only and nothing else. None of these examples, in themselves, necessarily entails that one must perceive meditation practice as away from, indifferent to, or even at odds with others' welfare. And yet, they all offer occasions for construing such an opposition as somehow inherent in meditation. However, understanding meditation in this way is precisely what is relinquished through practice, and also what needs to be relinquished to some degree since the beginning in order for practice to make sense in the first place.

This adversarial conception of meditation as a practice that 'I' do away from, against, despite, or regardless of others, is based on an ego-centric ideal of autonomy, self-sufficiency and individuality, which can be more or less explicitly articulated. This view plays a role both in positively supporting the urge to conceive of practice as 'my effort' to progress towards 'my liberation' and in negatively criticizing it for the same reasons.[11] Such an ideal is surely fostered and bloated in today's Western capitalist culture, but it has much deeper roots, which are inextricably interwoven with the very sense of self-hood and the engrained attitude of making 'mine' all contents of experience. Friendliness meditation is practiced for the sake of seeing through this attitude, appreciating its absurdity, and being freed from it.

Sometimes the discourses encapsulate the whole teaching in just one word. A very important word is the epithet of the Buddha himself, which

11 As it will become clearer later, the problem with views about the self is not just their contents (for instance, 'the self is an autonomous individual or substance' *versus* 'the self is a socially and relationally constructed process'), but the sense of appropriation towards the view as such. At different moments, different views about the self might be more or less helpful, but their being helpful is always related to their ability to somehow erode the sense of appropriation towards that view and towards any view. Views (any view) are ways in which contents are interpreted; there is nothing more or beyond in them that could ever be appropriated as 'mine.' And yet, appropriating views is one of the deepest forms of appropriation, one of the most difficult to discern, and the most resilient.

means 'awakened one' but also 'the one who truly knows.'[12] Awakening has to do with knowing the absurdity of this whole business of 'mine-making' and relinquishing it, possibly forever. However, another keyword that is omnipresent in the discourses is the name most used to address the committed followers of this teaching, who are called *bhikkhu* or *bhikkhunī*. These are commonly translated as 'monk' and 'nun' respectively, referring to fully ordained male and female followers. Their original meaning, though, is more basic and less formal, it just means 'mendicant,' someone who lives on alms food.[13] The Buddha appropriates the lifestyle of the mendicant (which, of course, is not exclusive to Buddhism) as a sort of living exemplar for conveying and recollecting some of the guiding ideals of his teaching.

Society, now as in the past, has its own conventions to define what a mendicant is or how he or she looks. The image resulting from these constructions is often fairly negative, if not scaring, and it is approached at best for stressing the need to actively intervene for saving the mendicant from his or her condition. The discourses provide an opposite perspective. Here, people voluntary decide to become mendicants, often disregarding significant amounts of wealth, and sometimes even whole kingdoms. Being and living as a mendicant becomes an ideal, which embodies a set of values associated with both a sense of freedom from worldly burdens and a profound under-

12 *Buddha* is the past participle of the verb *bujjhati*, which means 'to be awakened' but also 'to know' or 'to perceive clearly.' Hence, the epithet *Buddha* can also be rendered as 'the one who truly knows.'

13 Already since the sixth century before the common era, the north-Indian region was witnessing a movement of individual seekers endorsing the lifestyle of ascetic wanderers (*samaṇa*), engaged in different contemplative and religious practices. Around the time of the Buddha, they were often adherent to a specific sectarian teaching, inspired by some master. Jains are the most famous example of another group of ascetics contemporary to the Buddha (and often presented in the discourses as opponents). Unlike lay householders and brahmins (the established cast of 'priests' devoted to cultivating religious ceremonies based on the *Vedas*, the oldest Indian corpus of sacred lore), these wanderers had no permanent dwelling and lived on alms food, often engaging in fairly extreme ascetic practices. Some of these practices are described by the Buddha himself (who engaged in them for some years) in MN 12 and 36, and, after his awakening, he criticized them as unhelpful in his first sermon (see §4, SN 56.11). However, the followers of the Buddha remain part of the *samaṇa* movement.

standing of the nature of reality. Mendicancy is no longer just a matter of social norms, but it embodies a certain way of looking and approaching experience in general. This also suggests that being a mendicant is less dependent on the social standards used to define this condition, and more rooted in one's own vision and wisdom. When this ideal is taken seriously, it counters three prejudices at play in the adversarial conception of meditation mentioned above.

First, at a very basic and fundamental level, a mendicant is *not* an autonomous individual, since his or her own life depends on the generosity of others and their graciousness in offering food. Every time one eats, one has to appreciate that one's life depends on others. Even the most secluded hermit has to eat at some point, and that food will be provided by the generosity of donors. There are lifestyles in which this fact gains the foreground. Institutionalized monastic conventions, for instance, often have the purpose of emphasizing this aspect. However, it takes little reflection to realize that *everybody* is a mendicant in some basic sense. Not only does everybody obviously need other human beings to have access to food (and all other basic commodities), but even if one would imagine living alone in nature, one would still have to rely on the presence of other (vegetal or animal) *living beings* in order to survive. Life in a complete desert is simply impossible. Whoever survives can do so only because of (the sacrifice of) other living beings, human or not, in one way or another.[14] The only genuine difference is fully acknowledging this dependence or ignoring it. Reflecting on one's

14 In SN 12.63 the Buddha offers a particularly dramatic simile for explaining one's dependence on food. Imagine two parents who need to cross a desert with their only child. At some point, they run out of food and, in order to cross the desert, they kill the child, prepare dried meat, and eat that in order to cross the desert, while also wailing for the loss of their only and beloved child. As a simile for food, this suggests that life eats life, and those who got eaten are like beloved children, they are not a commodity. With its extreme tone, the simile is meant to convey a sense of profound responsibility towards food. Having to eat is inevitably having to sacrifice the life of some other being; this is just how life works. But knowing that, one might at least try to minimize this sacrifice (hence, the Buddha's insistence on reducing the amount of food consumed) and put it at the service of some higher goal (using food for sustaining a noble quest that might lead to greater freedom).

inevitable dependence on others for such a basic need like food might have a deep transformative effect, often resulting in reconsidering one's standards for what counts as truly necessary, and realizing that being content with little, being easy to sustain, and not being blundersome for others are values worth pursuing and cultivating.

Second, a mendicant does not own anything. A mendicant has given up the very idea of possessing anything. This resolution is often expressed in the discourses as the decision of going forth from homelife into homelessness. At the most profound level, this choice is not due to the fact that circumstances deprive someone of goods and wealth, but rather because one understands that ownership is impossible. If one cannot have anything, one is naturally a mendicant. In fact, there is no genuine alternative to this. In turn, owning nothing, one cannot be troubled by anything since fear, concern, worry, and anxiety can only arise from the anticipations of threats against one's beloved possessions (beginning from one's own physical body and life). Not being troubled by anything, a mendicant is thus naturally content, at ease everywhere, free from needs. In this sense, mendicancy also entails a profound degree of independency and autonomy, which is not at odds with the sense of dependency mentioned above, but rather results naturally from it. All sorts of social conventions might sometimes be used to cover up the impossibility of ownership, or sometimes to stress it. In any case, the true distinction is not between those who are rich and possess a lot and those who are poor because they do not have enough wealth. The distinction is between those who are aware of the impossibility of owning anything in the first place and those who live in the illusion of being able to possess and appropriate things and contents of experience, be those material or not.

Third, acknowledging one's condition, a mendicant can shape his or her life around the fundamental values of non-sensuality, non-violence, and non-aversion. These three values are standardly presented as constituting 'right thought' (*sammā saṅkappa*), the second factor of the eightfold path, the

one directly arising out of right view. Non-sensuality (*nekkhamma*) is often translated with 'renunciation,' although this rendering makes it sounds as if one is giving up something that might be desirable in its own right. However, for one who fully understands the impossibility of ownership, there is nothing that can be really given up since nothing has even been one's own in the first place. Non-sensuality might be better understood as the fact that the ordinary obsession for the enjoyment of sensual pleasures becomes obsolete. One no longer needs them in order to find contentment and satisfaction. This development takes quite some time. It is gradual and profoundly linked with the deepest aspects of one's practice. Non-sensuality does not result from a dismissal, a condemnation or a sheer act of willpower directed against sensual pleasures, but rather from one's understanding of what is or is not genuinely needed for one's long-term happiness and welfare. Non-violence (*avihiṃsā*) can be seen as an immediate result of the commitment to live a moral life, for the sake of one's own safety and for that of others. A mendicant is harmless, not because of a lack of resources or possibility to harm, but because the very intention of harming oneself or others became inconceivable. Harm and cruelty arise out of an act of violence done against something. At the basis of this violence there is some fear (aversion against any harm one might receive), some greed (desire of getting what one does not have), or just ignorance (not even realizing how harmful some action might be). Aversion, greed, and ignorance are all ways of appropriating contents of experience, and without appropriation they simply become impossible; hence, harmfulness and violence become impossible. Non-aversion (*abyāpāda*) itself is the root of friendliness, which in turn encompasses and leads to non-violence and non-sensuality. A mendicant *is* the embodiment of friendliness and vice versa; fully developed friendliness *is* living as a mendicant.

Ordinarily, one appropriates life as 'mine' and tries to figure out what to do with this beloved possession. A mendicant sees things differently. Life is nobody's. Whatever is given or offered is received with gratitude, without

taking for the sake of appropriation, but only for the sake of sustaining this life and making something good out of it. Whatever is available is shared with generosity. Without appropriation there is no bound, and nothing to defend or fear, just freedom. If one is looking for a meaning of life, then the meaning might be witnessing this freedom. Ordinarily, one would try to change and poke the conditions and situations in which one's life unfolds in order to get something more and get rid of something else. Arranging one's conditions might be needed to some extent, insofar as they need to be *sufficiently* good in order for practice to unfold. Above this threshold, however, a mendicant gives up the deluded view of having to interfere with conditions in order to make them square with what 'I' want. Rather, the attitude becomes: given that these conditions are offered, and given that this practice depends on what they allow and offer, how is it possible to infuse them with a greater degree of friendliness, generosity, gratitude, safety, and contentment?

The purpose is not to fix the world and make all badness disappear. One sees more and more clearly that this is obviously not possible, given the inherent dissonance and uncertainty of all experience. And yet, whatever grain of goodness and wisdom one might have realized, that has been distilled from all that one received from those same circumstances one is always in. Hence, one simply tries to discern the most skillful ways to allow that grain of goodness, wisdom and understanding to circulate back, disseminate, produce further benefits for others as well, whatever these might be, in whatever form they might arise. The thought 'I've got to do my practice; I can't really take care of anybody else' becomes inconceivable. One's practice *is* cultivating a certain friendly and wise attitude towards anything else and all other living beings, relinquishing as much as possible that obsession with what 'I' have to do in order to gain something 'for me.' This attitude, though, includes also a relinquishment of the obsession for making anything else better, to fix it, or to make everybody necessarily happy, as 'I' want them to be.

True generosity is sharing and allowing others to take what one sees as one's most valuable good. Offering some white rice might be extremely generous for one who can barely put together a meal a day. Offering time, listening, energies, understanding, knowledge and skills are all other options. What is offered is less important than the attitude with which it is offered. Behind a genuine offering there is the wish: 'may you be well, happy, content, free from aversion and ill-will, free from hostility, free from fear and enmity.' One offers that which contributes to make this wish more real. What matters in this wish is not the extent to which it will be actually realized, but the fact that the wish is expressed, sustained, and becomes one's dwelling, from which one sees and approaches everything else that happens within the field of experience. The wish itself is vulnerable and fragile, cannot be expressed once and forever, it will arise and cease, sometimes it will slip away and will need to be re-established.

The ideal of mendicancy can be a powerful value to cultivate, regardless of how current or historical social standards construct it or say about it. In fact, it might be best to understand mendicancy first of all as a regulative ideal, a tool to establish one's fundamental orientation in life, before and apart from how this can be embodied in socio-historical forms. The advantage of this approach is that one begins to resist (if not prevent) the implicit default tendency to wanting to become this or no longer wanting to be that. Thirst for being something or not being something else is one of the most fundamental forces that shape all experience. Thirst is the main force responsible for suffering and stress. Thirst does not care much for the kind of object towards which it is directed, and it can very much take mendicancy or awakening or any other value as its target. One needs to see the trap that lies here and wisely avoid it or step outside of it. Taking mendicancy as a regulative ideal is a way of using it for the purposes it serves (weakening any sense of ownership and extinguishing thirst for existence), *without* relating to it according to the default scheme of appropriation, namely, as something that

one needs to become, as a form of existence that one needs to appropriate. This consideration has very little to do with the outer form and the sort of social conventions in which and through which one ends up embodying the ideal of mendicancy, but it is essentially rooted in one's understanding of the meaning of this ideal and of the problem that it addresses. After all, all problems begin and end with understanding them.

Friendliness is deeply interwoven in the ideal of mendicancy and receives further support from it. In fact, friendliness can be a wise counsellor to better discern what might be the best way for embodying that ideal given one's current situation. As one allows friendliness to guide the way in which one interprets one's experience and practice, the sense of loneliness, isolation, and perhaps desertification that one might otherwise encounter melts away. Any conflict that sets 'me' against the 'others' is seen as just another manifestation of what friendliness is supposed to overcome. What remains is the wish: 'may all be free from aversion.'

In his *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748 CE), David Hume wrote:

> Should a traveller, returning from a far country, bring us an account of men, wholly different from any with whom we were ever acquainted; men, who were entirely divested of avarice, ambition, or revenge; who knew no pleasure but friendship, generosity, and public spirit; we should immediately, from these circumstances, detect the falsehood, and prove him a liar, with the same certainty as if he had stuffed his narration with stories of centaurs and dragons, miracles and prodigies.[15]

15 David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, sect. viii, §65. As a hyperbolic and provocative comparison, cf. MN 21: 'Mendicants, even if cruel bandits were to cut you limb by limb with a two-handle saw, if one would give into unwholesome thoughts in that case, because of that he would not be complying with my teaching. Mendicants, in that case you should train like this: 'our understanding will remain unchanged, we shall not burst into evil words, and we shall dwell compassionate for their welfare, with a friendly understanding (*mettacittā*), without inner hate. We shall dwell having pervaded them with an understanding endowed with friendliness, and taking

The discourses of the Buddha partly agree with Hume's remark, showing that people living in north-east India some twenty-five centuries ago were ordinarily, and for the most part, as prone to avarice, ambition and revenge as ordinary people are today in the Western world. But the discourses prove also the Hume was wrong, that there is a training that allows those who seriously follow it to completely overcome these attitudes and know no pleasure but friendship and generosity, if nothing even higher. This might not be a default habit, and yet it can be learned, practiced, and become second nature, or even one's only nature due to appropriate education. Among all prodigies and miracles, this might be the most wonderous one, especially because it can really happen.

Who's afraid of soteriology?

What has been introduced so far might already raise a number of concerns in some readers. Is this discussion the presentation of a *religious* practice? Is this practice compatible with the values of today's Western secular societies? Can an emphasis on renunciation and letting go make a person less functional in ordinary life? If friendliness leads to abandon sensual desires, will it not somehow undermine one of the most common and profound ways in which people give meaning to their existences? If friendliness is a dismissal of aversion, will it not make people too prone to accept injustice and abuses and unable to protest against them? The list can go on.

them as a basis, we shall dwell pervading the whole world with an understanding endowed with friendliness, abundant, great, boundless, free from enmity, free from ill-will.' Mendicants, this is how you should train!' This simile comes at the end of a discourse devoted to explaining the necessity of not being affected by others' words (of praise or blame, towards oneself or others dear to one). The bandits represent instances of extremely harsh and abusive speech. Instead of reacting with anger, the Buddha's disciple is encouraged to remain imperturbable and in an attitude of unconditioned friendliness. The Buddha suggests that real and genuine friendliness is witnessed not when everything is optimal, but when one faces adverse conditions and yet does not give in to hatred but remains established in friendliness. When friendliness constitutes the background understanding of any experience, the change of conditions no longer matters (see also §5, AN 3.100).

Anyone who reads the Pāli discourses will notice that they have a very precise agenda. This agenda has one main point on it: ultimate liberation. Liberation can be presented in different ways, which might be more or less understandable by different people, especially depending on the whole array of views they have. One way of characterizing liberation is by considering it as a profound, even revolutionary change in one's way of understanding and interpreting experience. This change is as radical as that of waking up from a dream and then being able to recognize and clearly discern what was a dream from what is awake experience. This characterization (encoded in the very epithet of the Buddha itself) does not tell what the *content* of awakening is, but it does tell that liberation is a radical change in the *overall quality* of experience. With final awakening, this change is irreversible. Having understood the dream as a dream, one can no longer *believe* it, or take it at face value as it was happening while still dreaming. There is a continuity in the structure of experience, since both the dream and the awakened experience remain basically an instance of the fact that some content is appearing. But there is a radical change in the meaning that experience takes. Knowing that something is a dream, and that something else is not, entails a completely different understanding of what these contents actually mean. The difference between awakened and ordinary experience is analogous.[16]

16 In later Buddhist traditions, this difference tends to be spelled out in terms of an opposition between illusion and ultimate reality. Ordinary life unfolds in the domain of what is apparent but illusory, and beyond it lies something that usually does not appear, and yet is genuinely real. The early discourses are somehow less concerned with denouncing the illusory nature of ordinary experience, although they do point to the fact that the ordinary *interpretation* of experience is profoundly biased and epistemically unreliable. The distinction between illusion and reality, as it is used in later traditions, seems to hinge on the opposition between what really exists and what does not really exist. But the early discourses tend to mention illusions as examples of what appears to be 'natural' (not constructed by anybody, simply given in experience) and yet it is the product of craft (e.g. SN 22.95, in §7). The magician is the one who *makes* the illusion, and their trick consists in making something appear *as if* it was genuinely natural and 'unconstructed' by somebody, while in fact it is not. Hence, the illusory nature of ordinary experience consists in the fact that ordinary experience is constructed by specific intentional attitudes that shape it, and yet make it appear as if it was simply given, natural, and unconstructed. From this point of view, seeing reality does not mean to see something that was hidden or not apparent before, but rather appreciating the constructed nature of ordinary experience itself. This point will be further discussed in §7, *Reflections*.

This change is for the good. In fact, an ordinary unawaken person might not remotely fancy the depth, profundity and beauty of the way in which awakening reshapes experience and how precious it is to have the possibility of bringing about this revolution. Awakening comes with a radical sense of freedom, the freedom of no longer being in a condition of need, unfulfillment, thirst, hunger, it is freedom from yokes, freedom from the duty of having to struggle. Most often, the discourses present practical ways of progressing towards awakening and let each one to find out for themselves what that feels like, rather than offering verbalized reports and descriptions about it. In any case, awakening or final liberation is always the main goal of the teaching, and everything presented in the discourses is functional with respect to that goal.

In its long and wide multimillennial history, various Buddhist traditions and lineages have tried to spell out awakening in different ways, sometimes apparently at odds with each other. While the possibility of awakening continued to function as a leading soteriological ideal, the meaning of this transformative event received diverse interpretations. For present purposes, it is not relevant to find out whether there is some fundamental agreement beneath these differences or whether one interpretation is preferable to others. The approach developed in this introduction takes as its starting point that complete awakening is the complete and irreversible extinction of greed, aversion, and ignorance. These three attitudes are responsible for shaping and giving meaning to ordinary experience; their extinction is thus a waking up from that construction. Understanding this point entails realizing that there is something inherently wrong with the way in which ordinary beings (humans or not) are bound and even attached to greed, aversion, and ignorance as their default way of dealing with any experience.

From this point of view, awakening is not a particular extraordinary experience but rather the complete reshaping of the fundamental attitudes towards experience in general. Awakening neither entails nor requires any

special metaphysical or mystical revelation but the most profound revolution in one's way of making sense of and understanding reality *in this very life*. Moreover, among greed, aversion, and ignorance, aversion can be seen as the basis that sustains the other two; hence, tackling aversion more directly will undermine also greed and ignorance. Since friendliness is the basis of non-aversion and the main condition for the non-arising of aversion (or the breaking of the habit of reacting with aversion), friendliness can become a vehicle for awakening. The approach presented here seeks to illustrate how.[17] Nonetheless, this all presupposes taking seriously the soteriological context of the discourses, according to which the problem posed by greed, aversion, and ignorance is real, and liberation from them or awakening is a viable and real possibility.

Soteriology is usually understood as the science, knowledge, or discourse (depending on how one interprets the Greek *lógos*) about salvation (*sōtēria*, in Greek). It would take long to assess the complex relationship between soteriology and religion or to establish whether some sort of soteriology is compatible with non-religious forms of life or even with some form of secularism, including philosophical discussion. This debate can wait for another occasion and it will not be explored here.[18] What can be pointed out is that it will be

17 If one asks for a label to call this approach, perhaps one might name it *mettāyāna* since it takes the practice of friendliness (*mettā*) as the vehicle (*yāna*) for awakening.

18 Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, provides an insightful and documented case against the use of the notion of 'religion' as a heuristic category, showing how it is heavily laden with Western ideology and colonial domination. Fitzgerald proposes replacing this notion with three related concepts, which play a central role in otherwise 'religious' phenomena: ritual, politics, and soteriology. Ritual is associated with a hierarchical order of both the world and society, politics refers to modern socio-political structures and movements that surround 'religious' ways of life, while soteriology: 'is essentially a doctrine of individual salvation or liberation (moksha, mukti) and it specifies a path or marga. Traditionally it has been conceived as a release from this world into a transcendental reality or consciousness and has thus often been dubbed 'otherworldly.' However, in the modern era, liberation has tended to be understood also in a collective sense and has frequently been reinterpreted to mean liberation of a minority from institutionalized oppressions' (pp. 121-122). This distinction allows us to disentangle, to some extent at least, ritualist and political elements associated with certain forms of life or cultures (e.g. Buddhism as a 'world religion') from soteriological ideals, stressing that there is no necessary connection between them. Discussing soteriology does not necessarily entail embracing or advancing ritualist or political agendas, and vice versa. For a discussion of a case study based on

hard to make sense of the teaching conveyed by the discourses by ignoring their soteriological purposes, and hence (from a methodological and hermeneutic point of view) anyone interested in understanding what the discourses are actually teaching should take their soteriological goal into account, as the ultimate context from which their teaching is supposed to be assessed and make sense.

The genuine question is: who is afraid of this soteriological context? And why? For someone who could not make sense of a soteriological horizon at all, there would be probably no worry in the first place and this whole discussion could simply end here. Not acknowledging a soteriological dimension presupposes that one does not see any inherent problems with the ordinary condition of human (and non-human) beings. Circumstances might be improved or managed more efficiently, this or that might be done better or prevented from occurring, but things are ultimately already fine as they are. Holding this view, it will not make any sense to embark on a path (a process of development and cultivation) that aims to radically change and leave behind this ordinary condition. It will make much less sense to make a serious effort to understand what this path entails or what it even means, except perhaps for sheer curiosity and divertissement. In this case, reading further is perhaps not worth the time.[19]

twentieth century Indian Buddhist movements, see Fitzgerald's chapter 6, pp. 121-133. For a more historical reconstruction of the emergence of the modern Western notion of 'religion' as an objectified set of beliefs, practices, and political structures, see Peter Harrison, *The Territories of Science and Religions*. Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2015 (ch. 4, pp. 83-116).

19 In his *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011 (originally delivered as a set of lectures in 1902 CE), William James distinguished between 'healthy-mindedness' and the sort of more tortuous struggle proper of what he calls 'the sick soul.' In James's reading, healthy-mindedness is based on a fundamental belief that all in nature is good, and all that is needed is to simply relinquish oneself into this original goodness through the power of positive thinking. Healthy-mindedness might be powerful, but it seems to overlook the genuine problems that affect human experience. The alternative approach starts by taking seriously the experience of evil, and, in James's words, acknowledging that: 'life and its negation are beaten up inextricably together. But if the life be good, the negation of it must be bad. Yet the two are equally essential facts of existence; and all natural happiness thus seems infected with a contradiction' (Lecture VI, p. 139). Especially in some of today's Westernized presentations,

If someone does recognize that a soteriological opening is at least *possible* (even though little explored in other aspects of the currently dominant culture or of one's own life), then this possibility can be interpreted as either a potential or as a potential threat. What seems threatening about a soteriological perspective is that it more or less explicitly claims (and the discourses tend to be explicit) that there is something inherently wrong with the ordinary way of living, and this is an inescapable condition that will have to be addressed at some point by everybody.

What is wrong is not as much about things that happen or events that occur, it does not concern external circumstances or facts, but rather the underpinning way in which all these experiences are met and understood. The soteriological perspective tends to denounce some sort of very fundamental mistake that affects the ordinary way of making sense of experience, and it points towards an escape from that. A soteriological dimension is commonly present in many different traditions and cultures around the world. Sometimes, it takes the shape of some opening towards an un-worldly reality, a going elsewhere, outside, far away from this troubled world, possibly towards some sort of heaven or paradise, quite commonly thanks to the merciful intercession of a savior. But there are also entirely immanent and even atheistic soteriologies, as philosophers likes Spinoza or Nietzsche can remind.

In the discourses, the Buddha is not presented as a savior, even less as some sort of hieratical deity, but only as (the most excellent) teacher and role model for how a certain process can be accomplished by any human being. Even more importantly, both this world and any other world (including all sorts of heavens and paradises) share the same fundamental problems, which have to do with the most rooted ways in which any experience in general is interpreted and lived from within. A supreme god (a *Brahmā*) and a lower animal ultimately share the same predicament, the same horizon; they are

the teachings of the Buddha are made fit for the 'healthy-minded' approach; any acquaintance with the discourses would dispel this impression.

differently confronted with the same challenge, which neither of them can ultimately avoid. Switching condition in the scale of being does not change the fundamental issues that one ought to face. The discourses are interested in spelling out this challenge as clearly as possible and offering ways for addressing it upfront, straightforwardly, without too much compromise or hesitation.

To some extent, contemporary culture highly values the ability of challenging the status quo, debunking myths, undermining prejudices, and moving the overall ways of understanding and dealing with different realities towards a more open, inclusive, sensitive, and non-adversarial attitude. The ability of shaking off seemingly obvious and established views (regardless of how old, respectable, shared, reasonable, and commonsensical they might seem) is sometimes regarded as philosophy's quintessence or the genuine added value of cultivating a critical spirit. The idea is not that of criticizing everything for the sake of being critical (which is just a polemical caricature of the critical attitude), but rather seriously exploring whether what seems obvious is really so, and whether alternatives to it are possible or even preferable. Anybody that is sympathetic to this sort of project should at least be open to a soteriological perspective since soteriology simply takes this critical attitude towards the ordinary status quo to a whole new level, a cosmic level indeed.

Human beings often show a negative bias towards anticipating negative outcomes. When one is faced with an option, it might be easier to imagine the downsides of what one might lose upon undertaking it rather than the good results one might gain. Faced with a soteriological challenge (there is something wrong with ordinary life that needs to be fixed and overcome), one might then focus on the negative side: all that one might lose going along these lines. Friendliness offers a vantage point of view to compensate this negative bias since it shows how the process of letting go is surrounded by a profound flourishing of the best qualities of one's emotional intelligence, and

how it thrives in the understanding that all that is abandoned (aversion, craving, thirst, confusion, ignorance) was indeed very much worth abandoning.

Reading about the need of overcoming sensual desires will not lead the reader to become apathic on the spot, even less to actually overcome sensual desires. Being exposed to the challenge of leaving behind aversion will not make one prone to accept any sort of abuse. More generally, trying to understand how this whole perspective aimed at ultimate liberation might work will not by itself significantly change one's well-rooted behaviors, habits, coactions. They are safe where they are. Those who fear that by simply being exposed to ideas about non-sensuality they might suddenly end up in robes living an ascetic life, be reassured. If it required just a bit of reading and pondering to overcome one's yokes, they would not be that serious after all, and the whole teaching in the discourses could be skipped as redundant and overly emphatic. The actual problem is that one's yokes are deep and strong, and difficult to see, more than one might imagine or expect.

Exploring friendliness is first of all a way of (at least partially) uncovering the nature of these yokes, seeing how they work, appreciating their pull, and hopefully getting a sense of what it would take to make a serious effort to undermine their grip. This exploration is provided for the purpose of opening an alternative, creating a space for maneuver that might otherwise be overlooked. Yokes are there, but they are neither necessary nor unbreakable. *If* one wants to break them (and break free from them), *then* there is something that can be done. Whether one wants to proceed in that direction, when one wants to start, how far one wants to go, these are all rather personal questions one will have to answer on her or his own.

On one occasion (AN 10.95) the Buddha was asked whether his teaching would be capable of saving the whole world, only half of it, or only a third of it. The Buddha did not answer. His silence was explained by pointing out that the Buddha does not know *how many* living beings might reach the goal

of ultimate liberation, but he knows *how* they might if they want, and he teaches that to everybody who is willing to listen.

Readings

As a preliminary topic for reflection, the following reading (AN 11.15) presents the main benefit that can be expected from the practice of friendliness. What is the benefit that attracts you most? What is the benefit that seems less relevant for you? Reflect on the reasons behind your answers and investigate what are the views and values that support them.

> 'Mendicants, when the liberation of the understanding through friendliness (*mettāya cetovimuttiyā*) has been practiced (*āsevitāya*), developed (*bhāvitāya*), cultivated (*bahulīkatāya*), made a habit (*yānīkatāya*), made a basis (*vatthukatāya*), looked after (*anuṭṭhitāya*), scrutinized (*paricitāya*), well-undertaken (*susamāraddhāya*), eleven benefits can be expected. What eleven?
>
> One sleeps happily, wakes up happily, does not have nightmares. One is dear to human beings, dear to non-human beings. The deities protect one. Neither fire, poison, nor weapons can touch one. One's mind gains composure quickly. One's complexion is bright. One dies unconfused and, if one does not penetrate any higher, is headed for the Brahma world.[20]
>
> Mendicants, these are the eleven benefits that can be expected when the liberation of the understanding through friendliness has been practiced,

20 In the cosmology that underpins the discourses, the Brahma world is the realm of existence in which dwells Brahma, the highest divinity, whose existence is extremely blissful, long and sublime. 'Brahma world' can thus be taken as a synonym of the highest heaven. From a historical point of view, the Vedic tradition tended to see Brahma as the personification of *Brahman*, the underpinning universal principle behind the whole of reality. Seeking (or realizing) one's union with Brahma(n) was then considered to be the highest goal of life. The Buddha often declares (e.g. DN 1, MN 49) that the 'Brahma world' is as conditioned and uncertain as any other realm of existence and that genuine freedom does not consist in joining this particular world (ultimate freedom is 'higher' than that). However, the expression 'headed to the Brahma world' can be taken more loosely as a synonym of 'headed to final liberation' since this is what it would have meant for people familiar with the Vedic tradition (hence the sentence would mean 'if someone does not reach liberation, one is nonetheless headed towards it'). The expression witnesses a subtle play of words and shift of concepts operated in the discourses with respect to that tradition. Concerning these aspects, see Richard Gombrich, *What the Buddha Thought*. Sheffield and Bristol: Equinox Press, 2009.

developed, cultivated, made a habit, made a basis, looked after, scrutinized, and well-undertaken.'

(AN 11.15)

The following discourse (Ud 2.10) describes how a former prince experienced a radical change in his life after undertaking the training offered by the Buddha.

It has been heard by me that, on one occasion, the Fortunate[21] was dwelling at Anupiya, in the Mango Grove. At that time, the excellent Bhaddiya, Kaligodha's son,[22] having gone to the forest, to the root of a tree, to an empty hut, was continuously uttering this inspired utterance: 'Ah, what happiness! Ah, what happiness!'

Many mendicants heard that the excellent Bhaddiya, Kaligodha's son, having gone to the forest, to the root of a tree, to an empty hut, was continuously uttering this inspired utterance: 'Ah, what happiness! Ah, what happiness!' Having heard this, it occurred to them: 'Undoubtedly, friends, the excellent Bhaddiya, Kaligodha's son, does not find delight in the training,[23] and it is remembering the royal happiness he had in his former

21 *Bhagavā* (the Fortunate One, or the Blessed One) is an epithet for the Buddha.

22 According to the tradition: 'the Buddha's father, King Suddhodana, had four brothers and two sisters. Bhaddiya, [is] the son of Dhotodana, King Suddhodana's next oldest brother and Princess Kaligodha, the chief Sakyan lady of her time' (quoted from Bhante Walpola Pyananda and Stephen Long, *Thus we Heard. Recollections of the Life of the Buddha*. Los Angeles: Metta from Us, 2010, p. 14).

23 *Brahmacariyaṁ carati* is commonly rendered as 'living (*carati*) the holy life (*brahmacariyaṁ*).' In ancient Indian culture, *brahmacariya* is a technical term designating a period in which the young son of a householder leaves the parental home and lives a celibate life at the house of a teacher, who instructs him in the traditional Vedic lore and prepares him for taking up household duties after this training period. With the development of various forms of ascetic life (the *samaṇa* movement), the idea of living a celibate life under the guidance of a teacher came to be envisaged as a life-long possibility, no longer aimed at simply preparing young males for their future duties as householders, and no longer necessarily connected to passing Vedic lore on to new generations. In this sense, *brahmacariya* becomes the life-style of someone who renounces household life altogether, commits to celibacy, and then pursues the research of the supreme good under the guidance of a teacher. In later times, it became synonymous with the lifestyle of ordained monks and nuns. In the formula used to express the reaching of full awakening, it is acknowledged that 'the *brahmacariya* has been lived (*vusitaṁ*).' This does not mean that one will then move on to some other way of living, but rather that 'the training has been completed' and one is no longer a 'disciple in training' (*sekha*), but one who is 'beyond training' (*asekha* or *arahat*) and who has fully mastered the skills of freedom. Since celibacy is a fundamental component of the lifestyle of a *brahmacarin*, the term is

homelife, that he goes to the root of a tree, to an empty hut, continuously uttering this inspired utterance: 'Ah, what happiness! Ah, what happiness!"

Then, many mendicants went to the Fortunate. Having arrived, they paid homage to the Fortunate and sat to the side. Once seated, the mendicants addressed the Fortunate: 'Venerable, the excellent Bhaddiya, Kaligodha's son, having gone to the forest, to the root of a tree, to an empty hut, was continuously uttering this inspired utterance: 'Ah, what happiness! Ah, what happiness!' Undoubtedly, Venerable, the excellent Bhaddiya, Kaligodha's son, does not find delight in the training, and it is remembering the royal happiness he had in his former homelife, that he goes to the root of a tree, to an empty hut, continuously uttering this inspired utterance: 'Ah, what happiness! Ah, what happiness!"

Then, the Fortunate addressed a certain mendicant: 'Mendicant, please go in my name to mendicant Bhaddiya, and say to him: friend Bhaddiya, the Teacher calls you.'

'Yes, Venerable' that mendicant replied and went to the excellent Bhaddiya, Kaligodha's son. Having arrived, he addressed Bhaddiya: 'Friend Bhaddiya, the Teacher calls you.'

'Yes, my friend' replied Bhaddiya, Kaligodha's son, to that mendicant, and went to the Fortunate. Having arrived, and having paid homage to the Fortunate, he sat to the side. Once seated, the Fortunate addressed Bhaddiya, Kaligodha's son: 'Bhaddiya, is it true what they say, that having gone to the forest, to the root of a tree, to an empty hut, you continuously utter this inspired utterance: 'Ah, what happiness! Ah, what happiness!'?'

'Yes, Venerable.'

'Bhaddiya, but what reason do you see for doing this?'

'Venerable, in the past, when I was living the homelife, when I was ruling the kingdom, the inside of the inner quarters was well protected with guards, the outside of the inner quarters was well protected with guards, the inside of the city was well protected with guards, the outside of the city was well protected with guards, the inside of the country was

also used in the context of spelling out the third *uposatha* precept (see AN 8.41 below), as a synonym for the abstention from any intentional sexual activity.

well protected with guards, the outside of the country was well protected with guards. And yet, Venerable, even if I was protected and guarded in this way, I lived fearful, anxious, agitated, frightened. But now, Venerable, having gone to the forest, to the root of a tree, to an empty hut, I live alone, unafraid, unagitated, not anxious, fearless, at ease, confident, active, with the understanding of a wild animal. Venerable, this is the reason why, having gone to the forest, to the root of a tree, to an empty hut, I continuously utter this inspired utterance: Ah, what happiness! Ah, what happiness!'

Then, the Fortunate, having understood the meaning of this, in that moment, uttered this inspired utterance:

'For one who has overcome being 'this' or 'that',
there are no inner aversions;
free from fear, happy, without sorrow:
even the deities do not experience the sight of one like this.'

(Ud 2.10)

Even when practice is relatively in its beginnings, it might be fruitful, from time to time, to explicitly commit to a higher standard of life for at least one entire day. The discourses encourage doing this systematically throughout the month, by observing the lunar Sabbaths. The following discourse offers a presentation of the eight key precepts that are taken up during these observances. They encompass a strengthening of moral conduct and a degree of sense restraint, both conducive to nourish self-worth and joy, which are in turn a fruitful basis for developing practice further. As one gradually learns to appreciate the purity and clarity that derive from these standards, one might even choose to make every day an observance day. The observance day is designed to provide a direct experience of how a fully awakened person would usually spend her or his time, and the sort of aspirations and intentions that would shape it. The eight training rules presented here constitutes the bridge between (and across) ordained and lay disciples (see also Sn 2.14).

It has been heard by me that, on one occasion, the Fortunate was dwelling in Jeta's Grove, at Anathapindika's park. There, the Fortunate addressed the mendicants:

'Mendicants!' 'Yes, Venerable' those mendicants replied to the Fortunate. The Fortunate said this:

'Mendicants, the observance of the lunar Sabbath (*uposatho*), endowed with eight aspects,[24] it's of great fruit, great benefit, great brightness, great scope.[25] Mendicants, and how is the lunar Sabbath observed endowed with eight aspects, so that it is of great fruit, great benefit, great brightness, great scope?

Here, Mendicants, an outstanding disciple reflects: 'as long as they live, the Worthy Ones (*arahanto*) have abandoned the killing of living beings and abstain from it, and having given up rod and sword, scrupulous and kind, they dwell compassionate and friendly towards all living beings.

Today, for this night and this day, I too shall abandon the killing of living beings and abstain from it, and having given up rod and sword, being scrupulous and kind, I shall dwell compassionate and friendly towards all living beings.

I shall observe the lunar Sabbath and imitate the Worthy Ones in this aspect.'

This is the first aspect by which it is endowed.

'As long as they live, the Worthy Ones have abandoned taking what is not given and abstain from it, they take or expect only what is given, and they dwell by keeping themselves pure and without stealing.

24 At the time of the Buddha, many different sects and groups used to have 'observance days' (*uposatha*), usually in coincidence with the days associated with the moon phases. This practice is taken up by the Buddha, who adjusts it and recommends it to his disciples as occasions for strengthening practice and motivation. The clause *aṭṭhaṅgasamannāgato* (which could also be rendered as 'completed' or 'perfected' in its eight factors) stresses that the observance prescribed by the Buddha comes with specific tasks, which in this discourse are outlined as eight precepts aimed at imitating the attitudes that are natural for the fully awakened ones (*arahanto*). In a more elaborated account (AN 3.70), before listing the eight precepts, the Buddha includes the recollection of the qualities of the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha (the three 'refuges' or three 'jewels'), followed by a recollection of the disciple's own virtue and a recollection of the deities. These five recollections are introduced as a method for generating inner joy, suitable in turn for cultivating composure and cleansing the understanding from intoxicants and impurities.

25 The twin discourse AN 8.42 elaborates further on this list of qualities.

Today, for this night and this day, I too shall abandon taking what is not given and abstain from it, I shall take or expect only what is given, and I shall dwell by keeping myself pure and without stealing.

I shall observe the lunar Sabbath and imitate the Worthy Ones in this aspect.'

This is the second aspect by which it is endowed.

'As long as they live, the Worthy Ones have abandoned non-celibacy, they live celibately and secluded, abstaining from sexual activities.

Today, for this night and this day, I too shall abandon non-celibacy, I will live celibately and secluded, abstaining from sexual activities.[26]

I shall observe the lunar Sabbath and imitate the Worthy Ones in this aspect.'

This is the third aspect by which it is endowed.

'As long as they live, the Worthy Ones have abandoned false speech and abstain from it, they speak the truth and adhere to it, they are reliable, trustworthy, no deceivers of the world.

Today, for this night and this day, I too shall abandon false speech and abstain from it, I shall speak the truth and adhere to it, I shall be reliable, trustworthy, no deceiver of the world.

26 Periodic celibacy was (and remains) a common practice among many cultures across the world, and it is usually associated with purification rituals. In the Buddhist teaching, celibacy can be taken up as a life-long commitment by the most dedicated practitioners (ordained or not). In the discourses, sexual activity is associated primarily with two domains: procreation and pleasure. Procreation is the core business of the household life and conceived as a social duty. In the ancient-Indian context, children (especially males) would constitute a possession of the householder and ensure his survival after death. They thus represent a core domain of appropriation. Celibacy leads to a withdrawal from the values and ideals associated with this model of life, regardless of whether one already has children or not (the Buddha himself had one before embarking in his quest for awakening). As it will be discussed later (SN 36.6, §3), greed for sensual pleasures (including sex) is understood as mostly a distraction strategy used to cover up a fundamental uneasiness and unpleasantness. Giving up sex is a way of renouncing this strategy and find new and different ways of facing one's vulnerability to suffering. Between procreation and seeking sexual pleasure for its own sake, the latter is regarded as more problematic. This being said, it is conceivable that, twenty-five centuries later, in a very different cultural context, sexual activity might receive further meanings and dimensions that go beyond those taken into account in the discourses. Whether this is really the case is up for exploration. In any case, a confrontation with the ideal of celibacy might help stripping the phenomenon of sex of those aspects that are most directly connected with sheer greed and possessiveness and investigate whether something else is left or revealed. Be that as it may, taking up celibacy is never presented as a commandment or a duty, but more like a challenge and a way of embodying a certain ideal of inner contentment. In contemporary, ordinary terms, it is more akin to going vegan than to a Biblical 'thou shalt not ...!'

I shall observe the lunar Sabbath and imitate the Worthy Ones in this aspect.'

This is the fourth aspect by which it is endowed.

'As long as they live, the Worthy Ones have abandoned states of intoxication and abstain from them, such as those produced by intoxicants like wine and liquors.

Today, for this night and this day, I too shall abandon states of intoxication and abstain from them, such as those produced by intoxicants like wine and liquors.

I shall observe the lunar Sabbath and imitate the Worthy Ones in this aspect.'

This is the fifth aspect by which it is endowed.[27]

'As long as they live, the Worthy Ones have one meal a day, abstaining from eating in the evening and at inappropriate times.

Today, for this night and this day, I too shall have one meal a day, abstaining from eating in the evening and at inappropriate times.

I shall observe the lunar Sabbath and imitate the Worthy Ones in this aspect.'

This is the sixth aspect by which it is endowed.

'As long as they live, the Worthy Ones have abandoned and abstain from dancing, singing, instrumental music, entertainment, or using garlands, perfumes or cosmetics for dressing up and beautifying themselves.

Today, for this night and this day, I too shall abandon and abstain from dancing, singing, instrumental music, entertainment, or using garlands, perfumes or cosmetics for dressing up and beautifying myself.

I shall observe the lunar Sabbath and imitate the Worthy Ones in this aspect.'

This is the seventh aspect by which it is endowed.

27 The first five precepts listed here are also the five basic precepts that define the minimum of right moral behavior, except for the third precept, that in its more basic form entails abstaining from sexual abuse or misconduct (causing harm to oneself or others), instead of complete celibacy. Notice that the fifth precept is not just about abstaining from alcohol, but more fundamentally abstaining from all states of intoxication (most often caused by the use of substances), such as those *exemplified* by drunkenness due to alcohol. Anything else causing any similar intoxication also falls within the scope of this precept (which means that if a substance does *not* cause intoxication, it should not be considered a drug).

> ‘As long as they live, the Worthy Ones have abandoned and abstain from high and comfortable beds, they lay down on a low resting place or a straw mat.
>
> Today, for this night and this day, I too shall abandon and abstain from high and comfortable beds, and I shall lay down on a low resting place or a straw mat.
>
> I shall observe the lunar Sabbath and imitate the Worthy Ones in this aspect.’
>
> This is the eighth aspect by which it is endowed.[28]
>
> Mendicants, when the lunar Sabbath is observed endowed with eight aspects, it is of great fruit, great benefit, great brightness, great scope.’
>
> (AN 8.41)

This preliminary section has covered much ground and notions, which will be worth keeping in the background as one progresses in developing practice and reflection. Themes presented here will resurface in what follows. What should be clear, though, is that the practice of friendliness is no mechanical unfolding of pre-established steps and motions. Friendliness is a tool to open new options, become more flexible in the ways in which one can react to what happens, and eventually gain more freedom. But this might sometimes also lead to a sense of disorientation. Where should I go? What should I do?

28 The last three precepts focus on a degree of sense restraint that is supportive for practice. They also encourage to find and cultivate alternative resources of well-being, happiness and contentment, aloof from sensuality. Reducing the time allocated for food is a means for both reducing the time devoted to a major domain in which sensual desire usually manifests, and maintaining a degree of lightness and alertness, which makes meditation easier. In several lineages, this rule is interpreted in such a way that allows to eat a (light) breakfast after dawn and the main meal before noon. The seventh precept tackles various forms of distraction and entertainment (or even beautification for the sake of seduction), which can be used to foster sensuality or simply ‘kill the time’ and escape boredom. Today, this should be adapted so to include all sorts of electronic, digital and online entertainment. Restraining from entertainment is thus a way of allowing the underpinning tendency towards greed and aversion to manifest and become able to work with them. The eighth precept can be interpreted as an invitation not to indulge in sleep and sleepiness. Having a not-too comfortable sleeping place will make the time spent there less attractive. The idea is resting the bare minimum that is needed for the body to recover energies, but then remaining alert and awake as long as possible during the rest of the time.

Sometimes one might find oneself in a place that does not seem to be charted by the teachings, the discourses, or one's trusted acquaintances. On a few occasions, like the following discourse (AN 8.53), the Buddha provided a checklist of criteria that can be used to assess whether one is moving in the right direction or not, or at least how to decide what the right direction (in terms of practice) is.

> On one occasion, the Fortunate was dwelling at Vesali, in the hall with the peaked roof in the Great Forest. Then, Mahapajapati Gotami went to the Fortunate. Having arrived and having paid homage to the Fortunate, she stood to one side. Standing to one side, Mahapajapati Gotami said this to the Fortunate:
>
> 'Venerable, it would be good if the Fortunate could teach me the reality (*dhammaṁ*) in brief. Having heard the reality from the Fortunate, I will dwell alone, withdrawn, unintoxicated (*appamattā*),[29] ardent, resolute.'
>
> 'Gotami, when of certain realities (*dhamme*)[30] you know: 'these realities lead to infatuation (*sarāgāya*), not to dispassion (*virāgāya*), they lead to be fettered (*saṁyogāya*), not to be unfettered (*visaṁyogāya*), to accumulation, not to dispersal, to greater desires, not to fewer desires, to discontent, not to contentment, to entanglement, not to seclusion, to laziness, not to arousing energy, to be burdensome, not to be unburdensome'—Gotami,

29 The term *appamatta* is commonly rendered with 'heedful' or 'diligent.' However, it can be derived from the root *mad* (the prefix *pa-* is reinforcing), present in *majjati* ('being intoxicated,' from *mad* + passive suffix *-ya*), from which one gets the past participle *matta* (intoxicated), and the substantive *majja*, which refers to intoxicating substances (usually alcoholic) or to a state of negligence. The semantic scope of 'intoxication' is crucially important in the discourses, and it sounds clearly in AN 5.57 (§4), where the process of awakening is also described as a relinquishment of 'intoxicants' or 'poisonous' attitudes (*āsava*), and 'polluting factors' or 'defilements' (*kilesa*).

30 *Dhamma* has various meanings, and it is often rendered with 'phenomenon,' 'quality,' 'object,' or even 'nature.' It can also mean 'teaching' (especially in connection with the Buddha's own teachings). In this discourse, the spectrum of meaning clearly encompasses this whole range since *dhamma* refers both to the Buddha's teachings and to the objects of knowledge. Etymologically, *dhamma* derives from the root *dhṛ* (as in the verb *dhāreti*, 'to apprehend,' 'to remember'), which has the meaning of 'ground,' 'support,' and 'foundation.' As an experiment, from now on it will always be translated with 'reality.' The purpose of this experiment is twofold: on the one hand, to signal the use of the same term across different contexts, on the other hand to bring to the fore the root meaning of the term, which points to what is most tangible and real in any content of experience.

you should resolutely hold (*dhāreyyāsi*): 'this is not the reality (*dhammo*), this is not the discipline (*vinayo*), this is not the Teacher's instruction.'[31]

Gotami, but when of certain realities you know: 'these realities lead to dispassion, not to infatuation, they lead to be unfettered, not to be fettered, to dispersal, not to accumulation, to fewer desires, not to greater desires, to contentment, not to discontent, to seclusion, not to entanglement, to arousing energy, not to laziness, to be unburdensome, not to be burdensome'—Gotami, you should resolutely hold: 'this is the reality, this is the discipline, this is the Teacher's instruction!'

(AN 8.53)

31 Notice the subtle play with the word *dhamma* and the verb *dhāreti*, which share the same idea of firmly bearing or supporting something. In this case, *dhāreti* has the meaning of holding firmly in mind (remembering) but also being firmly convinced (believing), and thus gaining confidence and resoluteness (intention), into the reality (*dhamma*) that has been assessed.

1. Space

Directions

Take a comfortable seated position.[32]

Acknowledge whatever is currently present in your experience (external or internal perceptions, feelings, thoughts, intentions). This includes the fact that your body is sitting.

Within this broad field of experience, notice how the fact that you are sitting here, right now, provides the general context for whatever is manifest to you. Without this living sentient body, you could not experience anything else.

Allow your attention to gravitate around the sitting body. All other aspects of your experience (perceptions, feelings, intentions) might be calling for your attention, pulling and pushing it in various directions. The sitting body, in contrast, is more static, quiet, silent. It does not demand or require anything in particular. Notice this difference. Then, you can decide to remain with the body, instead of running around and being dragged by other forces, appreciating how a more restful and unagitated experience is also more enjoyable and refreshing.

32 If possible, it is advisable to sit on the ground, maybe on a mat to soften the contact between the knees and the floor. A meditation cushion is recommended to sustain the spine. Posture must be relaxed and alert at the same time. The spine erected and straight, but not overly stretched. The neck aligned with the spine, the chin gently forward, neither too reclined nor falling on the chest. Shoulders should be relaxed and low, hands can be wrap one in the other, or gently left on the knees. Legs are best positioned one in front of the other, without pressing on one another, possibly with knees touching the ground or a prop. If flexibility allows, one can also take a half lotus or a full lotus position, although these positions are best explored under the guidance of some teacher. In seated meditation it might be best to close the eyes, in order to support greater withdrawal from external stimuli. However, if drowsiness and sleepiness arise, one might also keep the eyes slightly open, gently focusing on a neutral point a few steps away on the floor. If you need to use a chair, then sit on the edge of the seat, never leaning towards the backrest, with feet evenly apart and fully touching the ground.

Wherever attention moves, keep remembering that you are still sitting, and that your sitting body remains the context of whatever else is currently happening. Initially, this recollection might require a gentle effort or nudge. It might be disrupted more or less profoundly; in which case you need to re-establish it. As you persist, it will create a continuity throughout experience by providing a broad, open and common context in which everything else unfolds.

Eventually, attention will tend to remain more centered on the context of the body. When any other stimulation arises, it will receive scant support and might fade on its own, without any need to follow it up. Instead of being scattered, attention will then feel collected, composed. You might feel like sinking into the body, immersing yourself into its peaceful experience, like when you put your hand into a warm glove.

Refinements

Taking the sitting posture of the body as the background of your experience does not require focusing on any particular aspect of the body, nor analyzing in detail any particular perception associated with the body. This is a much simpler, and to some extent fuzzier, knowledge which is intuitive, non-verbal, immediate, and felt from within.

If you have difficulties allowing your attention to rest on this immediate perception of the body, you might make the contemplation more dynamic. Survey each part of the body. You can begin from the head and move down to the feet or begin from any part that is at first more vividly present in your experience. Wherever the starting point is, make sure you gently move the gaze of attention through all the parts of the body: head, neck, shoulders, chest, arms, hands, abdomen, legs, feet. The breath can also be considered as a part of the body.

Remain with your attention on each part long enough to perceive how it feels, whether it is relaxed or contracted. If it is contracted, can you relax that contraction a bit? If it is already relaxed, could you make it even more relaxed?

While moving attention around your body and progressively relaxing all its parts, try to also build a sense of the whole bodily space. Connect the perception of one part with the other, until you can clearly discern the whole body at once.

Pay particular attention to the experience of space. The body takes up some space. Its posture is a way of occupying space. You can be aware of both bodily space and also of the space outside of it. See whether it is possible to stretch your awareness so as to include some of the space that surrounds you. Can you become aware of the whole body *and* of the space immediately outside of it, just beyond the skin? How far does your awareness go? How much space can it embrace at once?

If the experience of sitting becomes particularly painful, direct attention to the area where you feel pain. Relax the *attitude* towards the pain, the way in which you look and pay attention to it. Ask yourself if the pain is bearable for another minute. If it is, try to stay with it, and reassess the situation later. If the pain becomes unbearable, then slowly adjust your posture, possibly minimizing the movement, while remaining fully aware of your motion as you alter your posture.

Notice that there are two main ways of being aware of the body and of its posture.

In a more active and focused way, you can survey the whole body or any of its parts, adjusting its posture, relaxing any tension that you might notice, directly and deliberately intervening in your experience as if the body was an object on which you can work somehow from the outside.

In a more passive and open way, you can simply let the body manifest in the space of awareness in which this experience appears. In this modality, you do not actively try to change or modify the body, but embrace the whole of it with awareness, welcoming its manifestation, being open to it. The body is no longer just a target of attention, it reveals itself as already there; you just know from the inside that it is there. You can listen to the body, as if you were listening to the sound of the sea, coming from all directions, letting yourself rest within this open hearing, letting the body silently manifest its presence. When you experience tensions or contractions, instead of actively trying to relax them you can experiment with simply receiving those contractions as well, allowing space around them and letting them dissolve in that space.

A more focused and object-directed way of paying attention might come more naturally in the beginning, but it is also a bit more tiresome and demanding. A more passive and receptive attitude might appear more difficult to sustain at first, but it is actually more enjoyable and stable in the long term. It is important to appreciate the difference between these two ways of using attention, discern their different qualities, and eventually assess which one is the most appropriate at any given time.

You can observe how the perception of the body changes depending on the way in which you look at it. When you move your attention through different parts of the body, you can discern them with a certain degree of precision and sharpness. When you then dwell on the perception of the whole body,

in which all these parts just merge into a unified perception, the degree of detail is reduced. The whole body is perceived in a slightly fuzzier way than any of its parts. The whole body might still seem like the sum of its parts, which are most likely recognized due to different perceptions in each of them (pressure, temperature, skin contact, and so on). At this point, you can put aside these different bodily perceptions and just be aware of the space occupied by the body. This makes the perception of the whole body even fuzzier, less detailed, less precise, less determinate. When you try to extend your awareness just beyond the skin level, in order to include the space immediately outside the body, the perception of space might lose another degree of determination and sharpness. Explore this progressive lightening, simplification and fading of perception. Notice that you can still remain aware of the whole body and this is still a somewhat determinate perception, and yet its intensity and sharpness might change considerably.

Contemplation of the sitting posture can be helpfully alternated with contemplation of standing and walking. This is done by ideally establishing a straight walking path of some twenty steps between two end points. Standing on one extreme, well erect, the arms behind the back, hands grasping one another, shoulders open, observe the body while standing. Notice the subtle shifting of weight and the adjustments throughout the body that keep equilibrium. Standing still requires little movements. You do not need to intervene or interfere with this, since the body knows already how to keep standing, but you can observe the dynamic stillness entailed by the standing posture. Then, you can start walking along your path, at the pace that is more convenient for you, the gaze on the ground a few steps in front of you. Pay attention to the soles of your feet, then to the legs and other parts of your body as it moves, eventually building a sense of the whole body walking. Walking entails movement but also a subtle play with stillness and balance. Appreciate this still dynamic of walking. You do not have to interfere with

the walking, controlling it, guiding it, since the body already knows how to walk. If significant distractions arise during walking, then stop wherever you are, observe for a few moments the experience of standing still, then reestablish the intention of observing the body walking along the path.

Comparing the dynamic stillness of the standing posture with the still dynamic of the walking, you can also appreciate how the difference between the two is a matter of degree. In time, you can then build a sense of continuity across different postures, a feeling of unification that embraces their differences by revealing an underpinning identity.

While sitting, walking or standing fully enjoy these postures without the urge or the need to use them to achieve any other goals. You can sit, stand or walk just for the sake of sitting, standing and walking. You are free to take any posture without the burden of having to do something else with it or while in it. Appreciate, savor, and cultivate this sense of freedom and relief born from having less to do, being content with less, being happy with something as simple as walking, standing, or sitting.

Reflections

Metacognitive awareness

In ordinary daily life, attention tends to be absorbed in different objects or tasks. Often, it alternates between several of them quickly, becoming scattered and fragmented, unable to rest anywhere. This condition is more or less uncomfortable, and the habitual strategy to face it consists in trying to become absorbed in some object that can keep attention fixed, and thus allow it to rest. If nothing else works, some form of oblivion or even sleep might do. However, this approach is rarely observed as such and remains mostly implicit. In the constant effort of seeking objects and following tasks, there

is little space for reflecting on how this whole process unfolds or for noticing how attention works. One is too busy trying to fix attention to this or that content, for keeping in mind the broader, overall context that would reveal *how* that same experience is approached.

Experiencing something is knowing that a certain content is appearing. For instance, experiencing a sound is knowing that one is hearing a sound. Knowing one's own attitude towards the content of experience (or the way in which that content is experienced) constitutes the metacognitive context of experience. For instance, knowing whether one likes or dislikes the sound that one is hearing (or whether one wants to focus attention on it instead of filtering it out) is the metacognitive context of the experience of hearing that sound.

The more attention is scattered, the more it runs and jumps between different objects, the less apparent the metacognitive context becomes. Then the focus of attention tends to shrink, creating a narrow and brittle perspective on the object itself. By contrast, when attention is more stable and relaxed, its scope becomes broader, open, and it will naturally include also its own metacognitive context. In this case, one not only knows what the main content of experience is, but also what one's attitude towards that content is, and how this attitude shapes one's way of experiencing it.

Metacognitive awareness is the ability to be aware not only of this or that content of experience (the bodily posture, for instance), but also of the way in which one is aware of that content, or the way in which awareness is affected by the content (the experience of being distracted or being focused, for instance). More precisely, metacognitive awareness is awareness of the cognitive background that surrounds the experience of any object (which constitutes a foreground content of attention). The cognitive background usually encompasses a feeling tone (whether the object is experienced pleasantly, unpleasantly, or neutrally) and a set of reactions (based on that feeling, albeit often perceived as directed at the object itself), which affect the way one's attention works.

Metacognitive awareness entails a broadening of the scope of attention, which tends to make the overall experience more open, relaxed, and enjoyable. A sense of openness or spaciousness around the object allows one to have a *perspective*, in which the object takes the foreground of experience while one is also aware of the background within which this object appears. For instance, one pays attention to the bodily posture, while still being aware of other bodily aspects (e.g. perceptions or feelings in the body), other internal phenomena (thoughts arising and passing), or external stimulations (sounds in the environment, temperature, and so on). Openness is always felt neutrally or pleasantly since it entails some degree of relaxation and non-contraction. Metacognitive awareness contributes to openness.

However, this state of openness usually remains available only for a limited amount of time and, sooner or later, it starts shrinking more and more. As attention shrinks, it might move to a totally different object (distraction) or the same object might be felt differently (a slight uneasiness in the body might become an unbearable pain). The shrinking of attention is usually associated with a more or less explicit and intense painful feeling in the tone of one's experience since shrinking is a reduction of space, a form of contraction, which might result in a sort of tunnel-vision or temporary obsession with some content.

Metacognitive awareness reveals that different intentional attitudes affect the working and quality of attention and can contribute to sustaining it in different ways. This creates a potential feedback loop between the metacognitive context and the use of attention itself. By taking into account the metacognitive context, one can learn how to deliberately steer attention in such a way that it will remain more composed, collected, open, and metacognitively aware. Establishing this feedback loop is the first step of practice.

Attention perfectly illustrates the nature of intentionality. In its broadest and most fundamental sense, intentionality refers to the fact of being 'about' something. Like an arrow or a beam of light pointing at an object, attention

exemplifies this 'aboutness' by directing experience towards a particular focal point. In a narrower sense (which presupposes the former), however, intentionality can be understood as the quality of voluntary, deliberate, self-conscious actions, as opposed to involuntary or unconscious ones. In the latter sense, attention can still illustrate the experience of intentionality, since we have the power to consciously direct our attention in different ways. However, the unstable and scattered nature of ordinary attention also reminds us that no matter how much control we try to exercise, our actions always seem to involve elements or dimensions that are outside the scope of our will or conscious power. But whether something is recognised as conscious or unconscious, the essence of intentionality remains its 'aboutness', and it is in this broader sense that the term 'intentionality' will be used in the remainder of this book.

Sustaining attention is not inertial

Sustaining attention on an object is not a natural, inertial, effortless activity. It rather results from a series of repeated discrete intentional acts aimed at the same object for a certain period of time.[33] It is misleading to imagine that attention is in itself some real and concrete entity that, like a cloth, can be put wherever one wants and it will just remain there. Attention is rather an

33 It is beyond the purposes of the present reflection to provide a full-blown account of the nature of attention. As a preliminary indication, however, it might be pointed out that attention is best understood as the mental intention of engaging and interacting with a certain content of experience in some way. This intention induces as a consequence a certain priority in which the content engaged with acquires greater salience and relevance, and hence appears more in the foreground of experience. The sense of openness that characterizes attention concerns the fact that engaging with any object requires picking out that object in a certain context, and thus understanding the interaction in a broader scene. Since interaction requires sustenance and depends on circumstances, attention is not inertial, but needs constant support and can be disrupted in many ways (hence the scattered nature of attention). And since engagement might become so intense that it loses the original context, the focus of attention can shrink. This interactive (and hence relational) understanding of attention is sometimes neglected for a more subjectivist account, in which attention is constructed as an individual's mental structure essentially aimed at prioritizing certain contents over others (cf. Sebastian Watzl, *Structuring Mind. The Nature of Attention and How it Shapes Consciousness.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

experience that results from a stream of discrete momentary intentions. If the stream is not sustained in the right way, it will take any other direction, and this will be experienced as a shift away from the main object, or a change in the degree of awareness, or maybe just in the way in which the same object is experienced. In this sense, distractions are not the opposite of attention, but rather its natural result. It is in the (momentary) nature of attention to jump and move from an object to another. This entails that the experience of *sustained* attention on one object cannot be achieved inertially, by wanting it to happen and then forgetting about it. Rather, one needs to learn what the different kinds of intentional attitudes are that, moment by moment, support the ability of keeping attention on a given object. One has to play with these attitudes, balance them, sustain them, so that the stream of momentary intentions becomes coherent and converges continuously towards the same object.

This process might be illustrated by considering the standing posture. Standing might feel effortlessly and completely natural. However, if one keeps a standing posture for a while, it will become apparent that keeping the body erect and balanced in a standing posture is far from an inertial attitude but requires a constant and continuous balancing of little contractions and relaxations throughout the whole body, which take care of sharing the bodyweight and preserving equilibrium. The counterproof for this is that one can also learn to stand on one's shoulders, arms or hands, rather than on one's feet. In this case, one will have to learn anew how to bring about that balancing activity, but once that will be learnt and absorbed by the body, standing on the arms will not be more problematic than standing on one's feet.

It is thus vital to explore what are the intentions that sustain attention and learn how to achieve some fluency in them. Through mastery, the process of sustaining attention is no longer the blind effort of staring at an object, but becomes a playful way of engaging with it, which keeps attention

actually focused on the same object as long as one keeps playing with it. The experience of sustained attention becomes the experience of a constant flow of action, which is seemingly effortless due to fluency and acquaintance. The essential point is to realize that sustained attention is not a *state* that one enters or reaches, but rather a process that needs to be engaged in a skillful way in order to unfold and continue over time.

In terms of discrete kind of intentions that best contribute to sustaining attention, one might begin to discern between two broad groups. On the one hand, there are certain powerful forms of intentionality that can lead to a strong form of sustained attention and even of absorption or obsession with a certain object. Powerful intentions of sensual desire and lust or hatred are good examples. They might entail a stream of fantasies, images, feelings, inner talks and so on. If one examines how they work and shape experience, it will be possible to notice that they are a constant flow of discrete intentions all aimed at engaging in certain ways with the same object. However, the downside of these forms of intentionality is that they most often create contraction, tension, and closure, which usually result in some painfulness in the whole experience. For this reason, the sort of sustained attention fostered by these attitudes tends to be tiresome and is best avoided.

On the other hand, there are forms of intentionality that somehow play with the object, but with greater grace, lightness, openness. The intention of allowing an object to manifest; the intention of welcoming the contents of experience, even when they might not be as one wishes them to be; the intention of creating space, making room around a certain content, make it feel comfortable, regardless of its nature; the intention of remembering and recollecting the same object from one moment to the next, not forgetting it, not letting its experience fade away. These are examples of intentions that do engage with a certain object, thus contributing to sustain attention on it, but at the same time also reshape the whole experience by making it more comfortable, relaxed, enjoyable. This enjoyment is extremely precious, since it

does not arise from actually poking the object itself, but rather from the lessening of contraction and closure created by the other (unskillful) forms of intentionality. The enjoyment born from this sort of release is even *more* enjoyable than the kind of enjoyment produced by a more direct and brutal engagement with the object itself, although it does still bring the object into the center of experience, hence contributing to sustain attention on it. Enjoyment is in fact a form of ease and relaxation that results from a degree of openness. Openness, in turn, stabilizes attention and fosters enjoyment.

If attention is a stream of discrete intentional acts, and the experience of *sustained* attention is not an inertial process, but needs to be constructed and cultivated, then one might begin to wonder why sustained attention is worth striving for. A complete inability to sustain attention on any object for more than a moment would probably qualify as a pathological condition and would significantly hinders one's ability to function in the world, and perhaps even of surviving. Hopefully, this is not the most common condition even in ordinary daily life. Although attention might be scattered and very changeable, one is usually capable of engaging with certain activities for long enough and with enough attention to carry them over, at least to the extent necessary for getting around in the world and remain alive. The experience of sustained attention (in the most perspicuous sense of the term) should be understood as something stronger and more intense than this minimum degree of continuity that is usually available and even essential for daily life. There are two instances in which sustained attention is particularly necessary: in order to learn, and in order to choose.

Learning to do something, understanding how to carry out a new task, familiarizing with an activity that is not familiar yet, are all instances in which a degree of sustained attention is necessary. One needs to be able to engage with a certain object for long enough, and intensely and carefully enough, for becoming able to understand what that object is and how it works. By contrast, this reveals that the sorts of daily activities that can run

without seemingly requiring much sustained attention are *habitual* activities, namely, all those acts that have been interiorized and appropriated so much and so deeply that they can be performed almost automatically and without any need to specifically reflect or consider how to carry them out. One can walk without having to sustain attention on the walking because one has learned how to walk very long ago, and so long ago that now that action has become seemingly natural and effortless. When one learns how to drive a bike, a degree of sustained attention on how to keep equilibrium is needed in order to learn this new skill, although once learnt, this will then be reproduced effortlessly and without further need to sustain attention. Hence, learning requires sustained attention, while habitual activities do not, but this is only because habitual activities have been learnt already in the past. Without the ability to learn, one could not form habits. Since even instinctual responses might be somehow overruled by learning (one can learn how *not* to follow any seemingly natural instinct), this suggests that *any* habitual pattern (including seemingly innate instincts) have been an object of learning at some point, hence they have been established because of some degree of sustained attention. Sustained attention is what actually determines one's ability to learn, and this shapes in turn the whole of one's capability of acting, both with respect to those habits and actions that have been already acquired, and with respect to the potential for acquiring new ones or changing old ones.

Habitual patterns are mostly based on continuous repetition of relatively simple and well-trained schemes. After repeating a certain scheme of action long enough, the repetition becomes automatic and no longer needs any devoted effort. This means that habits are ways of rehearsing past schemes as if they were present, *or else* seeing and experiencing the present as yet another iteration of the past. Habits are efficient, smooth, seemingly effortless, confident, but they are also relatively rigid and dull when it comes to considering possible alternatives. The goal of establishing a certain habit is

to know beforehand what needs to be done in a certain situation, without having to learn this anew all the time. Habits are built in order to anticipate experience and not having to go through the laborious process of assessing, learning and deciding when similar circumstances arise. Habits short-circuit decisions. This is helpful in many ways, but it has a cost. If one's life is entirely run by one's habits, then one will never face the present and the possibility of doing otherwise.

The present happens only once. The present has never happened before, it will never happen again. Facing the present is acknowledging what is different in the current situation with respect to any past experience (despite potential similarities), and then taking that difference into account in order to see whether repeating the same scheme of action is appropriate or not. Facing the present is taking responsibility for one's action, acknowledging that what was appropriate in the past might no longer be appropriate now. Habits are blind to the present, they do not see the constitutive difference that makes the present different from the past, they can only see the similarity that makes the present just a new instance of the past. In order to see the present, one needs to step outside of habits, to stop taking them at face value, to suspend their pull, and to face what is new in this current moment. To do this, sustained attention is necessary, just because sustained attention is what disempowers habitual reactions and calls for a reopening of the possibility to take decisions and make (even slightly different or new) choices. Hence, sustained attention is needed for freedom, namely, for claiming the possibility of not having necessarily to repeat what one has already done in the past.

Ordinary concentration and composure

The ability of sustaining attention is perhaps one of the most important abilities that contribute to shape one's life and the meaning of it, since it is essential for both learning and choosing, for both establishing new activities and enjoying a degree of freedom. However, there are different ways of sus-

taining attention. Exploring this difference is key to properly distinguishing between the ordinary sort of concentration that is most familiar (and often troublesome to obtain) in daily life and what might be better called 'composure' (*samādhi*).[34]

Ordinary concentration results from a stream of intentional acts that manage to sustain attention on a given object for a certain period of time. Ordinary concentration requires two conditions: (i) a hedonic reaction (desire for pleasure or aversion to unpleasantness) connected with the perceived nature of the object of concentration itself; and (ii) an appropriate support from the context in which the object is experienced, or else the filtering out of the elements present in the context that are at odds with the hedonic reaction. Each of these two conditions might play a more or less relevant role at different times, but they both need to be present to some degree in order for ordinary concentration to obtain. Concentration has an external trigger in the experience of the object itself and in its hedonic or feeling tone (pleasant or unpleasant). Facing a very disturbing object, one might become extremely keen (concentrated) in getting rid of it, while facing a very enticing object, one might become fully absorbed in trying to enjoy it as much as possible.

34 The term *samādhi* literally means 'staying (from the root *-dhā*) together (*sam-*)' or 'putting together,' 'collecting.' It is often translated with 'concentration' (although the discussion that follows here should clarify to what extent this could be misleading) and sometimes with 'absorption' when it refers to a certain interpretation of meditative contemplations (*jhāna*). Discussing contemplations is a topic for a more advanced stage of practice (§6), but it can already be pointed out that *samādhi* in the discourses is applied to a broader range of experiences, which include for instance ethical behavior and moral conduct (§3). The following reflections simply introduce some of the basic aspects of the experience of composure in general; an almost unfathomable depth in it remains to be explored as practice unfolds. Notice also that the distinction made here between ordinary concentration and composure should not be confounded with the distinction between 'wise' (*yoniso*) and 'unwise' attention (see §2, SN 46.2). Wise and unwise attention concern the sort of objects one attends to and the reasons why one attends to them, while concentration and composure outline two different ways of sustaining attention. Composure tends naturally to undermine unwise attention, but both composure and concentration (to some extent) might be compatible with wise attention (although composure is more consistent with it, while concentration might be seen as a sort of *extrema ratio* tool, see MN 20).

The context in which the experience occurs also plays a crucial role. In the best scenario, the context can induce the triggering, by presenting the object in a certain way and thus facilitating the hedonic reaction and its positive or negative character. For instance, going to a temple in order to devote some time to a contemplative activity is a positive trigger for concentrating on that activity, since everything in the temple (architecture, design, furniture, decoration, music, people) is coherently arranged in such a way to point to contemplation as important, relevant, worth doing, moving. The same applies to all sorts of other contexts: at a university, lecture rooms and buildings are suitable environments for fostering concentration on learning and research, libraries for fostering concentration on reading, cinemas for fostering concentration on watching movies.

When the external context does not perform this facilitating function but works in the opposite way, it becomes a hindrance for ordinary concentration. Now the object of concentration is experienced within a context that is either very different (or simply indifferent) to it or that fosters other sorts of activities or reactions, which are at odds with concentrating on that object. A very noisy environment is not a suitable context for concentrating on reading and studying because the amount of external noise interferes with the ability of listening to one's inner voice or to the voice of a teacher. A commercial center or any space entirely designed to facilitate sensual entertainment and shopping is not a suitable environment for concentrating on a contemplative practice because the message emerging from that context is indifferent (if not opposed) to pursuing a contemplative practice there.

This is the reason why ordinary concentration often requires the effort of filtering some aspects (at least) of the external context that are not consistent with the sort of engagement triggered by the object of concentration. For instance, when external noise is too loud, one might have to put on some music that can filter that noise out and create a more suitable experiential bubble for concentrating on a certain object of study. Even when the trigger-

ing of the object is robust enough to establish a sufficient degree of engagement with it, part of the intentional activity will have to systematically prevent attention to flow towards those aspects of the external context that would undermine concentration. Those aspects are thus perceived as distractions (in the ordinary sense of the term), and effort is required in order to keep them at bay. The stronger the dissonance between the context and the sort of engagement that the object triggers, the stronger the effort needed for overcoming distractions and sustaining concentration.

In most casual scenarios, the matching between the object's triggering and the fitness of the context will be relatively superficial, hence, any attempt to sustain concentration will have to balance between a degree of engagement with the object and an effort of filtering out other elements. This is one of the reasons why ordinary concentration tends to be short-lived since it is quite demanding both in terms of external conditions and the amount of effort and even will-power that it requires. In some cases, ordinary concentration is then deliberately supported by creating suitable environments for certain specific activities (schools for studying, temples for contemplation, commercial centers for shopping, and so on).

In many cases, though, it is also possible to engineer the objects themselves in order to facilitate the way in which they induce the sort of tunnel vision required for ordinary concentration to unfold. By making any object of sight or hearing particularly pleasant (colorful, melodious, and so on) it is possible to make it so alluring and exciting with respect to any other ordinary context that it will become relatively easier to concentrate on it and filter out the rest. Hearing and paying attention to a melodious tune is simpler than concentrating on the amorphous background noise coming from the street. Electronic media are one of the most powerful recent implementations (but neither the first, nor the only one) of this principle. They are designed to create a tunnel vision effect on the contents they convey by making those contents particularly pleasant and enticing from a sensual point of view. In

principle, the ability to concentrate on a small screen would require much more effort than gazing at a vast natural landscape, unless the small screen is able to produce a visual experience that will be felt somehow more exciting and intense than any other more ordinary visual stimulation, including that of a vast landscape. This increased stimulation allows the observer to more easily filter out the rest of the context (the background of the screen, what is behind and around it) and just become absorbed in what happens within the screen. Instead of covering up the background noise, one has rather set on full volume the triggering activity of the object itself.

Compared with ordinary concentration, composure works in the opposite way. Composure is not triggered by a hedonic reaction to an object, but it arises from a form of internal happiness, interest and enjoyment towards any chosen object. While composure still considers a certain object as its main theme (composure is a way of sustaining attention on that object or theme; in this sense it is similar to ordinary concentration), the object itself is no longer the trigger for the sustained stream of moments of attention. This stream of moments is generated from within the understanding of the one who engages with the object. While ordinary concentration is essentially a reactive attitude, composure is more properly an active and even creative attitude; it is not a response to something else, but a deliberate decision to engage with a certain object in a certain way.

The sort of happiness and interest (being interested in something is to be happy about spending time with it and vice versa) that give rise to composure can arise in two main ways. In a more active way, one can simply find reasons for experiencing a certain object as worth exploring and playing with. This active attitude is similar to the ability that certain kids have of making seemingly neutral or pointless things into funny toys and thus spend a wonderful amount of time playing with them. Composure can arise from a similar attitude of playfulness, in which the object becomes only a pretext for enjoying the pleasure and happiness of the experience of composure itself. In

a more passive and receptive way, composure can also arise from any sense of relief and lightening of experience. Whenever an object is experienced in a more relaxed and less contracted way, its experience becomes more pleasant (simply because being relieved from contraction and tension is pleasant in itself). The object might well remain unchanged, but the attitude towards the object becomes more open, it allows for more space around the object, and hence makes the experience of it more enjoyable, easier to sustain, and even more interesting.

One way in which these two attitudes converge is when any object of attention becomes a point of reference for deliberately exploring the metacognitive context of its experience. Instead of focusing on the object itself for the sake of being fully absorbed within it (in the sort of tunnel vision created by ordinary concentration) composure can consider almost any object for the sake of indirectly and peripherally exploring its metacognitive context. This exploration can unfold at many levels of depth, but it usually includes and even begins from acknowledging the feeling tone (pleasant, unpleasant, neutral) that surrounds the object and contributes to create its meaning for the one who experiences it. This feeling tone is at the basis of any further and more complex intentional attitude or reaction towards the object, and it even affects the way in which the object is perceived. The metacognitive context also encompasses the ability to detect how changes in the feeling tones of experience affect changes in the way in which one engages with the same object. From this point of view, the metacognitive context of an object can be compared with the meaning of a word: upon reading the word, one understands its meaning, and the meaning is somehow deeply entrenched with the recognition of that word and the experience of it, although it cannot be directly found within the material or graphical appearance of the word itself.

One is seeing a certain visual form or hearing a certain sound or just walking or sitting, and this experience can become an object of composure,

insofar as one engages with this experience for the sake of better understanding how one feels or intends with regard to that object. Paying attention to the metacognitive context is a way of actively playing and being interested with the object, and thus making the whole experience more enjoyable and then attention more stable. At the same time, deliberately including the metacognitive context of the object into one's experience is a way of making the experience broader, more open, more inclusive, reducing the sense of constriction and tension that might arise around the intention of having to engage with this particular object.

The effort of filtering out other contents or even the overall context is essential in ordinary concentration, but it remains an effort, a contraction, hence always unpleasant to some extent. By deliberately including the metacognitive context, composure naturally relinquishes this effort. Even if the external context is disturbing, including the metacognitive context into one's contemplation means to take that experience of being disturbed as part of one's contemplation. Hence, filtering out disturbance is no longer necessary because disturbance has become part and parcel of one's extended object of contemplation. Since any relief from an effort is naturally pleasant, the object is met with a greater degree of ease and happiness (even despite the presence of some disturbance), and this happiness results in composure.

Filtering out potentially distracting contents from the context of experience is a key factor that allows ordinary concentration to obtain. This means that ordinary concentration, in order to be established, has to more or less deliberately sustain an effort of filtering distracting contents and preventing attention from flowing towards them. This filtering activity is demanding because it requires, on the one hand, to keep an eye (so to say) on watching the potential threat of distractions, while simultaneously not paying direct attention to them. Being constantly under threat, ordinary concentration tends to be brittle. The experience of composure might *result* in a filtering out of certain contents since the less attention is given to certain aspects of one's current

experience, the less prominently they will be experienced (if experienced at all). The intention of not giving attention to certain contents might also be used to establish a degree of composure when this seems appropriate.

However, the way in which this filtering activity occurs in composure is qualitatively different from how it is established in ordinary concentration. In developing composure, the main reason for withdrawing attention from certain contents is simply that they are not seen as relevant enough for the current contemplation. If one aims to cultivate composure on the basis of one's bodily posture, for instance, attending to visual experience is not relevant and it can be filtered out (by closing one's eyes). This is a deliberate decision in which there is no element of threat or craving involved, but rather a certain degree of dispassion and letting go. It is not the case that one experiences a tension between the enticing object on which one wants to concentrate (the bodily posture) and some disturbing elements in its background (the visual experience). Rather, one realizes that experience can be simplified to a certain degree and that certain aspects of its complexity can be left aside for the time being. Hence, the sort of filtering of experience brought about by composure is emotionally less charged, and surely more relaxed than the almost muscular effort and adversarial attitude required by ordinary concentration.

This reveals that composure is much less dependent on the nature of the object and its context, and on their mutual fit. Since composure is not triggered by a reaction to the object, it does not need to focus on a particularly enticing or hedonically charged object to work (in fact, it works best when objects are relatively neutral and simple). Composure arises from the ability *to make* any object an occasion for cultivating interest, happiness and playfulness. Similarly, composure works well by integrating the context of experience in the experience of composure itself, and by enlarging its own main focus. The context in which one practices composure can become itself part of the object of contemplation, and one's attitudes towards it (including indif-

ference, aversion or scorn) can become part of the metacognitive background that is contemplated. Since composure does not require the sort of tunnel vision that is instead vital for ordinary concentration to unfold, composure tends to be a significantly more flexible, robust, strong and enjoyable experience than ordinary concentration. This is also why, for instance, daily activities and moral behavior can be a very good playground for developing the experience of composure. All activities require some intention to be carried out, and one can simply make this intentional background the metacognitive context for watching any activity during day and night. Without having to do anything particularly different from one's daily routine, each action of that routine can become part of one's contemplation of action in general, and this contemplation will induce and foster a degree of composure.

Keeping possibilities open

Ordinary concentration and composure are two very different ways in which the stream of acts of attention can be stabilized on a given object or theme in a continuous way and for a sustained period. Ordinary concentration does not have to be entirely neglected, dismissed or condemned since there might be cases in which it could be fairly useful and perhaps the only resource accessible at that time. Even in ordinary life there might be moments of composure arising perhaps spontaneously due to special circumstances. Most commonly, though, if one is not aware of the structural differences between concentration and composure, one might easily confuse the two and overlook that what supports one does not support the other. More often than not, concentration tends to become the *only* way for someone to even imagine how to sustain attention on a certain object. Hence, instead of having the option of choosing between concentration and composure depending on what the situation requires, one is left with the alternative between ordinary concentration or just sheer distraction. This frequent and yet unwelcome scenario does not happen randomly. In the same way in which composure requires

some training, ordinary concentration too requires training. If ordinary concentration appears to be the only available option at some point, this must be because only ordinary concentration has been trained, and this training has been in fact so exclusive and intensive that one even lost track of the possibility of composure or became unable to differentiate between the two.

Making ordinary concentration a habit and neglecting (if not ignoring altogether) composure hinders in turn the ability to sustain composure. Ordinary concentration undermines the understanding of what composure might be in the first place, insofar as it creates a sense of obviousness around two assumptions that are necessary for ordinary concentration but not for composure: (i) the object needs to trigger the process; and (ii) external conditions need to be favorable or they have to be filtered out. If one becomes convinced of the validity of these two assumptions, even making sense of the possibility of the experience of composure will be difficult. This reveals that the single factor that most directly counters composure is one's own implicit view that ordinary concentration is the only way in which attention can be sustained (and hence the assumption that the premises on which ordinary concentration rests obviously apply to any attempt to sustain attention). The fundamental (albeit not the only) enemy of composure is neither a noisy or busy environment, nor other external adverse circumstances, nor even ordinary concentration per se, but rather one's own received and established views about what is or is not possible in terms of working with attention. These views are not innate, they are acquired through repetition, habituation and systematic neglect of alternative options. Since views are learned, they can be unlearned as well.

External conditions do play a role in the opening up of the possibility of composure, but this role is arguably different from how one might imagine. For someone who does not even recognize that there is a difference between ordinary concentration and composure, external conditions will be assessed by default from the point of view of how they function in the effort to establish

concentration. However, composure handles external conditions very differently than concentration, and hence the way in which it can be hindered by them is also different. The external condition that is most at odds with the unfolding of composure is the continuous exposure to those objects (like electronic media) that are engineered for the sake of triggering the maximal hedonic response towards their contents. This continuous exposure contributes to create a sense of obviousness around the experience of concentration (just because this is the sort of experience that is most often enforced) and thus actively prevent the possibility of exploring anything different. In this sense, they constrict not only how attention works, but also how one's understanding interprets the experience of sustained attention. Composure becomes viable not necessarily when external conditions become more peaceful, but surely when the exposure to exceedingly enticing and exciting objects is significantly reduced; so much reduced indeed that the sort of concentration that they aim to establish is no longer regarded as obvious or as the only way to sustain attention.[35]

Both ordinary concentration and composure are ultimately intentional attitudes. For as much power habits and customs might have, they cannot create any inherent and unbreakable yoke that will bind one to abide to concentration and necessarily stay away from composure. Intentions are all based on choices, and choices can be changed; in fact, intentions need constant renewal in order to be sustained. Assessing the different options, recognizing the potential costs and benefits of each, and then deciding which option can be more effective and fruitful in the long-term, is part of any responsible attitude, and also the first step towards changing habits and customs themselves.

35 This is why the only external condition needed for composure is a degree of sense restraint, which is nothing but the ability of dwelling without being disturbed by the constant push and pull of sensual objects. In a contemporary setting, this would entail some withdrawal from seeking entertainment using electronic media.

Readings

The ability to recollect is a crucially important factor in sustaining composure and developing one's understanding of experience. Recollection (*sati*) is a process that involves both memory of the past and discrimination in the present.[36] On the one hand, recollection can be seen as a long-term process. One learned in the past certain instructions, teachings or ways of looking at experience. Then, in this present moment, recollection allows one to remember and apply the bits of those memories that seem most appropriate and useful now. On the other hand, recollection works also as a moment-to-moment way of sustaining attention and metacognitive awareness, by keeping in sight what is the task at hand and carefully overseeing its execution. In this sense, recollection is the ability of framing experience and interpreting it in a certain way, based on a certain pre-established context. Recollection of the body, for instance, means being able to take the body or an aspect of it (such as its posture) as the general context that defines one's current situation, and then experience anything else as part of that context or from its point of view. Clearly, recollection is not one single or simple faculty, but it arises from the interplay between several factors

36 The Pāli term *sati* is most often translated in English with 'mindfulness,' which is usually understood as being aware of one's experience in the present moment, possibly with a non-judgmental attitude towards it. While this account of 'mindfulness' might find some antecedent in the discourses themselves, it is *not* the way in which the discourses use the term *sati*. On the one hand, the discourses connect *sati* essentially with memory and recollection of themes for reflection, of the teachings themselves, and of one's past experience and understanding, which is needed in order to interpret one's current experience. On the other hand, *sati* does make discriminations and judgments since its function is that of recognizing certain states as something to be abandoned, and other states as something to be cultivated. The discourses illustrate this discriminative function by using the simile of a sentry or a gatekeeper (e.g. AN 7.67 and 10.95), who is responsible for checking the entrance of a town, allowing in only those who are welcome and keeping outside those who are not welcome. *Sati* or recollection is not just remembering about the past, but using schemes of investigation that one has previously learned and understood in order to interpret and steer the unfolding of whatever experience is present right now. Just being in the present, forgetting entirely about the past, won't do because without some connection with past experience, the present is meaningless and blank. And just dwelling on past memories will also fail to face the present *as it is present*, stepping outside from old habits. What is needed is a sustained ability to monitor present experience based on what one has learned (in the past) in order to keep it in the appropriate context.

(memory, consciousness, attention, among others). In the discourses, right recollection (recollection of what is most important to recollect, and in the way in which it is most fruitful) is an essential component of practice.

Although seemingly straightforward, the practice of right recollection is in fact an advanced and sophisticated undertaking. The basic attitude consists in observing any of the four domains of recollection (body, feelings, understanding, realities) *as just* that (*just* body, *just* feeling, *just* understanding, *just* realities). This way of looking is in contrast with the ordinary way of experiencing any of these domains in a more personal way, as something that 'I am' or that 'belongs to me.' There are (see MN 10 below) three possible ways in which observing the body *as* body (for instance) can unfold.

The first option is to observe the body as it appears to oneself directly (or 'internally'), by thus avoiding attitudes of disconnectedness and alienation (which are the negative counterpart of appropriation, but still forms of appropriation). One can then observe how this body is not different from any other body (or look at the body 'externally'), and there is nothing special or particularly personal in its experience. Eventually, these two ways of looking can be combined. The body can be regarded as simultaneously present and manifest (no alienation or disconnect), but also as something that while present has nothing personal in it; something that is not 'mine' (no identification or appropriation, see Ud 1.10).

The second option is to observe the reality of the body, which is conditional and uncertain, subject to origination and cessation. Uncertainty reveals the impossibility of appropriation, and thus this way of looking at the body weakens the sense of ownership towards it (further details below in §4).

The third option is to observe the body with perfect equipoise and serenity, without being moved by any particular reaction or urge towards it (as would happen in the higher stages of composure, especially in the fourth contemplation, see §6 and *Appendix*). Appropriation results from intentional attitudes based on desire and aversion, which in turn enact a character ('myself') that has

to deal with the drama they evoke. When these attitudes are absent, the drama fades away, no character in particular has to be enacted, and hence what is contemplated (the body, for instance) can reveal itself for what it is: *just a body*.

These three options can be combined or developed at different degrees, in different ways, and depending on different circumstances. But they all build on a certain ability of disengaging from the pull and push of desire and aversion for contents of experience. Hence, it is only after one has abandoned (to some degree at least) passionate concerns for the unfolding of experience, that one's gaze can become still and clear enough to reveal that whatever is observed is just that and that there is nothing personal in it. In turn, this observation feeds back into the same process leading to weakening passionate concerns even further. If this body is just a body, why be so passionately concerned with it as it if was the most personal issue?

From the point of view of a beginner first attempting this practice, it is expected that they will *not* be able to establish this dispassionate observation. Comparing one's current experience (some presence of passion and personal concern) with the intended goal (dispassion and absence of any concern), one can directly appreciate the force of appropriation, how it manifests, and what it feels like. Without becoming fully aware of the phenomenon of appropriation, it would be impossible to do anything about it. But when appropriation is perceived, one can start observing what the main hindrances are that prevent one from observing the body as *just* a body. Effectively dealing with these hindrances will then appear as the immediate and necessary next step in order to develop right recollection (and this is itself part of the practice of right recollection, as explained below in §2). If one is successful in understanding the workings of the hindrances and weakening their grip sufficiently, it will eventually become possible to realize that the body is *just* a body and, in turn, use this realization to gain further emancipation from the hindrances.

The following excerpt presents the opening section of the discourse on the establishment of recollection (*Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, MN 10), which synthetizes

the general purpose of right recollection, and various approaches that can be used for implementing it. As mentioned, right recollection is established in four domains: body, feelings, understanding, and realities. These four domains together provide a way of exploring the metacognitive context of any experience, broadening it up from its physical underpinning (the body) to its meaning (feelings and understanding) and ultimately up to its most general structure and properties (realities). Here, we begin with the body, while the other domains will be introduced in due course.

> It has been heard by me that, on one occasion, the Fortunate was dwelling in the country of the Kurus,[37] near the Kuru town called Kammasadamma. There, the Fortunate addressed the mendicants: 'Mendicants!', 'Venerable!' they replied. The Fortunate said this:
>
> 'Mendicants, this is the direct (*ekāyano*) path for the purification of living beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and wailing, for the disappearing of suffering and sadness, for acquiring the method (*ñāya*), for the direct realization of extinction (*nibbāna*),[38] that is, the four establishments of recollection (*cattāro satipaṭṭhānā*).[39]

37 The Kuru kingdom is known since the middle Vedic period (across second and first millennium before the common era) as a major settlement of the Vedic culture and its tribes. It was located in the north of India, roughly between the upper stretches of the rivers Yamuna and Ganges, as they flow from the Himalayan mountains.

38 *Nibbāna* literally means 'extinction' and, in its most concrete sense, the extinction of a fire. Since greed, aversion, and ignorance are often compared with three fires or fevers (see SN 35.28 and Ud 3.10 in §7), in the Buddha's teachings *nibbāna* is an expression indicating the extinction of greed, aversion, and ignorance (which entails the extinction of thirst, appropriation, and identification with any of the five aggregates that constitute experience, see also *Afterword*). For the ordinary untrained person (*puthujjana*), this prospect might appear dreadful, mostly because they cannot imagine any other way of experiencing reality that is not entirely shaped and dominated by greed, aversion, ignorance, appropriation, identification. In this sense, extinction will inevitably be interpreted in a nihilist sense, as the annihilation of 'my being.' But the Buddha rejects this interpretation (SN 12.15). Nonetheless, it remains true that an ordinary person cannot be led to desire or wish to achieve extinction in the same way in which one is ordinarily moved to purse this or that worldly good; that is, by a sense of painful lack and the anticipation of a pleasant reward (§3, *Reflections*). Extinction is precisely the extinction of any sense of lack and it does not constitute any positive state or good or thing to be achieved or possessed. The only way in which one might be moved to (and even aspire for) realizing extinction is by understanding that the ordinary predicament of all living beings is essentially plagued by fear and thirst, in such a way that no other possible solution is conceivable except for the very extinction of fear and thirst (this amounts to adopting 'right view,' SN 56.11, §4). Only in this way can one realize that there is in fact nothing to be afraid of in extinction (SN 22.55, §5).

39 This formula is sometimes used to define the essence of the whole of the Buddha's teachings

What four?

Here, Mendicants, a mendicant dwells observing the body as [just] body (*kāye kāyānupassī*); ardent, metacognitively aware (*sampajāno*),[40] endowed with recollection (*satimā*), having abandoned desire and discontent for the world.[41]

A mendicant dwells observing feelings as [just] feelings; ardent, metacognitively aware, endowed with recollection, having abandoned desire and discontent for the world.

A mendicant dwells observing understanding (*citta*)[42] as [just] understanding; ardent, metacognitively aware, endowed with recollection, having abandoned desire and discontent for the world.

(AN 10.95). The 'method' mentioned here concerns the way in which reality is best examined in order to achieve freedom. As it will become clearer in due course, this method has to do with a specific way of analyzing phenomena in order to see their conditioned co-originating nature. One instance of this method is analyzing phenomena in terms of suffering (*dukkha*), its origin, and its cessation, which is standardly presented in the formula of the 'four noble truths' or 'four outstanding things' (see §4, SN 56.11). Here, the fourth truth or thing is the eightfold *path* (the 'method') leading to the full realization of this insight, which includes right recollection as its seventh factor. In turn, the fourth domain of right recollection includes the recollection of the 'four outstanding things.' Right recollection is the cultivation of the four *sati-paṭṭhānā*, which means 'establishments' or 'foundations' of recollection. Recollection needs to be established in just the same way that a context needs to be established. Taking something as the context within which anything else is going to be understood might require a deliberate effort and intention, especially in order to counter competing or alternative intentions aimed at establishing other contexts, or forgetfulness of the context that one has established.

40 This term is composed from the verb *pajānāti* ('to know clearly') and the prefix *saṃ-*, which has the general meaning of 'co-' in the sense of 'together with.' The adjective *sampajāno* is rendered in various ways, one of the most common is 'clearly knowing.' The meaning seems however more specifically concerned with the ability of understanding the overall situation in which one is in. Hence, sometimes the adjective is translated as 'situationally aware.' Taking this indication one step further, it is possible to appreciate that the overall situation in which anything else happens is the situation in which one's awareness is in, namely, the quality and texture of one's awareness at any given moment. Hence, knowing one's situation is first of all knowing this quality of awareness, which can be expressed as a form of 'metacognitive' awareness (awareness of the way in which one is aware). Although it might sound complicated or exotic at first, this metacognitive awareness is always present even in daily life, although the ordinary engagement with objects usually leaves little space and time to observe it, and even less for cultivating it.

41 This formula is usually interpreted as entailing the abandonment of the five hindrances (of which desire and aversion are the first two, see below §2). Notice that hindrances are abandoned as part of the practice itself, hence sustaining recollection and abandoning the hindrances form a dynamic process in which the more recollection is sustained, the more hindrances are abandoned.

42 *Citta* is the past participle of the verb *cinteti*, from the Sanskrit *cetati*, which has a wide range of meanings, all within the sphere of the mental, among which 'to perceive,' 'to attend to,' 'to observe,' 'to aim at,' 'to intend,' 'to design,' and 'to understand.' *Cetanā*, is the abstract noun derived from the same verb, and indicates the actual act of *cinteti*. Usually, *citta* is rendered as 'mind' or 'heart' while *cetanā* as 'intention' or 'volition.' These renderings are problematic. *Citta* is not an entity, but the result of an activity (a past participle), and the notion of 'mind' (especially when understood based

A mendicant dwells observing realities (*dhammā*) as [just] realities; ardent, metacognitively aware, endowed with recollection, having abandoned desire and discontent for the world.

And how does a mendicant dwell observing the body as [just] body?

[...]

When a mendicant is walking, he knows (*pajānāti*) 'I am walking,' when standing, he knows 'I am standing,' when sitting, he knows 'I am sitting,' when lying down, he knows 'I am lying down.' Whatever posture the body is in, he knows it.[43]

on the background of Western thought) is heavily loaded with an array of assumptions (among which the fact that the mind is a substance, which underpins different states and exercises specific functions, and it is often conceived as independent from the body) that are at odds with the teaching of the discourses. For this reason, it might be more helpful to take *cinteti* (the root verb) as 'to understand.' One can thus have a direct experience of *citta* any time that one has 'understood' something. For instance, when the reader understands the meaning of this sentence, then this act of understanding (having understood the sentence) is *citta*. *Citta* is wherever one has understood some content, condition, or situation. Having understood the meaning of a situation, one can thus also act for the sake of reaching some goal or experiencing some content and, in this sense, *citta* becomes *cetanā*, it understands what to do, it intends something. In this perspective, greed, aversion, and ignorance are modifications of *citta*, namely, states that happen to *citta* and affect the way in which contents are understood. When *citta* is affected by greed, for instance, contents are appropriated as 'mine' (namely, they are indexed to a subject). When *citta* is not affected by greed, instead, contents are simply understood as contents that are there, for instance: 'there is understanding' ('*atthi cittan'ti*). Hence, *citta* is the intentional domain within which greed, aversion, and ignorance can take root or from which they can be uprooted by 'liberating *citta*' (*ceto-vimutti*). This is reflected in this third frame of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice, which focuses on the recollection of *citta*, and notably on whether it is affected by greed, aversion, and ignorance, or free from them (discussed further below, §5). Sometimes *citta* is interpreted as a non-conceptual awareness of reality in its alleged original state, prior to any further conceptualization and interpretation. It is surely possible to distinguish between various ways or degrees in which experience can be understood and interpreted, from a bare acknowledgment that something is happening ('there is body') to the proliferation of appropriation ('this is my body, and I have to do this and that with it'). In both cases, something is happening, and this happening is specific to a certain perspectival point of view (it is happening here rather than there, for this individual rather than for another). But even at the barest level, conceptual elements (which can be extremely minimal, simple and light) are interwoven within the fabric of experience and used to interpret it. Without such a minimal interpretation, experiencing anything would make no sense; in fact, this would not count as an experience at all. However, this does not entail that one should postulate a further and more fundamental level where things appears as they are (or rather one experiences 'things in themselves'), eventually free from the slightest degree of conceptualization. There are good and bad concepts, heavy and light, simple and complex, helpful and unhelpful, biased and neutral. Seeking to dismiss all conceptual elements without qualification misses the point that the goal of practice is to *relinquish appropriation*, not concepts in general, and that in order to make sense, practice itself needs to be conceptualized to some extent and in a skillful way.

43 Notice that the phrasing here in first person perspective means just that: one knows what happens from within that experience. Subjectivity is nothing more than a perspectival construction (and also a grammatical construction) that is due to the intentional nature of any experience. Experience or awareness *of* contents is intentional (it is *about* something) and hence presupposes an object. But the determination of any object as such depends on its being posited with respect

So, he dwells observing the body as [just] body in himself (*ajjhattaṁ*), or observing the body as [just] body outside of himself (*bahiddhā*), or observing the body as [just] body in himself and outside of himself (*ajjhattabahiddhā*).[44]

Or else, he dwells observing the reality of origination in the body, or he dwells observing the reality of fading away in the body, or he dwells observing in the body the reality of fading-away-in-the-originating.[45]

Or else, the recollection 'there is body' is established in him; only in the measure sufficient for knowledge and recollection, and he dwells unestablished (*anissito*), not appropriating anything in the world.[46]

(MN 10)

to a subject from which it differs, since the two notions are correlatives (there is no object without subject, and vice versa). This form of perspectival subjectivity is itself not a problem and is in fact unavoidable given the structure of intentionality. The problem begins when this perspectival construction is overinterpreted (due to greed, aversion, and ignorance) as entailing the existence of a real entity (me, myself, the subject) who exists at the basis of that experience and owns or controls it in one way or another. It is this latter overinterpretation that practice of right recollection aims to block (see below §4 and §7).

44 *Ajjhattaṁ* is a compound of *adhi-* and *attā*, literally 'this self here,' meaning also 'personal,' 'in oneself,' hence 'internal,' and it is usually contrasted with its opposite, *bahiddhā*. The 'internal' in this refrain refers to the body that is appropriated as 'mine,' while 'external' to any other body. The refrain is repeated for all the other domains of recollection, it applies to feelings, understanding and realities. Moving from the observation of the body as 'internal' to the observation of the body as 'external' can be interpreted as moving towards a realization that what is taken to be 'my' body is not actually different from any other (external) body, except for its more immediate availability in experience. The third mode of contemplation (observing the body 'internally and externally') might be interpreted as a *result* of the first two steps, hence as the ability of looking at what was initially appropriated as 'my' body (internally) as not substantially different from the nature of any other (external) body (see also MN 62 below). Taking this refrain as a description of how practice evolves over time (across multiple sessions), it can thus indicate that proper contemplation of the body should progressively lead to weakening the default identification with one's own body and the attitude of appropriation and ownership towards it.

45 The reality of origination (*samudaya-dhamma*) and the reality of fading away (*vaya-dhamma*) can be initially interpreted as the way in which the experience of the body, for instance, arises and ceases together with the floating of attention. This can be taken further by observing all the other aspects and intentional attitudes that arise and fade away in connection with the experience of the body. Then, one can even recognize that the reality of the body is a conditional reality, which in itself arises because of certain supporting conditions (food and nourishment, for instance), and without which it would fade away. At this point, one might go even further and see that the very fact that the body has the reality of originating *entails* that it will have to fade away (since whatever is conditioned cannot sustain itself indefinitely by itself). This point will emerge more clearly as practice unfolds, see in particular §4.

46 This third way of looking indicates somehow a *result* of practice, in which the body is understood and known only to the extent necessary to acknowledge that there is an experience of it, without any further emotional reaction around it. Again, the full scope and depth of this point will be explored more at later stages. The adjective *anissito* is commonly translated with 'independent' (referring to the fact that one no longer depends on others for instructions or guidance). However,

The following excerpt is taken from a discourse (MN 62) that the Buddha addresses to his own eighteen years-old son, Rahula. The discourse covers several meditation methods that can be used to cultivate body recollection and gives particular attention to the discernment of the various natural elements that constitute the body (earth, water, fire, wind, and space). This recollection proceeds in steps and provides another illustration of what was introduced in MN 10. First one has to appreciate the quality associated with a certain element in one's experience of the body. One will notice that that quality is present both within the body but also equally outside of it. From the point of view of that quality, the distinction between internal and external does not make much sense. This insight can be used to weaken (and progressively undermine) the sense of appropriation towards the body itself. Since the elements do not discriminate between internal and external (between 'mine' and 'not mine'), they are dispassionate towards what happens in them or to them. The Buddha thus encourages Rahula to build his own practice by taking this attitude as its ideal. Not being attached to a sharp distinction between what is 'mine' and what is not 'mine,' one can learn how to let go of appropriation and thus remain less and less affected by the ups and downs (the agreeable and disagreeable experiences) that will arise and manifest. The excerpt that follows present how the Buddha articulates his advice with regard to the element of space.

> ... Rahula, and what is the phenomenon of space (*ākāsadhātu*)? The phenomenon of space can be either in yourself (*ajjhattikā*) or outside of you (*bāhirā*). Rahula, what is the phenomenon of space inside of yourself?
>
> That space which is in yourself (*ajjhattaṃ*), within yourself (*paccattaṃ*) endowed with spaciousness (*ākāsagataṃ*), and appropriated (*upādinnaṃ*),[47]

it can be rendered with 'unestablished' (from *nissayati*, 'to depend or rely on'), which is one way of pointing at the ultimate result of practice. Cf. MN 62 below (with regard to space, which does not 'steadily stand,' *patiṭṭhito*), MN 37 in §4 (in which one finds a compound of *nivesana*, 'settling in'), and SN 22.55 in §5 (consciousness has 'no more work to do,' it is unestablished, *na patiṭṭhā*, in any of the other aggregates).

47 What makes a certain space 'internal' (*ajjhattikā*) is the interpretation of that space as being

such as the cavities of the ears, of the nose, of the mouth, or that through which what is eaten, drunk, consumed and tasted is swallowed, and where it remains, and whereby it is excreted from below,[48] or whatever space which is in yourself, within yourself, endowed with spaciousness, a place endowed with vastness (*aghaṃ aghagataṃ*), an opening endowed with openness (*vivaraṃ vivaragataṃ*), untouched (*asamphuṭṭhaṃ*),[49] appropriated through acquaintance (*maṃsalohitehi upādinnaṃ*);[50] Rahula, this is called the phenomenon of space inside of you.

Now, the phenomenon of space, either in you or outside of you, is still the same phenomenon of space.[51] That should be seen according to nature (*yathābhūtaṃ*),[52] with right wisdom (*sammappaññāya*) thus: 'this is not mine (*netaṃ mama*), I am not this (*nesohamasmi*), this is not my self (*na meso attā*).'[53] Having seen that in this way, according to nature and with right wisdom,

'in' this body, which is in turn interpreted as 'my' body. Hence, appropriation of the body leads to appropriating a certain space as 'internal.'

48 This anatomic description suggests that space is understood here as an opening or as an empty place or room, hence as a hole or a cavity through which other things can move or in which they can remain for a while.

49 This qualification suggests that space cannot be properly grasped as other material objects *in* space. Space is rather what is by definition empty of anything that one could grasp.

50 *Lohita* means 'blood' and *sālohita* usually indicates a blood-relation, hence kinship. In this case, the compound *maṃsalohitehi* can be interpreted as qualifying appropriation (*upādinnaṃ*), in the sense that one appropriates internal space by means of (instrumental case) one's 'blood relationship' with it, as if that space was a relative, hence, 'through acquaintance.'

51 *Yā ceva kho pana ajjhattikā ākāsadhātu yā ca bāhirā ākāsadhātu ākāsadhāturevesā*. The point is to recognize that the distinction between 'internal' and 'external' is based on one's way of appropriating this or that content of experience, but the phenomenon of space does not know this distinction by itself. Space is the same everywhere.

52 This adverb is frequently used to stress the adequacy of one's understanding. It is often rendered with 'as things really are' because the term *bhūta* comes from *bhavati*, 'to be.' However, existence itself (*bhava*) is ultimately a misleading notion (see §7), and knowing things according to their 'existence' or 'being' cannot genuinely constitute an adequate form of knowledge. There is no ultimate 'being' that one needs to know, just because 'being' or 'existence' *as concepts* are not ultimately valid. The expression *yathābhūtaṃ* seems rather to refer to the ability of knowing how things arise and pass away according to the ordinary course of nature (and 'nature' originally means 'origin') and its constant unfolding process.

53 This key contemplation (cf. SN 22.59) is meant here to foster the absurdity of appropriation towards space. If space is the same inside and outside of the body, on what possible ground could one claim that this space inside is 'mine,' or that 'I am' that space? The assumption behind appropriation is that 'I' can claim some sort of right on this or that content (this space inside of the body, for instance). Realizing that space is everywhere the same, and it does not even acknowledge that 'I am' there, undermines this very assumption, and hence appropriation.

the understanding (*cittaṃ*) is disenchanted with it (*nibbindati*), and it is induced to be dispassionate (*virājeti*) about the phenomenon of space.[54]

...

Rahula, develop a meditation (*bhāvanaṃ bhāvehi*) that is like space. Rahula, as you develop a meditation that is like space, agreeable or disagreeable stimulations that arise, not having overwhelmed the understanding, will not stick there. Rahula, just as space does not stand steadily somewhere (*na katthaci patiṭṭhito*),[55] in the same way, Rahula, you should develop a meditation that is like space.

Rahula, as you develop a meditation that is like space, agreeable or disagreeable stimulations that arise, not having overwhelmed the understanding, will not stick there.

...

(MN 62)

54 What is no longer appropriated as 'mine' can no longer be a personal concern or problem. One is then 'disenchanted' with the body in the sense that begins to regard it as just a body (see footnote 274 in §7). Then, this attitude results in dispassion or induces a degree of dispassion (*virājeti*, causative form of *vi-rajjati*).

55 When referring to the other four elements, the discourse explains that elements can receive all sorts of seemingly repulsive and disgusting things, without being affected or repelled by them. This receptiveness is thus a simile for an attitude of complete non-aversion against repulsive experiences. In the case of space, the simile concerns the fact that space is not established anywhere; it does not have a particular center or support upon which it rests. In this sense, space is not concerned with anything that might come to occupy it, nor does it take that content as its own central point. In ordinary experience, the sense of 'my self' is what occupies the center of attention and concern. Developing a meditation that is like space is very much about moving away from this attitude. At a more subtle level, though, this also means not taking *any* content as the center of experience, nor building one's own practice as based on this or that particular object, experience, or content. For this approach, see MN 49, AN 11.9. Not being fixed or established anywhere (*na katthaci patiṭṭhito*) can also be related to the maxim 'all realities are unsuitable for fully settling in' (*sabbe dhammā nālaṃ abhinivesāyā*, MN 37, §4), and to the condition of consciousness when it has 'no more work to do' (*appatiṭṭhitaṃ viññāṇaṃ ... anabhisaṅkhacca,* SN 22.55, §5).

2. Hindrances

Directions

Establish awareness of your bodily posture as before (§1).

When this awareness is disrupted by any distraction, try to understand whether the distraction that occurred can be associated with one of the following five hindrances: (1) desire for sensual pleasures; (2) aversion, hatred or ill-will; (3) dullness, drowsiness or sleepiness; (4) agitation, restlessness or worry; (5) doubt.

Try to identify which one of these five hindrances is most likely connected with any episode of distraction. Learn to identify and discern the feeling, taste and texture of awareness associated with each hindrance. Then re-establish the initial intention of being aware of your bodily posture.

Pay attention to the condition of awareness when hindrances are not clearly discernible. There is a sense of spaciousness, openness, relaxation, freedom, which might be more noticeable after some hindrance faded away.

When no hindrance is clearly discernible, do not actively search for it, but rather appreciate the texture of awareness in that moment and fully enjoy it. You can then simply rest in the knowledge and awareness of the spaciousness of the whole body and of its posture (§1), without being disturbed by anything.

Refinements

The five hindrances can manifest in a whole spectrum of intensity, from extremely coarse and gross, to extremely subtle. They are not necessarily associated with any particular object, but can take anything as their object,

including meditation practice itself. Try to become more and more aware of this whole spectrum of manifestations during each session and across multiple sessions. Which hindrance is the most recurrent over a certain period? Which one is the strongest?

When hindrances are particularly strong, they can manifest as obsessions, which make it impossible to keep attention on the intended object of meditation. There are various remedies that can be used to counter each hindrance. Here below some basic suggestions.

(1) When sensual desire arises, closely examine the object of desire. Is it really so pleasant and desirable? If you decompose it in its constituent parts, are those parts inherently beautiful or attractive? Imagine getting what desire wants, and then sustaining that experience indefinitely. Would that be really pleasant? Also, pay attention to the way in which thought processes and the body itself contract under the influence of desire. Is that pleasant? In general, find ways of countering the push of desire by perceiving how the whole thread of imagination created by desire is surrounded by a larger background of neutral or definitely ugly or unpleasant aspects, which are not desirable at all.

(2) When aversion arises, consider how does it feel to sustain aversion towards any object. Shift attention from the target of aversion to the experience of aversion itself. Notice the contraction that aversion entails and its unpleasantness. Aversion might manifest in many ways, both towards external objects and towards oneself. However, it always entails a similar feeling and similar intentional attitudes. Try to detach aversion from its target object in order to contemplate its more general nature. Whether aversion is aimed at this or that object, whether it appears in the form of hatred or fear, it always entails the same sort of painful contraction, to be experienced both in the body and in the space of thought. Being subject to this contraction, see whether you can nourish a sense of compassion and mercy towards the suffering that is produced in this process, make some space around it, allow it to heal. Seeing how harmful aversion is,

also attempt to deliberately establish and support an opposite attitude of non-aversion, just by wishing it to arise.

(3) When drowsiness or sleepiness arise, try to open up awareness, stretch it to include a larger domain, play with the way in which you investigate the object, maybe moving faster through different parts, or exploring details in greater depth. Use verbal reflections if needed. Deliberately try to arouse a sense of energy and infuse your whole experience with it. If necessary, keep your eyes open, or do walking instead of sitting meditation.

(4) When restlessness or worry arise, try to create some spaciousness around them. Is there really any necessity to act or do anything? Ground yourself in your bodily posture and direct attention to the perception of spaciousness in the body. As the body remains still and calm, you can anchor your thought processes in that same stillness and use it to counter the push of restlessness. Remaining there, you can see that there is nothing to worry about right now or that cannot wait for later. If your moral conduct has been good, enjoy the feeling of having nothing to regret and use it to counter any worry that might arise. If that is not the case, then firmly establish the intention of keeping a good moral conduct and enjoy the sense of confidence that this might provide.

(5) When doubt arises, remind yourself that in this present session all that you need to know is very clear: you just need to be aware of your body. Can you find it? Do you doubt that? For the time being, nothing else is really relevant, it can wait for another time. Pay attention to the uprightness of your posture, to its stability and to the sense of nobility and dignity that it has. Grounded in these perceptions, deliberately arouse a sense of confidence and even faith. This is more like an overall feeling, warm, pleasant, firm; it does not have to be about any content or belief in particular. Also, observe the unpleasantness of doubt itself and the subtle tendency to run away from it. Could you allow that unpleasantness to stay, without you having to run or be dragged by it?

As a more general remedy, it might be helpful to dissociate the various components that constitute the manifestation of a hindrance. There might be some image associated or evoked by the hindrance, as well as feelings (pleasant, unpleasant, neutral), which are felt both at the level of thought and in the body. See whether it is possible to isolate the feelings in the body, and among these, discern the unpleasant aspects from any potentially pleasant or neutral aspect. The presence of a hindrance always entails some unpleasant feeling, and these are most often felt also at the bodily level. When the unpleasant feeling component is clearly seen, the attitude might be that of creating more space around it, allowing it to be as it wants. Opening the space in the body often dilutes the feeling and reveals that its own unpleasantness is mostly derived from how it has been regarded and experienced so far. Behind the unpleasant feeling there might be a bunch of bodily perceptions, which in themselves are not necessarily unpleasant, unless they are interpreted in a certain way. The purpose here is not to counter the hindrance directly (with the risk of fostering more aversion towards it), but rather allowing it to gently cease to be a problem and hence dissolve on its own accord. This attitude crucially changes the way in which attention is exploited by the hindrance itself, thus depriving it of its main fuel.

You can also observe that each hindrance *begins* to manifest at some point (usually in connection with some content of experience, which is interpreted as the cause or trigger of the hindrance). The hindrance is never a constant and unchanging state, it always unfolds as a changing process. By noticing that a hindrance has arisen, you can realize that it has not been always present, hence its nature is such that its manifestation will have to cease at some point. In the arising of a hindrance the promise of its cessation is already implicit, and this is the landmark of the uncertainty that characterizes the hindrance itself. You can try to gently shift your attention from the manifestation of the hindrance to the immanently present possibility of its cessation.

As this possibility is more clearly discerned, you can see that the cessation of the hindrance is the promise or the wish for a much more beautiful condition: contentment instead of desire, friendliness instead of aversion, alertness instead of torpor, tranquility instead of agitation, confidence instead of doubt. By systematically trying to let your attention gravitate to the element of cessation of the hindrance rather than to its arising and presence, you can start discerning these more positive states *within* the experience of the hindrances themselves (as a possibility, a wish, a promise entailed by cessation). As more attention flows into this path of contemplation, the manifestation of the hindrance progressively fades away and those positive states become increasingly more distinct and real, until they actually replace the experience of the hindrance altogether. In due time, and with some practice, this switch between the hindrance and the contemplation of its cessation grows more automatic, smooth and quick, so that even the initial arising of the hindrance becomes an occasion for contemplating cessation and the spacious states of openness disclosed by it.

Hindrances are processes that arise and gain momentum over time. They entail a movement of proliferation in which images, fantasies, and dream-like states are produced and become progressively stronger, as the hindrance gains a greater control of attention and mental energies. The basic way to counter hindrances is thus to recognize this process early enough and then disrupt it by using attention in such a way as to cut the proliferation process. Nevertheless, if one or more hindrances are particularly recurrent, strong and resilient, it would be appropriate to examine external conditions and daily moral conduct to see whether those hindrances could derive any support from unskillful actions and other factors currently at play in one's life.

Any antidote might work more or less effectively at different times. Sometimes, a hindrance might be countered easily, almost on the spot; other times

it might seem that nothing is enough to prevent it from harassing and hurting you. However, the point of countering the hindrances is not necessarily that of completely stopping their manifestation at will all the time. This eradication will require a considerable deeper degree of understanding and a more advanced level of practice. Hence, when hindrances reappear after a while, this is just what is supposed to happen. Any narrative about one's failure or disappointment for this fact is itself a manifestation of the hindrances; it should then be understood and approached accordingly. The purpose of countering the hindrances is that of gaining some space in which hindrances are momentarily not manifesting their effects. Countering the hindrances is a strategy for gaining time. They will still be subtly present, but somehow put to sleep. This space is essential for any further development to unfold, and it is thus sufficient for now to just gain access to this space of relative freedom, sustain it, cultivate it, extend it, and protect it as much as possible.

The most important element in dealing with the hindrances is the intention itself to resist the push and pull of a hindrance. This intention *is* already what most fundamentally counters the manifestation of that hindrance. The fact that, as a result of a certain strategy, a hindrance might completely fade away is less important than the fact that you recognized a certain intentional attitude *as a hindrance* and aroused the intention of not allowing it to grow and overwhelm your understanding. The force of the hindrances is mostly based on repetition, habituation and inertia. Having established certain patterns in the past, they tend to be repeated almost automatically. Hindrances are coactions. The intention of countering them begins first to disrupt this inertial pattern and, if sustained enough, can ultimately disband it entirely.

The intention of countering the hindrances should avoid both the extremes of aversion (hating the hindrances) and indulgence (unconditionally accept

their manifestation). Provided that this balance between opposite extremes is wisely established, then that intention itself is the actual remedy against the hindrances, regardless of the particular devices and means that it takes to handle a certain hindrance at a certain moment.

Reflections

Seeing the hindrances

The five hindrances (*nīvaraṇāni*) are a basic component of ordinary experience. Calling them 'hindrances' is a way of stressing that, despite appearing as seemingly normal phenomena, they actually hinder one's clarity of understanding. Hindrances tend to be transparent. One who does not deliberately try to recognize them as hindrances will not pay much attention (metacognitive awareness) to their arising or passing and will be simply fully absorbed by performing the tasks that they commend. Without training, one might not notice sensual desire *as* a hindrance, but simply get involved in what desire wants to get. Because of their transparency, hindrances foster views and beliefs about contents of experience (what one desires becomes good and pleasant, what one hates becomes bad, when one is restless, many things become boring or uninteresting, and so on). These views and beliefs are taken at face value and made one's own, although they are just a consequence of the hindrances themselves. Hence, one ends up believing and judging contents of experience based on how the hindrances asses them, making their judgments one's own.

In one way or another, all hindrances are felt unpleasantly, both in the body and in the space of thought. Even when they might be accompanied by some kind of pleasant feeling, this is most often only at a superficial level, beneath which and around which, there is genuine discomfort. For instance, sensual desire (any desire, greed, craving or lust for enjoying any object connected with the physical senses) might sometimes be envisaged as pleasant in

itself. However, this pleasantness is inevitably dependent on the perspective of satisfying desire itself, hence it is just an anticipatory pleasure. If one looks closely at the experience of desire, this is mostly shaped by a form of pressure and contraction, which is felt unpleasantly. Desire also entails a more or less profound sense of lacking, unfulfillment, hunger, or thirst. This unpleasantness is the main motive behind the push for satisfying one's desire and thus being freed from its pressure. The release of pressure is the genuine pleasure in desire, which means that desire as such is always felt unpleasantly.[56]

Familiarizing oneself with the nature of the hindrances and their manifestation is a way to understand how deeply and pervasively thought processes and even the whole body are shaped by forces that usually remain hidden from one's attention. Insofar as hindrances remain transparent, they are ignored as such. This ignorance is what protects hindrances and makes one a willing servant of their capricious longings. Not only are hindrances felt unpleasantly, but they are also genuine harassments and irritants that engender a state of contraction in both thought and body. By contrast, when one is able to appreciate the quality of one's experience when hindrances are

56 Notice that here, as in the rest of the following discussion, 'desire' (*chanda*), 'greed' (*lobha*, *abhijjhā*), and 'lust' (*rāga*) are typically seen as synonymous terms referring to the obtainment and enjoyment of sensual pleasures (*kāma*), namely, contents of experience that fall within the scope of the five physical senses (although sensual desire can also reach out towards contents of thought and imagination, which most often are derived from sensory materials). For this reason, the semantic spectrum covered by these terms can be equated with the domain of 'sensuality.' In the discourses, though, there is also another treatment of 'desire' in the context of the four bases of success (*iddhipādā*, see SN 51.20), which encompass desire (*chanda*), energy (*vīriya*), understanding (*citta*), and investigation (*vīmaṃsā*). In this latter context, desire works as a primary force that is then applied through energy and effort, supported by understanding (here *citta* might also be rendered with 'intention' and 'resolve'), and directed by investigation and discernment. This sort of desire is highly praised in the discourses, insofar as it sustains practice itself and actually constitutes one of the ingredients needed for development and, eventually, awakening (see SN 51.15, AN 4.159). However, this sort of desire should be carefully distinguished from the abovementioned forms of craving for sensuality since *chanda*, as a basis for success, is essentially aimed at overcoming sensuality altogether. Becoming fully able to discriminate between these two very different meanings, roles and experiences of desire marks a quite advanced stage of practice; it also reveals to what extent the desire for awakening can be a precious resource, surely to be exploited in order to face and overcome the desire for sensual pleasures, and yet even such an outstanding desire remains something that will have to be abandoned in due time.

relatively weak or even unnoticeable, one can savor a sense of relief, spaciousness, freedom, and joy. One can thus directly realize that it is indeed better to cultivate this latter condition. Abandoning the hindrances becomes the core of one's practice.

In ordinary daily life, hindrances are always more or less present. Not discerning and recognizing the hindrances *as* hindrances prevents one from appreciating the way in which the tone of one's experience changes when they are absent. Hindrances are not permanent states. They are more like recurrent habits and coactions, rooted in underlying tendencies to act always in certain predetermined ways. Despite having deep roots, their manifestations come and go as all other aspects of experience. However, if one is not aware of the nature of the hindrances and does not recognize their effects when they are presently manifesting, it will not be possible to discern the spaciousness, openness, relaxation and freedom that pervade experience when they are momentarily absent. Also, without making a deliberate effort to try to understand what sustains the hindrances and their manifestation, how they work, and what could prevent them, it will be impossible to counter them and progressively free oneself from their grip.

Although the five hindrances are something to counter (and ultimately to abandon), they are an integral part of practice. It is not the case that real practice occurs only in the absence of the hindrances. Rather, real practice begins when hindrances start to be recognized as such (as something that hinders one's understanding and prevents genuine freedom), and one learns how to best and most skillfully relate with them in such a way as to progressively weaken their influence, make their workings more opaque and visible, and progressively disengage and step more easily and more quickly outside of the story they tell. In fact, hindrances will never be fully uprooted until complete awakening, and hence one might even gloss over the whole practice as a way of dealing and overcoming increasingly subtler and subtler manifestations of the hindrances by digging up their deepest roots.

Establishing the right point of view

Recognizing hindrances as hindrances is key, but it also takes observing them from the right point of view. There might be contexts in which certain hindrances do not appear as hindrances at all, and they might even turn out to seem quite functional from that particular perspective. For instance, hunters (animal or human) need a good degree of aversion in order to face dangers and kill their prey. Enjoying sensual pleasures is usually quite functional to both be interested in edible food and in reproduction, two assets for contributing to sustaining life from one generation to the next. Sometimes, dullness is the only available remedy left against an overwhelmingly negative condition. In some cases, a degree of restlessness might contribute to push someone towards changing their condition for the better. Being open to doubt might on some occasions contribute to challenge and shake off received views and prejudices. These are all rather ordinary contexts, and from their point of view, hindrances are not necessarily or always hindrances, they do not mean that. This is also the main reason why hindrances are in fact not recognized as such in ordinary life.

When the discourses encourage to recognize hindrances as hindrances, they do so from the point of view of ultimate liberation. It is only by taking this point of view that hindrances can genuinely be recognized as hindrances. For as long as one's main concern is to hunt prey or pass on one's genes, it will be impossible to see the drawback of aversion or craving for sensuality. And yet, even amidst the ordinary way of life, human beings can recognize that something is off, something does not work so well. It is not just about this or that particular event or circumstance. It is rather the overall mood or atmosphere in which ordinary life unfolds, its overall meaning and context, that might be seen as problematic. The most obvious way in which this problematicity emerges is by acknowledging that no matter what one does or achieves, no matter the condition one acquires, a degree of unsatisfactoriness, uneasiness and dissonance will remain persistently present. It might take

very long to realize this fact; an endless repetition of seemingly different events might flow by before one suddenly begins to pay attention to this dissonance, which accompanies all experiences. Following up on this trail, one might investigate further if it might be possible at all to escape from this predicament. The first step in this investigation is to consider the set of attitudes encompassed by the five hindrances, and begin to analyze them as hindrances, namely, as intentional structures that positively and continuously contribute to produce and sustain unsatisfaction.

The more immediate and direct way of beginning this investigation is by paying attention to the unpleasant feeling tone that is always associated with the hindrances. This reflection can then be taken a step further, by realizing that there is a precise and consistent order in the way in which unsatisfaction is produced and sustained. Most often, the quest for sensual enjoyment is just an attempt to cover up a degree of unpleasantness that one does not know how to deal with (or how to escape from). Sensual enjoyment is a distraction from unpleasantness, an attempt to filter out pain from one's experience, like some music used to cover up a disturbing noise. In this sense, craving for sensual enjoyment is not only unpleasant in itself (because of the nature of craving and the painful unfulfillment it generates), but it also contributes to foster ignorance, to blur one's understanding, to mislead it towards a false solution. One can directly begin to realize that no degree of sensual enjoyment can make the underlying unpleasantness really go away. Sensual enjoyment can at best cover it up for a while, anaesthetize it, but it does nothing to actually remove its underpinning condition. The reason is that the genuine problem is not even the unpleasantness itself, but rather the habit of sustaining aversion against unpleasantness. Aversion is the trap, not the unpleasantness as such. Indulging in sensual craving reinforces one's ignorance about how to address unpleasantness other than through aversion and craving. Accepting and fostering craving thus fuels and reinforces aversion and ignorance as well. Sensual craving is a diversion, which then leads one to miss

the opportunity to see the real problem. The fabric of aversion and craving is a hindrance to clear knowledge, that sort of knowledge through which one might begin to discern an escape from this whole situation.

The right point of view for practice to make sense is the point of view that discerns the direction in which it will be possible to find ultimate liberation from this fabric of dissonance and unsatisfaction. This is just a point, a seed, it is not (nor does it require) any actual progress (yet) towards liberation itself. However, it encodes in itself the most precious information: *where* should one look, in which direction should one go. What is perhaps the most pervasive belief in both Western and Eastern cultures is that aversion towards what is unpleasant (and its twin: desire for what is pleasant) is natural, normal, and obvious. Whole philosophies have been built on this acknowledgment, and almost all religious, political and economic systems around the world presuppose that people will abide to such a belief in order to maintain any grip on them. In a sense, this belief is true as a description of a matter of fact: in their ordinary condition, living beings find unpleasant feelings repulsive, and are attracted by pleasant feelings.

The sort of practice taught in the discourses really begins only when one is capable of shaking off the obviousness of this belief, recognizing that this is just how ordinary beings *are*; it does not prescribe how they *ought to be* or to behave, even less to believe. When one can discern that no unpleasant feeling might ever be a problem if that was not met with a repulsive reaction (aversion); when one can discern that aversion against the unpleasant is what makes the whole experience genuinely unpleasant; when one can discern that the lifting and abandoning of aversion (in whatever degree this is possible) leads to a relief that is in itself more pleasant and enjoyable than any pleasure that might be achieved by temporarily fulfilling some sensual craving; when one can directly experience these connections and their consequences, not as random and disarticulated sequences of facts but as ruled by a very simple and precise conditional structure (when this is, that is; when

this ceases, that ceases), *then* one sees the direction in which one might go in order to find a solution to the dissonance, to the unsatisfaction, an escape from the predicament of all living beings.

This direction goes against the grain of ordinary life. Especially in the beginning, it reveals more clearly where one does *not* want to go anymore, what is the direction from which one wants to stay as far away from as possible. Going with the grain of ordinary life is easy and provides some comfort, but it always ends in the same place, in the same dissonance. One might not yet fully discern what the alternative would look like concretely, but one begins to see clearly that one no longer wants to go with the grain because that is the wrong way, it does not work as it pretends to. It takes effort, practice, and time to explore and develop an alternative, and yet one sees that only in that alternative direction can genuine freedom be found. If one is interested in exploring the teaching of the discourses, and yet one does not quite see or understand this point of view (one does not have it yet), then one's practice and understanding should be entirely devoted to get it, to see (from) it. Practical directions and training are there for this reason, pointers and suggestions abound, but one will still have to play one's own understanding to actually see what these tools are indicating, what they refer to, what they want to say, and what they mean. The meaning to grasp is not in them, but in one's own experience as it unfolds. Once this right point of view is established, then practice is nothing but a gradual deepening of that understanding.

However, very little in this discussion will make any sense if one does not accept to take seriously the perspective of reaching (or at least trying to clarify what would mean to reach) ultimate liberation. The right point of view, for the discourses, is a soteriological point of view. Accepting this does not necessarily entail a muscular effort of 'getting' liberation, nor the view that 'I must become awakened,' even less the thought that 'I'm a failure if I don't get this.' It will take relatively little reflection to see the glaring problems

with such views and attitudes. But taking liberation as one's ultimate goal (as a regulative ideal, or even as the supreme good, if you like) does profoundly change the context in which one interprets any experience, and thus the way in which the meaning of that experience is constructed and understood. Changing the point of reference, the whole representation of reality changes as well, and one can discover different (new) criteria to assess what is genuinely worth pursuing and what is worth abandoning, and how urgently this needs to be done in different domains of one's life. Then, one can also see that hindrances are the first point where to start. In fact, one then begins to see the hindrances as hindrances.[57]

57 Owen Flanagan, *How to do things with emotions. The morality of anger and shame across cultures.* Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2021, provides an interesting contrast to the account presented in the discourses of the Buddha (which he does not consider directly). Flanagan argues for four connected points: (1) emotions entail scripts of how to enact certain behaviors in given social contexts; (2) emotional scripts are culturally embedded and determined, there is no 'natural' (culturally-independent) way of doing emotions; (3) certain forms of anger are detrimental and should be downplayed, while others are permissible; (4) there are ultimately no objective grounds for supporting this latter point (including potential arguments derived from Buddhist traditions, discussed at pp. 115-119). With respect to these points, it would be important to make the following remarks. (Ad 1) The discourses do not directly deal with 'emotions' but they would take them as particular ways in which the five aggregates are structured at any given time. The focus instead is on the connections between perceptions, feelings, and intentionality; and *within* the latter category, on the basic drives of desire, aversion, and ignorance, or their absence. (Ad 2) The discourses agree to some extent with the idea that anger, for instance, is not 'natural,' but this is meant in a broader sense, namely, that it is possible to experience reality without any anger at all. Hence, anger is not a necessary intentional attitude for all possible subjects of experience. The particular socio-historical declensions of various emotions are secondary or even irrelevant for the discourses, which focus instead on the roots of these emotions (the conative drives or bases of intentionality). (Ad 3) As Flanagan acknowledges, several Buddhist traditions, and the discourses in particular, are intransigent with respect to anger, which is considered to be always unwholesome in all its forms, and never justified. Flanagan considers this position both 'unnatural, weird, and unhuman' (p. 50) and ultimately not justifiable in a broader multicultural context (p. 119). But he ignores the actual practice that is supposed to back up the claim (at least in the discourses), and he also ignores that the complete relinquishment of anger and aversion is never presented as a universal moral imperative, but rather in a soteriological context. In the discourses, the Buddha never states that all human beings *should* aim for awakening (hence for the complete extinguishment of aversion and anger), but rather that *if* one does aim for awakening, *then* one should practice the complete extinguishment of anger. In brief, Flanagan fails to appreciate the soteriological context of the Buddha's proscription about aversion and anger. (Ad 4) This also explains how the discourses can validly claim that anger should be rejected even if this claim does not have the state of an empirical scientific-like claim. Since the relinquishment of anger is a soteriological goal, it has to be understood, assessed, and experienced from the point of view of the practice aimed at achieving that goal (namely, from the point of view of the eightfold path). This is not an empirical claim that science might validate or not, since soteriology is outside of the province of science (if nothing else,

Disengaging

Once hindrances begin to be recognized as such, the general attitude should be that weakening one's identification and emotional investment in the sort of actions they prompt and undermining the attitude of believing the story they tell. In other words, countering the hindrances means to stop taking their manifestation at face value, believing what they say, and rather questioning them. 'You should get this! Please get rid of that!'—'Really? Should I?' One stops being an avatar of the hindrances and no longer feels the urge to take up what they want as one's own task.

From the point of view of advanced levels of practice, all that is needed is to remember that any coaction that emerges does not have the real force and cogency that it pretends to have. The sense of urgency and 'having to' comply with what hindrances ask is an illusion, which the advanced practitioner has pierced well enough to not be dragged by it anymore. However, this is precisely the skill that is lacking in the beginning of practice. Hence, dealing with the hindrances, initially at least, mostly consists in finding ingenious ways of deconstructing and challenging the story they tell and its alleged cogency, in order to reveal that there is in fact no such strong urgency of following along with what they prescribe to do, that there is freedom of doing otherwise hidden behind any hindrance, and in fact that it is even preferable not to follow what they demand. But this freedom needs uncovering.

Disengaging from the hindrances requires to clearly discern their constituent components and thus change the attitude towards them. Among these components, all hindrances are based and conditioned by certain perceptions and certain feelings. Desire is usually connected with attractive and enticing

because soteriology is normative while science is descriptive). But this does not entail that *experiential* validation is not possible. Flanagan himself writes (p. 126): 'what is universal is that anger is unpleasant; it has negative valence for the person who experiences it, and it is unpleasant for the recipient, producing pain, fear, anxiety, and sadness.' As the Buddha claims (see AN 3.65, §3), one can directly realize and experience a connection between the presence of aversion and anger and unwholesome and negative attitudes, and understand that cultivating these attitudes is against one's best long-term interests.

perceptions, while aversion and worry with more repulsive perceptions. Sleepiness and doubt might be connected with somehow vague or fuzzy perceptions. All hindrances also entail some unpleasantness, which sometimes (especially in the case of desire) might be masked with some degree of pleasantness. Countering the hindrances tackles them both from the point of view of perceptions and from the point of view of feelings.

From the point of view of perception, one can challenge the sort of perception presented by a hindrance and even replace it with an opposite perception. Desire, for instance, presents a certain object as beautiful and attractive, but seeing the same object from a different perspective might reveal a number of unattractive aspects that would surely not arouse any desire for it. Aversion tends to focus on faults and repulsive aspects, but the object of aversion is not always or entirely so repulsive and it does not have only faults. In the beginning, this strategy might consist in balancing the perspective enforced by the hindrances, by bringing into relief aspects that the hindrances would lead to systematically filter out.

As practice matures, it will become possible to appreciate that the relationship between hindrances and perceptions is deeper. The hindrances actually shape and determine perceptions, not only by selecting which aspects of a given object will be perceived more prominently, but by forcing the whole cognitive process to determine a certain object in a certain way. How any object is perceived depends on the underpinning attitudes that direct one's attention. Perception is neither a passive process of simply receiving information from a given outside object, nor a neutral observation of objective and invariable features of reality. One sees what one wants to see. Countering the hindrances thus can become a way to explore more directly how intentions shape perception, and how intentionally aiming at reshaping perceptions can in turn change one's underpinning intentions.

Each and every experience is first understood through a certain feeling: pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. This feeling is the basis for all hindrances, and

they produce new feelings in turn. Desire might be excited by a pleasant feeling associated with a certain sensual object, but all the other hindrances usually are nourished by a degree of unpleasantness. All hindrances also foster unpleasantness by producing unpleasant feelings as the side effect of their working. Since each hindrance aims to engage with its target object in a certain way to bring about some change in the current situation, all hindrances have to foster a sense of dissatisfaction with the current situation (which entails feeling it as somehow unpleasant); otherwise, there would be no point in doing anything and one would simply feel content with how things currently are. Hence, all hindrances not only react to unpleasant feelings, but they also contribute to produce further unpleasantness, which in turn sustains their activity. One way of cutting this vicious circle is by changing the perception of the object in such a way that it will no longer support the basic unpleasant feeling that triggers the hindrance. However, a deeper and more profound way to intervene in the feeling mechanism consists in changing one's own attitude towards unpleasant feelings in general. While aversion comes with the conviction that anything unpleasant should be rejected, this belief is part and parcel of aversion as such, not of the unpleasant feeling in itself. An unpleasant feeling is just that, a feeling; it does not require nor urge to take any action towards it.

On the one hand, unpleasant feelings (especially those connected with the body) can be endured to some extent, as an inevitable component of life. Cultivating patient endurance is not a way of challenging oneself or finding some sort of catharsis through suffering, but simply acknowledging that a degree of unpleasantness is inextricably entailed by all sentient experience. On the other hand, friendliness is a way to perceive the unpleasant as a sign of vulnerability, as something that demands care, a mark of fragility that asks for some protection, even help. This opens an entirely different attitude towards the unpleasant, which in turn makes aversion impossible, since it shows that reacting to the unpleasant by wanting to get rid of it is neither

necessary nor natural. More generally, any attitude that will help staying with the unpleasant without being pressured to get rid of it as soon as possible (either because one's ability to simply endure or because of a friendly look at it) will undermine the habitual pattern of the hindrances and deprive them of their main fuel and motivation. In time, this will lead to realize that the genuine condition of possibility for any hindrance to arise is not even any unpleasant feeling, but rather the previously established habit of interpreting the unpleasant as a problem in its own right and thus the need to do something with it.

Working with perceptions and feelings, it will become soon clear that combining various approaches, trying new strategies, adapting, and developing ingenuity are key factors in practice. In turn, by tackling the hindrances at their root, this approach will gradually undermine the default identification that hindrances usually entail. This identification is itself a *result* of the hindrances. When a hindrance gains full control on one's experience, then one is no longer able to see their mechanism, nor to counter them by altering the way in which perceptions and feelings are shaped by the hindrance. What the hindrance says thus becomes what 'I' want or am. The same process can be reversed. By depriving the hindrance of its basic fuel, by changing the way in which one perceives objects and relates to unpleasant feelings, the strength of the hindrance will decrease and the story it tells will become less convincing, like a dream from which it becomes easier to wake up.

In exploring this approach, it is essential to avoid two potential traps. The first trap is to assume that one can disengage at will from the hindrances, by simply wanting it to happen. Hindrances cannot be dismissed at will since hindrances are what shapes one's will. When hindrances are manifest, this means that one's experience is already currently shaped by the attitudes supported by the hindrances. Hindrances are such because they hinder one's ability to master one's own experience at one's own discretion. Hence, assuming that one can simply decide to not identify with aversion when aversion

is present risks creating false illusions. The experience of aversion is inextricably linked with the experience that 'I hate that object.' Aversion (as all the other hindrances) appears as a very personal concern, in which 'I am' the main character. Experiencing the manifestation of a hindrance entails being already an integral part of this story. Hence, when a hindrance is present, one cannot simply step outside of it at will by repeating 'this is not mine,' because the presence of the hindrance *is* also expressed as a degree of identification with the hindrance itself.

Surely, having recognized a hindrance as such, one can know that stepping outside of the story *is possible.* Knowing this possibility is vital to develop the right strategy to overcome the hindrance. But this does not mean that knowing the possibility of stepping outside of the story told by the hindrance will be *ipso facto* the way to actually step outside. Since the sense of 'I am' is a result of the hindrance, a symptom of its working, one cannot undermine the hindrance tackling it from there. One needs to address the root condition of the hindrance, which is always at the level of perceptions and feelings, and the attitudes towards them. Then, one can assess the degree of success obtained by assessing the relative weakening of one's own identification with the story told by the hindrance. Tackling the hindrance by pretending that one can simply stop its manifestation by somehow imposing the mantra 'this is not mine' will at best cover up the hindrance's manifestation for a while, and most likely it will engender a sense of alienation and frustration.[58]

58 In the discourses, the reflection 'this is not mine' (*anattā*, as in SN 22.59, but also encountered in MN 62 included in §1) is followed by a sequence of emotional reactions: weariness or disenchantment (*nibbidā*), and then dispassion (*virāga*), followed further by non-thirsting and release. This means that contemplation of *anattā* is a key tool (and the starting point) to open up an emotional transformative process of disengagement, but it does not constitute nor exhaust, by itself, the entirety of this process. Further discussion will follow in §4, *Reflections.* Moreover, the contemplation of *anattā* always presupposes a quite advanced level of practice in which one has acquired at least an initial understanding of the right view (see *Afterword*). In this sense, any beginner yet to achieve this realization won't be able to implement this contemplation. Instead, their practice should consist in creating the conditions for it to become available.

The second trap is to think that since aversion is a hindrance, then one should never try to change anything and rather accept any experience for what it is and how it manifests, hindrances included. This view is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of both the nature of aversion and of the overall goal of practice. The goal of practice includes being freed from (avoidable) unpleasantness. Without a preference for freedom, without valuing this over its opposite, without this asymmetry, practice will not make sense. In fact, practice begins by realizing that there is a form of unpleasantness that is gratuitously embedded in all experience, and seeking an escape from that, one might wonder what a genuine solution might be (AN 4.255). Hence, practice is not about being absolutely neutral and without preferences with respect to anything that manifests. Rather, practice is aimed at making a difference, discerning between the sort of unpleasantness that is naturally associated with biological life and the unpleasantness that is produced instead by how life is *interpreted* (see SN 36.6 in §3 below). Abandoning the latter will also reveal a new way of facing the former so that it ceases to be a genuine problem.

The main reason why aversion does not lead to achieve this goal is because aversion towards the unpleasant aims at getting rid of the unpleasant feeling itself, without realizing that the problem cannot be the unpleasant feeling, but it is rather the attitude towards it. If an unpleasant feeling is met without any aversion that feeling cannot be a problem at all because there would be no need to push it away, and thus the same unpleasant feeling might coexist with, and even give rise to, a sense of contentment and serenity. One is released by the unpleasant not by preventing any unpleasantness from arising, but by not being dragged away or even moved or disturbed by it anymore.

Practice thus aims to change the reaction towards the unpleasant by undermining the habitual patterns of reactivity (based on aversion and exemplified by the hindrances) because they are basically a failed attempt to solve the problem of suffering. The goal is not that of getting rid of the unpleasant itself,

but rather being freed from those reactions against the unpleasant that not only do not alleviate unpleasantness but actually further amplify it. This allows one to stop producing new unpleasant feelings (which constitute the vast majority of ordinary experience) while cultivating a friendly and patient attitude towards the degree of unpleasantness that is constitutive of the condition of any living being. This new attitude then faces without aversion the unavoidable unpleasantness that is left, and thus allows one to remain unperturbed amidst it, retaining a profound sense of contentment, born from freedom.

The alternative to the hindrances

As the hindrances are progressively abandoned or even just prevented from manifesting, other qualities take their place, which are often spelled out in terms of the seven factors of awakening: (1) recollection (for instance, recollecting the body); (2) investigation of realities (for instance, recognizing the hindrances); (3) energy; (4) enthusiasm (an energizing sense of joy, felt pleasantly both in the body and in thought, associated with increased ease and freedom from the hindrances); (5) tranquility (easiness, relaxation and openness in both thought processes and body); (6) composure; and (7) serenity. These factors encompass the most positive aspects that both thought and body are led to develop during practice. Their full meaning and more complete experience will emerge progressively as practice matures. Initially, one might just begin to remember and distinguish that these factors are supposed to fill in the space left free when hindrances fade away, and by keeping that space open and clear, they actually prevent hindrances from arising again. One can also begin to figure out how each factor would feel like, and learn how to recognize it, nourish the conditions for its manifestation, and deliberately try to make it arise.

Hindrances and awakening factors share a common ground, namely, the dynamics of attention. Hindrances are nourished by attention, they attempt to monopolize attention, and they actually are (unskillful) ways of using and

paying attention to certain qualities or characteristics of the objects. Awakening factors are just the opposite, they are nourished and developed by paying wise attention to other characteristics of the contents of experience. Hence, abandoning the hindrances and cultivating the awakening factors are actually two inseparable sides of the same right effort aimed at understanding how attention works and deliberately inclining it towards more skillful and comfortable ways of operating. Discerning, recognizing, and countering the hindrances becomes a way to deal with the shrinking of attention and the painfulness that accompanies it. Discerning, arousing and sustaining the awakening factors is a way to foster the sense of spaciousness, openness, relaxation and freedom that goes together with more stable forms of attention.

Attention provides a paradigm to explore the nature of intentionality. Attention, as any other intention aimed at a certain content of experience, has a main focus or target, but it also arises within a certain background context. Looking at an object usually entails discerning that object (target) within a certain landscape (context). Similarly, paying attention to something entails a metacognitive context that shapes and stirs the unfolding of attention.

Depending on how attention (intentionality) is shaped and modulated, the relationship between the target and its context changes. In some cases, the target becomes more apparent and the context more indeterminate, while in others the opposite obtains. In extreme cases, the context might be completely lost and attention reaches a sort of tunnel-vision; or else, no particular object can remain as a specific target, attention becomes diffused and de-focused, and experience becomes all about the overall, encompassing context with no particular center.

Hindrances shape and constrain attention in such a way that it will tend to focus more narrowly on a specific target, and in their most extreme manifestation (such as extreme forms of desire or hatred), they induce a complete absorption in it and lose the context entirely. The shrinking of attention due to the action of the hindrances not only concerns the immediate surround-

ings of a certain object (for instance, the landscape in which a certain visual form is seen), but also the metacognitive context of the whole experience. In this way, hindrances hide themselves, since in the grip of strong desire or aversion, one will be entirely absorbed with the dealing of the target of desire or aversion, and will retain little or no room for observing the metacognitive state of being subject to desire or aversion as such. The result is akin to being trapped in a sort of (non-lucid) dream.

The development of awakening factors moves in the opposite direction. By weakening the forms of intentionality that are more focused on engaging with particular objects, they allow the context of experience to naturally emerge and fill the space of awareness. Like the experience of zooming out on a vast landscape, objects are encountered in a more detached, open way. Attention does not stick to them, but includes their broader context. This context includes what is immediately in the surrounding of any given object and also encompasses the whole dynamics of attention itself, in other words, the metacognitive context of experience.

At the beginning of practice, in order to increase metacognitive awareness, it might be helpful to deliberately direct attention towards metacognitive awareness itself, by remembering that around any experience of any content there are also feelings, intentions, memories, and others factors involved and at play. This intention to remember the metacognitive context might help one to withdraw from the target object and regain some perspective on *how* attention actually works. But this effort of remembering the metacognitive context is needed only insofar as there is no sufficient clarity about the structure of experience, and hindrances are still constricting attention most of the time. As hindrances are weakened through practice, the metacognitive context of any object will become naturally more apparent, simply due to the fact that the quality of attention will be less concerned with any target object and it will be more open—like a pool of water that, when it is unstirred and unagitated, can be seen straight through by an observer (DN 2, cf. SN 46.55).

Eventually, at the most advanced stage of practice, attention can take a step back from any particular object, and let the metacognitive context of all experience shine. This happens when hindrances have been completely subdued, no further thirst or craving is stirring attention, and thus no particular need to engage with any particular object is experienced anymore. No matter what is experienced, it is experienced with a sense of freedom and lack of concern. What remains is the experience of being released from duties and yokes, while attention is unestablished on any particular point. The awakening factors are the key ingredients that make this transformation possible.

The cultivation of awakening factors, however, does not have to be interpreted in an overly schematic or rigid way. Awakening factors can at times become a main theme for practice and one can explore how to arouse and sustain each of them, noticing different conditions that best support each factor, but also how the factors themselves mutually support each other and arise from one another (SN 46.3). Nevertheless, it is also possible to cultivate and sustain awakening factors more indirectly by focusing on a seemingly different theme or object, whose development will indirectly lead to the arousal and development of the awakening factors. For instance, a certain way to practice breath recollection (MN 118) can result in the cultivation of all the seven awakening factors, even if they are never made a deliberate and thematic object of direct contemplation. Friendliness is another theme that can allow all awakening factors to blossom (SN 46.54).[59] This point will

59 A rather common feature of the way in which the discourses approach a variety of meditation practices is by distinguishing a common or ordinary way of practicing, and a more insightful way. The common or ordinary way might be already familiar to other traditions or schools, but it is considered insufficient with respect to the goal of achieving ultimate liberation (see, e.g. MN 26 concerning *samādhi*, SN 54.6 concerning breath recollection, AN 6.20 concerning the contemplation of death, AN 4.185 and 10.29 concerning other sorts of contemplations, and SN 46.54 concerning friendliness). One way of spelling out the insufficiency of ordinary approaches is by referring to the awakening factors. Any meditation practice, in order to fulfil the soteriological goal of the Buddha's teachings, needs to be shaped in such a way to provide a basis for developing the seven factors of awakening. It is *how* something is practiced that make it more or less suitable for reaching ultimate liberation. Sometimes one might encounter some polemics revolving around the question of whether this or that meditative technique can be considered 'originally' Buddhist or if it was not

become more apparent as practice unfolds. For the moment, it might be sufficient to observe a crucial connection between friendliness and the absence of aversion, and how this will in turn open the space for awakening factors to naturally arise.

Among the hindrances, aversion deserves special attention. Aversion encompasses a whole spectrum of adversative emotions (fear, hatred, ill-will, harshness, harmfulness, sadness, depression, and so on) which arise in connection with unpleasant feelings. Since all hindrances entail, in one way or another, some aspect of unpleasantness, they are all somehow intermingled with components of aversion or give rise to further aversion. Since aversion itself is experienced painfully, it generates more unpleasant feelings, which feed back into the process that feeds the hindrances. Hence, aversion is a particularly powerful and prominent factor that sustains all the hindrances. However, since aversion is so clearly unpleasant in itself, the urgency of countering aversion might be relatively easier to understand, and this intention might become the main focus of one's practice. By succeeding in lessening aversion, all the other hindrances will also receive less fuel and thus will become more manageable. Different approaches might be required to address the specificity of each hindrance. Having countered aversion first, though, will greatly help in creating more space for any more focused intervention and will also ease the intervention itself. For this reason, friendliness might be considered as a universal remedy against not only aversion, but indirectly against all the hindrances.

Friendliness arises from non-aversion and thrives in the understanding produced by the inherent unskillfulness of sustaining aversion. In the space created by friendliness, it is unlikely that desire will find a firm support since

rather borrowed from previous or other traditions. The plot of Shakespeare's plays is most often borrowed from other sources, the theme of Beethoven's *Diabelli variations* (op. 120) was written by Anton Diabelli. Even knowing this, what changes in one's understanding of Shakespeare's plays or of Beethoven's music? Behind this sort of polemics there might often be a fairly naïve concern for originality, and it is unclear how fruitful and hermeneutically helpful this could be.

friendliness by itself provides a satisfaction and contentment that makes any further sensual desire redundant at least. Without the turbulence created by sensual desire and aversion, restlessness is more easily countered (also because friendliness greatly supports moral integrity, which further depletes restlessness from its normal fuel), and one can enjoy a sense of confidence and trust, but also of brightness and alertness, which naturally prevent doubt and sleepiness. Hence, friendliness by itself can be used to counter all the hindrances more or less directly and, by clearing the way from their presence, it can become a catalyst for the arousal and development of all the awakening factors.

Readings

While the scheme of the five hindrances is perhaps the most standard in the discourses, this same teaching is sometimes presented in alternative forms. The following excerpt (from MN 19) introduces a somehow simplified pattern, in which 'thoughts' are divided into two different categories: based on sensuality, ill-will and violence; or not. These 'thoughts' are indeed 'certitudes' or ways of believing that this or that object has to be acquired (sensuality) or rejected (ill-will) or that one does not have to do either (non-sensuality, non-ill-will). Then, the method explained by the Buddha consists in reflecting on the dangers (for both oneself and others) of entertaining the first kind of certitudes, and thus the need to abandon them; while one can instead enjoy the second kind of certitudes without harm. This method does not aim at forcefully suppressing the thinking activity, but rather exploits it in a skillful way, which ultimately allows one to move farther in the territory of composure. The key in this process consists in the ability to recognize whether a certain certitude is skillful and virtuous or not, and then decide whether it would be wise to sustain it. Whatever one frequently ponders (ascertains) and explores will inevitably tend to become a habit and gain

momentum in one's experience. This principle underpins most of the apparent force that hindrances seem to have, but it is also key to undermine it through a deliberate and continuous cultivation of opposite attitudes.

It has been heard by me that, on one occasion, the Fortunate was dwelling in Jeta's Grove, at Anathapindika's park. There, the Fortunate addressed the mendicants:

'Mendicants!' 'Yes, Venerable' those mendicants replied to the Fortunate. The Fortunate said this:

'Mendicants, before my awakening, when I was still a non-awakened being destined to become awakened (*bodhisatta*), this came to me: 'well, let me dwell having divided certitudes (*vitakke*)[60] in two groups.' Then, Men-

60 The reason for focusing on 'thought' (*vitakka*) is rooted in the Buddha's more fundamental contention that all action is rooted in intention (e.g. AN 6.63), which belongs to the domain of thought (*mana*) or of the understanding (*citta*). Hence, thoughts are the basis that determines verbal and physical acts as well. This entails that sorting out what are the right and best thoughts to entertain also leads to a purification of verbal and physical conduct. The term *vitakka* is commonly rendered in a rather loose sense as 'thought' (any thinking process about a certain object or theme or moved by a certain intentional attitude). Here, however, the translation plays with the notion of 'certitude' by interpreting *vitakka* as breaking apart (*vi-*) doubt (*takka*). This choice has two main reasons. First, from an experiential point of view, defining and even recognizing the phenomenon of 'thought' is far from obvious because the term used to point to it is in itself vague and partial. One might tend to consider 'thoughts' anything that is expressed through one's own inner voice or dialogue, somehow running in one's 'head' or 'mind' or 'heart' or similar. However, thoughts clearly do not have to be verbalized phenomena, and in fact all verbalized phenomena are just a consequence of a subtler and deeper 'thinking' activity. Hence, the term 'thought' is not necessarily the best suited term to guide practice. Second, and connected with this point, thoughts in themselves are not neutral representations of states of affairs, but they are inherently shaped by intentionality and always come with some sort of judgment or belief or attitude that should be adopted with regard to the object of thought. Thinking about something entails entertaining a certain intentional attitude towards it, also assuming that such an object will be worth acquiring, or best to avoid, and so on. The discourses do not trace any sharp boundary between 'thought' and 'intention' but rather suggests that all thinking activity is inherently intentional and shaped by intentions. In this sense, the phenomenon of *vitakka* is best captured by 'certitude' insofar as it points towards that sense of belief and apparent certainty with which one launches upon this or that for the sake of engaging with it in one way or another. Being engaged with sensuality or ill-will about a certain object, for instance, means being certain that such an object is worth pursuing or avoiding. Sensuality and ill-will, in particular, are pro-active attitudes, which steer and induce reactions (unlike sleepiness and doubt, which might undermine action). For this reason, they are also experienced within an aura of 'certitude' about what should be acquired or rejected. The activity of *vitakka* (expressed by the verb *vitakketi*, 'to reason') is about 'ascertaining' whether certain objects are worth engaging with and how. The method presented by the Buddha, thus, asks to first discern these more fundamental attitudes (these certitudes, beliefs, more or less implicit, verbalized or not), and divide *these* into two heaps. As this process becomes more and more refined, this activity will be increasingly shaped by the awakening factor of investigation (see below SN 42.6) and will become a factor of composure.

dicants, I put certitudes about sensuality (*kāmavitakko*), ill-will (*byāpādavitakko*) and violence (*vihiṃsāvitakko*) on one side, and I put certitudes about non-sensuality, non-ill-will, and non-violence on another side.

Then, Mendicants, when I was dwelling unintoxicated (*appamatta*), ardent, and resolute, a certitude about sensuality, or a certitude about ill-will, or a certitude about violence arose.[61] I knew that: 'this certitude about sensuality, ill-will or violence arose in me. It leads to my own affliction (*attabyābādha*), to the affliction of others, and to the affliction of both; it extinguishes wisdom (*paññānirodhiko*), contributes to vexation (*vighātapakkhiko*), and does not lead to extinction (*anibbānasaṃvattaniko*).'

'It leads to my own affliction:' Mendicants, when I reflected on this, it vanished away. 'It leads to the affliction of others:' Mendicants, when I reflected on this, it vanished away. 'It leads the affliction of both myself and others:' Mendicants, when I reflected on this, it vanished away. 'It extinguishes wisdom, contributes to vexation, and does not lead to extinction:' Mendicants, when I reflected on this, it vanished away.

Mendicants, whenever a non-arisen certitude about sensuality, ill-will or violence arose in me, I abandoned it, I dispelled it, I did away with it.

Mendicants, whatever a mendicant frequently ascertains and explores, his understanding will bend towards that.[62] Mendicants, if a mendicant frequently ascertains and explores certitudes about sensuality, ill-will and violence, he has abandoned certitudes about non-sensuality, non-ill-will and non-violence, and made grow certitudes about sensuality, ill-will and violence, and his understanding (*citta*) will bend towards those certitudes about sensuality, ill-will and violence.[63]

For further discussion of composure, see below §6.

61 In the original Pāli version, the same scheme reported here once is actually repeated three times, one for each of the three kinds of non-virtuous thoughts.

62 *Yañ̃ñadeva, bhikkhave, bhikkhu bahulamanuvitakketi anuvicāreti, tathā tathā nati hoti cetaso*. This is a crucially important principle, which underpins the fact that habits profoundly shape the understanding (for good or for worse), through repetition and inertia. But it also opens up the possibility for changing ordinary habitual patterns and establishing new ones through practice. Notice that here *vitakka* appears together with *vicara* (in the compound forms with *anu-*). Again, in this context, *vicara* does not necessarily indicate the more technical sense of 'investigation' but rather a looser sense of 'moving around (*carati*) in a domain (*vi-*).' However, since thoughts of sensuality, ill-will, and violence are often strong and exciting in their own right, *vicarati* is not a blunt 'thought-wandering' but a genuine exploration, a getting involved with those thoughts.

63 Again, in the original Pāli version, the same scheme reported here only once is actually repeated three times with variations for each of the three kinds of thoughts discussed.

Mendicants, suppose that in the last month of the rainy season, in the autumn, when the crops are ripening, a cowherd would look after his cows. Using a stick, he would beat and poke the cows on this or that side, block and gather them. For what reason? Mendicants, it is because that cowherd sees that he could be punished, imprisoned, being subject to confiscation, or blamed due to that.[64]

Just in the same way, Mendicants, I saw the danger (*ādīnavaṃ*), degradation, and pollution (*saṅkilesaṃ*) of non-virtuous realities, and the advantage (*ānisaṃsaṃ*) and their contribution to purity (*vodānapakkhaṃ*) of virtuous realities and non-sensuality.

Mendicants, when I was dwelling unintoxicated, ardent, and resolute, a certitude about non-sensuality, or a certitude about non-ill-will, or a certitude about non-violence arose. I knew that: 'this certitude about non-sensuality, non-ill-will or non-violence arose in me. It leads neither to my own affliction, nor to the affliction of others, nor the affliction of both; it increases wisdom (*paññāvuddhiko*), contributes to non-vexation, and leads to extinction.

If I would ascertain and explore this certitude all night long, all day long, all night and day long, I do not see anything to fear due to that. But after a long time of ascertaining and exploring the body might be fatigued. When the body is fatigued, the understanding is disturbed. When the understanding is disturbed, the understanding is far from composure (*samādhimhā*).' Then, Mendicants, I induced my understanding to settle internally, I made it quiet,[65] I made it unified (*ekodiṃ*), I composed it. For what reason? In order for my understanding not to be disturbed.'

Mendicants, whatever a mendicant frequently ascertains and explores, his understanding will bend towards that. Mendicants, if a mendicant frequently ascertains and explores certitudes about non-sensuality, non-ill-will and non-violence, he has abandoned certitudes about sensuality, ill-will and violence and developed certitudes about non-sensuality, non-ill-will and non-violence, and his understanding will bend towards those certitudes about non-sensuality, non-ill-will and non-violence.

64 The cowherd is not the owner of the crops; hence, if his cows would damage the crops, the cowherd would be responsible for that damage and could incur bad consequences as a result.

65 Notice the use of a series of causative verbs (*cittaṃ saṇṭhapemi sannisādemi*), which stress the deliberate intention to arouse and sustain composure.

> Mendicants, suppose that in the last month of the hot season, when all crops have been brought inside the village, a cowherd would look after his cows; sitting at the root of a tree or in the open air, his duty would be only to remember (*satikaraṇīyam*) this: 'those cows.' In the same way, Mendicants, my duty was only to remember this: 'those realities' (*ete dhammā*).[66]
>
> Mendicants, unremitting energy was aroused in me, recollection was established (*upaṭṭhitā sati*) without forgetfulness (*asammuṭṭhā*),[67] the body tranquil and not agitated, the understanding composed and unified (*samāhitaṃ cittaṃ ekaggaṃ*).
>
> Then, Mendicants, secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from non-virtuous realities, after having entered upon it, I dwelt in the first contemplation (*paṭhamaṃ jhānaṃ*), with ascertainment and investigation, and enthusiastic pleasantness born from seclusion.'
>
> ...[68]
>
> (MN 19)

Countering the hindrances is a core practice in the gradual training taught by the Buddha. This stage usually builds on previous effort made in the domain of moral conduct and sense restraint (which by themselves deprive the hindrances of much fuel) and precedes the development of composure. The following excerpt (DN 2) explains how to work with each hindrance via a simile, which might be helpful in better understanding their nature and, in turn, overcoming them.

66 When the understanding is quiet and peaceful, not harassed by non-virtuous realities, there is no reason for fear or worry. Hence, one can rest simply remembering what is present. The 'duty' is 'what should be done' (*karaṇīyam*), and this concerns not forgetting what is currently present, namely, sustaining a minimal degree of recollection (*sati*). Cf. this point with the last indication included in the refrain of MN 10, provided in §1, where this is applied to simply acknowledging that 'there is body.'

67 This passage makes quite clear that *sati* is understood in terms of 'recollecting' since it is contrasted with *muṭṭhā*, which refers to forgetfulness.

68 The rest of the discourse describes the progression through the four contemplations (see more details in §6), which is followed by an account of the Buddha's own final awakening.

... Endowed with this outstanding bulk of honesty,[69] endowed with this outstanding restraint of the sensory faculties, endowed with this outstanding recollection and metacognitive awareness, endowed with this outstanding contentment, one resorts to a secluded dwelling place: a forest, the root of a tree, a mountain, a cave, a hiding place, a cemetery, a jungle grove, the open air, a heap of straw. After the meal, returning from the alms round, one sits down, having taken a crossed-leg posture, having set the body straight, and having established an all-encompassing recollection.[70]

Having abandoned greed (*abhijjhaṃ*) for the world, one dwells with an understanding free from greed, one purifies the understanding from greed.

Having abandoned ill-will and aversion (*byāpādapa dosaṃ*), one dwells with an understanding free from ill-will, friendly and compassionate (*hitānukampī*)[71] for all living beings, one purifies the understanding from ill-will and aversion.

69 *Ariyena sīlakkhandhena*, more commonly translated 'with a noble aggregate of virtue.' In these translations, however, *ariya* is rendered with 'outstanding;' *ariya* originally indicates a certain ethnic origin (the Arian clan) but it can be more broadly used to emphasize all that is worth and excellent. *Sīla* is traditionally presented as moral discipline and virtue, and it is here expressed in terms of 'honesty' (understood as a broad value of moral integrity). *Khanda* is usually translated as 'aggregate' and it is most commonly used in the context of spelling out the 'five aggregates' in which experience can be analyzed (see SN 22.95 in §7). More literally, the terms refer to the main body or bulk of something (like the bulk of an elephant or the trunk of a tree).

70 *Parimukhaṃ satiṃ upaṭṭhapetvā*, literally 'having established memory (*sati*) around (*pari-*) the mouth (*-mukhaṃ*).' This can be interpreted in the context of breath recollection as the establishment of attention around the point of contact where the breath comes in and out of the body (which is usually the mouth or the upper lip). More loosely, this can be taken to refer to the need to establish the intention of focusing on a certain object or theme, and then recollecting this intention by carefully re-establishing it each time that it slips away. However, the use of this expression in this context suggests that it does not necessarily refer to the practice of focusing on a specific object, given that what follows is rather a progressive engagement and clearing away of the hindrances (which are not defined by a specific object of attention, but rather discerned through metacognitive awareness of how attention works as a whole). From a historical point of view, in the Vedic culture, the Sanskrit *mukha* is also sometimes used to indicate the place where the sacrifice is conducted, referring to the fire and the altar, namely, the focal point of the sacrificial action. The compound *sarva(to)-mukha* ('facing in all directions') is sometimes used to refer to a ritual altar 'facing all directions' and sometimes as an epithet of the ultimate principle to express its all-encompassing nature (e.g. in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, 9.5). There seem to be no stringent terminological reason to interpret *mukha* in an overly literal and physical sense as a physical mouth. Notice also that the Pāli *pari-* ('all around, entirely') is similar in meaning to the Sanskrit *sarva*, allowing for a reading of *pari-mukhaṃ* not in terms of one specific point of attention, but rather as an opening of attention in all directions, 'all-encompassing.'

71 *Hita* usually means 'benefit,' 'welfare,' but it can also mean 'friend,' while *ānukampa* refers to an attitude of compassion and mercy.

Having abandoned sloth and torpor (*thina middhaṃ*), one dwells free from sloth and torpor, with a bright perception,[72] recollecting, having metacognitive awareness, one purifies the understanding from sloth and torpor.

Having abandoned restlessness and worry (*uddhacca kukkuccaṃ*), one dwells calmly,[73] having internally pacified the understanding, one purifies the understanding from restlessness and worry.

Having abandoned doubt (*vicikicchaṃ*), one dwells having gone beyond doubt, unperplexed about virtuous realities,[74] one purifies the understanding from doubts.

Great King,[75] suppose that a man was to take a loan and would invest it in his business, and his business would prosper. He could then repay his old debt and would have enough left over to support his wife. He would think: 'in the past, I have taken a loan and invested it in my business. My business prospered, and I can now repay my old debt, and there is enough left over for me for supporting my wife.' Through this, he would acquire gladness (*pāmojjaṃ*), and attain happiness (*somanassaṃ*).

Great King, suppose that a man was sick, suffering, seriously ill; he could not enjoy his food, and his body would not have enough strength. At a later time, he recovers from that sickness; he would enjoy his food, and his body would have enough strength. He would think: 'in the past I was sick, suffering, seriously ill; I could not enjoy my food, and my body did not have enough strength. Now, I recovered from that sickness; I

72 *Ālokasaññī* literally means 'perception of light.' 'Light,' however, can also be understood more metaphorically as the quality of brightness that qualifies knowledge and awareness, hence, the absence of sloth and torpor is experienced in terms of a bright and clear perception. This also entails a component of energy.

73 *An-uddhato*, also 'un-disturbed' or 'not agitated.' The term 'conceit,' however, might capture more precisely the main propeller of the hindrance of restlessness and worry, which most often has to do with some story associated with what 'I' am or do, hence with 'my' being inferior, equal, or superior to others.

74 *Akathaṅkathī kusalesu dhammesu*, this clause clarifies the sort of doubts that need to be overcome and that constitute the core of this hindrance, namely, doubts about what is virtuous and what is not, what is skillful and what is not, what one should be doing and what one should be avoiding. Hence, this is mostly a practical doubt about how to sustain action and direct it. More generally, this doubt concerns whether one should follow the Buddha's teachings or not, in a certain way or another. Any other (more speculative) doubt that is not directly concerned with action and practice can be tolerated, solved at a later point, or simply set aside since it will not have a direct impact on one's ability to practice.

75 In this discourse, the Buddha is addressing King Ajatasattu of Magadha.

enjoy my food, and there is enough strength in my body.' Through this, he would become glad, and attain happiness.

Great King, suppose that a man was bound in prison. At a later time, he would be freed from prison, safe and sound, without having lost any of his possessions. He would think: 'in the past, I was bound in prison. But now I have been freed from prison, safe and sound. And there is none of my possessions that is lost.' Through this, he would acquire gladness, and attain happiness.

Great King, suppose that a man was a slave, not independent, subject to others, unable to go wherever he wants.[76] At a later time, he would be freed from slavery, he would be independent, no longer subject to others, a freeman able to go wherever he wants. He would think: 'in the past, I was a slave, not independent, subject to others, unable to go wherever I wanted. But now I have been freed from slavery, I am independent, not subject to others, I'm a freeman able to go wherever I want.' Through this, he would acquire gladness, and attain happiness.

Great King, suppose that a man with his wealth and possessions was travelling along a perilous path in the wilderness, where food is scarce and there is fear of creeping things. At a later time, he would cross over that wilderness and safely arrive at a village, which is secure and without causes for fear. He would think: 'in the past, I was travelling with my wealth and possessions along a perilous path in the wilderness, where food was scarce and there was fear of creeping things. But now, I crossed over that wilderness, and I safely arrived at a village, which is secure and without causes for fear.' Through this, he would acquire gladness, and attain happiness.

Just in the same way, Great King, like a debt, like sickness, like imprisonment, like slavery, like a perilous path in the wilderness: it is in this way that a mendicant considers these five hindrances when they are unabandoned in himself.

76 Notice that the hindrance of sloth and torpor and that of restlessness and worry use a similar imagery, linked to the idea of bondage. Sloth and torpor are more akin to physical confinement in which one cannot leave the narrow space of a jail cell, while restlessness and worry are more akin to a condition of slavery, in which one can physically move around, but still depends and is bound to a master. In this sense, one might see that sloth and torpor have a more explicit bodily component, while restlessness and worry indicate a more general existential condition, rooted in how one understands and thinks about one's own situation.

> But, Great King, when these five hindrances are abandoned in himself, a mendicant considers this as being without debts, without sickness, freed from imprisonment, being a freeman, being in a safe place.
>
> When he considers that these five hindrances have been abandoned in himself, gladness (*pāmojjaṃ*) arises; for one who is glad, enthusiasm (*pīti*) arises; for one whose thought is enthusiast, the body becomes tranquil (*passambhati*); one whose body is tranquil, feels pleasantness (*sukhaṃ vedeti*); for one who is pleased (*sukhino*), the understanding becomes composed.'[77]
>
> ...
>
> (DN 2)

Hindrances and awakening factors are related by their opposite use of attention. Frequently attending to certain objects or characteristics nourishes the hindrances, while frequently attending to other objects or characteristics nourishes the awakening factors. This point is illustrated in the following discourse (SN 46.2).

> At Savatthi. 'Mendicants, just as this body is sustained by food, it subsists dependent on food, and without food it does not subsist; in the same way, Mendicants, the five hindrances are sustained by food, subsist dependent on food, and without food they do not subsist.
>
> Mendicants, and what is the food for the arising of a non-arisen desire for sensual pleasures, or for the increase and full development of an arisen desire for sensual pleasures? Mendicants, there is the characteristic of

77 This formula is key in understanding the nature of composure. Composure does *not* arise out of a deliberate effort for concentration, but rather from happiness (or a form of non-sensual pleasure). Abandoning the hindrances entails a degree of effort, which leads to gladness. This gladness is a sense of relief that is experienced as a form of enthusiasm for the new condition that one has reached. Because of this relief, one can relax effort and one's body becomes more tranquil. This creates a pleasant condition in which happiness arises. Composure is just the coming together of thought and bodily process, which simply coalesce in peace and unity (see further details below, §6). Notice how this progression also covers four of the awakening factors: effort (energy), enthusiasm, tranquility, and composure. Recollection and investigation can be seen as preliminaries necessary for this progression to unfold, while serenity can be seen as a result of composure.

the attractive.[78] Devoting unwise attention to this:[79] there it is the food for the arising of a non-arisen desire for sensual pleasures, or for the increase and full development of an arisen desire for sensual pleasures.

Mendicants, and what is the food for the arising of a non-arisen ill-will, or for the increase and full development of an arisen ill-will? Mendicants, there is the characteristic of the repulsive (*paṭigha*). Devoting unwise attention to this: there it is the food for the arising of a non-arisen ill-will, or for the increase and full development of an arisen ill-will.

Mendicants, and what is the food for the arising of a non-arisen sloth and torpor, or for the increase and full development of an arisen sloth and torpor? Mendicants, there is dislike, weariness, drowsiness, sleepiness after the meal, and immobility of the understanding. Devoting unwise attention to this: there it is the food for the arising of a non-arisen sloth and torpor, or for the increase and full development of an arisen sloth and torpor.

Mendicants, and what is the food for the arising of a non-arisen restlessness and worry, or for the increase and full development of an arisen restlessness and worry? Mendicants, there is lack of calm in the understanding. Devoting unwise attention to this: there it is the food for the arising of a non-arisen restlessness and worry, or for the increase and full development of an arisen restlessness and worry.

Mendicants, and what is the food for the arising of a non-arisen doubt, or for the increase and full development of an arisen doubt? Mendicants, there are realities that support doubt. Devoting unwise attention to this:

78 *Subha-nimittaṃ*. The term *nimitta* is often used to indicate the distinctive characteristics of some content of experience that allows one to recognize it for what it is. For instance, when one recognizes a person from their voice, the voice is the *nimitta* of that person. *Subha* indicates whatever can be considered to be bright, good, pleasant, and beautiful, hence, 'attractive.'

79 *A-yoniso-manasi-kāra-bahulī-kāro*. The compound *bahulī-kāro* literally means 'made (*kāro*) much of (*bahulī*),' but generally refers to frequently practicing something or devoting oneself to some activity. *Manasi-kāra* literally means 'making (*kāra*) in the thought (*manasi*, locative of *manas*)' and more generally refers to 'paying attention to' (bringing a certain content of experience to the fore of one's thought process). *Yoni* literally indicates the womb, and more figuratively the origin, foundation, or place of birth of something. Even more figuratively, then, *yoniso* (ablative) indicates a way of being thorough, down to the root of something, systematic, complete, and deep. Since this attitude is based upon some degree of understanding, *yoniso* might be best rendered with 'wise' because it is a characteristic of wisdom to be able to scrutinize something thoroughly and down to its origins and foundations. In the most proper sense, this means understanding reality by uncovering its conditionally co-originated structure (e.g. SN 12.10), which makes attention genuinely wise. Sometimes, *yoniso* is rendered as 'appropriate' but this seems too vague.

there it is the food for the arising of a non-arisen doubt, or for the increase and full development of an arisen doubt.

Mendicants, just as this body is sustained by food, it subsists dependent on food, and without food it does not subsist; in the same way, Mendicants, the five hindrances are sustained by food, subsist dependent on food, and without food they do not subsist.[80]

Mendicants, just as this body is sustained by food, it subsists dependent on food, and without food it does not subsist; in the same way, Mendicants, the seven factors of awakening are sustained by food, subsist dependent on food, and without food they do not subsist.

Mendicants, and what is the food for the arising of the non-arisen awakening factor of recollection (*sati*), or for the cultivation and fulfillment of the arisen awakening factor of recollection? Mendicants, there are realities that support the awakening factor of recollection.[81] Devoting wise attention to this: there it is the food for the arising of the non-arisen awakening factor of recollection, or for the cultivation and fulfillment of the arisen awakening factor of recollection.

Mendicants, and what is the food for the arising of the non-arisen awakening factor of investigation of realities (*dhammavicaya*), or for the cultivation and fulfillment of the arisen awakening factor of investigation of realities? Mendicants, there are virtuous (*kusala*)[82] and non-virtuous realities, blamable and unblameable realities, inferior and superior realities,

80 In another discourse (SN 46.51), the same principle is applied to explain how the five hindrances can be de-nourished and brought to extinction, by 'starving' them through a wiser use of attention.

81 In another discourse (SN 46.3), it is explained that the factor of recollection is cultivated by recollecting and pondering the Buddha's teachings themselves (*dhammaṃ anussarati anuvitakketi*) or just 'bring to mind (*anussarati*, based on the same root of *sati*), and ascertain (*anuvitakketi*) reality (*dhamma*).' *Vi-takka* comes from *takka* which means both 'reasoning' in general and 'doubt.' Interpreting the prefix *vi-* in a negative sense, *vitakka* becomes 'departing from doubt,' namely, that sort of thought or reasoning that allows one to overcome doubt and then *ascertain* what the situation is (see footnote 60 above). Since doubt is in itself a hindrance, *vitakka* has a more specific function that simply 'thinking' or 'pondering' because its task is that of providing a sufficiently powerful and clear understanding (or even reasoning) capable of moving from doubt towards greater certainty. In the context of the awakening factors, this might also be interpreted as fully understanding and ascertaining the *meaning* that one attributes to one's reality or condition or to the teachings of the Buddha himself (which concern that reality).

82 *Kusala* can have both a moral sense of 'wholesome' and a more practical sense of 'skillfulness' or 'mastery' (like when someone is able to play a musical instrument very well). The term 'virtuous' aims to simultaneously capture both of these dimensions since it can refer to both a sense of moral goodness and a sense of 'virtuosity' or ability in performing a task well.

dark and bright realities with their counterparts.[83] Devoting wise attention to this: there it is the food for the arising of the non-arisen awakening factor of investigation of realities, or for the cultivation and fulfillment of the arisen awakening factor of investigation of realities.

Mendicants, and what is the food for the arising of the non-arisen awakening factor of energy (*vīriya*), or for the cultivation and fulfillment of the arisen awakening factor of energy? Mendicants, there is the phenomenon of application, the phenomenon of exertion, the phenomenon of endeavor.[84] Devoting wise attention to this: there it is the food for the arising of the non-arisen awakening factor of energy, or for the cultivation and fulfillment of the arisen awakening factor of energy.

Mendicants, and what is the food for the arising of the non-arisen awakening factor of enthusiasm (*pīti*),[85] or for the cultivation and fulfilment of the arisen awakening factor of enthusiasm? Mendicants, there are realities that support the awakening factor of enthusiasm. Devoting wise attention to this: there it is the food for the arising of the non-arisen awakening factor of enthusiasm, or for the cultivation and fulfillment of the arisen awakening factor of enthusiasm.

Mendicants, and what is the food for the arising of the non-arisen awakening factor of tranquility (*passaddhi*), or for the cultivation and fulfilment of the arisen awakening factor of tranquility? Mendicants, there is tran-

83 In this sense, the factor of investigation is cultivated primarily as a reflection on the nature and consequences of *actions* since they are the primary domain within which these categories apply. See below, §3, AN 3.65.

84 The sequence reads: *ārambhadhātu nikkamadhātu parakkamadhātu*. The term *dhatu* (etymologically related to *dhamma*) is usually rendered with 'element' and is often connected with the four great elements that constitute physical reality (earth, water, fire, and air). An element is usually discerned as the result of some analysis, and hence it is assumed to be relatively simple and fundamental, like a constituent of more complex realities. In a looser sense, however, the term can just indicate the appearing or manifestation of something as a content of experience, hence, a 'phenomenon.' The progression *ārambha- nikkama- parakkama-* indicates different shades of effort, from an initial application to its sustenance and then to the attempt at extending and expanding it. This suggests that energy is deliberately cultivated by striving to arouse it.

85 *Pīti* is variously translated as 'joy' and 'rapture' and it commonly features as a constituent of the first two stages of composure (see §6). The experience of *pīti* unfolds both at the physical level and at the level of thought. In the body, it is associated with a profound (albeit often subtle) sense of well-being and pleasure, while at the level of thought it is a form of effervescence, hilarity, excitement. As mentioned in other discourses (e.g. DN 2 above), *pīti* arises from gladness (*pāmujja* or *pamoda*, similar to the verb *pamodati*, 'to rejoice' from the root *mud*, same as in *mudita*, 'sympathy,' 'gladness,' see below §5). Hence, it results from fully understanding one's condition of well-being and happiness and being taken by the joy for it.

quility of the body and tranquility of the understanding.[86] Devoting wise attention to this: there it is the food for the arising of the non-arisen awakening factor of tranquility, or for the cultivation and fulfillment of the arisen awakening factor of tranquility.

Mendicants, and what is the food for the arising of the non-arisen awakening factor of composure (*samādhi*), or for the cultivation and fulfilment of the arisen awakening factor of composure? Mendicants, there is the characteristic of peace (*samatha*), the characteristic of non-distraction.[87] Devoting wise attention to this: there it is the food for the arising of the non-arisen awakening factor of composure, or for the cultivation and fulfillment of the arisen awakening factor of composure.

Mendicants, and what is the food for the arising of the non-arisen awakening factor of serenity (*upekkhā*),[88] or for the cultivation and fulfilment of

86 In the experience of *pīti* the levels of body and thought tend to remain intermingled and form a unified phenomenon (with the bodily component often being more apparent). *Passaddhi* also entails this twofold component, but it allows for a more systematic exploration of both or for the reliance of one aspect in order to cultivate the other; for instance, attending more to bodily tranquility to tranquillize the understanding or vice versa. This duplicity is explored in other meditative approaches, like in the *ānāpānasati* (breath recollection, MN 118), in which instructions progress explicitly from the pacification of the body towards the pacification of thought processes.

87 *Abyagga-nimittaṃ* can be understood as '*a-* (privative) *by-* (phonetic alteration of the prefix *vy-* or *vi-*, meaning 'separation') *agga*.' The term *agga* literally means 'first' or 'foremost' and can have a variety of meanings, including 'first in time' or 'the top' of a place (like the top of a mountain or the tip of the tongue), hence also 'excellent.' Interpreting the compound, *by-agga* indicates a moving away from the 'top' or the 'foremost' aspect of experience, and the privative prefix (*a-*) further qualifies this as the '*non*-moving away from what is foremost.' If one takes 'foremost' (*agga*) to refer to whatever content of experience is currently contemplated in the foreground or at the center of one's focus of attention (hence, *agga* works figuratively as what is 'most important' in one's current experience), then *abyagga* can be rendered as 'non-distraction.' This seems consistent with the other characteristic of composure, which is 'peace' (*samatha*), since peace is also experienced as the ability to not be disturbed or dragged away. Notice, however, that interpreting 'non-distraction' in connection with 'peace' suggests that this form of stability of attention is not the result of a forceful effort or will-power that tries to keep something steady, but rather as a progressive relinquishment of effort and force. In this sense, it is important to appreciate how composure is most directly linked with tranquility (*passaddhi*).

88 Literally, *upekkhā* means 'to look on' often with a sense of detachment and non-involvement or dispassion. This attitude can be compared with the ability of embracing a vast landscape in one's gaze and looking at it with a degree of peace and emotional non-involvement. Usually, the term is rendered with 'equanimity' or 'indifference.' The problem with 'indifference' is that in common colloquial English it entails a negative nuance, which is absent from *upekkhā*. The term 'equanimity' instead suggests an idea of balance between different pulls, but *upekkhā* arises in the *absence* of any pull. Perhaps, a more vivid poetic counterpart for *upekkhā* might be discovered in Lucretius (*De Rerum Natura*, book 2, verses 7-9): '*Sed nil dulcius est, bene quam munita tenere / edita doctrina sapientum templa serena, / despicere unde queas alios passimque videre* ...' ('but nothing is sweeter than dwelling in the well protected / serene temples built upon the wisdom of the sages, / from which you can see

the arisen awakening factor of serenity? Mendicants, there are realities that support the awakening factor of serenity.[89] Devoting wise attention to this: there it is the food for the arising of the non-arisen awakening factor of serenity, or for the cultivation and fulfillment of the arisen awakening factor of serenity.

Mendicants, just as this body is sustained by food, it subsists dependent on food, and without food it does not subsist; in the same way, Mendicants, the seven factors of awakening are sustained by food, subsist dependent on food, and without food they do not subsist.'

(SN 46.2)

The relevance of freeing the mind from the hindrances and cultivating awakening factors is key in the fourth domain of the establishment of recollection (*satipaṭṭhāna*). This fourth domain illustrates how to observe 'realities as *just* realities.' The following excerpt (MN 10) focuses on how hindrances and awakening factors are approached in this context. Hindrances, for instance, are a real component of one's experience, and yet they are *just* a conditioned phenomenon. Any further personal meaning and identification that comes with them is gratuitous and unwarranted. Seeing hindrances as *just* realities is again a way of disengaging from the story they tell and hence countering them. The same applies to awakening factors.

from above the others, here and there ...'). The Latin expression *templa serena* can also be rendered more metaphorically as a serene, holy space in the sky from which one can oversee how ordinary human beings run (and ruin) their lives. Following up on this suggestion, *upekkhā* is rendered with 'serenity,' which is different from (albeit connected with) 'tranquility' (*passaddhi*) and 'peace' (*samatha*).

89 In a more detailed account (SN 46.4), the Buddha explains: 'Mendicants, at the time when a mendicant thoroughly oversees the understanding thus composed, it is then that the awakening factor of serenity is aroused in that mendicant' (*Yasmiṃ samaye bhikkhave bhikkhu tathā samāhitaṃ cittaṃ sādhukaṃ ajjhupekkhitā hoti. Upekkhāsambojjhaṅgo tasmiṃ samaye bhikkhuno āraddho hoti*). Notice here the play between the fact of *upekkhā* and the activity of *ajjhupekkhati* (formed with the double prefixes *adhi- + upa-*, both reinforcing the activity of seeing 'upon,' 'fully' and 'intently,' hence also 'overseeing'). This suggests that serenity (*upekkhā*) is not just a passive 'looking upon' but it does entail a skillful and self-reflexive ability to 'over-see' composure and guide it towards deeper understanding.

Notice that this contemplation employs a fixed pattern of investigation for the five hindrances and the seven awakening factors, with a slight variation between the two. In both cases, the fixed part consists of recognizing (i) presence, or (ii) absence, and (iii) how something arises. In the cases of the hindrances (which must be abandoned), the pattern of investigation then entails knowing (iv) how to abandon and (v) how to ensure that what is abandoned will not arise again. In the case of the awakening factors, instead, the pattern entails knowing (iv') how to cultivate and fulfill what has arisen. This makes this contemplation a straightforward implementation of right effort, the sixth factor of the eightfold path (SN 56.11, §4).

'... Mendicants, and how does a mendicant dwell observing realities as [just] realities?

Here, Mendicants, a mendicant dwell observing realities as [just] realities with respect to the five hindrances. Mendicants, and how does a mendicant dwell observing realities as [just] realities with respect to the five hindrances?

Here, Mendicants, when desire for sensual pleasures is present in him, a mendicant knows 'desire for sensual pleasures is present in me,'[90] or when desire for sensual pleasures is not present in him, he knows 'desire for sensual pleasures is not present in me;' and he knows how a non-arisen desire for sensual pleasures arises; and he knows how an arisen desire for sensual pleasures is abandoned; and he knows how an abandoned desire for sensual pleasures will not arise in the future.

When ill-will is present in him, he knows 'ill-will is present in me,' or when ill-will is not present in him, he knows 'ill-will is not present in me;' and he knows how a non-arisen ill-will arises; and he knows how an arisen ill-will is abandoned; and he knows how an abandoned ill-will will not arise in the future.

90 The original Pāli construction is phased with the verb 'to be' (*bhikkhu santaṃ ... ajjhattaṃ kāmacchandaṃ 'atthi me ajjhattaṃ kāmacchando'ti*), which is here used in the sense 'to be for someone' in the possessive meaning of 'belonging to someone' or 'having.' The adverb *ajjhattaṃ* usually means 'internally' and it is contrasted in the refrain of MN 10 with *bahiddhā* 'externally' (see above, the previous excerpt from MN 10 included in §1). In this context, however, it likely stresses that a certain factor (a hindrance or an awakening factor) is present within the field of experience of the one who observes it; hence, it is present 'within' or 'in me' (speaking from first-person perspective).

When sloth and torpor is present in him, he knows 'sloth and torpor is present in me,' or when sloth and torpor is not present in him, he knows 'sloth and torpor is not present in me;' and he knows how a non-arisen sloth and torpor arises; and he knows how an arisen sloth and torpor is abandoned; and he knows how an abandoned sloth and torpor will not arise in the future.

When restlessness and worry is present in him, he knows 'restlessness and worry is present in me,' or when restlessness and worry is not present in him, he knows 'restlessness and worry is not present in me;' and he knows how a non-arisen restlessness and worry arises; and he knows how an arisen restlessness and worry is abandoned; and he knows how an abandoned restlessness and worry will not arise in the future.

When doubt is present in him, he knows 'doubt is present in me,' or when doubt is not present in him, he knows 'doubt is not present in me;' and he knows how a non-arisen doubt arises; and he knows how an arisen doubt is abandoned; and he knows how an abandoned doubt will not arise in the future.

...

Furthermore, Mendicants, a mendicant dwell observing realities as [just] realities with respect to the seven factors of awakening. Mendicants, and how does a mendicant dwell observing realities as [just] realities with respect to the seven factors of awakening?

Here, Mendicants, when the awakening factor of recollection is present in him, a mendicant knows 'the awakening factor of recollection is present in me,' or when the awakening factor of recollection is not present in him, he knows 'the awakening factor of recollection is not present in me;' and he knows how the non-arisen awakening factor of recollection arises; and he knows how the arisen awakening factor of recollection is cultivated and fulfilled.

When the awakening factor of investigation of realities is present in him, he knows 'the awakening factor of investigation of realities is present in me,' or when the awakening factor of investigation of realities is not present in him, he knows 'the awakening factor of investigation of realities is not present in me;' and he knows how the non-arisen awakening factor of investigation of realities arises; and he knows how the arisen awakening factor of investigation of realities is cultivated and fulfilled.

When the awakening factor of energy is present in him, he knows 'the awakening factor of energy is present in me,' or when the awakening factor of energy is not present in him, he knows 'the awakening factor of energy is not present in me;' and he knows how the non-arisen awakening factor of energy arises; and he knows how the arisen awakening factor of energy is cultivated and fulfilled.

When the awakening factor of enthusiasm is present in him, he knows 'the awakening factor of enthusiasm is present in me,' or when the awakening factor of enthusiasm is not present in him, he knows 'the awakening factor of enthusiasm is not present in me;' and he knows how the non-arisen awakening factor of enthusiasm arises; and he knows how the arisen awakening factor of enthusiasm is cultivated and fulfilled.

When the awakening factor of tranquility is present in him, he knows 'the awakening factor of tranquility is present in me,' or when the awakening factor of tranquility is not present in him, he knows 'the awakening factor of tranquility is not present in me;' and he knows how the non-arisen awakening factor of tranquility arises; and he knows how the arisen awakening factor of tranquility is cultivated and fulfilled.

When the awakening factor of composure is present in him, he knows 'the awakening factor of composure is present in me,' or when the awakening factor of composure is not present in him, he knows 'the awakening factor of composure is not present in me;' and he knows how the non-arisen awakening factor of composure arises; and he knows how the arisen awakening factor of composure is cultivated and fulfilled.

When the awakening factor of serenity is present in him, he knows 'the awakening factor of serenity is present in me,' or when the awakening factor of serenity is not present in him, he knows 'the awakening factor of serenity is not present in me;' and he knows how the non-arisen awakening factor of serenity arises; and he knows how the arisen awakening factor of serenity is cultivated and fulfilled.'

...

(MN 10)

Working with the hindrances might result in becoming more sensitive to a certain degree of discomfort. This is not only normal, but necessary for practice to unfold. Ordinarily, one does not even recognize the hindrances as such and simply does whatever is possible to satisfy them, hoping to get some relief from their pressure. Working with the hindrances entails first to *refrain* as much as possible from satisfying them. This is often spelled out in terms of 'sense restraint' (*indriya-saṃvara*), which means the deliberate intention of not fueling the hindrances by indulging in sensual objects or experiences that can support their arousal. The point of restraint is not to shut off the senses, but rather to establish a different relationship with the whole sensual domain, such that it is no longer experienced as the feeding ground for the hindrances. This is mostly done by working with the way in which attention is used, the quality of it, and the characteristics that one decides to pay attention to. For instance, when a visual form arises, one deliberately decides *not* to grasp at those characteristics that might arouse sensual desire, or to those characteristics that can arouse aversion. From this perspective, one might see the practice of sense restraint as a way to work with the dynamics of attention that sustain or undermine the hindrances during informal periods and daily life, while formal sessions will allow to work with them in a more focused and deeper way. In any case, restraining the senses (and the hindrances) might be felt as a momentary *increase* in one's discomfort, especially in the beginning, since one is now lacking the sort of anesthetics derived from constantly feeding and satisfying the pulls and pushes of the hindrances.

The following discourse (MN 75) presents a debate between the brahmin Magandiya and the Buddha. The brahmin thinks that the Buddha is a 'life-destroyer' (*bhūnahuno*) because his teaching forces to abandon the enjoyment of sensual pleasures. In the following excerpt, the Buddha explains what the rationale behind sensual restraint is and he illustrates his point with a helpful simile.

'... Magandiya, suppose that there was a leper whose body was covered by sores and blisters, eaten by worms, scratching with the nails the opening of the wounds, he would cauterize the body over a burning charcoal pit. His friends and companions, kinsmen and relatives would bring a surgeon physician to treat him. This surgeon physician would make a medicine for him. Thanks to that medicine, he would be freed from leprosy, he would be without illness, happy, independent, autonomous, going wherever he likes. He would then see another leper, whose body is covered by sores and blisters, eaten by worms, scratching with the nails the opening of the wounds, who cauterizes his body over a burning charcoal pit.

What do you think, Magandiya, would the first person envy the other leper for his burning charcoal pit or for having to take a medicine?'

'Surely not, master Gotama. And why is that? Because, master Gotama, when there is sickness one must use a medicine, but when there is no sickness, there is no need to use any medicine.'

'Just in the same way, Magandiya, in the past, when I was living as a householder, I amused myself endowed with the five strings of sensual pleasures:[91] with forms discernible[92] with the eye, agreeable, pleasant, dear, likable, accompanied with sensual pleasures, arousing lust; sounds discernible with the ear, agreeable, pleasant, dear, likable, accompanied with sensual pleasures, arousing lust; odors discernible with the nose, agreeable, pleasant, dear, likable, accompanied with sensual pleasures, arousing

91 *Kāma-guṇa*, the term *guṇa* means 'string' and can also be used for referring to the strings of musical instruments. The expression 'five strings' of sensual pleasures also entails a metaphorical meaning, which represents the five senses as a musical instrument capable of producing pleasant sounds. More figuratively, *guṇa* can also mean 'strand' or even 'element.' The Samkhya Indian school (emerging roughly from the fourth century before the common era), for instance, posits three fundamental *guṇā* out of which phenomena are composed (*sattva* 'positivity' or 'truth;' *rajas* 'activity' or 'passion;' and *tamas* 'obscurity' or 'dullness'). An instance of this doctrine is used in the *Bagavhad-Gītā* (18.41-44) to articulate the fundamental qualities of the four traditional 'castes' (or functional social groups) in which Indian society was divided. However, in the discourses, all the five *kāma-guṇā* are presented in an analogous way; they do not differ qualitatively, but only in virtue of the sensory basis upon which they rely. Hence, they do not seem to indicate relatively independent components of a whole, but rather different declensions of the same phenomenon, precisely like the strings of a musical instrument.

92 *Cakkhu-viññeyyehi rūpehi*, which can be also rendered as 'forms cognizable with the eye.' *Viññana* is usually associated with both bodily sense bases and their relative sense objects and it is often translated as 'consciousness.' But to be conscious of something one needs to discern that thing as an object; hence, the activity of being conscious of something necessarily entails a process of discernment.

lust; tastes discernible with the tongue, agreeable, pleasant, dear, likable, accompanied with sensual pleasures, arousing lust; touches discernible with the body, agreeable, pleasant, dear, likable, accompanied with sensual pleasures, arousing lust.

Sometime later, having understood according to nature (*yathābhūtaṃ*) the arising and fading away of sensual pleasures,[93] their gratification, their danger, and the escape from them,[94] having abandoned the thirst for sensual pleasures, having removed the fever for sensual pleasures, freed from longing, I dwelt with an understanding internally pacified.

I see other living beings, who are not free from lust for sensual pleasures, being eaten up by the thirst for sensual pleasures, being burned by the fever for sensual pleasures, and yet indulge in sensual pleasures. I do not envy them, nor do I delight in this. For what reason? Because, Magandiya, there is a delight that is apart from sensual pleasures, apart from non-virtuous realities, which stands having surpassed even the happiness of the gods.[95] Enjoying that sort of delight, I do not like what is inferior, nor do I delight in it.

Magandiya, suppose that there was a leper whose body was covered by sores and blisters, eaten by worms, scratching with the nails the opening of the wounds, he would cauterize the body over a burning charcoal pit. His friends and companions, kinsmen and relatives would bring a surgeon physician to treat him. This surgeon physician would make a medicine for him. Thanks to that medicine, he would be freed from leprosy, he would be without illness, happy, independent, autonomous, going wherever he likes. But then, two strong men, having grabbed him by both arms, would drag him to the burning charcoal pit.

What do you think, Magandiya, wouldn't that man writhe to and fro?'

93 This stock formula concerns the fact that all sensual pleasures (like any other content of experience) are uncertain (*anicca*) since their arising entails the real possibility of their cessation, see discussion of this point in §4.

94 The pattern of 'gratification-danger-escape' is very common in the discourses and consists in acknowledging what is actually pleasant in a given phenomenon (which justifies why beings seek it out), what is its danger (its inherent uncertainty) and what is the escape from this danger (abandoning any form of appropriation for what is uncertain and not ownable). See for instance MN 13 and AN 3.104-105.

95 This is a stock reference to the delight of *samādhi*, see below §6.

'Sure, master Gotama. And why is that? Because, master Gotama, that fire is painful to touch, extremely glowing, terribly burning.'

'And what do you think, Magandiya, is it just now that that fire is painful to touch, extremely glowing, terribly burning, or also in the past was fire painful to touch, extremely glowing, terribly burning?'

'Master Gotama, this fire that is now painful to touch, extremely glowing, terribly burning, was painful to touch, extremely glowing, terribly burning also in the past. Master Gotama, when that man was a leper, with the body covered by sores and blisters, eaten by worms, scratching with the nails the opening of the wounds, his sense faculties were injured, and even if the contact with fire was painful, he formed the inverted perception[96] that it was pleasant.'

'Just in the same way, Magandiya, sensual pleasures were painful to touch, extremely glowing, terribly burning in the past, and sensual pleasures will be painful to touch, extremely glowing, terribly burning in the time to come, and sensual pleasures are also painful to touch, extremely glowing, terribly burning right now. However, Magandiya, these living beings who are not free from lust for sensual pleasures, who are eaten up by the thirst for sensual pleasures, burned by the fever for sensual pleasures, have sense faculties injured, and even if the contact with sensual pleasures is painful, they form the inverted perception that they are pleasant.

Magandiya, suppose that there was a leper whose body was covered by sores and blisters, eaten by worms, scratching with the nails the opening of the wounds, he would cauterize the body over a burning charcoal pit. Magandiya, the more the leper whose body is covered by sores and blisters, eaten by worms, scratches the wounds and cauterizes his body over the charcoal pit, the more infected, bad smelling and rotten those wounds become, and yet he has a certain degree of pleasure and gratification, which is due to the scratching of the wounds.

In the same way, Magandiya, living beings who are not free from lust for sensual pleasures, who are eaten up by the thirst for sensual pleasures,

96 *Sukhamiti viparītasaññaṃ paccalatthā*. The compound *viparīta-saññaṃ* can be rendered also with 'wrong' perception (*saññā*), but in this case it seems more precise to read *viparīta* as 'the opposite' because it concerns perceiving something unpleasant as pleasant.

burned by the fever for sensual pleasures, yet indulge in sensual pleasures. Magandiya, the more beings who are not free from lust for sensual pleasures, who are eaten up by the thirst for sensual pleasures, burned by the fever for sensual pleasures, indulge in sensual pleasures, the more the thirst for sensual pleasures in these beings grows and the fever for sensual pleasures burns them, and yet they find a degree of pleasure and gratification, which depends on the five strings of sensual pleasures.'

...

(MN 75)

3. Actions

Directions

Develop a clear sense of being present in the body, immersed in it, fully grounded in it (§1). Without losing touch with this experience, whenever some hindrance manifests (§2), gently notice its feeling tone. When you discern the unpleasantness associated with the hindrance, say 'yes' to that *feeling* (not to the hindrance as such), welcome it, let it enter and sink in the bodily space, dissolve in it on its own accord. Do not be afraid of opening to the unpleasant. Gently replace the habitual attitude of saying 'no' to the unpleasant, with a smiling attitude of saying 'yes.' When no particular hindrance is manifest, then rest in the immediate experience of the body.

Notice the quality of attention and awareness that results from the absence of doubt, restlessness and torpor. You can dwell systematically for some time on each of the qualities that are caused by this absence, by letting them fill the whole bodily space. As you notice the absence of doubt, you can encourage a sense of confidence and even faith, a sense of safety and certainty, which can suffuse the whole body. Similarly, as you recognize the absence of restlessness and worry, you can dwell in a sense of tranquility, peacefulness, calm, and satisfaction for your moral righteousness, which suffuses both the body and the understanding. As you enjoy this experience, you can also notice the quality of awareness, which is alert, bright, luminous, free from sloth and torpor, hence also quite energetic and endowed with a gentle strength, even courage. Whatever you experience, you experience it with a sharpness of sight that makes it more vivid and interesting, which in itself is a quality that contributes to increase the enjoyment of your experience.

You can regulate the intensity of any of these qualities by giving more attention to their manifestation and sustaining your gaze on them, piercing

through them, or by simply being more receptive and open to their manifestation, listen to it, and let it pervade the bodily space.

If you feel that any of these positive qualities is perhaps taking too much space in your experience so that it creates some unbalance in it, you can use another quality to compensate that. You can use a sense of tranquility for compensating an excess of energy and confidence that might verge towards subtle restlessness; or use energy and confidence to compensate when tranquility risks of drifting into subtle dullness. Energy can also compensate confidence, when the latter tends towards complacence, and confidence can compensate energy when it drifts towards subtle restlessness. See how you can establish each of these qualities in the right amount and degree so that they can balance each other and mutually support each other.

When these qualities are clearly discernable and balanced, pay special and careful attention to the absence of aversion. You can notice it as a lack of resistance, the absence of an intention to push back or run away from the contents of experience that are currently manifesting. You are at ease, you do not need to run away from anything, nothing is bothering you. The whole bodily space arises in your awareness and does not encounter any resistance, it is like a light that is allowed to shine without impediment. Try to identify and discern the taste of non-aversion and the gentle lack of resistance that accompanies it. Suffuse, permeate, massage the whole bodily space with non-aversion.

When the whole of experience is saturated with a sense of non-aversion, appreciate the subtle but pleasant contentment that arises from this condition. Right now, there is nothing that must be removed, nothing to get rid of, nothing that can be a threat. Dwelling in non-aversion naturally entails a sense of safety and satisfaction. Fully enjoy this condition and learn how to recognize its distinctive flavor.

While dwelling in non-aversion and contentment, pay attention to the sense of fulness and perfection that arises from it. Nothing is missing right now, there is no need to desire or crave anything. This absence of desire reinforces the sense of openness and relaxation, and this in turn feeds back into the absence of aversion since nothing has to be changed at the moment.

Let this virtuous feedback circle between non-aversion, contentment, non-desire, openness build momentum, grow, and expand on its own. Keep it expanding and suffusing the whole bodily space with it. See how you can best enjoy it, without having to interfere too much with its natural unfolding.

When you feel that your session is coming to an end,[97] notice again the whole bodily space (§1) and how its experience has been affected by your contemplation. Stay there for a while before ending your session.

97 There are both external and internal means to assess how long a session is (or should last). Especially in the beginning, it is highly recommended to work with a timer. Set beforehand a given amount of time (ideally one hour, but one might begin with less) and make a commitment not to interrupt the session or even watch at the time left before the alarm rings. One might also make the further commitment to spend a few more minutes in meditation just after the time is over, in order to emerge from meditative composure more smoothly and graciously. However, with time and experience, it is also essential to learn to perceive the timing of the session from within. This does not necessarily have to do with a precise perception of objective time, but with the sense of 'how much' you can or want to spend in meditation. Negatively, you might notice a sense of fatigue that might arise when your energies start to be exhausted. Try not to react too immediately to this perception since it might underestimate the amount of energies you actually have left and overestimate the fatigue. You might use this perception as an internal alarm, and resolve to spend just a few more minutes in meditation, before considering emerging from it. More positively, in due course, you can learn 'how much' time and momentum you need to get to a level of fluency and clarity with respect to the goal of your current session. For instance, you might learn how much time you need to keep hindrances at bay or even reach a more peaceful state in which hindrances do not manifest (as a very rough indication, it is possible that after one hour of committed meditation, hindrances will be significantly weakened). You can decide how long you can or want to stay in this condition, perhaps experimenting with the ability to extend it at your discretion. When you feel that you have achieved the goal for your current sitting, you can decide that time is ready to come to a closing and slowly emerge from it. These internal ways of timing a meditation session might or might not square with the more objective signal provided by your timer, but in due course and with enough practice, your internal perception of the timing of meditation can harmonize with the more objective measure of external time. You will know how much you have spent meditating, how much is still worth spending there, and when it is time to end the session.

Refinements

In order to encourage a discernment of non-aversion, you can experiment with perceiving the whole body as if it were received in the open and relaxed space of awareness. The body manifests in awareness, and awareness gently allows it to be there, without any resistance. Awareness is like still water in which a stone gently sinks. Pay special attention to the sense of non-resistance, the absence of contraction against what is manifesting. You can also play with the experience of listening to the body, tuning into the experience of it, as if you were hearing the silence that comes from the horizon of your experience, enveloping you.

When the absence of aversion and desire are distinct enough and you are able to fully appreciate and enjoy the sense of spaciousness and contentment that they provide, you might articulate this condition by expressing a wish to yourself: 'may I be really content, may I be really free from aversion.' Find a phrasing that is meaningful to you and that is able to express the emotional state elicited by the absence of aversion and sensual desire. Direct that wish towards yourself and enjoy the sense of relief that it brings.

If you encounter difficulties in arousing or discerning the feeling of non-aversion or in directing goodwill and wishes towards yourself, you can recollect the brightest sides of your recent moral conduct. Insofar as you succeeded in refraining from gross leaps in acts based on aversion and greed, you did already develop a good degree of non-aversion and non-desire. In this way, not only did you manage to genuinely contribute to your own well-being and happiness by refraining from unskillful actions, but you also contributed to the well-being and happiness of many others, even if just unknowingly. Hence, you fully deserve to acknowledge that, to encourage yourself, to congratulate yourself, and further progress in this direction.

By contrast, if your moral conduct has been shaky and you find yourself in the grip of the hindrances, it becomes even more important to realize the inherent problems of this condition and acknowledge that it would be better to be free from these harassments. Feeling the unpleasant pressure and stress associated with the presence of the hindrances, just imagine what a relief it might be to be actually free from them. You can also remember moments in the past in which this was the case and try to enact again the feelings associated with those memories. Use these thoughts to cultivate a sense of goodwill and sincerely wish to yourself to fully be free from any of these problems.

Sometimes it might be helpful to practice in a more analytical way in order to better understand the meaning of non-aversion and how to best support it. Begin by noticing any subtle manifestation of aversion, which usually consists in more or less unpleasant forms of contraction, defensiveness, and uneasiness with respect to certain contents.

Then, notice that aversion as such is a movement against and away from these contents, aimed at countering the unpleasantness of the experience by altering the contents that are experienced. The movement of aversion actually creates further unpleasantness and magnifies the unpleasantness that might be already present in experience, when it does not fabricate it completely. When this condition is discernible, you might realize that moving against aversion itself would lead to amplifying aversion even more, while following along with whatever aversion suggests would sustain its movement.

A third option is available: you can notice that there would be no problem at all with any content of experience if that content would not be experienced with aversion. Regardless of the content, if you could simply not meet it with aversion, the content could not be a problem. Hence, you might simply arise the wish: 'may I be free from aversion, may I be free from hostility, may I be

happy.' This wish is based on a fundamental insight in the connection between the absence of aversion and the relief from the suffering that it engenders.

Wishing freedom and happiness to oneself should not be regarded as a task to accomplish, as a job, as work, as a duty, it does not have to fulfil any specific criteria in order to be good enough or to succeed. A wish is just a wish, the acknowledgment of a possibility, the opening to what might happen, it is something light, to be sustained with a gentle smile.

This wish is not (and it cannot be) an expression of aversion since wishing for freedom from aversion does not entail positively acting against the currently present movement of aversion. It simply acknowledges as a matter of fact that aversion is painful and freedom from aversion would solve the problem. Now, since this wish is not an expression of aversion, expressing this wish is also an instance of an experience of freedom from aversion. By discerning this and fully appreciating its taste, this experience can become the main focus of attention, and it will also be felt as significantly less painful and stressful than the movement of aversion. This experience might for some time seemingly co-exist with the movement of aversion and attention might shift back and forth between the two. However, over time, if the wish is sustained enough, it can become possible to simply rest in the experience of freedom from aversion entailed by the wish, without having to nourish any aversion towards aversion itself, nor altering or interfering with the contents of experience that are targeted by aversion.

As this practice unfolds, aversion naturally fades away, and even the content that was its target might equally fade to a degree. The stream of attention (even the obsession) for that content was created by aversion itself and by the way in which aversion shaped attention and perception. With the lessening of aversion, attention works differently, and perception is also produced dif-

ferently or simply produced less. This is not the result of having acted against aversion with aversion, but rather of having stepped outside of this whole whirlpool of aversion. Since aversion is nourished by attention, diverting and reshaping attention leads to the progressive effacement of aversion.

Reflections

Vicious and virtuous feedback loops

Normally, one's focus of attention is on the contents of experience themselves, how to get this or get rid of that, how to change one's external conditions in such a way as to obtain this or that result. In normal conditions, there is little effort or emphasis spent on developing metacognitive awareness of how different ways of paying attention and dealing with contents influence the experience of those contents themselves. Working with the hindrances leads to take a step back from the ordinary way of engaging with contents and to include in one's focus of attention the attitudes themselves that push or pull towards this or that. Among the hindrances, desire for sensual pleasures and aversion are both the strongest and the most important since they express an extremely deeply rooted pattern that shapes most of one's actions. As already noticed, desire and aversion do not genuinely lead to contentment and relief, but they are actually the main source of stress, contraction, suffering and uneasiness. Moving away from desire and aversion and becoming free from their force is thus key.

In its most basic form, friendliness arises as a simple absence of aversion. Aversion takes up space in one's experience and pretends to shape it with its repulsive force. Simply being free from the effects of this force already entails a profound sense of relief, a re-opening of attention and awareness, a rediscovery that one can welcome and include things that the force of aversion imposed to see as repulsive. Not having to bother for any sort of things is way better than having to get rid of them. Being free from aversion, one can start

enjoying a natural sense of spaciousness, which is just the result of not being subject to aversion for the time being. In this sense, friendliness does not require to actively like and enjoy all things and other beings in the same way. Friendliness is not blind to differences, nor does it dissipate perceptions of ugly and beautiful, right and wrong. And yet, friendliness is a way of staying amidst these differences without having to worry about them, without being disturbed by them, hence without having to get rid of this or that.

Friendliness is not a way of turning a blind eye on certain aspects of reality. Friendliness is a way of seeing the whole of reality with wisdom. Because a condition of non-aversion is inherently more satisfying and it is experienced as a relief, this creates an initial sense of contentment. When there is some degree of contentment, there is less need for desiring or craving for this or that; with less craving there is also more contentment, and hence more strength to support non-aversion. In this way, friendliness grows from the initial absence of aversion into a more positive feeling of genuine well-being, contentment and happiness, joined with an absence of sensual desire as well. Since friendliness is already itself a fulfilling and nourishing emotion, the stronger it gets, the less one needs to desire enjoying this or that sensual object. In this way, friendliness is deeply connected not only with non-aversion but also with non-greed, and it allows to progressively relinquish one's cravings for sensual pleasures, not based on aversion for them, but simply because they are no longer needed to provide satisfaction; they become obsolete.

In turn, by building a form of contentment that does not depend on any particular content of experience, but simply on the way in which any content is met and faced, friendliness creates a gentle but extremely powerful form of strength that allows one to retain a genuine contentment and well-being regardless of whatever contents of experience might be appearing at a certain moment. Insofar as friendliness is well established, whatever content will be experienced, that content will not be approached with attitudes of aversion or greed. The content itself might be judged unpleasant, ugly, wrong, but since

there will be no aversion against the feelings engendered by it, there will be no reason to get rid of it or seek something else. Hence, even unpleasant feelings associated with certain contents will not be experienced as a genuine problem since one will retain the strength to face them without losing the ability to enjoy the freedom and openness created by friendliness. The force of friendliness is the force of peace and non-resistance.

Sensual desire and aversion often take external contents for their targets: this or that person, this or that thing. However, desire and aversion can very often concern also oneself and one's own self-image. On the one hand, they both presuppose a reference to oneself as the point with respect to which different contents are indexed and judged as worth appropriating or rejecting. On the other hand, one's own sense of self can become a target of desire and aversion, as something that needs to be changed to become more desirable or to eliminate something that is judged to be undesirable. Desire and aversion are thus inextricably interwoven with the sense of self. For this reason, they cannot be significantly relinquished if they do not start to be relinquished at the level of one's own thought processes and one's own self-image. In order to experience what friendliness is and how it feels, it is crucial to be able to experience it towards oneself. In this case, one is both agent and subject of a decrease of aversion and desire, and an increase in contentment and relief, which can then be experienced directly. With a weakening of desire and aversion towards oneself (as an object or target), one can also experience a simultaneous weakening of one's own desire and aversion in general (as intentional attitudes that one creates and then appropriates as 'mine'). This process has the potential to engender a virtuous feedback loop headed to the eradication of desire and aversion altogether. When desire and aversion soften at the very core of one's experience, the sense of contentment and ease so produced becomes also available for being extended to other beings as well; and this in turn contributes even further to the weakening of desire and aversion and of one's own involvement with (or appropriation of) them.

Bases for action

This virtuous feedback loop is best supported by reflecting and deepening one's understanding of the structure of action. Desire and aversion are bases for action, in the sense that they provide general patterns or schemes for orienting intentional activities at the level of thought processes, speech and bodily actions. Desire and aversion are distinctive and simple patterns of guiding action and pursuing contents (move towards or move away). In this sense, they are both practical and intellectual, because they entail both a way of seeing things and an embedded pre-programmed attitude for reacting to what is seen. In the same way, friendliness fuses in itself practical and intellectual components, as it results from a particular way of engaging with contents based on a particular way of understanding both those contents and how certain attitudes towards them can affect their perception and any resulting actions.

It is very important to distinguish between action and basis for action. Any action (physical, verbal, or at the level of thought) is intentional, in the broad sense that it aims at a certain content. However, intentions require a basis that could provide a means for anticipating the intended content and a reason for intending one content rather than another. Before an intention is elicited, the content of that intention is not yet present as such or in the way in which the intention aims at experiencing it. Even when one just intends to enjoy something a bit longer *that* enduring of enjoyment is not yet present. Intentions aim at contents that somehow need to be anticipated to be available as contents of intentions.[98] Why do you anticipate this or that content?

98 To put it differently, actions are teleological, in the sense that they aim at a goal for the sake of which the action is elicited. But at the moment of eliciting the action, the goal is not yet actualized, even if it operates as the 'final cause' of the action itself. One might thus ask: how is it possible for something that is not actualized yet (the goal) to determine an actual causal process (the action) and even cause it to some extent (as a final cause)? One option is to somehow assume that the goal must already exist or be present (Aristotle would contend that the goal can already be actualized in the *form* of the being who is acting; later philosophers would contend that the goal exists as a representation in the agent's intellect; in some Buddhist *Abhidharma* discussions, all moments of time, including the future, are considered to be existent in their own right). Another option, though, is to state that the intention itself depends for its functioning on a basis, and it is this basis that provides the scheme in which a future goal is anticipated as having certain features. The anticipation

Intentions require basic and general criteria to choose some sort of view about what is expected through the fulfilling of a certain intention. Hence, a basis for action (a basis for intention) provides both an anticipation of intentional contents and a criterion for anticipating one particular content rather than another. Without this basis, intentions (and actions) would not be possible, and yet intentions are not their own basis since they depend on a basis for being elicited and function. Desire and aversion are two bases for intentions in the sense that they anticipate that certain objects are worth pursuing or avoiding, based on the feeling that they associate with those contents. Desire anticipates certain contents as worth pursuing because of the pleasure that they are supposed to bring, while aversion anticipates certain contents as worth pursuing (including the non-being or non-experience of something) because of the relief of pain that it is expected from them (or else, aversion anticipates a content as worth avoiding because of the anticipated unpleasantness associated with it).

The inherent problem with both these bases is that they also produce new unpleasant feelings as a side effect of their own working. In order for desire to motivate pursuing certain contents, it is necessary to experience the lack of those contents as unpleasant; hence, desire produces new unpleasantness. Experiencing something as an object of desire entails fabricating the perception of the lack of that object as inherently associated with a sense of unfulfillment due to not possessing (or not possessing enough) the desired object. This sense of unfulfillment is a product of desire (its landmark, so to say) that becomes intermingled in the perception of the desired object itself, and without which that object could not be actually craved. In this way, the working of desire also provides an instance of how deeply interconnected the processes of intentionality, perception and feelings are.

provided by the scheme might be just a sketchy blueprint of the actual goal as it will be brought about, and yet it might be sufficient to direct intentionality towards its achievement.

If a content was not an object of desire, its lack or absence would not be experienced as unpleasant. One cannot miss or grieve over the lack of something that one does not desire or crave in the first place. Similarly, for aversion to motivate to remove certain other contents, it is necessary for it to amplify the unpleasantness of what has to be gotten rid of. One cannot react with aversion to contents that are not experienced as being actually unpleasant in some way. However, it is not necessary for an object to be actually and presently experienced as unpleasant in order for it to become a target of aversion. Aversion can also simply anticipate that a certain object is a potential source of (future) unpleasantness, and this anticipation will already be interpreted through (hence, it will engender) an unpleasant feeling because seeing unpleasantness coming is itself an unpleasant perception. This process, in turn, will excite the urge of getting rid of that object, even if its unpleasantness has not been actually experienced *yet* (and here aversion becomes fear for future events, which are present only as anticipatory thoughts).

Not only do desire and aversion positively amplify and create new unpleasantness, but since they are both programmed to move away from unpleasantness as much as possible, the unpleasantness they create feeds back into their structure by providing them with new fuel and by thus contributing to sustain a general degree of unpleasantness in experience that justifies cultivating further intentions based on desire and aversion. In this way, attitudes of desire and aversion can become established habits that can sustain themselves over indefinitely long periods of time.

Remarkably, desire and aversion *seem* the most natural ways of sustaining intentionality because their own working remains transparent to those who are subject to them. This means that one who is subdued by the habits of desire and aversion does *not* see how desire and aversion work, but rather sees through them, as through a pair of glasses. Hence, *ignorance* (not seeing, turning a blind eye) is also a third basis of action, which underpins both desire and aversion. Ignorance not only directly turns attention away from

whatever appears to be neither pleasant (hence not worth pursuing) nor unpleasant (hence not worth running away from), but it also ensures that one does not see the side effects that keep grounding intentionality on the bases of desire and aversion. In turn, desire and aversion, by sustaining their feedback loop, also sustain ignorance by making their own habitual pattern obvious and seemingly natural (hence, transparent). For this reason, any countering of ignorance (especially about how the whole process works) would undermine desire and aversion, while any countering of desire and aversion would also naturally reduce ignorance (by positively clarifying the metacognitive context and structure of action). The three bases for action go together and are relinquished together.

The interplay of desire, aversion, and ignorance reveals why the ordinary way of dealing with these attitudes is problematic. Ordinarily, the tendency would be that of moderating desire, aversion, and ignorance, to prevent their more dangerous results (such as the breaking of basic morality through violent actions). An ordinary person might think that these results are just extreme manifestations of these attitudes and all that is needed is just to prevent these extreme manifestations through appropriate managing. Desire, aversion, and ignorance are not seen as inherently problematic. This ordinary picture is misleading since it overlooks the fact that whatever needs moderation is inherently dangerous since otherwise moderation would not be needed. Moderation does not change or eliminate the nature of this danger, but simply aims at making those who are subject to desire, aversion, and ignorance functional enough for ordinary life. Moderation and managing, though, also keep one subject to these attitudes, and hence victim of them and bound to experience the inherent risks and side effects that they engender. Any strategy for moderation and management is thus inherently uncertain and provisional. While it might help to some extent in particular circumstances (and any form of moral discipline or restraint is to some extent a form of moderation and management, which is necessary in practice, especially in the beginning), this does not offer

an ultimate solution since it handles only certain symptoms, but does not address the root of the disease. Dealing with this root entails acting for the sake of eventually eradicating desire, aversion, and ignorance altogether, which means no longer letting these attitudes rule one's habits and becoming fully free from their influence.

Changing the basis

The importance of appreciating the difference between intentionality and the basis of intentionality is that one can thus see that intentionality as such does not have to be based necessarily on desire, aversion, and ignorance. If intentionality itself was the problem (if all intentionality was inherently shaped by some form of desire, aversion, or ignorance) then all intentionality would be doomed since it would try to escape unpleasantness while producing more unpleasantness in this very effort. Moreover, intentionality provides the basic force that creates any experience. Without intentionality there is no attention nor any discernment of any content, hence, without intentionality there is no experience of any content. If intentionality was the problem, then there could be no escape from it, except for escaping from experience as such. And yet, it is impossible to escape from experience, since even this escape would have to come through the experience of escaping from experience.

Appreciating the distinction between intentionality (action) and the basis of intentionality offers a way out from this conundrum, by revealing that intentionality is not a basic and primary entity, which could be conceived and posited in its own right without relying on anything else. Intentionality does not arise out of itself, nor does it function on its own, but it requires a basis. When this becomes clear, then the problem shifts from intentionality as such to the basis that nourishes and shapes intentionality in different ways. Desire and aversion are bases whose side effects are overwhelmingly worse than their alleged benefits. However, this does not entail that one should dismiss all intentionality (action) as such in order to move away from desire, aver-

sion, and ignorance. Rather, one needs to find alternative bases for intentionality that can avoid the downsides of desire, aversion, and ignorance. From an ordinary point of view, intentionality might be so strongly associated with desire and aversion than the perspective of dismissing the latter would be seen as necessarily entailing a wholesale dismissal of any action and intention altogether. Part of the training consists in differentiating between bases of intentionality and intentionality itself, in order to understand how acting and intending does not necessarily require (and actually can benefit from the absence of) desire and aversion. Friendliness (which grows out of non-aversion and can support action) is an example of how this can be implemented.

More generally, the progress of practice can be understood not so much as an increase in control (which is based on desire and aversion) but rather as a relinquishment of coactions, habits, yokes; that is, of the very bases of desire and aversion. In the beginning of practice, one can experience the conflict between two broad streams of intentionality, one aimed at steering intentions and attention in a certain way (contemplating the body, for instance), while another stream keeps interfering and diverging from that goal (hindrances). If the practitioner identifies with the first stream, the strengthening of practice will be experienced as an increased 'control' that the practitioner gains over the other stream of intentionality. But this interpretation remains misleading, insofar it is based on a wrong form of identification.

What is clear is that within the same field of experience there are opposing streams of intentionality (one pro-practice, the other against-practice). They can both feel 'mine' in different ways (hindrances usually are taken as particularly personal concerns), but in that case, this means that there is no unified 'me' that controls the game. Alternatively, one might so strongly identify with one stream, that the other appears totally alien and disconnected from oneself, despite being very much present and active in one's own experience. This kind of alienation of certain components also shows a contrast between 'me' and 'another' that challenges the very nature of both (since neither can stand on its

own terms, nor be dismissed entirely). The experience of control presupposes a sense of unification (control is exercised by *one* agent who is in charge), but actual experience reveals the opposite (there is neither *one* agent in charge, nor a hierarchic or straightforward subordination of different components). Experience is dissonant, and what is dissonant cannot be appropriated or controlled; it cannot be subject to 'myself.' The notion of control involves trying to use an ordinary scheme to interpret the progress of practice, but this scheme is inherently misleading, and it is best abandoned. Practice does not lead to greater control, because control is never really possible.

The field of experience is shaped by a number of acquired habits. Ordinarily, these habits are based on desire, aversion, and ignorance. They are sustained through constant repetition and by supporting circumstances (in which other beings also follow similar habits). However, since intentionality is inherently unstable and uncertain, habits are also inherently unstable and uncertain. They need constant maintenance and can be naturally disrupted from time to time. In the same way in which one might be distracted from contemplation, one might also be distracted from being greedy or hateful. The genuine difference between the practitioner and the untrained ordinary person is that the latter does not know what to do with the structural uncertainty of ordinary habits. They might try to avoid these disruptions, or even when they can enjoy their occurrence (since any moment that is free from desire, aversion, and ignorance, is blissful in itself), they will not know how to capitalize on that spark of freedom.

A practitioner has heard from an instructed other, if not from the Buddha (AN 2.126), that habits based on desire, aversion, and ignorance can be disrupted, and has understood (or has faith in the fact) that disrupting them for good is a worth pursuing task. Then, the practitioner starts capitalizing on the natural uncertainty of these habits, by systematically cultivating conditions that will lead to their continuous disruption. Disrupting ordinary habits based on desire, aversion, and ignorance then becomes a new habit in itself,

a set of skillful actions aimed at disbanding the ordinary course of life. The practitioner does not aim at becoming the undisputed controller of intentionality, but simply works at systematically sabotaging the status quo established on the basis of desire, aversion, and ignorance. Meditation is an exercise of systematic mental disobedience. The result is not greater control, but rather a weaker pull and coaction in having to follow the ordinary habitual patterns, until they eventually lose all their force and one is free from them. In this way, practice sets in motion a feedback cycle that directly counters the ordinary feedback cycle of desire, aversion, and ignorance. But nobody is really in charge of any of these cycles.

Friendliness provides a concrete example of how this works. Friendliness is empty, there is no 'real stuff' in it. While aversion is a way of fabricating more unpleasantness (hence more repulsive perceptions to get rid of), friendliness is a way of fabricating less, or reducing the process of fabricating perceptions and feelings, and thus allowing the whole fabric of experience to slow down, open up, simplify, and become emptier. The root of friendliness is the absence of aversion, nothing more positive than that. It grows by building momentum on the contentment that this absence creates, by thus creating more contentment by letting desire go and allowing it to cease in its own turn. Hence, stronger friendliness is based also on the absence of desire. This absence of desire is far from apathy and depression. It is rather a growing sense of freedom, spaciousness, openness, as if heavy burdens were removed. And yet, once again, there is no new entity or tangible 'thing' that is created in this process. Dwelling in friendliness one might feel like dwelling in a boundless mansion. It is not friendliness that makes one's dwelling boundless, but it simply dissipates those forces that cumbered and stuffed one's dwelling by thus revealing its original spaciousness. Even in this spaciousness there is nothing really to grasp or hold. Space is just space; it allows things in, but only in virtue of its being empty of them.

These observations are an important complement of friendliness practice. They counter any attempt of hypostatizing friendliness and turn it into an object of grasping. More importantly, recognizing the emptiness of friendliness invites to deepen one's understanding of the fact that what is the most important and profound factor of freedom is the relinquishment of any gesture of appropriation, control, and presumed ownership towards contents of experience, including the best ones. Friendliness is a way of not sustaining the ingrained attitudes of making 'mine' this or that content, and because of this, friendliness is a vehicle of liberation from appropriation.

Wise friendship

Friendliness and wisdom go together. By weakening desire and aversion, friendliness also weakens ignorance. The maturation of friendliness grows together with a maturation of clarity, knowledge and penetrative discernment into the nature of action and intentionality. This is the root of wisdom. Wisdom (*paññā*) is the ability of deeply understanding the nature of reality and the workings of experience by discerning where genuine freedom can arise. Ultimately, wisdom depends on one's understanding of the absurdity of any my-making and I-making. Friendliness is the natural result of this understanding. Like in a star, wisdom is the process that happens within the star itself, which brings about its heat and light, while friendliness is the actual shining of that light and radiation of that heat, both within the star and outside it. For this reason, an important criterion to assess the maturation of both wisdom and friendliness is the quality of one's relationship with moral practice.

The strengthening of wisdom and friendliness makes immoral and non-virtuous actions less and less attractive, to the point that refraining from them is no longer a matter of forceful coercion but the only natural attitude that one could ever entertain. Without a footing in aversion or greed, no immoral action (even intention) could develop. As friendliness consumes and disintegrates these unwholesome bases, the appeal of indulging in immoral behaviors

becomes increasingly more remote, until it is no longer appealing at all. Moral integrity and honesty become something non-negotiable anymore. Any external conditions (including one's livelihood) will have to allow for such a degree of integrity or will have inevitably to change or be abandoned.

This also entails that friendliness is not a passive acceptance of any behavior or attitude. Sometimes it might happen that one understands the practice of morality on the basis of some form of aversion towards certain behaviors. If this is the case, removing aversion might lead towards the opposite extreme of accepting and allowing for everything. As the intrinsic problems of this latter view become apparent, morality receives a wiser footing. It becomes clear that friendliness is the opposite of any form of moral laxism since allowing and accepting any behavior based on greed and aversion would be the opposite to wishing to oneself and others safety and freedom (which can only be the result of non-greed and non-aversion). With regard to oneself, this amounts to a strengthening of one's owns moral sense, while with regard to the actions of others towards oneself, this strengthens one's ability to recognize unskillful and non-virtuous behaviors and trying to find ways of defusing their consequences (for the others' own sake and welfare) or avoiding them as much as possible (for one's own sake and welfare). And yet, when one could not escape the consequences of others' unskillful actions, friendliness would still remain both as a dam against harboring any sense of aversion or revenge against them, and as the most valuable attitude to protect.

The wisdom that nourishes friendliness discerns that the absence of ill-will and the presence of good wishing for all living beings do not entail, nor require, that all living beings shall be actually always happy or conform to one's own wishes. The more one realizes how intentions, feelings and understanding shape one's experience, the more one can appreciate that ultimately every living being is responsible for the way in which they deal with their own experience. Different beings have different ranges of options, some have more, some have none. In some cases, these options allow for openings of

genuine happiness and even freedom, sometimes this is not available. Sometimes beings are bound to suffering, they remain trapped, and cannot escape from the coactions of aversion, greed, and ignorance. Friendliness is not bound to these differences, nor is it affected by them. It radiates and pervades everything everywhere, regardless of whether its wish will be fulfilled.

Since the strength of friendliness is proportional to the strength of wisdom, wherever friendliness fails, there is a failure in wisdom. If one cannot accept (hence, if one resists and reacts against the fact) that some other being(s) might not be able to be happy and wise (at some point or even in general), this is a failure of friendliness towards them. When one is not able to dissipate with friendliness a degree of aversion towards a certain situation, other people, or even oneself, this happens because there is some aspect in this whole condition that has not been penetrated with sufficient wisdom yet. A safe bet is that there remains some degree of implicit appropriation towards certain feelings, perceptions or interpretations created around that same situation. Without appropriation there could be no resistance, and without resistance there would remain only pure unconditioned friendliness. Hence, even the failure of friendliness might be an extremely resourceful and important occasion for developing and deepening wisdom further, and by this means allowing friendliness to grow and mature as well.

In ordinary life, the experience of what is perceived to be injustice or abuse is often the occasion for harboring a sort of disdain and noble indignation for that wrongdoing. Seeing unfairness, one then suffers with the victims of it, and is up for a fight in their defense against their oppressors. This attitude might grow at more or less heroic scales, but usually entails a sense of 'having something to do about that' situation that one finds unacceptable. The problem with any ordinary activism of this sort is that it is not informed about the difference between problematic and non-problematic bases for action, and hence it cannot understand whether its engagement is going to actually foster the former or the latter. Wisdom helps discerning

wrong and right activism, depending on whether the intention that supports any course of action is based on any degree of desire, aversion and ignorance, or rather their absence.

Activism (actions) based on desire, aversion, and ignorance are doomed to sustain those same vicious circles from which any unfairness, injustice and wrongdoing arise. One can then beat the occasional wrongdoer, but this will simultaneously reinforce and sustain the overall structure within which people act wrongly. Wrong activism is ultimately ineffective since it is unable to eradicate what it wants to eradicate, and in fact contributes to support it. However, non-desire, non-aversion, and non-ignorance are also bases for action. Right activism is any course of action based on these. Right activism both counters the conditions of possibility for any wrongdoing in general and it opens a whole dimension of possible interventions and commitments that are worth pursuing and surely beneficial.

Bringing into play more generosity (non-desire), friendliness (non-aversion) and wisdom (non-ignorance) challenges the ordinary way of facing injustice and unfairness, since it does not focus on who is the culprit of what, but more on how engrained attitudes of desire, aversion, and ignorance can be relinquished on all sides. Wisdom does not disdain (in fact, it encourages) this sort of right activism, and it invites to reflect on how to actualize it, by developing one's own ingenuity and sensitivity to particular conditions and situations. Right activism is not for the sake of appropriating a more pleasurable condition, nor for the sake of getting rid of an unpleasant situation. Right activism is for the sake of relinquishing those attitudes of desire, aversion, and ignorance that make any condition or situation unpleasant, and any action taken in regard to it unskillful. The task is not to change the situation or the feeling tone of it (these will change by themselves, regardless), but to change the attitude towards that feeling, and hence also the meaning with which the whole situation is understood and experienced.

There is a quiet, everyday heroism in asking oneself 'how can I infuse a friendlier attitude in this whole situation in which I find myself in?' Answering this question takes some wisdom.

Readings

Feelings are a key component of all experience. In the Buddha's teachings, feelings are categorized in a threefold scheme: pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. This simplification is extremely helpful in practice since it allows to quickly recollect the most fundamental features that are necessary for interpreting what is currently happening. As mentioned, all hindrances are somehow associated with unpleasant feelings, while friendliness and all other states associated with the arousal of awakening factors are always connected with pleasant feelings (and free from unpleasant feelings). Discerning feelings and how they are interwoven with intentional attitudes is thus a way of immediately perceiving whether one is progressing in the right direction. For this reason, the second domain of *satipaṭṭhāna* is the recollection of feelings, which is presented in the following excerpt (MN 10).

> ... Mendicants, and how does a mendicant dwell observing feelings as [just] feelings?
>
> Here, Mendicants, a mendicant who is feeling a pleasant feeling knows 'I am feeling a pleasant feeling;'
>
> or feeling a painful feeling knows 'I am feeling a painful feeling;'
>
> or feeling a neither pleasant nor painful feeling knows 'I am feeling a neither pleasant nor painful feeling;'
>
> or feeling a pleasant feeling associated with the flesh (*sāmisaṃ*)[99] knows 'I am feeling a pleasant feeling associated with the flesh;'

99 The term *āmisa* literally means 'flesh' or 'meat' (as food). In a more metaphorical sense, the distinction between *sāmisaṃ* and *nirāmisaṃ* can be taken in at least two ways. It can mean 'material' versus 'spiritual' or it can also mean 'physical' versus 'psychological.' Both meanings can be helpful in practice. The first is concerned with the overall spectrum of feelings one will encounter during practice. Some of them are based in the sensory world and arise out of sensory impressions; hence, they are 'material' or 'carnal.' Others instead arise from a degree of detachment from the sensory

or feeling a pleasant feeling not associated with the flesh (*nirāmisaṃ*) knows 'I am feeling a pleasant feeling not associated with the flesh;'

or feeling a painful feeling associated with the flesh knows 'I am feeling a painful feeling associated with the flesh;'

or feeling a painful feeling not associated with the flesh knows 'I am feeling a painful feeling not associated with the flesh;'

or feeling a neither pleasant nor painful feeling associated with the flesh knows 'I am feeling a neither pleasant nor painful feeling associated with the flesh;'

or feeling a neither pleasant nor painful feeling not associated with the flesh knows 'I am feeling a neither pleasant nor painful feeling not associated with the flesh.'

...

(MN 10)

Since the topic of feelings is vital in the Buddha's teaching, it is worth deepening its implications further. In the following discourse (SN 36.6), the Buddha explains that painful feelings in the body are inevitable given the fragile nature of the body, but painful feelings originated by reacting against the former are definitely dispensable and they can be fully avoided. In fact, avoiding them can be taken as one of the main goals of practice. Moreover, the discourse illustrates how aversion towards pain, greed for sensual desire, and ignorance for how this whole process works are deeply connected with one another. Learning to uncover and discern this connection is an essential component of the contemplation of feelings.

'Mendicants, an uninstructed worldling feels a pleasant feeling, feels an unpleasant feeling, feels a neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling. Men-

world, as the feelings generated by composure for instance. The second meaning is perhaps more immediate, insofar as it brings attention to the fact that some feelings arise in connection with the body itself and its various conditions, while other feelings arise from how one thinks, reacts, imagines, and understands. These latter feelings might or might not be directly connected with bodily feelings, but they are genuinely different in their nature (see SN 36.6 below).

dicants, also an instructed outstanding disciple feels a pleasant feeling, feels an unpleasant feeling, feels a neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling. Mendicants, what is the discrepancy, what is the distinction, what makes the difference between the instructed outstanding disciple and the uninstructed worldling?'

'Venerable, our reality is rooted in the Fortunate, it is guided by the Fortunate, it finds refuge in the Fortunate. Venerable, it would be a good thing if the Fortunate could explain the meaning of what has been said. Having heard it from the Fortunate, the mendicants will remember it.'

'Then, Mendicants, listen and pay attention carefully, I shall speak.'

'Yes, Venerable' those mendicants replied. The Fortunate said this:

'Mendicants, when an uninstructed worldling is touched by an unpleasant feeling, he grieves, is depressed, wails, laments beating his chest, falls into confusion. He then feels two feelings: one bodily, and the other in the understanding (*cetasikaṃ*).[100]

Mendicants, suppose that a man was shot with an arrow. Immediately after, he was shot with a second arrow hitting the same spot. Mendicants, in this way that man feels a feeling by two arrows.

In the same way, Mendicants, when an uninstructed worldling is touched by an unpleasant feeling, he grieves, is depressed, wails, laments beating his chest, falls into confusion. He then feels two feelings: one bodily, and the other in the understanding.

Touched by an unpleasant feeling, he is full of repulsion (*paṭighavā*). For one who is full of repulsion for unpleasant feelings, there is the tendency

100 It is very important not to interpret this distinction in an overly simplistic or rigid way. At an initial level, one might surely distinguish between purely bodily (*kāyika*) feelings and mental or 'psychological' feelings (*cetasika*). However, bodily feelings include all feelings based on the sensory bases (the five physical senses and the 'inner' sense of thought or 'common sense,' *mano*); hence, both the piercing bodily sensation of a thorn *and* the hearing of a harsh speech would qualify as *bodily* (unpleasant) feelings (even if the harsh speech can be interpreted as unpleasant only insofar as it is decoded and understood at the level of thought). Moreover, since one's current condition and past experiences greatly contribute to shape perception (*saññā*), even bodily feelings (which depend on perception) are constructed to some degree. Nonetheless, what distinguishes these 'bodily' feelings from feelings originated from the understanding (*cetasika*) is that the latter are produced by a reflection or reaction triggered by the first. Hence, feelings based on the understanding (in the most relevant sense at stake in this discourse) are 'second order' feelings since they arise as a result of one's interpretation and interaction with 'first order' feelings (bodily feelings in the broad sense, which might also themselves be constructed to some degree). The point in this discourse is not to assert some form of mind-body dualism, but rather to stress the different degrees of complexity of different sorts of feelings, and the role that the understanding (*citta*) plays in producing new feelings.

to repel (*paṭighānusayo*) unpleasant feelings, and this becomes a habit (*anuseti*).[101]

Touched by an unpleasant feeling, he seeks delight in (*abhinandati*) the pleasure of sensual pleasures (*kāmasukhaṃ*). And for what reason? Mendicants, it is because the uninstructed worldling does not know another escape from unpleasant feelings other than the pleasure of sensual pleasures. For one who seeks delight in the pleasure of sensual pleasures, there is the tendency towards lust (*rāgānusayo*) for pleasant feelings, and this becomes a habit.

He does not know according to nature the arising and fading away of these feelings, their gratification, their danger, and the escape from them. For one who does not know according to nature the arising and fading away of these feelings, their gratification, their danger, and the escape from them, there is the tendency towards ignorance (*avijjānusayo*) for feelings that are neither pleasant nor unpleasant, and this becomes a habit.[102]

If he feels a pleasant feeling, he feels yoked (*saññutto*)[103] to it. If he feels an unpleasant feeling, he feels yoked to it. If he feels a neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling, he feels yoked to it.

101 The phrasing of this passage is very important since it stresses how the basis of aversion (*dosa*) is established. The term *paṭigha* (literally 'going against') is here a synonym for a sense of repulsion and rejection against unpleasant feelings, hence aversion. By allowing and nurturing this repulsion, it becomes a habitual pattern engrained in one's understanding. The term *anusaya* and the verb *anuseti* (both from the verb *seti*, 'to lie down,' here in the sense of 'underlying' and 'underpinning') indicate an underlying tendency or bad habit to always repeat a certain pattern or coaction. Eradicating these 'bad habits' is one of the goals of the whole path, as mentioned in AN 5.57, §4. Notice that the implication is that the basis and condition for aversion is not the unpleasant feeling itself (otherwise, also the outstanding disciple would be bound to aversion), but rather the *previously established habit* of reacting with aversion against the unpleasant feeling.

102 The uninstructed worldling is primarily concerned with unpleasant feelings (which he tries to get rid of) and pleasant feelings (which he tries to use as a replacement for the unpleasant feelings). The neutral feelings (neither pleasant nor unpleasant) are experienced, but they are mostly ignored or disregarded because they do not square with the primary concern of finding relief from painful feelings through the quest for pleasant feelings. The value of these neutral feelings is appreciated only if one is able to develop composure (*samādhi*) and serenity (*upekkhā*), which in turn are possible only by preliminarily understanding that seeking sensual pleasures does not provide a genuine relief from unpleasant feelings, mostly because the sort of habitual pattern that this attitude establishes and its side effects (increase of craving and aversion, which by themselves produce further unpleasantness). In this sense, *not* knowing this escape leads to create a bad habit of systematically ignoring neutral feelings, which might otherwise play an important role in one's liberation.

103 *Saññutto* is a form of *saṁyutta* (past participle of *saṁyuñjati*, 'to connect'), which means 'fetter,' 'bond,' and 'yoke.' By reacting against feelings, one makes aversion, greed, and ignorance a habit, which leads to regard feelings as a personal matter as if they were 'mine' or a matter of vital concern for 'me.' This, in turn, feeds back into the process of reacting to feelings with even greater

Mendicants, this is called an uninstructed worldling, bound to birth, aging, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, sadness, and tribulation; bound to suffering, I say.

Mendicants, when an instructed outstanding disciple is touched by an unpleasant feeling, he does not grieve, he is not depressed, he does not wail, he does not lament beating his chest, he does not fall into confusion. He then feels only one feeling: a bodily one, but not in the understanding.

Mendicants, suppose that a man was shot with an arrow. Immediately after, he was not shot with a second arrow hitting the same spot. Mendicants, in this way that man feels the feeling of only one arrow.

In the same way, Mendicants, when an outstanding disciple is touched by an unpleasant feeling, he does not grieve, he is not depressed, he does not wail, he does not lament beating his chest, he does not fall into confusion. He then feels only one feeling: a bodily one, but not in the understanding.

Touched by an unpleasant feeling, he is not full of repulsion. For one who is free from repulsion for unpleasant feelings, the tendency to repel unpleasant feelings does not become a habit.

Touched by an unpleasant feeling, he does not seek delight in the pleasure of sensual pleasures. And for what reason? Mendicants, it is because the instructed outstanding disciple knows another escape from unpleasant feelings other than the pleasure of sensual pleasures. For one who does not seek delight in the pleasure of sensual pleasures, the tendency towards lust for pleasant feelings does not become a habit.

He knows according to nature the arising and fading away of these feelings, their gratification, their danger, and the escape from them. For one who knows according to nature the arising and fading away of these feelings, their gratification, their danger, and the escape from them, the tendency towards ignorance for feelings that are neither pleasant nor unpleasant does not become a habit.

If he feels a pleasant feeling, he does not feel yoked to it. If he feels an unpleasant feeling, he does not feel yoked to it. If he feels a neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling, he does not feel yoked to it.[104]

aversion, greed, or ignorance, which then strengthen the sense of appropriation towards feelings. Hence, one is dragged wherever feelings and reactions to them go.

104 Notice that the instructed disciple still feels all the three *bodily* feelings, while feelings produced by the understanding of the former (the 'second-order' reactions to them, based on aversion, greed, or ignorance) have ceased, and hence one no longer appropriates the ('first-order') feelings

Mendicants, this is called an instructed outstanding disciple, unyoked (*visaññutto*) from birth, aging, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, sadness, and tribulation; unyoked from suffering, I say.

Mendicants, this is the discrepancy, this is the distinction, this makes the difference between the instructed outstanding disciple and the uninstructed worldling.

There is a pleasant and an unpleasant feeling
that one with wisdom, a learned one,
does not feel;[105] this is the difference between the wise
and the uninstructed worlding, this is the great distinction in virtue.

For the learned one who has examined reality,[106]
who has thoroughly investigated[107] this world and the next;
likable realities do not agitate the understanding,
dislikable ones do not repel it.

For him attraction and obstruction
are destroyed, ended, exist no more;
and having known the sorrowless state of dispassion,[108]
he knows rightly and has gone beyond existence.'

(SN 36.6)

that are experienced, one is no longer 'yoked' to them and dragged away by them. Notice, also, that the instructed disciple feels *pleasant* feelings produced by the understanding in the cultivation of *samādhi*, which are different from the pleasant feelings produced by sensual objects.

105 This verse reads: *Na vedanaṃ vedayati sapañño, / Sukhampi dukkhampi bahussutopi*, which might be misunderstood as 'the wise and learned one does not feel pleasant and unpleasant feelings,' which cannot be the case based on the above discourse. Rather, there are a particular kind of pleasant and unpleasant feelings that the wise one no longer feels, which are the (unpleasant or pleasant) feelings produced by the understanding itself as reactions to bodily feelings.

106 *Saṅkhāta-dhamma*, can also be understood as someone who has 'seen' reality, namely, who has 'fully understood,' see below §4, SN 56.11.

107 *Vipassato*, from *vi-* (inside) and *passati* (to see), commonly translated as 'in-sight' or 'clearly seeing;' it means a thorough understanding based on a deep investigation.

108 *Padañca ñatvā virajaṃ asokaṃ*, a periphrasis for the experience of freedom and extinction (*nibbāna*). *Pada* has a variety of meanings, usually derived from the more literal idea of 'foot,' hence it can be used to express 'the way' or 'an element' (as in prose or verse), but also 'where one stays,' hence a 'state.'

Having gained greater familiarity with the recollection of feelings, this can be applied, integrated and deepened by paying attention to the *bases* of action that underpin intentions at the level of thought, speech and body. The following discourse (AN 3.65) presents a systematic method to realize the need of relinquishing the basis of greed, aversion and ignorance, and cultivating their opposites instead, which naturally result in attitudes of friendliness and other sublime states. The whole discourse can also be read as a remedy against the hindrance of doubt, especially doubt concerning the validity of the Buddha's teaching and any potential risks coming from thoroughly committing to it. This discourse, especially in its conclusion, dispels such doubts by stressing how nothing bad or regrettable could ever be expected by one who implements the Buddha's teachings, which are entirely safe and can lead only to one's long-term welfare.

It has been heard by me that, on one occasion, the Fortunate was wandering in the country of the Kosalans,[109] with a large community of mendicants, when he arrived at a town of the Kalamas called Kesamutta. The Kalamas of Kesamutta heard:

'Indeed, the ascetic Gotama, son of the Sakyans, who went forth from the Sakyan clan, is arrived at Kesamutta! A beautiful sound of fame about that master Gotama spread thus: that fortunate one is a perfect being, perfectly awakened, endowed with knowledge and honesty, a happy one, knower of the worlds, incomparable tamer of people to be tamed, teacher of human beings and deities, an awakened one, a fortunate one. It is a good thing to go seeing such perfect beings.'

Then, the Kalamas of Kesamutta went to the Fortunate. Having arrived, some of them bowed to the Fortunate and sat to one side; others exchanged greetings with the Fortunate, and, after this exchange of greetings, sat to

109 The Kosala kingdom, in north-east India (roughly between modern Uttar Pradesh and Western Odisha) emerged in the late Vedic period (roughly seventh century BCE). The Kosala region has been the cradle of the *samaṇa* movement. During the period of the Buddha, Kosala was powerful and absorbed the territory of the Sakyan clan from which the Buddha originated, before being annexed itself to the rising kingdom of Magadha (roughly based more south than Kosala in the eastern Ganges Plain). Kosala is also well-known in the epic Indian poetry of the *Rāmāyana* and *Mahābhārata*.

one side; others having joined their palms in front of the chest, greeted the Fortunate and sat to one side; others sat to one side after having announced their name and clan; others sat to one side in silence. Sat to one side, the Kalamas of Kesamutta said to the Fortunate:

'Venerable, there are some ascetics and brahmins that come to Kesamutta. They explain and clarify their own teaching, but they break in pieces, despise, denigrate and scold the teaching of others. Venerable, after some time, some other ascetics and brahmins come to Kesamutta. They too explain and clarify their own teaching, but they break in pieces, despise, denigrate and scold the teaching of others. Venerable, we are uncertain and doubtful: who among these good ascetics and brahmins says the truth, who lies?'

'Kalamas, of course you are uncertain! Kalamas, of course you are doubtful! Doubt has arisen for you with regard to an uncertain subject.

Kalamas, you should not go by oral tradition, by lineage, by hearsay, nor on the basis of the authority of collected teachings,[110] neither because of reasoning, or because of a method, or by a careful ascertainment, nor by delighting in views,[111] or because there is an appearance of competence, or because this or that ascetic is your teacher.[112]

Kalamas, when you know by yourself: 'these realities are non-virtuous (*akusala*), these realities are blameworthy, these realities are reproved by the wise, these realities when taken up and endorsed lead to suffering (*dukkha*) and ruin,' then, Kalamas, you should abandon them.

110 The first four sources of knowledge mentioned here can be read as a progressive strengthening and refinement in the establishment of a teaching tradition: *anussava* ('hearsay,' but also oral tradition), *parampara* ('after another,' hence legend or lineage), *itikirā* ('hearsay'), *piṭakasampadā* ('authority of the *Piṭaka*, the collection of teachings'). Notice that the mentioning of the *Piṭaka* might be interpreted in different ways, either as a reference to a later period to which this discourse might belong (in which the *Piṭaka* collection was already established) or more generally as a reference to whatever collection of teachings one might derive knowledge from (including the collections of Vedic hymns and teachings that predate the Buddha).

111 The next four sources of knowledge are different ways of exercising reasoning: *takkahetu* ('causal reasoning' or also 'because of, or based on – *hetu* – reasoning'), *nayahetu* (*naya* means 'method' or 'knowledge'), *ākāraparivitakka* ('careful examination of reasons'), and *diṭṭhinijjhānakkhanti* ('delighting in speculation or views').

112 The last two sources of knowledge more directly invoke a principle of personal authority: *bhabbarūpatā* ('the appearance of dexterousness or ability'), and *samaṇo no garūti* ('this ascetic is our teacher').

What do you think, Kalamas? When greed (*lobha*) arises inside a person, does it arise for their welfare or for their ruin?'

'For their ruin, Venerable.'

'Kalamas, this greedy person, overcome by greed, whose understanding is consumed by greed, kills living beings, takes what is not given, commits adultery, speaks falsehood,[113] and induces others to do the same, and this is for their long-term ruin and suffering.'

'Yes, Venerable.'

'What do you think, Kalamas? When aversion (*dosa*) arises inside a person, does it arise for their welfare or for their ruin?'

'For their ruin, Venerable.'

'Kalamas, this hateful person, overcome by aversion, whose understanding is consumed by aversion, kills living beings, takes what is not given, commits adultery, speaks falsehood, and induces others to do the same, and this is for their long-term ruin and suffering.'

'Yes, Venerable.'

'What do you think, Kalamas? When ignorance (*moha*)[114] arises inside a person, does it arise for their welfare or for their ruin?'

'For their ruin, Venerable.'

'Kalamas, this ignorant person, overcome by ignorance, whose understanding is consumed by ignorance, kills living beings, takes what is not given, commits adultery, speaks falsehood, and induces others to do the same, and this is for their long-term ruin and suffering.'

'Yes, Venerable.'

'Kalamas, what do you think, are these realities virtuous or non-virtuous?'

'Non-virtuous, Venerable.'

'Blameworthy or blameless?'

'Blameworthy, Venerable.'

'Reproved by the wise, or approved by the wise?'

'Reproved by the wise, Venerable.'

113 These are four of the five precepts that define the minimum of moral conduct. In standard presentations, the fifth precept is abstaining from states of intoxication, such as those produced by substances like alcohol and liquors.

114 *Moha* can also be rendered as 'delusion' or 'confusion.'

'When taken up and endorsed do they lead to suffering and ruin, or not? What is your position on this?'

'Venerable, when taken up and endorsed they do lead to suffering and ruin. This is our position on this.'

'Kalamas, I said: you should not go by oral tradition, by a lineage, by hearsay, nor on the basis of the authority of collected teachings, neither because of reasoning, or because of a method, or by a careful ascertainment, nor by delighting in views, or because there is an appearance of competence, or because this ascetic is your teacher. Kalamas, when you know by yourself: 'these realities are non-virtuous, these realities are blameworthy, these realities are reproved by the wise, these realities when taken up and endorsed lead to suffering and ruin,' then, Kalamas, you should abandon them. This is what I said, and this is why I said it.

Kalamas, you should not go by oral tradition, by a lineage, by hearsay, nor on the basis of the authority of collected teachings, neither because of reasoning, or because of a method, or by a careful ascertainment, nor by delighting in views, or because there is an appearance of competence, or because this ascetic is your teacher. Kalamas, when you know by yourself: 'these realities are virtuous (*kusala*), these realities are blameless, these realities are approved by the wise, these realities when taken up and endorsed lead to welfare and happiness,' then, Kalamas, having endorsed them, you should dwell in them.[115]

What do you think, Kalamas? When non-greed (*alobha*) arises inside a person, does it arise for their welfare or for their ruin?'

'For their welfare, Venerable.'

'Kalamas, this non-greedy person, not overcome by greed, whose understanding is not consumed by greed, does not kill living beings, does not take what is not given, does not commit adultery, does not speak falsehood, and does not induce others to do the same, and this is for their long-term welfare and happiness.'

'Yes, Venerable.'

'What do you think, Kalamas? When non-aversion (*adosa*) arises inside a person, does it arise for their welfare or for their ruin?'

115 *Upasampajja vihareyyātha*, this two-step formula (first entering, then dwelling) is very common in the discourses and standardly used to introduce the stages of *samādhi* as well, see below §6.

'For their welfare, Venerable.'

'Kalamas, this non-hateful person, not overcome by aversion, whose understanding is not consumed by aversion, does not kill living beings, does not take what is not given, does not commit adultery, does not speak falsehood, and does not induce others to do the same, and this is for their long-term welfare and happiness.'

'Yes, Venerable.'

'What do you think, Kalamas? When non-ignorance (*amoha*) arises inside a person, does it arise for their welfare or for their ruin?'

'For their welfare, Venerable.'

'Kalamas, this non-ignorant person, not overcome by ignorance, whose understanding is not consumed by ignorance, does not kill living beings, does not take what is not given, does not commit adultery, does not speak falsehood, and does not induce others to do the same, and this is for their long-term welfare and happiness.'

'Yes, Venerable.'

'Kalamas, what do you think, are these realities virtuous or non-virtuous?'

'Virtuous, Venerable.'

'Blameworthy or blameless?'

'Blameless, Venerable.'

'Reproved by the wise, or approved by the wise?'

'Approved by the wise, Venerable.'

'When taken up and endorsed do they lead to long-term welfare and happiness, or not? What is your position on this?'

'Venerable, when taken up and endorsed they do lead to long-term welfare and happiness. This is our position on this.'

'Kalamas, I said: you should not go by oral tradition, by a lineage, by hearsay, nor on the basis of the authority of collected teachings, neither because of reasoning, or because of a method, or by a careful ascertainment, nor by delighting in views, or because there is an appearance of competence, or because this ascetic is your teacher. Kalamas, when you know by yourself: 'these realities are virtuous, these realities are blameless, these realities are approved by the wise, these realities when taken up and endorsed lead to welfare and happiness,' then, Kalamas, having endorsed them, you should dwell in them. This is what I said, and this is why I said it.

Kalamas, an outstanding disciple (*ariyasāvako*), free from greed, free from aversion, free from ignorance, with metacognitive awareness (*sampajāno*) and recollection (*patissato*), dwells with an understanding endowed with friendliness (*mettāsahagatena cetasā*), having pervaded the eastern direction, the same with the southern direction, the same with the western direction, the same with the northern direction. So, they dwell having pervaded above as below, all around, everywhere, in every respect, the whole world, with an understanding endowed with friendliness, abundant (*vipula*), great (*mahaggata*), boundless (*appamāṇa*),[116] free from enmity, free from ill-will.

In the same way, they dwell with an understanding endowed with compassion (*karuṇā*) ...

In the same way, they dwell with an understanding endowed with sympathy (*muditā*) ...

In the same way, they dwell with an understanding endowed with serenity (*upekkhā*), having pervaded the eastern direction, the same with the southern direction, the same with the western direction, the same with the northern direction. So, they dwell having pervaded above as below, all around, everywhere, in every respect, the whole world, with an understanding endowed with serenity, abundant, great, boundless, free from enmity, free from ill-will.

Kalamas, this outstanding disciple has an understanding that is thus free from enmity, free from ill-will, free from defilements, purified. For one like this, there are four consolations that are acquired in this very life.

'If there is another world, and if there is fruit and result of good and bad actions, then it is possible that, with the breaking apart of the body, after death, I will be reborn in a good destination, in a heavenly world.' This is the first consolation that is acquired.

'But if there is no other world, and there is no fruit and result of good and bad actions, then it is possible that I preserve myself in this very life

116 Among these three characteristics of the understanding endowed with friendliness, the second (*mahaggata*, 'becoming great') is also a quality covered by recollection of the understanding (MN 10, see §5). *Ap-pamāṇa* literally means 'without measure' or 'measure-less,' see further discussion below in §5. In a more technical sense, 'measure' might be interpreted as 'determination,' namely, that in virtue of which something acquires a determinate shape, boundary, and measure, discriminating and differentiating it from something else. In any case, measureless or boundlessness should not be interpreted in a purely quantitative sense (which is somehow already covered by *mahaggata*), but in a more qualitative sense.

without enmity, without ill-will, free from confusion, at ease (*sukhiṃ*).' This is the second consolation that is acquired.

'If evil (*pāpaṃ*) is done (*karīyati*) to one who has done (*karoto*) it,[117] I intended (*cetemi*) no evil for anybody.[118] And not having done any evil action, from where suffering will touch me?' This is the third consolation that is acquired.

'But if evil is not done to one who has done it, I can still regard myself pure in both respects.'[119] This is the fourth consolation that is acquired.

Kalamas, this outstanding disciple has an understanding that is thus free from enmity, free from ill-will, free from defilements, purified. For one like this, these are the four consolations that are acquired in this very life.'

'It is really like this, Fortunate! It is really like this, Happy One! ... Wonderful, Venerable, it is wonderful! Venerable, just as if he were to place upright what was turned upside down, or to reveal what was concealed, or to show the path to one who was confused, or to bring a lamp into the dark so that those with eyes could see forms; in the same way, the Fortunate has made the reality (*dhammo*) clear in many ways. Venerable, we go for refuge to the Fortunate, to reality, and to the community of his mendicants (*bhikkhusaṅghañca*). From now on, may the Fortunate remember us as lay followers (*upāsake*) who have gone to him for refuge for life.'

(AN 3.65)

Focusing more directly on friendliness as a key quality, the following discourse (Sn 1.8), outlines both how friendliness arises naturally out of moral conduct, and how it can lead to transcend the whole sensory world.

117 This hypothesis rephrases the idea that action (*kamma*) is followed by a result (*vipaka*) and that evil results come as a consequence of evil actions, while good results come as a consequence of good actions.

118 Notice that, in the Buddha's teachings, all actions (*kamma*) are based on *intentions* (*cetanā*). See, e.g. AN 6.63.

119 In other words, if there was no connection between the quality of actions and the quality of results, one would not have to fear any bad results (because of the hypothesis itself), and one would not be doing bad actions anyway. Hence, one is pure both with respect to one's own actions and with respect to their results.

What should be done by one skillful in goodness,[120]
who has understood the state of peace, is this:[121]
shall they be able, upright, straightforward,
affable, gentle, not arrogant,

content, and easy to support,
with few duties, and needs easy to satisfy,
the faculties pacified, wise,
not bold, without covetousness for the families,[122]

and shall they not pursue anything frivolous,
that the wise could later reprove.
'May they be happy and safe,
may all living beings be pleasing to themselves.[123]

120 *Karaṇīyam-attha-kusalena*. The first verse introduces the audience of the discourse: someone who is interested and can understand what virtuous action means and wants to fully develop that to its supreme fulfilment. Since *attha* can mean both 'good' and 'goal,' the first verse might also be interpreted as 'what should be done by one who understands well (skillfully) the goal (of practice).'

121 *Yanta santaṃ padaṃ abhisamecca*. A preliminary understanding (*abhisamecca*, gerundive of *abhisameti*, 'to grasp,' 'to realize,' 'to understand') of the 'path (*padaṃ*) of peace (*santaṃ*)' is a condition for the practice outlined here. The path of peace can be interpreted as referring to the eightfold path, see below §4, SN 56.11. The Pāli commentaries take *santaṃ padaṃ* as a reference to *nibbāna* (hence as the '*state* of peace') and *abhisamecca* as stating a preliminary condition, either in the form of a first glimpse into *nibbāna* (as would be the case for a stream-enterer, see *Afterword*) or even just an intellectual understanding of it as the goal of practice (as in the case of someone practicing for the sake of stream-entry). This emphasizes that the practice outlined here already requires some preliminary knowledge and an establishment of right view. Cf. also *Padañca ñatvā virajaṃ*, in SN 36.6, above, where *padaṃ virajaṃ* is another periphrasis for *nibbāna*, but in the context of this latter verse, this is presented as achieved already (*ñatvā*). It should be stressed that, in both cases, this discourse entails that *mettā* is a means towards *nibbāna*. If this reading is accepted, then it has not only consequences for how one understands the role of *mettā*, but also for how one understands *nibbāna* itself. In this perspective, *nibbāna* appears as the complete fulfilment of *mettā*, which suggests that *nibbāna* itself is a profound and irreversible emotional transformation in the way in which one faces and interprets reality in general.

122 Notice that this discourse is addressed directly to mendicants, who depend for their living on alms food and, hence, have to visit lay communities every day to receive offerings.

123 *Sabbasattā bhavantu sukhitattā*. The first part of this verse indicates a wish (*bhavantu*, 'may they all be') aimed at all living beings (*sabba sattā*). The term *sukhitattā* is a compound of the past participle *sukhita* (from *sukheti*, 'to make happy,' 'to please') and the reflexive pronoun *attā* ('self'). Sometimes, this is interpreted simply as 'may all beings be really happy.' The Pāli commentaries interpret it as 'inwardly happy.' However, the wish concerns the ability of all living beings to make *themselves* happy, to allow themselves to enjoy their being, to please themselves (if one wants to keep *sukheti* in the semantic range of *sukha* understood as a pleasant feeling). This is not a minor detail. A widespread assumption entails that some outside cause (external circumstances, other begins, con-

Whatever living beings there might be:
trembling or immovable, no one excepted,
great or mighty,
middle-sized, short or small,

visible or invisible,
near or far away,
born or to be born,
may all living beings be pleasing to themselves.'[124]

May no one do harm to another,
nor despise anyone anywhere;
let them not wish suffering to one another,
because of anger or a repulsive perception (*paṭighasaññā*).

Like a mother would protect
with her life her child, her only child;
in the same way, one should cultivate
a boundless thought towards all living beings.[125]

tents of experience) has to bestow happiness upon someone; hence, one can be happy and pleased only because of something else. This view is wrong since it misses the fact that all experience is constructed from within, and also the experience of happiness and pleasure does not arise because of external circumstances or occasions, but only because of one's own enjoyment. Ordinarily most beings experience a sort of blockage with respect to their own ability to enjoy and be pleased by their own being. This blockage is suffering, and aversion against this suffering induces the endless quest for extrinsic sensual pleasures. However, if beings would be able to allow themselves to enjoy their own being and be pleased by it, the blockage would be removed, aversion would be deprived of fuel, and the quest for sensuality would become idle. Notice that in this wish the point is not that 'being' as such is enjoyable, nor that one should be pleased by one's own self-view or anything of this sort. The point concerns the deeper relation that one has with the experience of pleasantness and happiness, and the ability to relate to it as something that one is allowed to plunge into. This happiness or pleasantness does not have external causes, conditions, or any particularly personal feature, it is just a phenomenon available, and the biggest challenge is to remove the blockage that prevents one from simply embracing it. Another crucial dimension involved in this understanding of the wish is that all living beings are ultimately responsible for their own happiness or unhappiness since this does not ultimately depend on the circumstances they are confronted with, but with their own way of understanding and reacting to them. Hence, the best that can be wished to all is that all may be able to relate to their lives in the most virtuous and skillful way.

124 These verses are perhaps the most important, since they articulate the sort of thought and wish that expresses the feeling of friendliness, which is addressed to absolutely all sorts of living beings without any discrimination.

125 The Pāli commentaries interpret the metaphor of the mother as if one should care for all beings as a mother would care for her only child. However, the verse rather indicates that one should

With friendliness (*mettaṃ*) towards the whole world,
one should cultivate a boundless thought;
above, below, and all around,
without resistance, without enmity or hostility.

Standing, or walking, sitting,
or laying down, for as long as one is free from torpor,[126]
one should sustain this recollection;
'the Brahman is dwelling here,' they say.[127]

protect the *thought* of friendliness itself as a mother would protect her only child. This thought of friendliness is what prevents enmity and aversion, and hence it is the most precious thing one might have. Notice also the original expression: *mānasaṃ bhāvaye aparimāṇaṃ*. What is at stake here is a 'thought' (*mānasaṃ*), which should be cultivated and developed (*bhāvaye*) or meditated upon, and this thought is (or should become) 'boundless' (*aparimāṇaṃ*). See further discussion of this latter point below, §5.

126 *Middha* is torpor or dullness, and *thina-middhaṃ* is 'sloth-and-torpor' or sleepiness-and-drowsiness, the third of the five hindrances. The most direct reason for the mentioning of *middha* in this verse is perhaps because of the reference to the laying-down posture, which is the most prone to induce torpor. Hence, the verse suggests that friendliness should be cultivated in a state of full alertness. However, this reference also points to the non-systematic way in which this text presents the same doctrinal content that in other texts will be standardized in the formula of the five hindrances. Here, abandoning desire and worry has been covered in the first introductory part of the text, while aversion is directly countered by friendliness itself. Doubt is countered in the next stanza with the reference to having abandoned views and being accomplished in insight. The practice of friendliness is thus interwoven with the abandonment of the five hindrances, although they are not singled out here as a clear doctrinal (fivefold) unit.

127 *Brahmam-etaṁ vihāram-idham-āhu*. This verse is usually rendered as 'this (*etaṁ*) is a divine (*Brahmam*) dwelling (*vihāram*) here (*idham*), they say (*āhu*).' In this rendering, *Brahmam-etaṁ* is interpreted as the name of the dwelling, which is considered to be a 'divine' way of spending one's time in this life (*here*). This reading assumes the traditional view according to which friendliness is a lofty and sublime state, but *not* the goal of the path. The term *Brahman* is thus interpreted in a deflationary and metaphorical sense as 'divine' or 'sublime.' However, the verse can also be interpreted as simply stating that 'the *Brahman*' (reading the demonstrative *etaṁ* as functioning as a definite article), spends its time (*vihāram*) in this condition here (*idham*), namely, in (uninterrupted) friendliness. In this rendering, friendliness is not just an occasionally nice dwelling, but it captures the emotional texture associated with the form of life of a supreme and (according to the Vedic tradition) supremely free being. The Buddha is not making an ontological statement about what a *Brahman* (the supreme unitarian principle in Vedic thought) is, but rather he is using Vedic terminology (*Brahman* is the name used to express the pinnacle of reality and freedom), to convey the depth of the soteriological potential disclosed by friendliness. Hence, the reference to *Brahman* might be understood as a way of expressing in Vedic terminology that this practice (brought to its consummation) leads to ultimate liberation, as already pointed out in the second verse, and reiterated in the last one. The use of this terminology makes sense from an historical point of view, given that most of the audience addressed by the Buddha would have been already familiar with it. Appropriating traditional Vedic expressions can thus become a way to convey the new meaning intended by the Buddha (cf. for instance Sn 1.7, in which the Buddha redefined the notions of 'outcast' and 'brahmin' by making them dependent on the quality of one's actions, rather than on one's birth).

Not having appropriated any views,
the honest one gains perspective;[128]
having abandoned greed for sensual pleasures,
they shall not come to the womb again.[129]

(Sn 1.8)

128 *Diṭṭhiñca anupaggamma / Sīlavā dassanena sampanno*: the reference is likely to the way in which appropriation of views constitute a deep and powerful fetter. 'Views' should be understood as broad ways of seeing the world and conceiving one's experience, including the way in which one envisages and construes one's own self-image. The problem with views is not necessarily their content (some might be more correct than others, but this is a secondary concern), but rather the attitude of appropriating them. See further discussion in §5 below. Notice that 'not undertaking views' (*diṭṭhiñca anupaggamma*) can be regarded as the condition for the honest one (*sīlavā*), to 'being endowed with (or acquiring, *sampanno*) a view or insight (*dassana*) on things.' In other words, by removing appropriation towards beliefs, one gains the clarity needed to dismiss obstructive speculations and reach a broader and more direct perspective on one's own experience and its overall context instead. This is *right view* (the root of the eightfold path), which is not a *belief* to uphold and defend, but rather the broader sense of direction to orient one's progress; in other words, the experiential knowledge of how to practice in order to reach awakening.

129 From a traditional point of view, this is a periphrasis for indicating the third and penultimate stage of awakening (*anāgāmī*, 'non-returner,' see *Afterword*). This stage is achieved when greed for sensual desires and aversion are completely and irreversibly destroyed and one's longing for the sensual world completely abandoned. Since the 'world' is often defined in the discourses (e.g. SN 12.44) as what is experienced through the sensory bases (which are in turn the basis for attitudes of greed or aversion towards sensual pleasures), abandoning the quest for sensual pleasures amounts to leaving the 'world' behind. However, one might also interpret the verse as suggesting the end of rebirth altogether, and hence as a periphrasis for final liberation. This double reading would be in line with what is suggested in other discourses (e.g. AN 11.15, §0), according to which the practice of *mettā* can lead to full liberation or to a stage immediately prior to it if one falls short of reaching that goal.

4. Vulnerability

Directions

Establish awareness of your bodily posture (§1). Abandon the hindrances or just notice if they are momentarily absent (§2). Arouse a sense of contentment and non-aversion and pervade your whole bodily space with it (§3).

Use contentment to stabilize attention and non-aversion to allow yourself to stay open to the experience, lowering any defensive structures that might be in place, resolving to face whatever is present without fear. When this attitude is clear and stable enough, you will experience it as a particular emotional texture: soft, spacious, receptive, defenseless, and yet bright, sharp, fearless. Take due time to fully establish yourself in this condition.

Then, deliberately bring to your thought one of the following five themes:

1. Aging is my reality; I did not go beyond aging.
2. Sickness is my reality; I did not go beyond sickness.
3. Death is my reality; I did not go beyond death.
4. There is alteration and separation with respect to all that is beloved and pleasing for me.
5. I am responsible for my actions, the heir of my actions, and I am bound to experience the consequences of my actions, for good or for bad.

Find ingenious ways of making the theme relevant for you in this present moment. You can evoke how the reality of the theme could be experienced in your own body, use images or talk to yourself, or just staying with the feeling that seems naturally associated with the theme. Pay particular attention to the fact that the reality evoked by the theme is certain and inescapable, and you have no say in it. This makes your own current situation unpleasantly uncer-

tain. The theme is cornering you, forcing you to face a predicament that you cannot escape. If evoking the theme leaves you entirely indifferent and emotionally untouched, then work on establishing a preliminary attitude of contentment and non-aversion, before trying to evoke it again.

The theme is established when you clearly perceive a degree of unpleasantness that it evokes. You understand what the theme means for your own condition. The theme might appear as disturbing, painful, it might also elicit some anxiety. Try to focus on how these reactions are perceived at the bodily level. Do not get dragged away by proliferations and stories that might arise at the level of thoughts.

Cultivate an attitude of quiet and patient openness towards the unpleasant reality that the theme is revealing, like if you were listening to a good friend, who came to you to share some burdensome situation. The news is unpleasant and even unlikable, but your first task is to listen to it, acknowledge it, pay attention to it, open to it, stay with it. Realize that you are in fact talking to yourself, that the unpleasantness evoked by the theme is the unpleasantness of your own condition, it is your own pain, your vulnerability, and this is the time for you to be the best friend to yourself.

When you are established in this attitude, notice the sense of resistance and even repulsion that surrounds the unpleasantness of the theme. Do not let this sense of resistance and repulsion take over. Rather, see whether it is possible to perceive the broader and more encompassing sense of vulnerability that the theme implies. You are vulnerable to the reality spelled out by the theme. Stabilize your attention on this vulnerability and to the way in which it is felt. Use this reflection to see directly, in your own experience, how fragile your condition is. Use the perception of vulnerability to soften the sense of resistance against the unpleasantness evoked by the theme.

See whether you can surround this perception of vulnerability with the sense of non-aversion and contentment that you evoked before (§3). You are vulnerable and fragile, and you cannot run away from this condition. But you can wish yourself to remain safe, to remain relatively free from afflictions. You can look at your own vulnerability without aversion, but instead with a sense of protection and goodwill. What is vulnerable and fragile needs a gentle gesture, needs care, needs understanding, needs friendliness.

Explore how encouraging this attitude gradually changes the experience of vulnerability itself and how the perception of vulnerability in turn feeds back into the attitude of friendliness by making it stronger. Keep paying attention to how this whole process is felt and unfolds.

When your session is coming to its conclusion, gently come back first to the simple feeling of contentment and non-aversion (§3), and let it fill the awareness of the whole body (§1). Stay there for a while before ending your session.

Refinements

If the evocation of one of the five themes is disorienting or creates too much tension, reflect more explicitly by asking yourself: what might be the best way of handling this situation? Deliberately consider what the consequences would be if you would decide to face the situation evoked by the theme by fostering aversion, greed, or simply trying to forget and ignore the situation itself. Imagine how this would impact your way of acting and your moral conduct. Try to feel as lively as possible what that would amount to. Then, see whether it is possible to reach any clarity about the fact that, given the situation, sustaining and fostering aversion, greed, and ignorance will not help in any way. Try the alternative: a clear experience of non-aversion and non-greed, expressed by a genuine wish for yourself to be happy, content, safe, free from afflictions. How does this feel?

Once you have stabilized the contemplation of one of the themes with respect to your current situation, you can extend it to the condition of all other living beings, human and non-human. For instance, you can imagine yourself as existing in any other shape, life-form, time or place. The theme you evoked would equally apply there. You can imagine the multitudes of living beings around you in this moment, all those who lived before you, all those who will live after you: they all equally share in the same way the same reality, they are all equally subject to your same situation. Or you can imagine other particular people or beings, some with whom you are already acquainted, or just unknown ones. Use this contemplation to directly perceive the absolute generality of the situation described by the theme, and the fact that you cannot possibly escape from it by simply changing your external conditions or even imagining existing in a different life-form.

When the universal scope of a theme is established, extend to all other living beings the same wish for their contentment and freedom from afflictions that you arouse towards yourself. All living beings are in the same predicament, they all share the same vulnerability, they all deserve the same friendly way of looking at them, wishing the best for all.

Try to familiarize yourself with all the five themes. Explore the implications and ramifications of each of them. At times, you can decide to focus on one theme more often, but be prepared to work with all of them. If the first four themes seem too difficult to handle, begin with the fifth (action) and remain with it until there is enough confidence, well-being and trust to face the others. Approach them in the order that is more feasible and reasonable for you.

Reflecting on a theme does not necessarily involve an inward verbalized discussion. Verbalizations might help to some extent, but they remain peripheral to this practice. Reflection consists in upholding in your attention the

understanding of a fundamental aspect of your current situation (the vulnerability evoked by any of the themes mentioned), and then cultivate a skillful emotional attitude that will allow you to hold that aspect in your awareness without being disturbed by it but rather sustain a friendly attitude towards it. You can use words, phrases and short arguments in order to direct attention to the characteristics and distinctive qualities associated with a theme. Once these are clearly perceived, though, you can drop all verbalized activity and just remain with the observation of those characteristics. The same works for friendliness. You can begin by verbally reflecting on the need to face the situation with friendliness, but once the feeling of friendliness is discernible in a sufficiently clear way, you can drop verbalizations and remain with the feeling. Notice that this friendliness is neither counterfeit nor forced, it arises from a wise reflection on what is the most skillful way to face the situation you (and everybody else) are in.

When friendliness is fully established around a theme, observe how it progressively dissolves the perception of the theme itself. This is not due to the fact that attention drifted away from the theme. With more friendliness there is less aversion; hence, the content of the theme is experienced with less resistance. With less resistance there is less emotional investment and more detachment from the theme itself. With more detachment there is less production of perceptions associated with the theme, and with less perception there is less experience. Hence, friendliness set in motion a process that progressively let the theme fade away, while the feeling of friendliness itself silently fills the space of experience left empty by the theme.

Practice can alternate and experiment with two basic ways of dealing with friendliness. Friendliness can be perceived as a vast background space, in which contents of experience (like the theme evoked) are received, suffused, and immersed. Alternatively, friendliness might be perceived as a sort of

force, energy, feeling, or perception (the labelling is not relevant here) that originates from some particular point in the field of experience, and that can be deliberately directed from that point to any other point, like a beam, in order to shed some gentle and friendly light on other contents (like the theme evoked). At different times, different ways of perceiving friendliness might be more or less available or more or less preferable to address whatever the current situation demands. Experimenting with both is key. In any case, the cultivation of friendliness results in a sort of interpenetration between friendliness and the whole field of experience, including all its contents. Wherever you look, you will see friendliness there, since friendliness is now established in your own gaze.

Notice that vulnerability is a perception, is a way of recognizing a certain characteristic of what is experienced, and a way of understanding it in a certain way, by giving a certain meaning to it. Vulnerability is something perceived in contents of experience. As this perception becomes clearer, the way of facing those contents changes because their meaning is changed. Vulnerability alters the default and habitual attitude of reacting with aversion against what is perceived as unpleasant. The perception of vulnerability in what is unpleasant prevents it from being experienced as repulsive (it stops aversion before it arises, or it counters aversion if it is already present). A degree of unpleasantness might stay or remain, but it is no longer understood as the signal for running away or fighting against, but rather as the mark that a degree of care, good-wishing and protection is needed to surround that unpleasantness, prevent it from escalating, and soften it if possible.

Once the perception of vulnerability is clearly established with respect to the inherent unpleasantness of the general predicament of all living beings (as described by the five themes), it can be further extended to the experience of the hindrances themselves. All hindrances (and aversion in particular) are

experienced with a degree of unpleasantness. In fact, all hindrances amplify and magnify any unpleasantness that might already be entailed by the current situation one is in. Hindrances are themselves a wound, a mark that one is vulnerable to suffering. The clearer one sees the connection between aversion (and the other hindrances) and suffering, the clearer the perception that one's greatest vulnerability is in fact towards the hindrances, even more than towards aging, sickness, death and separation. By perceiving the hindrances and their working as a manifestation of one's vulnerability, their manifestation becomes an occasion for taking care of their inherent unpleasantness in a radically different way. Nurturing a friendly and compassionate attitude towards one's own vulnerable condition, and dwelling in this attitude, the vicious circle that feeds the hindrances by producing and sustaining aversion is disbanded and can be abandoned entirely.

Reflections

Facing vulnerability

Aging, sickness, death, and separation are a reality for all sorts of living beings. Ordinarily, they are perceived as states to be avoided as much as possible, preferably to be ignored when one feels relatively far away from them. One tries and strives to construe one's own experience in order *not* to perceive any of these general features. This desperate attempt exposes ignorance and aversion. An alternative approach is that of striving to perceive some other reality that could provide any sort of salvation or relief from aging, sickness, death, and separation. One will try to believe and cultivate some sort of faith in something that can protect against the experience of these unwanted realities, now or perhaps in the future. This alternative approach handles the basic aversion engendered by aging, sickness, death, and separation by fostering craving and greed for an imagined solution or savior. These two seemingly opposite approaches are based on the same fun-

damental delusion and insipience, namely, on a basic refusal to confront the reality and inescapability of aging, sickness, death, and separation.

Reacting with aversion, greed, or ignorance is not providing any genuine solution to the problem that one perceives in being subject to these realities. Aversion, greed, and ignorance simply foster unskillful actions, attitudes, and beliefs that not only are unable to solve the problem evoked by these realities, but make it worse by creating endless vicious circles. This insight sheds light on the practical centrality of the fifth theme of contemplation, which focuses on one's own responsibility for one's actions. The domain of actions (and intentionality) is the playground where everything is decided. There, one can discover a space to reconsider habitual patterns of reactions and coactions, and take a step back from them, cultivating alternative attitudes. Friendliness is one of them, which radically changes the way in which the experience of unpleasantness and vulnerability is met.

Friendliness is not a way of escaping from vulnerability, to forget about it, to be distracted from it. One rather contemplates the question: given how fragile all of this is, how should it be held and handled? Friendliness is a gesture of kindness and understanding towards what is seen on the verge of being altered or even destroyed at any moment. It is not a way of remedying vulnerability or softening it. Friendliness is a way of touching vulnerability in such a way that it will not hurt, and it might even be protected to some extent. Friendliness is not interested at all in the story behind vulnerability. It does not investigate why this being is so vulnerable in this way, why that hurts so badly, who is responsible for such and such circumstances. Friendliness is indifferent and blind to these sorts of enquiries; it plays an entirely different and even revolutionary game. Instead of delving into vulnerability and exploring its causes, friendliness challenges the very fact that vulnerability itself is the genuine problem; friendliness knows that *aversion* is the problem, and *this* is where the core interest and concern of friendliness lie.

Vulnerability entails two dimensions. There is a general predicament in which all living beings ultimately find themselves. These are the realities evoked by the themes. Aging, sickness, death, and separation do entail exposure to unpleasantness, pain, and suffering. There is no way around this situation and no way of entirely avoiding it. However, this by itself is not the worst part. The worst part is fostering, amplifying and getting entangled with this suffering by unskillfully reacting to it. The hindrances showcase these unskillful reactions. Aversion is the chief. More generally, aversion against any degree of unpleasantness fosters more aversion, and not knowing how to escape from this whirlpool, one is led to desperately seek some relief in sensual pleasures, which eventually creates even more thirst and makes the possibility of escaping even more remote and incomprehensible (see §3, SN 36.6). Hence, one is not only vulnerable to some basic degree of unpleasantness (just in virtue of living a life, which is sensitive to the experience of unpleasant feelings), but one is also vulnerable to living in hell (the five hindrances at their best) and remain locked into it.

Friendliness tackles both these dimensions of vulnerability. First, it provides a way of meeting and facing any sort of unpleasantness *without* the pressure for getting rid of it. Friendliness switches the meaning through which unpleasantness is understood, by transforming it from something to push away into the landmark of an inherent fragility that needs to be met with a caring attitude and gentle gaze. Second, by doing so, friendliness actually provides an alternative to, and hence an escape from, the underlying habit of getting rid of anything unpleasant, by thus undermining the unfolding of the hindrances and keeping one as far as possible from the hellish world they fabricate.

Pondered profoundly enough, one can see how deeply transformative this way of looking can be. When something is perceived as fragile and vulnerable, aversion would urge to get rid of it or would encourage some form of disgust for it. Desire would instead push towards seeking something that is

not so fragile and vulnerable. Ignorance would try to forget about vulnerability and fragility altogether and rather search for something else; it does not even matter what. Wisdom sees that none of this works. When something is perceived as vulnerable and fragile, it demands kindness, protection, care, and friendliness. Not for the sake of making it otherwise or to save it from its own nature, but simply because a friendly and gentle attitude is the only way in which something fragile can be handled without being broken. As a result, one can also discover that despite all fragility and vulnerability, there is some magical and wonderous beauty in all forms of existence, in their struggles and hopes, in their moments of happiness, in their potential for deeper forms of contentment and freedom. In fact, contentment and freedom are more genuinely understood not when vulnerability is taken away, but when it becomes possible to dwell and move in it with a new grace, without being affected by it while remaining amidst it.

The experience of friendliness itself is always pleasant, refreshing, warming, even when it faces the deepest manifestations of one's own vulnerability or the fragility of others. In fact, friendliness is a stroke of genius: it takes what is seemingly the worst side of living experience and, by playing with perception, makes it into a catalyst for well-being and ease. The experience of uncertainty becomes the occasion of appreciating how precious and valuable is this same experience, which might break at any point, which might have not been here at all, which will be impossible to preserve forever. Instead of desperate possessiveness, friendliness allows for a sense of profound gratitude, nourished by the realization that whatever is received might have not been received, might be lost at any point, and there is no entitlement towards having or keeping it. It is a rare and delicate gift, and as a gift the whole world can be welcomed and saved.

Friendliness can simultaneously provide the strength to sustain the contemplation on what is otherwise perceived as repugnant, while providing a source for inner contentment and ease, which are necessary for a clear under-

standing of the meaning of one's situation. In turn, friendliness is nourished by the perception of vulnerability, since one recognizes that the only helpful attitude to adopt when facing vulnerability is a wish for safety, protection, and an attitude of goodwill. In this way, friendliness creates a virtuous feedback loop around vulnerability, which prevents the habitual reactions based on aversion to take over, by rather fostering openness and well-being, thus gaining time and space for a deeper understanding to unfold.

In the safe space created by friendliness, it becomes apparent that the genuine problem is not constituted by aging, sickness, death, and separation, but rather by one's attitude of appropriating young age, health, life, and beloved possessions, as if they were one's own property, fully subject to one's own control. The problem, in fact, is the intoxicating sense of ownership one is trapped in with regard to these conditions. Hence, the solution does not consist in running away from aging, sickness, death, and separation, but rather ceasing to appropriate, as much as possible, young age, health, life, and any beloved possessions. Appropriation is the genuine true problem that needs to be addressed. This requires further deepening.

No owner

On the one hand, it is vital to realize that appropriation is *impossible*. Wanting or wishing to claim ownership of anything can in itself never be more than a want or a wish. Ownership as such is a practical contradiction. Aging, sickness, death, and separation are the most evident and direct factual proof of this. On the other hand, it is also important to notice that what are most directly appropriated are not 'things' but, first of all, *feelings*. One wants certain things and does not wish to go through certain experiences only because of the feelings associated with (or expected to arise from) them. Feelings are what shapes any understanding one might have of any content of experience. If, without any further change, something felt unpleasantly could be converted into something felt pleasantly, then the very same content would

immediately become a target for desire and cease to be a target of aversion. In reacting with aversion against the unwanted realities of aging, sickness, death and separation, one is primarily reacting against the unpleasant and painful feelings associated with them (and with the broader perspective and condition they entail). This reaction presupposes (implicitly at least) that one is claiming ownership of those very feelings. Faced with the thought of death, one not only sees death as the end of 'my life,' but one also experiences that unpleasant and painful feeling of loss connected with the perspective of death as 'my pain.'

By appropriating feelings, one appropriates all the contents associated with those feelings. However, feelings are no more subject to ownership than any other content of experience. In fact, closer observation reveals that they are even less likely to ever be subject to ownership, given how fleeting and changeable their nature is. For this reason, beginning to relinquish the sense of ownership with regard to feelings is essential in order to undermine the broader and deeper assumption about the possibility of appropriation in general.

At the most advanced level of practice, this contemplation becomes very straightforward: 'this condition of vulnerability is (or is going to be) painful, and this painful feeling is not something I want; but if I had any real control over this feeling (if it was really mine), I should be able to get rid of it or even prevent it from arising; but I cannot do that, hence this feeling is not really subject to my control, it cannot be really mine; in fact, there is nothing personal in it.'[130] But as was already noted (§2), for a beginner who still lacks sufficient development it will be impossible to take such a straightforward approach. In a nutshell, appropriation is a symptom, and its underlying condition is the set of habits based on desire, aversion, and ignorance that shape one's experience. Until these habits have been weakened sufficiently, one

130 For a comparison about how this point is developed in the discourses, see SN 22.59 and MN 35. Notice that this contemplation is presented as the advanced practice of those near to reaching full awakening, it is not introduced as a beginner's practice.

cannot avoid regarding any aspect of experience as 'mine,' at least to some extent. The best training strategy thus consists in understanding *in principle* that appropriation is impossible and then working on weakening the threefold basis of desire, aversion, and ignorance. If the latter is done properly, then one should expect a decrease in the sense of ownership towards the components of one's experience. This process begins by changing one's attitude towards the painfulness revealed by vulnerability.

The purpose of this practice is not preventing any particular feeling from arising, but rather changing the way in which one relates to feelings in general. The five themes force a direct confrontation with particularly unwanted sorts of unpleasant feelings, associated with an acknowledgment of one's own inherent vulnerability, which is usually something difficult to face and is best avoided if possible. Vulnerability can be a genuine problem only because it is felt in an unpleasant way, *and* because there is aversion to it, which in turn entails that the unpleasant feeling is perceived as 'my own' feeling. Usually, the ordinary approach focuses on vulnerability and tries to either gain protection from it or ignore it. But what is essentially vulnerable cannot be protected forever from its own nature, nor can this nature be always ignored. A more skillful strategy, instead, consists in discerning that the problem of vulnerability is not vulnerability itself, but the attitude of aversion towards how it feels. Instead of trying to reject, change or escape from vulnerability, one can work on relinquishing that aversion, which in turn lessens appropriation. As it turns out, vulnerability cannot be changed, but any appropriation is in fact unwarranted. Hence, it can be released since it has never been anything more than a groundless pretension.

It is very important to approach this reflection in the right way. The experience of any feeling is inherently shaped by a subjective perspective. All feelings are always experienced by an experiential subject of them. The experience of feeling something simply does not make sense at the experiential level if it is not understood in regard to one who feels it. Hence, a potentially

alienating and frustrating way of countering one's appropriation of feelings consists in envisaging feelings as if one could detach oneself from them entirely. One could imagine that feelings are like clouds floating in the sky, while oneself is neither them nor the sky, but essentially different and separate. This attitude is problematic. It objectifies and hypostatizes feelings even more, without realizing that giving feelings their own inherent existence (as if they were self-standing phenomena) is just another way of supporting appropriation of them. In this case, appropriation simply changes its sign, from positive 'moving towards and making mine' it becomes 'running way and putting outside of me.' Changing the direction of appropriation does not change the nature of appropriation. Objectifying feelings prevents one from observing one's own entanglement with those feelings, by creating a sense of 'me' being 'here' and feelings being 'over there,' which might result in even greater alienation.

Appropriation works by taking the subjective perspective of feelings at face value (fully believing in the literal meaning of what it seems to say), and thus by taking for granted not only that such feelings are 'mine,' but also that the experience of '*me* feeling in this way' is a true and genuine story about a very unique and personal event that is happening to this special character, 'myself.' Non-appropriation begins to arise when one stops taking this story at face value, when one stops believing it, when one sees that the story is *just a story*, there is no character (and also no real feelings) existing outside the story itself, nor anything personal in what the story tells. To do this, though, one needs to face the story and discern its unfolding in one's current experience.

This is a delicate point. It is not the case that when there is the experience of feelings, there is no experience of someone feeling those feelings. The opposite is true, and without keeping this point clear, the whole contemplation is distorted and mystified. However, the experienc*er* of feelings (the one who feels) is a *perspectival construction* that arises within the experience itself. It does not exist or stand in its own right, just as the character of a novel is

very real from the perspective of the novel and within it, but it cannot be found outside it. And there is nothing personal in this construction, in the sense that it is *just* a perspectival construction. Appropriating feelings is very much like getting so involved with a novel that one will then expect to meet its characters in real life. The point is not that there is no novel or no character in it; the point is that they are real only dependent on the perspective created by the novel itself. A character has no status independently from its novel, or outside it. Seeing this, one can realize that there is genuinely nothing to appropriate in feelings, there is no 'real stuff' in them, nor in the one who feels them; they are like bubbles of water, empty inside.

Again, the point is *not* that feelings or subjects are illusory or unreal (they do appear in their own way, they are genuine objects and contents of experience). The point is that, ordinarily, feelings and subjects are interpreted as things existing in their own right, as if they would not constantly and constitutively require conditions or bases for supporting themselves all the time. This ordinary interpretation, in turn, bestows upon the subject and its feelings an aura of importance, value, cogency, which makes the whole experience feel personal, uniquely 'mine.' There is a sort of existential exclamation mark that accompanies anything that is appropriated as 'mine' which makes it stand out in the field of experience as a particular focus of attention and concern. But this whole interpretation is misguided, because feelings are just feelings, and the subjective perspective is just a subjective perspective. Both are conditioned by various factors, structurally uncertain, unsuitable for being appropriated, and there is nothing personal in any of them, and hence no inherent special value or cogency that they must have for anybody in particular. The existential exclamation mark is the problem, or rather the illusion.

Feelings and subjects occur and can be experienced only within a complex web of conditional dependencies, as threads in the fabric of experience. Insofar as something is regarded as relatively independent, to that extent it can be appropriated, rejected, and manipulated. But what is fully appreciated as

being constitutively conditional and dependent can no longer be detached from its context and approached in its own right. There is nothing *in* feelings or subjects that can be separated and appropriated. Seeing thus, one begins to investigate the complex conditions that give rise to their experience, and how it would be possible to play with these conditions in order to change the ordinary unfolding of experience itself.

The key to disown feelings and break the automatic tendency of appropriating them is by changing the sort of reaction one habitually sustains towards feelings.[131] When an unpleasant feeling is met with aversion, aversion leads to interpret that feeling as 'my pain.' It is no longer just a matter of experiencing a painful feeling from the point of view of the experiential subject of that pain. 'My pain' is a much more vivid and profound experience, it touches 'me' directly, it takes that experience with seriousness, heaviness, urgency, as a most vital and personal concern. It becomes a very engaging story. The way in which this whole experience is constructed moves from feeling to the sense of 'I am' via aversion (craving) and appropriation. But the way in which the same experience appears from within seems the opposite: there is 'me' and, on this basis, 'I have' this feeling, which leads 'me' to react against it. Wisdom consists in recognizing the right order in which experience is constructed (from feeling to 'I am'), and then realizing that the order in which experience appears (from 'I am' to feelings) is reversed, or rather perverted, since it takes the end result as its starting point.

Wherever and whenever the sense of 'I am' (which actually means 'I have') emerges, *there* one can discover an underlying tendency to push away some degree of unpleasantness. This is because the sense of 'I am' is born

131 In MN 2, the Buddha shows that the ordinary worldling does not know what to pay attention to and what not to pay attention to, which results in the thriving of the five hindrances. In turn, the hindrances are the basis for the proliferation of thoughts and concerns about the self (hence the self *emerges* from attitudes of desire, aversion, and ignorance instantiated by the hindrances). In SN 24.2 (but cf. also SN 22.85 and 22.156), the thought 'this is mine, this I am, this is my self' is regarded as what originates from thirst for any of the five aggregates.

from the unfolding of aversion (which evolves by covering itself up with the quest for sensual pleasures as a diversion). Hence, the most direct way of relinquishing this whole structure is by re-engineering how unpleasantness is met, faced and understood, by blocking aversion and replacing it with its opposite, friendliness. Then, without aversion, there will be contentment; with contentment, no need for sensual craving; without aversion and craving, no need for distractions, diversions and ignoring of this whole process, and more profoundly, no need for claiming that 'this is mine,' because there is no precious and personal belonging for 'me' to defend or react against.

Appropriation of feelings is dissolved by dissolving the condition of that appropriation. The condition of appropriation is a certain intentional structure, based on the interplay between aversion, desire for sensuality, and ignorance, which then *results* in a more or less explicit sense of 'me' being the main and genuine character of this whole drama. The root problem is not the character itself, nor even the deluded attitude that leads to take its story at face value. These are consequences and effects of how the process unfolds. The true problem is the deep, amorphous, impersonal, and yet extremely powerful habitual attitude of pushing away and getting rid of what is unpleasant. That is what needs addressing. Addressing this problem requires friendliness since friendliness is the ability of flipping the perspective, switching off the habit of pushing away, and rather staying with the unpleasant, understanding the bliss that arises from the absence of aversion, even when this is just as a simple wish.

Appropriation is conditioned by aversion and ignorance; hence it can be weakened and eventually abandoned only by countering both aversion and ignorance. Friendliness does this by simultaneously giving to the unpleasant a completely different meaning (not something to fear or to oppose, but a vulnerability to take care of, to protect as much as possible), and by uncovering the paradoxes nestled in the views that support appropriation and aversion. The experience of the unpleasant is the playground where this process

unfolds. Relinquishing appropriation requires being able to fully engage with experience at this level (by being able to discern the feeling tone of experience and facing it), by addressing it with wise friendliness and emotional intelligence. Not appropriating feelings as 'mine' does not consist in simply proclaiming 'this is not mine' and repeating this as a mantra. It takes both an understanding of why feelings cannot be 'mine' *and* the ability to sustain intentional attitudes that are able to meet the unpleasant in a different, healthier way.

More concretely, since the sense of 'I am' is conditioned by a reaction to feelings, the same sense of 'I am' can also be relinquished only by relinquishing that same reaction. One can understand that ownership is impossible, but one will not be able to escape from the sense of ownership if one does not undermine the emotional attitudes (aversion, desire) that support ownership and appropriation from within. Friendliness helps right here. It undermines aversion and desire by fostering clarity and knowledge. This naturally results in a degree of dispassion towards feelings and other contents of experience, insofar as they are no longer charged objects of craving. Dispassion thus weakens appropriation, and the lessening of appropriation allows for the fading away of the sense of 'I am' and 'I have' with respect to any content of experience.

However, unpleasantness arises at all levels of experience and at all degrees. One has to start experimenting with a more friendly way of dealing with it wherever this becomes available and feasible. And yet, it will be crucial at some point to push this contemplation deep enough towards that overall horizon within which the most encompassing level of unpleasantness is found. That is the horizon of aging, sickness, death, separation, the predicament of all living beings, their inherent and structural vulnerability, which accompanies them regardless of their condition or life-form. Bringing friendliness there, sustaining it there, letting it grow there, is where its wisdom can bring the greatest fruits.

Dissonant determinations

Vulnerability is the key to unlock and penetrate the mystery of existence. But to begin with, it is necessary to realize that aging, sickness, death, and separation are not just events that will happen in the future at some point. They are realities immanently present right now in one's current experience. Even if one does not look or feel old yet, one is aging, or aging is a real possibility currently present in one's current not-so-old condition. The same for sickness: even if one feels relatively healthy at the moment, being healthy *means* that sickness is a real possibility that can be actualized at any moment. For sure, one can contemplate death only while one is still alive, and yet any moment one is alive is a good moment to die. Why? Because without the real possibility of death, life could not be determined as such. Something that never dies has never been alive. The same consideration applies also to separation. Being together with something or someone and enjoying that togetherness is precious only because separation and alteration are a real possibility immanently present.

To generalize this insight, one might see that anything that is determined in a certain way (being young rather than old, healthy rather than sick, alive rather than dead, being united rather than separated) entails in that very determination the real possibility for the cessation of that determination (there would be no youth without a real possibility of aging, no health without a real possibility of sickness, no life without a real possibility of death, and no union without a real possibility of separation). This real possibility is a *possibility* in the sense that it might not yet be actualized in this very moment, but it is *real* because it will be actualized at some point, no matter what one does or believe. Hence, seeing these realities as real possibilities is a way of discerning their implicit and immanent presence in what might seem to be momentarily free from them. Any content of experience that arises at some point as *this* determinate content, for that very reason that it

arises, it also has the reality of ceasing since it is immanently inhabited by the real possibility of its own cessation.

Discerning this real possibility discloses the sense of uncertainty (*anicca*) that characterizes the horizon of all experiences of all sentient beings.[132] Seeing this uncertainty is subverting the ordinary perspective about existence. Ordinarily, aging, sickness, death, and separation are seen as incidents, contingencies. They might arise at some point, but they seem to belong to the future; they are uncertain in the sense that they are not here yet. However, fully understanding these realities as real possibilities inherently and essentially impressed in the heart of any determinate life-form (just because that life-form is so determinate) entails that these realities are not uncertain at all. On the contrary, they are the most certain realities of all. By contrast, what was ordinarily assumed to be relatively certain (the fact that now aging is far away, sickness does not appear, and death is surely not present) becomes the most uncertain. Since youth is defined by the real possibility of aging, aging is certain, but youth is structurally uncertain. Since health is defined by the real possibility of sickness, sickness is certain, but health is uncertain. Since life is defined by the real possibility of death, death is certain, but life is uncertain. Since possessions and union are defined by the real possibility of separation and alteration, these are certain, while possessions and union

132 The characteristic of *anicca* (literally 'non-permanence' or 'un-certainty') is often presented as the fact that phenomena are in constant flux and their constitutive elements arise and cease with an extremely rapid frequency. These characterizations seem to derive from the commentarial tradition and the *Abhidhamma* thought, in which phenomena are increasingly analyzed in terms of flicking 'mind-moments' that arise and cease very rapidly. In the discourses, there is no suggestion about the fact that the *frequency* or the *speed* of change has to be regarded as the salient feature of *anicca*. The fact that phenomena change has great significance insofar as one realizes that this change is structurally encoded in the nature of phenomena themselves, and hence the fact that they arise already entails the fact that they will have to cease. This, in turn, makes idle any attempt to hold on to phenomena or appropriate them or claim any sort of ownership of them, given that they will fade away regardless of what one wishes or pretends. Hence, *anicca* is not just changeability in general, nor is it necessarily connected with the speed of change, but it rather indicates the structural feature in virtue of which any content of experience is essentially and structurally uncertain and thus impossible to own.

are uncertain. The whole ordinary way of conceiving of reality is turned upside down.[133]

Regardless of the kind of life-form one considers that condition is fundamentally uncertain because in order to be alive, one inevitably and certainly ends up living in the space characterized by the realities of aging, sickness, death, and separation. Seeing these four realities is plunging into the nature of one's deepest vulnerability and fully facing the inherent uncertainty that comes with any possible form of existence. This uncertainty is not due to some external factor or extrinsic perspective. Uncertainty is the inherent dissonance at the heart of all determinate contents of experience (and all contents are inevitably determined, otherwise they could not be experienced). Each determinate content aims to be what it is, but to be such, it has to be defined by the real possibility of its cessation. Because of this inherent dissonance, all contents of experience bring with them a shade of instability, painfulness, uneasiness (*dukkha*).[134]

133 The contemplation of *anicca* can be scary, insofar as it brings to the foreground of experience the impossibility of having full control over anything that happens. On one occasion (SN 22.78), for instance, the deities react with fear and dismay to the teaching of the Buddha, since they realize that the reality of *anicca* entails that they too are not eternal, as they might have wanted to believe. However, *anicca* also has a bright side. Insofar as all realities are uncertain, all bounds and constrictions are also uncertain and ultimately contingent. Craving, thirst, appropriation, attachment, greed, aversion, ignorance, and the like, are also all uncertain and contingent; they can cease. This entails that there is a fundamental element of freedom at the bottom of all realities, precisely because of their uncertain nature, which prevents any particular attitude from taking root too firmly or definitely. Hence, contemplation of *anicca* opens the possibility for a contemplation of freedom (see §7, *Reflections*), by revealing that experience does not *have* to be shaped by attitudes that create and support *dukkha*.

134 The implication between *anicca* and *dukkha* needs to be understood in the context of the presence of thirst. If what is inherently uncertain is experienced against the background of thirst for existence or non-existence, then that content will be felt unpleasantly and will lead to suffering since its nature (*anicca*) is unsuitable to satisfy the wishes and wants that one craves to impose over it. This means that the cessation of thirst is also the cessation of the experience of *dukkha*, although this does not entail that contents of experience cease to be uncertain. One rather realizes that uncertainty and dissonance are not inherently painful; they are felt painfully only in a context affected by thirst and craving. Sometimes, the implication between *anicca* and *dukkha* is taken to be stronger, as if the very fact of uncertainty would necessarily entail that anything uncertain is inherently and by itself painful and full of suffering. But if this was really the case, then the cessation of suffering could be experienced only as a cessation of all experience altogether (since there can be experience only on the basis of the five aggregates, and they are structurally uncertain), which in turn would entail that the cessation of *dukkha* could not be experienced at all. This consequence is

The inherent and unavoidable presence of this dissonance is the most glaring evidence that *no* content of experience whatsoever can ever be subject to appropriation, and it is structurally unable to become 'my own.' Ownership entails certainty of possession and the right to make one's possession conform to one's wishes. Uncertainty undermines possession since it subtracts the content from any alleged right one might claim to have on it (since that content can cease at any time, wanting it or not). The painful dissonance produced by uncertainty undermines the wish to make contents conforming to one's desires, especially the pretension of avoiding any pain and unwanted experiences at one's command. Hence, vulnerability is the most direct, glaring and evident proof of the impossibility of appropriation of any possible content of experience whatsoever. Seeing vulnerability is seeing that no content whatsoever can be 'mine.' The story told by appropriation (that pleasant story in which 'I am' the main character, the hero who is entitled to own this, fight for that, conquer here, perhaps loose there) can then appear for what it is, just a story, a dream (actually, a nightmare, since it binds one's experience with all sorts of inevitable frustration). Not appropriating any content, their uncertainty and dissonance can no longer be 'my' problem or anybody's problem. With the realization that this is not 'mine' and does not belong to 'myself' (*anattā*), comes the opening of genuine freedom.[135]

at odds with the foundational event of the Buddha's own awakening in life and his ability to lead others to the same experience of awakening, which is canonically presented as the experience of the cessation of *dukkha*.

135 The teaching of *anattā* (usually translated as 'no-self' or 'no-soul') can be interpreted in various ways. A common reading takes it to be an *ontological* teaching concerned with the nature and existence of a particular entity, the self. From this point of view, one can debate what exactly is the self that is denied by the Buddha, whether it is only an eternal transcendental Soul (like the one posited in late Vedic thought) or if it encompasses any ordinary expression of selfhood. However, from what has been presented so far it should be clear that selfhood is primarily a way of acting based on certain intentional bases (aversion, desire, and ignorance). The sense of 'I am' results from 'I-making' and 'my-making' towards contents of experience. Similarly, appropriation is not just an ontological condition or relation, but a deliberate way of handling contents of experience as if they could be controlled and mastered by a certain subject. From this point of view, *anattā* is best understood not as an ontological doctrine, but as a practical discipline aimed at transforming one's intentional attitudes towards experience. The sort of appropriation that the Buddha targets in the discourses is an adversarial form of appropriation, concerned with a specific way of acting

In this way, seeing vulnerability, seeing through it, and fully understanding it leads to being free from it, without having to leave it. This seeing, in turn, is made possible by friendliness. Maybe this does not come as a total surprise. As the analysis unfolds, it reveals something familiar, something that was already there since the beginning. One cannot genuinely wish happiness and contentment to others, or even to oneself, without relinquishing (at least to some extent) the concern for one's own self. A sincere wish is a moment of forgetfulness about oneself as the alleged subject and ruler of one's experience and its stories. When the wish arises, the pretensions of the self and its struggle for ownership disappear, maybe even just for a moment, but they cannot coexist at the same time. That moment of forgetfulness is a moment of freedom, a taste of bliss. It might go unnoticed, but it is there. Friendliness knows it by acquaintance because that is its source, its wisdom.

Readings

There are some ways in which the Buddha's teachings can be encapsulated in a short formula. One of the most important is the scheme provided by the 'four noble truths,' here rendered as the 'four outstanding things' about the universal condition of all living beings. The following discourse (SN 56.11) is presented by the tradition as the first public sermon delivered by the Buddha, and it acquired a foundational role in defining the core of the Buddha's teachings. The scheme provided by the four things offers a relatively simple but extremely powerful matrix to analyze experience in terms of what leads towards or away from unpleasantness (in its whole spectrum). The first thing

towards contents for the sake of subjecting them to one's own control. One might thus distinguish this form of appropriation from the subjective perspective that is inherent in the structure of conscious experience, in virtue of which contents can be indexed to a certain field (they appear as happening 'here' rather than somewhere else). While this subjective perspective is unavoidable, and indeed necessary, for any experience to occur, it neither entails nor supports the more robust form of appropriation and control that tends to interpret that perspective in much more personal and dramatic terms.

brings to the foreground the unavoidable experience of vulnerability (phrased in terms of *dukkha*) and makes it the turning point of the whole contemplation. This contemplation is included also in the fourth domain of right recollection (MN 10), and it is further expanded in some accounts of it (DN 22). Notice that, in the following presentation, each thing comes with a task associated with it, and the full realization of the meaning of these things arises from completely fulfilling these tasks. In the discourses, this also provides one account (although not the only one) of how the process of awakening unfolds. The first step is marked by the realization that 'whatever has the reality of originating, all of that has the reality of ceasing.'

> It has been heard by me that, on one occasion, the Fortunate was dwelling at Baranasi, in the Deer Park at Isipatana. There, the Fortunate addressed the group of the five mendicants:[136]
>
> 'Mendicants, these two extremes should not be followed by a homeless one. What two? On the one hand, a practice attached to the pleasantness of sensuality (*kāmasukhallikānuyogo*)[137] in sensual pleasures, which is low, common, worldly, vulgar, meaningless; and on the other hand, a practice of self-exhaustion (*attakilamathānuyogo*), which is painful, vulgar, meaningless.
>
> Mendicants, without taking either of these two extremes, a middle way has been discovered by the Realized,[138] which gives rise to vision and knowledge, and leads to peace, supreme knowledge, awakening, extinction.
>
> Mendicants, and what is this middle way discovered by the Realized, which gives rise to vision and knowledge, and leads to peace, supreme knowledge, awakening, extinction? It is this outstanding eightfold path, that is: right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right liveli-

136 According to the tradition, these are the five companions with whom the Buddha shared his life as an ascetic wanderer, and whom he encountered again after his awakening.

137 In introducing these two extremes, the Buddha qualifies them as *anuyoga*, which has the general meaning of 'practice of' or 'devotion to' something. This makes sense, since the Buddha is about to introduce the path of practice discovered by him, as a middle way between these two other forms of practice.

138 *Tathāgata*, an epithet of the Buddha, difficult to translate, which he uses to refer to himself. Here it is understood as *tathā* (reality) + *gato* (suffix used to indicate the possession of something).

hood, right effort, right recollection, right composure. Mendicants, this is the middle way that has been discovered by the Realized, which gives rise to vision and knowledge, and leads to peace, supreme knowledge, awakening, extinction.

Mendicants, this outstanding thing[139] is suffering (*dukkha*):[140] birth is suffering, aging is suffering, sickness is suffering, death is suffering, being yoked with what one does not like is suffering, being separated from what one does like is suffering, not getting what one wants is suffering; in brief, appropriation of the five aggregates is suffering.[141]

Mendicants, this outstanding thing is the origin of suffering: this thirst (*taṇhā*) for the renewal of existence, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here and there, that is: thirst for sensual pleasures, thirst for existence (*bhava*),[142] thirst for non-existence.

139 *Ariya-sacca*: most commonly translated as 'noble truth.' *Ariya* often means 'noble' and it is commonly used to distinguish the 'learned disciple' who trains in the Buddha's teaching (*sāvaka*) from the ordinary worldling (*puthujjana*). Here, it is intended in a more general sense as 'outstanding' or worth knowing (see footnote 69). *Sacca* means 'true' or 'real.' But the way in which the term is used in this discourse makes it problematic to translate it (straightforwardly) in this way. The four *ariya-saccāni* are not presented as objective statements about matters of fact, nor as pieces of true knowledge, but rather as calls for specific actions. The second, for instance, must be abandoned, and it does not make sense to say that a 'truth' or a 'fact' must be abandoned. Translating it as 'thing' might bypass this problem, following up on a suggestion by Ñāṇavīra (see Ñāṇavīra Thera, *Clearing the Path (1960-1965)*. Path Press Publications, 2010, Letter 49, p. 258). This translation also stresses that the core formula is simply *idaṁ dukkhaṁ* ('this [is] suffering'), and the additional qualification *ariasaccaṁ* should be understood as emphasizing the pronoun *idaṁ*.

140 While keeping with the standard translation of *dukkha* as 'suffering,' it is worth stressing that the term is often used in the context of *feelings* to express a negative feeling tone of unpleasantness or pain. According to Manfred Mayrhofer, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindoarischen* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1992–2001), vol. 1, p. 730, the Sanskrit *duḥkhá* derives from *duḥ-* (prefix indicating 'bad') and *khá*, which has the abstract meaning of 'opening' or 'space' but the more concrete and literal meaning of the 'hole in the hub of the wheel that holds the axle journal' (ibidem, vol. 1, p. 442), which is traceable back to the Vedic texts. Hence, *su-khá* (Pāli *sukha*) takes the meaning of 'running smoothly or going well,' or more generally 'comfortable, agreeable, pleasant' while *duḥkhá* (Pāli *dukkha*) literally means 'running with difficulty or not going well,' or 'uncomfortable.'

141 The five aggregates are part of a standard method used in the discourses to analyse experience in its most general components. They are physical body (*rūpa*), feeling (*vedanā*), perception or recognition (*saññā*), coactions (*saṅkhāra*), consciousness (*viññāṇa*). The term *upādāna* is sometimes translated as 'clinging' or 'attachment.' Literally, it means 'taking (*ādāna*) up (*upa-*),' and it is perhaps best understood as referred to the constant activity of 'mine-making' and 'I-making' that underpins all ordinary experience.

142 Existence (*bhava*) is best understood as the assumption of 'being something,' which can have both a psychological dimension ('I am *this*') and a more eschatological dimension in terms of the rebirth that one seeks to obtain. Sometimes, the term is translated with 'becoming,' which is usually interpreted in the context of the process of rebirth. Thirst for non-existence can be interpreted as the aversive attitude that seeks the destruction of what it does not like, but more fundamentally

Mendicants, this outstanding thing is the cessation of suffering: the cessation (*nirodha*) and fading away without any residue of this very thirst, giving up and letting go of it, freedom from it, non-attachment to it.

Mendicants, this outstanding thing is the path leading to the cessation of suffering: it is this outstanding eightfold path, that is: right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right recollection, right composure.

Mendicants, with respect to realities unheard before, vision arose, knowledge arose, wisdom arose, gnosis arose, light arose—it occurred to me: 'this outstanding thing is suffering!'

Mendicants, with respect to realities unheard before, vision arose, knowledge arose, wisdom arose, gnosis arose, light arose—it occurred to me: 'this outstanding thing is suffering—*that* must be fully understood (*pariññeyyan*)!'[143]

Mendicants, with respect to realities unheard before, vision arose, knowledge arose, wisdom arose, gnosis arose, light arose—it occurred to me: 'this outstanding thing is suffering—*that* has been fully understood!'

Mendicants, with respect to realities unheard before, vision arose, knowledge arose, wisdom arose, gnosis arose, light arose—it occurred to me: 'this outstanding thing is the origin of suffering!'

Mendicants, with respect to realities unheard before, vision arose, knowledge arose, wisdom arose, gnosis arose, light arose—it occurred to me: 'this outstanding thing is the origin of suffering—*that* must be abandoned (*pahātabban*)!'[144]

as an expression of fear. Being afraid, one tries to escape from this state, either by destroying the cause of fear, or by trying to destroy or hide oneself.

143 The task associated with the first outstanding thing is to fully understand it. *Dukkha* is expressed as appropriation towards the five aggregates (namely, towards the constitutive elements of any possible experience). Fully understanding *dukkha* thus entails realizing both the presence of this appropriation and its absurdity, given the uncertain and conditional nature of what is appropriated. On this point, see SN 35.60.

144 The task associated with the second outstanding thing is to abandon it. This consists in deliberately letting go of the thirst for sensuality, existence, and non-existence by relying on the sense of contentment and ease that arises from practice itself (and more fundamentally, from the knowledge and right view that appropriation is impossible anyway). Thirst is abandoned by *seeing* that there is really nothing to be thirsty about (MN 2), and this is thus closely connected with fully understanding the nature of *dukkha*. However, during training, this process is experienced as the abandoning of certain forms of thirst by relying on alternative sources of contentment, which will also eventually be abandoned in the end, and yet perform a scaffolding function for the unfolding of such letting go (see MN 137 in §7, and *Afterword*).

Mendicants, with respect to realities unheard before, vision arose, knowledge arose, wisdom arose, gnosis arose, light arose—it occurred to me: 'this outstanding thing is the origin of suffering—*that* has been abandoned!'

Mendicants, with respect to realities unheard before, vision arose, knowledge arose, wisdom arose, gnosis arose, light arose—it occurred to me: 'this outstanding thing is the cessation of suffering!'

Mendicants, with respect to realities unheard before, vision arose, knowledge arose, wisdom arose, gnosis arose, light arose—it occurred to me: 'this outstanding thing is the cessation of suffering—*that* must be directly experienced (*sacchikātabban*)!'[145]

Mendicants, with respect to realities unheard before, vision arose, knowledge arose, wisdom arose, gnosis arose, light arose—it occurred to me: 'this outstanding thing is the cessation of suffering—*that* has been directly experienced!'

Mendicants, with respect to realities unheard before, vision arose, knowledge arose, wisdom arose, gnosis arose, light arose—it occurred to me: 'this outstanding thing is the path leading to the cessation of suffering!'

Mendicants, with respect to realities unheard before, vision arose, knowledge arose, wisdom arose, gnosis arose, light arose—it occurred to me: 'this outstanding thing is the path leading to the cessation of suffering—*that* must be developed (*bhāvetabban*)!'[146]

Mendicants, with respect to realities unheard before, vision arose, knowledge arose, wisdom arose, gnosis arose, light arose—it occurred to

145 The task associated with the third outstanding thing is to directly experience the cessation of thirst and *dukkha*, or 'realize' it. While thirst is an intentional construction that is deliberately performed, its cessation is not something that is itself constructed, but rather appears as the space left empty when thirst has ceased. Directly experiencing or realizing cessation does not require a specific effort, but rather consists in the ability to understand how experience is transformed when appropriation, thirst, and *dukkha* are no longer present. Fulfilling this task thus requires *not* grasping at the phenomenon of cessation (see AN 9.36, in §7). This manifests as a complete absence of concerns and, more fundamentally, as the immediate and glaring manifestation of the originally impersonal nature of any constituent features of experience.

146 The task associated with the fourth outstanding thing is to develop the path that leads to the realization of the cessation of *dukkha*. This requires knowing what the conditions that support *dukkha* are and how they can cease (a knowledge entailed by the first and second outstanding things), and hence putting in the appropriate amount of effort for realizing that cessation. The idea of development entails that the process will be gradual and will, at each step, lead to a degree of cessation and realization, which can in turn be used as an internal feedback mechanism for the practitioner to assess their own progress.

me: 'this outstanding thing is the path leading to the cessation of suffering—*that* has been developed!'

Mendicants, for as long as the knowledge and vision of these four outstanding things, in their three phases and twelve aspects, according to nature, was not fully purified by me, I did not claim, Mendicants: 'I discovered the boundless and complete awakening' in this world with its deities and demons, its supreme gods, and its generations of renunciants and brahmins, deities and human beings.

However, Mendicants, when the knowledge and vision of these four outstanding things, in their three phases and twelve aspects, according to nature, was fully purified by me, then I did claim, Mendicants: 'I discovered the boundless and complete awakening' in this world with its deities and demons, its supreme gods, and its generations of renunciants and brahmins, deities and human beings.

Knowledge and vision arose in me: 'my liberation is unshakable, this is my last birth, there is no further coming to existence.'[147]

This is what the Fortunate said. Elated, the group of the five mendicants rejoiced in the words of the Fortunate.

While this discourse was being spoken, the stainless and clear vision of reality arose in the excellent Kondanna: 'whatever has the reality of originating, all of that has the reality of ceasing.'[148]

And when the Wheel of Reality has been set in motion by the Fortunate, the deities dwelling on earth cried: 'At Baranasi, in the Deer Park at Isipatana, the Wheel of Reality has been set in motion by the Fortunate, and it cannot be stopped by any renunciants or brahmins, deities or demons, supreme gods, or by anyone in the world!'

Having heard the cry of the deities dwelling on earth, the deities of the Four Great Kings raised [the same] cry.

147 This is the formula used by the Buddha himself to express the attainment of his full awakening. The formula is slightly different from the one used by disciples, cf. for instance MN 37 below.
148 *Yaṃ kiñci samudayadhammaṃ sabbaṃ taṃ nirodhadhamman*. This formula is sometimes used to encapsulate how a disciple reaches the first initial understanding of the Buddha's teachings, which leads to 'entering the stream of Reality' (*sotāpatti*) and represents the first stage of awakening (cf. *Afterword*). Notice that the deities raise their cry of joy *after* Venerable Kondanna expresses his understanding. This means that the teaching has reached from the Buddha to another person, and thus the 'Wheel of Reality' (*Dhamma-cakka*, also a metaphor for the 'rudder' of who governs the world) cannot be stopped anymore.

Having heard the cry of the deities of the Four Great Kings, the deities of the Thirty-three raised [the same] cry.

Having heard [them], the Yama deities raised [the same] cry.

Having heard [them], the Happy deities raised [the same] cry.

Having heard [them], the Creator deities raised [the same] cry.

Having heard [them], the deities Delighting in Creation raised [the same] cry.

Having heard [them], the deities of the Brahma's company raised a cry: 'At Baranasi, in the Deer Park at Isipatana, the Wheel of Reality has been set in motion by the Fortunate, and it cannot be stopped by any renunciants or brahmins, deities or demons, supreme gods, or by anyone in the world!'

So, at that moment, at that instant, at that second, the cry reached as far as the Brahma world. And this ten-thousandfold world system trembled, shook, quaked, and an infinite sublime light appeared in the world, surpassing the divine majesty of the deities.

Then, the Fortunate uttered this inspired utterance: 'Kondanna has indeed understood! Kondanna has indeed understood!' In this way, the excellent Kondanna acquired the name: 'Kondanna Who Has Understood.'

(SN 56.11)

While the above discourse is often taken to represent the most standard presentation of the Buddha's core teaching, other discourses offer alternative perspectives on the same insight. If one realizes that this insight has to do with the impossibility of claiming ownership on any reality (because of its inherent uncertainty), then the main task becomes that of relinquishing that appropriation, by also relinquishing one's attitude towards feelings (since feelings are the direct basis for thirst and appropriation). In the following brief excerpt (MN 37), the Buddha offers a summary of his whole teachings in terms of the ability of first understanding the impossibility of any appropriation, and then relinquishing appropriation of feelings in particular.

'... A mendicant has heard: 'all realities are unsuitable for fully settling in' (*sabbe dhammā nālaṃ abhinivesāyā*).[149]

When a mendicant has heard this, he fully understands (*abhijānāti*) all realities; having fully understood all realities, he completely understands (*parijānāti*) all realities.[150]

Having completely understood all realities, whatever feeling he feels (pleasant, painful, neither pleasant nor painful),[151] he dwells observing uncertainty (*anicca*) in that feeling, he dwells observing dispassion (*virāga*), he dwells observing cessation (*nirodha*), he dwells observing letting go (*paṭinissagga*).[152]

149 The meaning of this saying has to do with the impossibility of making any reality 'my own.' Ownership entails the right or entitlement to decide what to do with one's possessions and being their master. But all realities are inherently uncertain (*anicca*), hence unsuitable for supporting appropriation and ownership. Hence, understanding this saying entails or presupposes having understood (to some degree at least) the universal characteristic of *anicca*.

150 This passage suggests a three-step process: (i) hearing; (ii) fully understanding; and (iii) completely understanding. The last two steps sound almost like synonyms from a linguistic point of view. However, one might also distinguish two nuances of understanding, which concerns fully grasping (ii) the content of what has been heard, and then understanding its absolutely universal scope or validity (iii). This process of generalization, in which one realizes that what is applicable to a certain present reality is in fact applicable to all realities (past, future, near, far, and so on) is rather common in the discourses (see e.g. SN 22.59 concerning the universalization of the three characteristics of the five aggregates).

151 One reason for focusing in particular on feelings, is that feelings are the basis and condition for thirst, and hence thirst arises towards feelings (SN 12.10). This entails that changing one's attitude towards (or way of observing) feelings, thirst and appropriation can be countered directly. This point is a consequence of what presented in SN 56.11 and, more broadly, in the structure of conditioned co-origination.

152 The progression *anicca*, *virāga*, *nirodha*, *paṭinissagga* is also present in the fourth tetrad of breath recollection (MN 118). This sequence has some commonality with another standard sequence that is often used to explain the basis for developing the seven factors of awakening (e.g. MN 2), which should rely on *viveka* (seclusion), *virāga* (dispassion), *nirodha* (cessation), and *vossagga-pariṇāmiṁ* (resulting in relinquishment, leading to letting go). The connection between *virāga* and *nirodha* is best understood in both formulas based on the scheme of the second and third outstanding things: abandoning craving (second thing) leads to its cessation (third thing). In the formula associated with the awakening factors, the sequence begins with *viveka*, which can be interpreted in connection not only with physical seclusion, but more fundamentally with seclusion from non-virtuous realities (i.e. the hindrances). The different beginning between the two formulas (*anicca* or *viveka*) is thus only a different perspective from which the whole process can start, more focused on the practical setting of it (abandoning the hindrances, *viveka*) or rather on the key insight to be developed in that setting (uncertainty, *anicca*). Based on this analogy it might be possible to interpret *vossagga* and *paṭinissagga* as synonyms, also given that they are based on the same root (*sṛj*) and connected with two verbs with a very similar meaning (*vossajjati*, 'to give up,' 'to relinquish,' and *nissajjati*, 'to give up,' 'to hand over'). Both terms are also closely connected with *nibbāna* (even synonyms with it) since the result of the full development of the awakening factors is awakening, and *paṭinissagga* features among the component of the deathless element (*sabbūpadhipaṭinissaggo*, e.g. AN 9.36, §7). They both

> While dwelling in this way, he is not attached to (*upādiyati*) anything in the world. Not being attached, he does not thirst (*paritassati*), not thirsting he directly experiences full extinction: 'birth is destroyed, the training has been completed, what should be done has been done, there is nothing more to this end.'[153]
>
> ...'
>
> (MN 37)

This sort of contemplation springs from the ability of directly facing one's own vulnerability, which is the predicament that all living beings share. The Buddha's own personal quest for freedom and awakening is reported to have originated from a direct confrontation with this situation (AN 3.39), hence he recommended reflecting constantly on these themes. One of the most complete presentations of them is the following discourse (AN 5.57).

express the result of *nirodha*: once thirst has ceased, what is left is a sense of freedom, absence from any trace of attachment to any aspect of experience. But they also express the necessity of applying the attitude of relinquishment and letting go of the very experience of *nirodha* itself, since *even that* is something that is 'unsuitable for fully settling in.' Going one step further, one might also take *paṭinissagga* to be the opposite of *upādāna* since the latter literally means 'taking up,' while *paṭinissagga* can also be interpreted as 'giving back.' This latter meaning seems appropriate in the context of this particular excerpt since one has started with understanding the impossibility of appropriation, and (via the contemplation of feelings), one now realizes the cessation of thirst and 'gives back' what was appropriated as 'mine,' namely, understands that what was taken to be 'mine' was only provided as available for use, borrowed, but never properly owned. Expanding on this reading, one might experience *paṭinissagga* as the 'giving back' or generous sharing with all living beings of any attitude of freedom, friendliness and generosity that arises at the moment when thirst subsides. This more positive interpretation is in keeping with the standard approach in the discourses to introduce a virtuous concept first as the negative of a non-virtuous concept (hence, 'letting go' vs. 'attachment'), but then coloring the virtuous concept with more positive traits (hence, from 'letting go' to 'giving back' what was appropriated).

153 This is another stock formula for expressing final awakening. The last clause, *nāparaṃ itthattāyā* is often rendered as 'there is no more becoming' or 'nothing more for this state of being' in order to emphasize the ending of the cycle of rebirth, which is fueled by the attitude of appropriating this or that form of existence and thus 'becoming' this or that. However (following Rupert Gethin, *Sayings of the Buddha*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 275), *itthattāyā* (literally 'here-ness,' in the dative case) can be more simply interpreted as referring to the goal of the path and the purpose of training. Once the training is achieved, there is no need to do anything else: one has arrived.

'Mendicants, there are these five situations (*ṭhānāni*)[154] that should be reflected upon without break by a woman or a man, a householder or a homeless.[155] What are these five?

'Aging is my reality (*jarādhammomhi*),[156] I did not go beyond aging' should be reflected upon without break ...

'Sickness is my reality (*byādhidhammomhi*), I did not go beyond sickness' should be reflected upon without break ...

'Death is my reality (*maraṇadhammomhi*), I did not go beyond death' should be reflected upon without break ...

'There is alteration (*nānābhāvo*) and separation (*vinābhāvo*) with respect to everything that is pleasing and dear to me (*sabbehi me piyehi manāpehi*)' should be reflected upon without break ...

'I am my own actions (*kammassakomhi*), I am heir of my actions (*kammadāyādo*), I am born from my actions (*kammayoni*), I am bound to my actions (*kammabandhu*), my actions are my refuge (*kammapaṭisaraṇo*). Whatever action I will do, good or bad, of that action I will be the heir' should be reflected upon without break ...

Mendicants, and for what reason should [one][157] constantly reflect upon 'aging is my reality, I did not go beyond aging'? Mendicants, there are living beings who are intoxicated with youth (*yobbana-mado*) during their youth (*yobbane*),[158] and intoxicated by this intoxication they misbehave by body, speech, and thought. For one who reflects about this situation without break, that intoxication for youth during one's youth is either com-

154 The term *ṭhāna* has a variety of meanings. In its most basic sense, it indicates a location or place, but it can also be used to refer to a more general condition, state, or even subject of reflection, theme, something on which one dwells.

155 The four categories of people mentioned here cover the four 'assemblies' of followers, namely, male and female lay followers, and male and female ordained people. Hence, this contemplation is recommended as suitable and even necessary for everybody, regardless of their social status.

156 The suffix *-dhamma* can be used to indicate a state or a condition. Hence, *jarā-dhamma* can be rendered also as 'nature of aging' or 'subject to aging.' The same for the other similar constructions listed below.

157 Abbreviation for the sake of readability, in the original text one should repeat the initial formula 'a woman or a man, a householder or a homeless.'

158 This is an important point: reflection on aging is most helpful while one is still relatively young (or perceives oneself as young) since the result of the reflection is to reveal that youth is not something that can be appropriated, being inherently uncertain. The same applies to the other themes as well.

pletely abandoned, or at least reduced. Mendicants, this is the reason why one should reflect [in this way].[159]

Mendicants, and for what reason should one constantly reflect upon 'sickness is my reality, I did not go beyond sickness'? Mendicants, there are living beings that are intoxicated with health while they are healthy, and intoxicated by this intoxication, they misbehave by body, speech, and thought. For one who reflects about this situation without break, that intoxication for health while one is healthy is either completely abandoned, or at least reduced. Mendicants, this is the reason why one should reflect in this way.

Mendicants, and for what reason should one constantly reflect upon 'death is my reality, I did not go beyond death'? Mendicants, there are living beings that are intoxicated with life while they are alive, and intoxicated by this intoxication, they misbehave by body, speech, and thought. For one who reflects about this situation without break, that intoxication for life while one is alive is either completely abandoned, or at least reduced. Mendicants, this is the reason why one should reflect in this way.

Mendicants, and for what reason should one constantly reflect upon 'there is alteration and separation with respect to everything that is pleasing and dear to me'? Mendicants, living beings have desire and lust (*chandarāgo*) for what they find pleasing and dear, and because of the lustfulness of this lust, they misbehave by body, speech, and thought. For one who reflects about this situation without break, that desire and lust for what is pleasing and dear is either completely abandoned, or at least reduced. Mendicants, this is the reason why one should reflect in this way.

Mendicants, and for what reason should one constantly reflect upon 'I am my own actions, I am heir of my actions, I am born from my actions, I am bound to my actions, my actions are my refuge. Whatever action I will do, good or bad, of that action I will be the heir'? Mendicants, living beings misbehave by body, speech, and thought. For one who reflects about this situation without break, that misbehaving is either completely abandoned, or at least reduced. Mendicants, this is the reason why one should reflect in this way.

159 Abbreviation for the sake of readability, in the original text one should repeat the initial statement of the theme.

Mendicants, an outstanding disciple (*ariyasāvako*)[160] reflects thus: 'I am not the only one for whom aging is their reality, who did not go beyond aging; to the extent that there are living beings (coming back and going away, disappearing and reappearing), aging is the reality of all living beings, they did not go beyond aging.' For one who reflects on this situation without break, the path (*maggo*) arises.[161] They practice (*āsevati*), develop (*bhāveti*) and cultivate (*bahulīkaroti*) that path.[162] For one who has practiced, developed and cultivated the path, the yokes to existence (*saṃyojanāni*)[163] are completely abandoned, the bad habits (*anusayā*)[164] are destroyed.

160 The fact that the discourse introduces the *ariyasāvaka* at this point suggests that the following reflection marks the difference between those followers who did not yet fully understand the teaching and those who had at least a first initial understanding, which enables them to progress further. As the discourse makes clear, though, this difference is consistent with the fact that the previous reflection is a preliminary one that enables and leads to the arising of this further development.

161 The arising of the path can be interpreted as the arising of the factors of the eightfold path (SN 56.11). The difference between the preliminary reflection and this improved version is its scope or generality, which now encompasses no longer just 'my' personal condition, but the condition of all living beings. In a broader sense, this can be interpreted as the realization that regardless of the form of existence that one can discern or appropriate, that existence will never be free from the reality of aging (the same applies to the other themes). Hence, one cannot find an escape from aging while remaining within the domain of existence (namely, while still appropriating any sort of existence). The path is what leads to transcend the domain of existence altogether or to relinquish any appropriation towards any sort of existence. For further developments of this point, see below §7, Ud 3.10. The 'arising of the path' is also a phrasing to express that a disciple has reached the first stage of awakening (stream-entry), which is often spelled out as the overcoming of the first three lower 'yokes to existence' (*saṃyojanāni*, see *Afterword*). The reason why this enhanced contemplation leads to such a result can be explained in the following way. A proper understanding of any of the themes (but especially death) leads to fully understanding the structural uncertainty (*anicca*) of one's condition and the impossibility of owning one's own body (which is what is most immediately affected by the realities mentioned in the themes). This, by implication, leads to relinquish appropriation also towards all the other aspects of experience (feelings, perceptions, coactions, consciousness) that somehow depend on the body itself. Hence, it becomes impossible to regard (view) one's own body as 'my own.' This realization is both built on one of the most certain aspects of experience (any of the themes), and a direct confirmation of the Buddha's teaching; hence, it dissipates any fundamental doubts about the latter. Eventually, this also reveals that a solution to the problem evoked by the themes cannot be found in any sort of orthopraxis or external adherence to practices, rituals, methods, and techniques, but only in deepening one's understanding of the meaning of one's own condition.

162 Notice that the discourse uses here a variation of the otherwise frequent threefold scheme based on (i) initial entering, (ii) development, and (iii) fulfilment, also included in SN 56.11 with respect to the four 'outstanding things' or 'noble truths.'

163 The ten *saṃyojanāni* (also rendered as 'fetters' or 'ties') are one way in which the discourses systematize the list of factors that prevent awakening. In this sense, awakening can be understood as the complete removal of these factors. They all contribute to bonding (yoking) one to a certain form of existence, and when this runs out, to seek another form (hence fueling rebirth). A standard list of yokes is provided in AN 10.13. See further discussion in the *Afterword*.

164 The *anusayā* provide another set of qualities that can be used to map the progress towards

Mendicants, an outstanding disciple reflects thus: 'I am not the only one for whom sickness is their reality, who did not go beyond sickness; to the extent that there are living beings (coming back and going away, disappearing and reappearing), sickness is the reality of all living beings, they did not go beyond sickness.' For one who reflects on this situation without break, the path arises. They practice, develop and cultivate that path. For one who has practiced, developed and cultivated the path, the yokes to existence are completely abandoned, the bad habits are destroyed.

Mendicants, an outstanding disciple reflects thus: 'I am not the only one for whom death is their reality, who did not go beyond death; to the extent that there are living beings (coming back and going away, disappearing and reappearing), death is the reality of all living beings, they did not go beyond death.' For one who reflects on this situation without break, the path arises. They practice, develop and cultivate that path. For one who has practiced, developed and cultivated the path, the yokes to existence are completely abandoned, the bad habits are destroyed.

Mendicants, an outstanding disciple reflects thus: 'I am not the only one for whom there is alteration and separation from all that is pleasing and dear to me; to the extent that there are living beings (coming back and going away, disappearing and reappearing), for all living beings there is alteration and separation from all that is pleasing and dear to them.' For one who reflects on this situation without break, the path arises. They practice, develop and cultivate that path. For one who has practiced, developed and cultivated the path, the yokes to existence are completely abandoned, the bad habits are destroyed.

Mendicants, an outstanding disciple reflects thus: 'I am not the only one who is one's own actions, heir of one's actions, born from one's actions, bound to one's actions, who has one's actions as their refuge, and whatever action one will do, good or bad, of that action one will be the heir; to the extent that there are living beings (coming back and going away, disappearing and reappearing), all of them are their own actions, heirs of their actions, born from their actions, bound to their actions, they have

awakening. In a standard list (AN 7.11), they are seven: (i) the habit of lust for sensual pleasures (*kāmarāgānusayo*); (ii) the habit of repulsion (*paṭighānusayo*); (iii) the habit for views (*diṭṭhānusayo*); (iv) the habit for doubt (*vicikicchānusayo*); (v) the habit for conceit (*mānānusayo*); (vi) the habit of lust for existence (*bhavarāgānusayo*); and (vii) the habit for ignorance (*avijjānusayo*).

their actions as their refuge, and whatever action they will do, good or bad, of that action they will be the heir.' For one who reflects on this situation without break, the path arises. They practice, develop and cultivate that path. For one who has practiced, developed and cultivated the path, the yokes to existence are completely abandoned, the bad habits are destroyed.

Their reality is that of sickness, aging,
and even death;
existing in this way, according to their reality,
ordinary people are disgusted by it.

But if I were to be disgusted by
beings in these realities,
that would not be appropriate for me,
who in that same reality also dwell.[165]

While I was dwelling in this way,
I understood reality without attachment:[166]
'I'm healthy!'—'I'm young!'—
'I'm alive!'—*these* are all intoxications!

165 *Ahañce taṃ jigucceyyaṃ, / evaṃ dhammesu pāṇisu; // Na metaṃ patirūpassa, / mama evaṃ vihārino.* This stanza captures a very profound realization. There is a fundamental sense of resistance, aversion, and uneasiness towards the way in which others reveal various unpleasant aspects and conditions of existence (here exemplified by the general predicaments of being subject to aging, sickness, and death). In order to escape this unpleasantness, the ordinary attitude is to cover it up with the quest for sensual pleasures, which however only worsen the sense of unease since it creates greater unfulfillment on top of the initial aversion (see §3, SN 36.6). The wise attitude, instead, consists in acknowledging that other beings are just a mirror of one's own (actual or potential) condition. This realization works at the deep level where the root of aversion is. Undermining resistance, repugnance, disgust, allowing instead the repulsive to manifest as such, without any need to contrast it, the root of aversion is first weakened and ultimately removed. Without aversion there cannot be any uneasiness or disturbance, and without disturbance experience is naturally peaceful, full, pleasing, hence the need for sensuality is cut off as well. Not needing sensual pleasures anymore, one is no longer in the need of appropriating a sensual existence as 'my own.'

166 In this verse, *ñatvā dhammaṃ nirūpadhiṃ*, the term *upadhi* indicates 'attachment' and it is closely related to 'thirst' (the origin of *dukkha* in the second outstanding thing, SN 56.11). For the use of this notion, cf. below Iti 1.27, footnote 169; §7, AN 9.36, footnote 241; Ud 3.10, footnote 266.

I have overcome all intoxications,
having seen safety in non-sensuality;
endeavor arose in me,
who fully saw extinction.

Now, I am no longer able
to indulge in sensual pleasures;
I shall not turn back
until the achievement of the training.'[167]

(AN 5.57)

The following discourse (Iti 1.27) extolls the importance of cultivating friendliness and compassion towards all living beings, stressing how these attitudes can overcome attachment and enmity. The discourse also provides a gist of the way in which the Buddha's teachings aimed at countering some core elements of the Vedic tradition of his time (including animal sacrifice and the use of ritual intoxicant substances).

This has been said by the Fortunate, this was said by the Perfect, this has been heard by me:

'Mendicants, whatever grounds for meritorious deeds leading to future rebirth there might be, all of them do not equal a sixteenth part of the liberation of the understanding through friendliness. Having surpassed them all, the liberation of the understanding through friendliness, shines forth, bright and brilliant.

Mendicants, just as the radiance of all the stars does not equal a sixteenth part of the radiance of the moon, and having surpassed them all, the radiance of the moon shines forth, bright and brilliant; in the same way,

167 The last verses of this poem can be interpreted as expressing the achievement of the third stage of awakening, marked by the irreversible overcoming desire for sensual pleasures (and aversion). These verses are elsewhere presented (AN 3.39) as the Buddha's statement in one recollection of his own path.

Mendicants, whatever grounds for meritorious deeds leading to future rebirth there might be, all of them do not equal a sixteenth part of the liberation of the understanding through friendliness. Having surpassed them all, the liberation of the understanding through friendliness, shines forth, bright and brilliant.

Mendicants, just as in the last month of the rainy season, in autumn, when the sky is clear and free from clouds, the sun rising in the sky, having dispelled all other lights and darkness that were there, shines forth, bright and brilliant;[168] in the same way, Mendicants, whatever grounds for meritorious deeds leading to future rebirth there might be, all of them do not equal a sixteenth part of the liberation of the understanding through friendliness. Having surpassed them all, the liberation of the understanding through friendliness shines forth, bright and brilliant.

Mendicants, just as at the end of night the morning stars shine forth, bright and brilliant; in the same way, Mendicants, whatever grounds for meritorious deeds leading to future rebirth there might be, all of them do not equal a sixteenth part of the liberation of the understanding through friendliness. Having surpassed them all, the liberation of the understanding through friendliness shines forth, bright and brilliant.'

This is the meaning of what the Fortunate said, and in regard to this it was also said:

One who recollects,
develops boundless friendliness;
the yokes to existence are consumed,
for one who sees the destruction of attachment.[169]

168 *Nabhaṃ abbhussakkamāno sabbaṃ ākāsagataṃ tamagataṃ abhivihacca.* Both *nabha* and *ākāsa* can mean 'sky' but given the structure of the comparison, the meaning must be that the sky of the rainy season did have some luminosity, but it was clouded and did not stand the comparison with the light that shines forth from the sun when the clouds are gone.

169 This stanza is crucial: *Yo ca mettaṃ bhāvayati, / appamāṇaṃ paṭissato; // Tanū saṃyojanā honti, / passato upadhikkhayaṃ.* This establishes a direct connection between the cultivation of friendliness based on right recollection (*sati*), and the progressive consumption (*tanu*, 'thin') of the yokes to existence, which in turn is connected with the ability of seeing (*passato*, 'one who sees') the destruction of attachment (*upadhi*). The term *upadhi* ('putting down,' 'substratum') is connected with the craving for existence and rebirth, hence it works as a synonym of 'thirst' (*taṇhā*).

If one, with a good understanding, shows friendliness (*mettāyati*)
for just one other being, this by itself is already virtuous;
but a thought of compassion for all beings[170]
makes an even greater merit.

Those who have conquered the earth teeming with beings,
royal seers, went about making sacrifices:[171]
sacrifice of horses, sacrifice of people,
water rituals, soma rituals,[172] rich in results.

But these do not share even the sixteenth part of
a well-developed understanding of friendliness;
like all the stars compared with the radiance of the moon.[173]

170 *Sabbe ca pāṇe manasānukampaṃ*: here *ānukampa*, compassion (close to *karuṇā*) works as something very near or even synonym with *mettā*.

171 The early Vedic culture was profoundly shaped around the ritual sacrifice. The practice of sacrificing to the gods was traditionally established by the early *seers* (*rishis*) who claimed to have discovered the order of the universe and the way of establishing profitable relations with their inhabitants, including the divine ones. The seers reached this knowledge through visions, and expressed it in hymns and poems, which were later collected in the most ancient stratum of the Vedic corpus, the *Ṛg-veda*. In time, reciting these hymns became an integral part of more sophisticated and rigidly organized ritual sacrifices, ensuring the right performance of which was the core business of the brahmin caste.

172 The horse sacrifice is considered in the Vedic culture one of the most important, often associated with the consecration of new kings and later interpreted even in cosmological terms as providing a blueprint for understanding the creation of the currently existing world. *Vājapeyyaṃ*, the soma ritual, is another crucial sacrifice, which is connected with the preparation and ritual consumption of the *soma* drink, a juice extracted from a plant (one hypothesis identifies it with the *amanita muscaria*) and mixed with milk. The soma was responsible for a state of exaltation and was considered key in inducing visionary powers. But Soma was also considered an important god in the Vedic pantheon; hence, consumption of the soma drink was inextricably connected with a sort of possession through which god Soma bestowed knowledge and vision upon the seers.

173 Since the late Vedic tradition (the *Vedānta*), around the sixth century before the common era, just before the flourishing of the Buddha, the *Upaniṣads* begin to voice criticisms against a certain ritualism and the idea that the external performance of rituals could by itself lead to true freedom and liberation. This evolution is complex and cannot be tackled here (for an overview, see Richard Gombrich, *What the Buddha Thought*. Sheffield and Bristol: Equinox Press, 2009), but it might be pointed out that in the *Upaniṣads* what is supposed to replace exterior ritualism and orthopraxis is a sort of withdrawal into oneself, seeking to uncover one's true Self. By contrast, here the Buddha presents the attitude of *mettā* as the way beyond the sclerotization of the older tradition.

One who does not kill, nor does cause others to kill,
does not conquer, nor does cause others to conquer;
with friendliness towards all living beings,
one like this is the enemy of no one.'

This also is the meaning of what was said by the Fortunate, heard by me.

(Iti 1.27)

5. Boundlessness

Directions

Establish awareness of your bodily posture (§1). Abandon the hindrances or just notice if they are momentarily absent (§2). Arouse a sense of contentment and non-aversion and pervade your whole bodily space with it (§3). After having perceived your own vulnerability, arouse and dwell in an attitude of friendliness towards it, and extend this attitude towards all living beings (§4).

When this is stable enough, drop the more discursive and analytical aspects of your contemplation and simply remain with the feeling of friendliness that has been generated through practice. Savor this feeling, learn how to recognize and discern it. At times, it might become subtler or it might be more apparent.

When the feeling of friendliness is clear and distinct, notice the space in front of you. There is a vast, boundless space just outside, it goes indefinitely on. See whether you can pervade that space with the feeling of friendliness that pervades already your body. You can imagine the innumerable living beings that are encompassed by the space in front of you and gently embrace them all with a friendly gaze. Or you can simply feel the indefinite space in front of you and by that very act let friendliness overflow through that space. You can use your in-breath to gather friendliness inside of you and your out-breath to suffuse friendliness in the space in front of you. Experiment with whichever method seems to work better and more naturally. Do not force the gesture, let it become spontaneous. At the same time, make it as concrete and real as possible, do not remain content with just a general and vague idea or a merely nominal attitude of boundless friendliness. Deliberately enjoy the possibilities of your imagination. Be an artist.

When you perceive that the space in front of you is filled with friendliness, gently move your attention to your right and repeat the same. When this is done, gently consider the space behind you and repeat the same. When this is done, gently consider the space at your left and repeat the same. When this is done, gently consider the space on top of you and repeat the same. When this is done, gently consider the space beneath you and repeat the same.

When the space is filled all around you with friendliness, you can move the gaze of attention in any direction and see the same friendliness everywhere. Just remain in this boundless sphere of friendliness, which extends everywhere and includes everything. Let yourself sink in this boundlessness, while always remaining alert, sustaining metacognitive awareness of how the process is going, without losing track of the possibility for subtle manifestations of the hindrances to arise.

In this state, you might also notice how many other perceptions faded away, how much simpler, stiller and serene experience has become in terms of its contents and the way of experiencing them. A clear experience of your body might fade, perhaps to the point that the body is no longer immediately apparent. There remains just space, neither internal nor external.

When your session is coming to its conclusion, gently return first to the feeling of friendliness towards all sentient beings, and then towards yourself (§4), suffuse with it your whole body (§1). Stay there for a while before ending your session.

Refinements

When you are familiar enough with the experience of dwelling in boundless friendliness, you can explore three further feelings deeply connected with it.

Compassion (*karuṇā*) is very close to friendliness and arises from a slightly different way of looking at vulnerability. Compassion springs from fully recognizing how all living beings, regardless of their nature or status, share the same predicament and are subject to the same realities. In doing so, it brings to the foreground of attention the actual facts of suffering and pain that are entailed by vulnerability. Compassion faces upfront the cracks, the wounds, and the breaking apart of living beings. It engenders a sense of kinship with others, some degree of courage in wanting to face this condition in the most skillful way, and a profound sense of understanding and non-rejection for the inevitable experience of actual suffering. Compassion overcomes any sense of enmity against others or solitude and dejection regarding one's own condition. It does not arise from empathically sharing others' sadness, but rather from understanding how all living beings have to bear the same condition and are together exposed to the same suffering. At times, compassion might be a bit warmer than friendliness, but it is always free from grief and sorrow.

Sympathy (*muditā*) is the ability to rejoice for the beauty and happiness that other living beings can experience, despite all their fragility and vulnerability. Different living beings know different forms of happiness. Some are rather simple and coarse; others are more subtle and refined. Sympathy does not discriminate between these, but appreciates how wonderous it is for beings so vulnerable to be able to enjoy beauty and contentment. Sympathy thus brings to the foreground of attention a happiness that pervades the whole world and all the beings that live in it. Sympathy leads to the overcoming of any sense of competition with others, it directly counters envy and covetousness. At times, it might feel a bit more enthusiastic and energizing than friendliness.

Serenity (*upekkhā*) is the ability of looking evenly at the whole horizon of existence, recognizing that vulnerability is equally distributed across the

whole of it. Facing this fact, the equanimous one is not disturbed by vulnerability because a deeper understanding reveals that vulnerability itself is not a problem. The real problem is how one deals with vulnerability. Greed, aversion, and ignorance will inevitably lead to unskillful reactions and will make the whole situation worse. Friendliness is instead a way of facing vulnerability without being harmed by it. Serenity is not just friendliness itself; it is the wise gaze that sees this whole picture from a bird's eye perspective, embraces it all, and understands it well, finding peace in this understanding. Serenity brings to the foreground of attention the factor of wisdom that forms the core of friendliness and looks at the world through that wisdom, by thus being both reconciled and uplifted by the clarity that it provides, no matter what actually happens in the world. At times, serenity might feel a bit cooler than friendliness, compassion, and sympathy. Cooler like a gentle breeze during summer or like the light of the moon on the dark night sea.

Friendliness, compassion, sympathy, and serenity are feelings informed by a certain understanding. They are not simply emotional states, and they are not purely intellectual realizations either. They form the core of emotional intelligence. They can all be developed in such a way to become a boundless dwelling. At times, they might be used to compensate one's current condition and counter subtler manifestations of the hindrances or other emotional disturbances. They can also be used to compensate and complement each other, balancing one's reactions to current conditions or demands. While friendliness is at the root, compassion, sympathy, and serenity provide powerful different declensions that add depth and breadth to practice.

These states do not have a specific target, they do not a priori discriminate with respect to who can receive their attention or not. Dwelling in the unfathomable vastness of friendliness and of the other states, it becomes clear that they encompass all life-forms, in all times. Oneself, and the few hand-

fuls of other humans one might know are nothing but an infinitesimal fraction of this ocean of living beings who are addressed by these attitudes. Fully understanding this fact leads to seeing how boundlessness arises from non-discrimination, and thus deliberately cultivating non-discrimination fosters the experience of boundlessness.

Reflections

The myth of the unfabricated

A crucial moment in practice occurs when one allows oneself to deliberately encourage certain perceptions rather than others. One intentionally decides to see things in one way and not in some other way. One becomes able, and even skillful, in deciding how to look at experience. This attitude is often resisted as if it would amount to some counterfeit or artificial way of deluding oneself. Such a worry is based on the assumption that there is an objective reality out there, which can be accessed and experienced in one way or another, and one should aim at experiencing it in the more direct and immediate manner, without indulging in what seem doubtful forms of autosuggestion. Often, this assumption entails that the ordinary way of seeing reality is already naturally in touch with this alleged objective reality, while ways of perceiving reality through deliberate cultivation and meditation are distorted ways of perceiving, created expressly for the sake of experiencing some special, altered states. For this reason, they would be unreliable and would not provide an objective point of view.

Reflection reveals that this assumption is itself a way of looking at experience, and this way of looking is itself fabricating the idea of an objective reality out there. More deeply, one can realize that it is simply impossible to experience any content of experience (including one's ideas and beliefs about what experience is about, what contents are, and so on) without the mediation of some way of looking at that content. A content can manifest only if it

appears, namely, only if it is looked at. If one does not look at a content, that content cannot be present in one's experience and cannot manifest. Assuming that contents manifest anyway, regardless of whether anybody looks at them, is precisely establishing a way of looking at contents. The issue is not to find a way of experiencing reality that is immediate (since this would amount to finding a way to look at experience without looking at it), but rather to discern how, and to what extent, any specific way of looking at experience contributes to the construction of that experience and its meaning. If one cannot but look at experience in some way, the crucial task is to understand what the consequences are of this way of looking, whether there are more options, and which one should be preferred.

The ordinary way of viewing contents of experience is far from being immediate and unfabricated. Constant reflection and familiarity with the workings of the hindrances reveals how any experience is indeed shaped and constructed by the intentional attitudes of relating to some contents or others, hence perceiving them in one way or another. A key factor that distinguishes ordinary untrained perception from the sort of perception refined through meditative practice is the metacognitive awareness of the process of fabrication that accompanies any experience, and a greater skillfulness in steering this process in ways that lead to a relief of suffering, stress and constriction. Meditative perceptions do entail some degree of fabrication, but they usually entail a much smaller amount of fabrication, which makes them lighter and more enjoyable than ordinary perceptions. The difference between meditative perceptions and ordinary perception is not a difference between an unfabricated and unmediated access to some objective reality, versus a more counterfeited and artificial way of perceiving. The difference is the degree and the quality of fabrication that is entailed in each case.

Spaciousness and openness are ways of fabricating the experience of the body such that the body no longer feels like a focal point of concern, appropriation or even a threat, but rather something to be received in a welcoming

way, to be met with a friendly attitude. Friendliness is a fabrication. Aversion is a fabrication. However, while friendliness creates perceptions of greater freedom and boundlessness, aversion creates the opposite. All fabrications arise out of intentional attitudes, and one can deliberately decide which intentions should be supported and which intentions should be rather abandoned. Hence, friendliness and aversion are a crossroad in one's experience, and they call for a responsible decision about which one is better to pursue. As wisdom grows, the answer becomes more and more apparent.

Boundless friendliness should not be feared or regarded with suspicion because it is a fabricated perception. Thinking that ordinary attitudes based on aversion and greed are more natural because more common is just not seeing that they are as fabricated and artificial as the perception of boundless friendliness. In fact, they are way more fabricated. If 'natural' means 'not fabricated,' then since friendliness entails *less* fabrication, it is closer to a 'natural' perception than aversion. However, even the ideal of a 'natural' state is just another fabrication. The point is not whether something is fabricated or not (if it is experienced, it is fabricated to some degree, otherwise it would simply not be part of one's experience because it could not be perceived at all). The point is *how* and *how much* it is fabricated, and in which direction this fabrication leads, whether towards greater freedom, easiness and peace or towards the opposite instead. Meditation practice provides one with skills and discernment to better decide how to drive the process of fabrication. This is empowering and should not be feared.

Setting goals and going beyond

Boundlessness is not only a form of perception cultivated in formal practice. It can become an ideal, a suggestion about how to approach experience in general. The habitual patterns based on greed, aversion, and ignorance tend to create sharp demarcations; they invent boundaries all the time. Most often, the demarcating line has to do with 'me' and what is 'mine.' This is quite

apparent in many domains of one's experience, especially with respect to contents interpreted as 'other' or 'external.' However, it might be fruitful also to reflect how inevitably one will create boundaries within one's own practice, and why overcoming these is crucial.

In the very beginning, one will have some motivations for starting a practice and some ideas or expectations about what to gain from it. These motivations and expectations need to be right *to some extent*. Approaching any practice with completely wrong motivations and misleading expectations will simply sabotage the practice. As a rough guideline, one might get a sense of the direction to pursue by reflecting on the need to abandon whatever is bad and unskillful, cultivating whatever is good and skillful, and keep refining and deepening one's understanding of both.[174] This might be enough in the beginning, and also quite right. One might then expect that this practice, at some point, will yield some specific results, maybe some state, condition or experience, which will be deeply transformative and liberatory. All sorts of views can arise about what this experience might be, how this liberation might taste. Again, having some sense of directionality about what one could or should expect might be helpful, especially in order to avoid dead ends and sidetracks. For instance, the kind of freedom to be expected must have to do with a lessening of unskillful attitudes based on greed, aversion, and ignorance, it will be connected with a letting go of the sense of appropriation and possessiveness, and with any gross concern with what is 'mine' and 'myself.' Establishing this sort of expectation, one is in a better position to assess the feedback received from one's practice, judge whether practice is moving towards this direction or not, and act accordingly.

However, for as much as all these approximations might have a function and play an important role, they need to be recognized for what they are:

174 The famous verse 183 in the *Dhammapada* says: *Sabbapāpassa akaraṇaṃ, kusalassa upasampadā*; / *Sacitta pariyodapanaṃ, etaṃ buddhāna sāsanaṃ* ('do not do all that is evil, undertake what is virtuous; clarify your understanding: this is the teaching of the Buddhas').

approximations. The approximation of something true is not itself completely true, but partially false. The fact that one needs some sort of approximation at some point should not obscure the fact that this entails that one does not yet fully know what the goal of practice is. Any expectation that tries to figure out more precisely what this goal might be betrays the fact that one still largely ignores what that goal actually is. As practice unfolds and deepens, all sorts of glimpses and anticipations might provide powerful and profound anticipations of that goal, perhaps sometimes giving the sense that one is almost arrived. Wisdom lies in not forgetting this 'almost,' which actually means 'not yet.'

Reflecting in this way, one might appreciate that any expectation and general understanding about one's practice, motivations, and ideals about the ultimate goal are in fact boundaries one is creating around one's own practice. They determine a certain content (one's practice or some aspects of it), by thus making it inherently uncertain and dissonant. To keep refining these views is surely helpful and needed, but it ultimately simply shifts the boundaries, maybe to more and more subtle levels of experience. The problem is not any determined content that is taken to embody the goal of practice or any other aspect of it. The problem is the fact of *determining* such content. Boundaries are a result of an act of determination, and they are structurally uncertain and dissonant because of this determination, regardless of the actual content that is determined. In this sense, boundaries are always limiting and constricting, not just because of the specific ways in which they are traced, but in virtue of their own structure. If one's goal is to progress towards freedom, all boundaries must be relinquished at some point, sooner or later. This means that one has to eventually relinquish and let go of the very idea of determining the goal of one's practice and one's expectations about the sort of experience that will arise upon reaching it.

The riddle at this point is that practicing requires some form of intentionality and intentionality cannot work without aiming at certain goals. On the

one hand, one needs goals in order to actually *do* the practice while, on the other hand, intentionality requires determining goals and contents, which in turn create those very boundaries that practice aims to overcome. Intentionally aiming at the boundless thus appears as a contradiction in terms or just an endless process (which is another way of saying that the goal is never reached, hence intentionality always fails, at least to some extent). This might easily become an unsolvable paradox if one did not have access to a direct experience of the boundlessness of perception.

The experience of boundless friendliness is an intentionally created experience. Perhaps one might call it a sort of imagination. It feels boundless, and yet it is determined through a stream of very determinate intentional acts. From a purely theoretical point of view, one should expect that this would not be possible since intentional acts should always aim at determinate contents, while the boundless should be free from determination, hence from intentionality. Theoretically, one should not be able to experience any boundlessness. And yet, practice demonstrates that the opposite is true. The problem, however, is not with the experience of the boundless, but with the theoretical point of view used to interpret it, insofar as it remains confined to a purely semantic analysis of certain reports about experience, and does not rely instead on a direct acquaintance with how the experience itself is constructed.

Intentionality can reach and create the boundless, which in a sense is something at odds with the determinate nature of intentionality itself. The magical trick is simple: it is possible to intentionally aim at (attending to, experiencing, conceiving) the real possibility of cessation entailed in any determinate content. The body is experienced as a determinate space, which means that the space of the body entails the real possibility of the whole indefinite space that lies outside of it, within which the bodily space is determined. Perceiving the body as such is perceiving *this* space here, but this space here could not be determined as such without the real possibility of *that* whole space over there, where the body ceases to be. Hence, in this bodily space here, there is already the real

possibility of that whole space there. Since this real possibility is as real as the determination itself, it can surely become an object of intentionality. Instead of attending to the bodily space as such, one can learn how to attend to what the bodily space is not, namely, the rest of the whole space outside of it. The same applies to aversion. Aversion itself is a determinate content of experience, and it is determined by its not being non-aversion, namely, it does have the real possibility of non-aversion at its core. If non-aversion was not possible, aversion would not be possible either.[175] Friendliness is the deliberate intention of focusing on and cultivating this real possibility of non-aversion amidst the basis of aversion. For this reason, in its primordial form, friendliness takes the shape of a wish, something real, but only as a possibility: 'may all be free from aversion.'

Discerning the element of cessation

Contemplating along these lines, one can see how the meditative construction of boundless friendliness is in fact a skillful way of reversing the more ordinary way in which intentionality works. Instead of focusing on the positive side of determination (*this* content, which is not *that*), one can bring to the fore of experience the real possibility of the cessation of this determinate content, its other, its negative shadow, which is both present (as a real possibility) and absent (as an actuality) in all determinations. Experience can begin to gravitate to something that is both present and empty, real and not actual, arising, but only as a possible cessation; 'there' (in a sense) but only as an absence (namely, present insofar as an absence can be present). This way of perceiving can, in principle, be extended to all contents, since it is based on the structure that they all share in virtue of their being determinate contents.

Boundlessness thus is a result of intentionality when it is used not to focus on the positively actual determination, but on the real possibility of its

175 Hence, with the complete cessation of aversion, both aversion *and* non-aversion fade away (and similarly for the other bases of action): AN 3.34.

absence entailed by that actual positive determination. This real possibility concerns the cessation of what is determined, and when intentionality deliberately aims at it, intentionality aims at the cessation of itself. However, since this cessation is not an actual determined reality (there is no actual or present cessation of intentionality in the real possibility of its cessation), it *can* become a content of experience (unlike the actual cessation of intentionality, which cannot be experienced since without some form of intentionality neither consciousness nor attention could work, and without them no experience could occur). In this way, intentionality directed at the cessation of contents (the real possibility of their absence, entailed by their positive determination) is what makes it possible to experience the boundless *within* the bounded space of intentionality.

Applied to one's own practice, this reflection can have momentous consequences, which go beyond the domain of practice itself. At any point one determines what one's practice is about, what one's motives are, what one's goal should be or look like, one is creating a determinate content of experience. As already noticed, the problem with this attitude is that this content is determinate, hence uncertain and dissonant, it creates a boundary, it excludes something else, and fundamentally it betrays the fact that one does not yet fully know what one aims to realize (the very idea of having to realize something entails that one understands one's activity as not yet fully realized). One could then discern that all these aspects share a tendency to indexing practice to 'me,' to 'myself,' to what 'I' do, think, believe, intend. This remains the case even when 'I' know that 'I' and 'mine' should be relinquished. However, exactly because all these contents are so determinate, they necessarily entail the real possibility of their cessation: *this* (content) could not be (it could cease), and it could not be 'mine' ('I' might no longer be related to it, relevant for it, or appropriating it). As one appreciates this real possibility, one could also explore its certainty: *this* will not be, and it will not be 'mine.' Seeing this real possibility of cessation (possible and certain at the

same time) in one's practice and for one's practice, frees that practice from its own boundaries. It might be possible to have experience without the need for that experience to be interpreted and understood as part of 'my' story, unfolding under 'my' control.

The key insight here is that whatever is determined by the certainty of cessation (real possibility of cessation means that it is certainly the case that this content will have to cease) cannot be experienced as a boundary anymore because this boundary has in its own nature the promise of being relinquished and overcome. A chain that will surely be broken is not really a strong chain, nor is it able to permanently bound anybody. The ordinary attitude is often that of assuming that 'I have to be this or that,' 'I have to do this or that,' which is based on taking at face value the reality of the form of being that one wants to appropriate as 'mine' or 'me.' In fact, one *is* what one makes one's own. Seeing the cessation in all these determinations means realizing that whatever one might happen to be or do, even that has to cease, and there is no unbreakable tie that yokes to that determination. Hence, even when one *is* enacting this or that role, identifying with this or that content, engaging in this or that activity or practice, that is all something that will be relinquished; hence it can be relinquished; hence, in a sense, it has already been relinquished. Freedom is not to be achieved later; it is rather the preliminary condition for any achievement to unfold.

In this way, the urge of having to do or be something determinate is lessened to a degree, if not entirely abandoned. With a softening of this urge, there is more spaciousness, openness, and serenity; practice itself is less of a cage or a factory, more like a play in which one deliberately enacts a character without forgetting that it is just a character. This latter point (creating an illusion without forgetting that it is an illusion) is precisely what demonstrates that one is *no longer* an unaware victim of one's own ignorance and delusion, and *this* entails boundless freedom. One can believe a magician's trick only if one does not recognize it for what it is, namely, a magician's

trick. If one does recognize the trick as a trick, the performance does not change, but there is no longer any commitment to its objective reality, the experience is completely different, it *means* something fundamentally different. In a sense, the real fun of the magic show begins only at this point. Discerning the aspect of cessation in any content of experience is what frees experience from its boundaries, what makes it boundless. Practice *is* sustaining this discernment. Practice can fully contribute to cultivate freedom only if one learns how to become free even from practice itself, while steadily remaining within it and plunging more and more deeply.

Freedom and responsibility

One prejudice that might hinder progress in this direction is the assumption that certain motions or actions will automatically create a new condition. One might believe in a sort of deterministic mechanism, which would make the transformation of a certain input into a certain output inevitable. Concretely, this can manifest as the belief that just in virtue of doing this or that, such and such situation or condition will no longer occur, or it will become manifest and established. The problem with this prejudice is that it overlooks the role of responsibility in the structure of action.

Being responsible means undertaking to understand what the possible courses of action are, what are their meanings (both in terms of underpinning assumptions and of resulting consequences), and then deciding which course of action to take. Deciding means renouncing to some possibility for the sake of actualizing some other possibility. The necessary and sufficient condition for deciding any course of action is *letting go* of some other course of action, withdrawing from it. Sometimes, this also entails the positive embracing of an alternative, but sometimes it does not. Relinquishment of what is understood to be no longer necessary or even welcome is what empowers decision, and this relinquishment entails a responsibility towards how one intends to steer one's activity.

Believing in the determinism of action and results means believing that the performance of certain motions will *by itself* give rise to some effect, without any need for relinquishment, letting go, decision, and responsibility. It will be the process itself that will bring everything about, no need to do anything else. In believing so, one actually decides *not* to let go of one's possible alternatives. Through this decision, one keeps a firm (albeit maybe only implicit) hold on what remains perceived as an option that is still seen somehow attractive and thus best kept in reserve, even if only virtually. If the process itself takes care of bringing about a transformation, then 'I' do not have to go through the ordeal of *deciding* to separate myself of what I am profoundly attached to. This belief is thus an interiorization of the even more common faith in external conditions as able to magically induce certain behavior or realizations. Trusting one's environment for one's achievements is a way of avoiding the uneasiness and discomfort that can surround one's responsibility for deciding and letting go.

This prejudice itself does not escape the structure of action and it does entail a responsibility towards the decision of *not* explicitly letting go of this or that component of experience, even if it is just a virtual option or possibility. The genuine choice, thus, is not between being responsible or not, but between taking explicit responsibility or trying to escape from it. While the sense of self often manifests as a wanting for control and dominion over what happens in one's experience, it can equally take the shape of a profound shrinking from responsibility into passivity and (seemingly) inaction. The latter manifestation is opposite to the former, but the structure upon which they rely is the same, and it boils down to finding ways to avoid the unpleasant aspects of experience, often associated with some basic and deeper acknowledgment that contents of experience cannot be kept at one's orders and wishes.

If one does take explicit responsibility and realizes that any action requires decision, and decision requires letting go of certain options as no longer viable, then it becomes clear that freedom does not essentially manifest as

the material impossibility of doing this or that anymore, or as the bare absence of this or that yoke, but rather as the firm conviction and commitment to let go of those courses of action, renouncing them for good, forever. One does not become freer because of having less capacity, power, or occasions for doing something, or because one is prevented by circumstances or even by one's own condition. One is freer if, no matter what the conditions offer or suggest, one's certainty about what has to be abandoned cannot be shaken or confused anymore. This certainty does not appear at the material or physical level of what can factually be done or not, but at the level of understanding, namely, in the meaning through which one interprets one's experience and its components.

The possibility of doing otherwise might still be present, the urge to pursue this or that might still arise. The strength of one's decision is not measured by the factual absence of these circumstances, but rather by the clarity with which one's resolve will not be confused or altered, no matter what the circumstances are. This also entails that if one's resolve is in fact altered depending on the circumstances, chances are that a degree of confusion and ignorance is still playing an important role in shaping one's action. What is needed, then, is not to simply prevent circumstances from offering challenges (although to some extent, this might facilitate the process), but rather finding ways of making one's decision clearer, deeper, firmer, and more meaningful.

Take the case of unwholesome behaviors. Up to a certain point, practice can surely help seeing more and more clearly the problems associated with certain ways of acting. However, practice by itself will not mechanically transform the practitioner into someone who cannot act in unwholesome ways regardless of what they do or think. All that practice can do is to foster clarity about the courses of action available and their meaning. Building upon this basis, it is the practitioner's responsibility to decide and commit to the value of letting go of certain options. When this decision becomes firm and unshakable, then it will be irreversible. One will never commit certain actions again; they will have

been foregone forever. And yet, even in this case, such result does not simply arise out of a deterministic implication in which one's responsibility has no say. On the contrary, it is because one can no longer be confused about what is worth pursuing and what is worth avoiding that there could no longer be any uncertainty about the need to let go of unwholesome behaviors.

There is no freedom without this sort of responsibility. Hence, progress towards freedom is also assessed and witnessed by progress in one's ability to take responsibility, more explicitly, and more firmly. Cultivating boundlessness helps reveal that one does not *have to* pursue any particular course of action; ultimately, no conditioned and fabricated reality can genuinely yoke one's activity because all conditioned and fabricated realities are themselves uncertain in the first place. This sort of boundlessness provides an ideal situation for nourishing responsibility. Since there is ultimately no obligation or duty that must be fulfilled because of some eternal law or commandment, everything is open, in its whole, dense, spectrum of options, from the worst to the best. But the fact that everything is possible does not mean that everything is equally worth pursuing. Boundlessness invites to make a decision, to realize what is best abandoned and let go of, and what might instead be worth developing further. Until, perhaps, one finds one's own way of letting go without having to grasp anything else in its place.

Readings

The third domain of the establishment of recollection is the understanding itself (*citta*). Hindrances are ways of conditioning the understanding, awakening factors are ways of empowering the understanding. Feelings are the basic features that the understanding uses to interpret experience. The body itself is the playground for the understanding of any experience. Hence, in the process of exploring all these elements, it becomes crucial at some point to discern how the understanding itself works. This has to do with cultivating metacognitive

awareness not only with regard to how particular contents affect what one is currently perceiving, but also with how one's understanding in general is affected and actively contributes to create and shape experience. The following excerpt (MN 10) introduces the main aspects of one's understanding that should always be ready for recollection, as they provide points of reference for judging in which direction (towards or away from hindrances, towards or away from freedom) the understanding is moving at any given time.

> '... Mendicants, and how does a mendicant dwell observing the understanding as [just] understanding?
>
> Here, Mendicants, a mendicant understanding with lust knows 'understanding with lust,'[176] understanding without lust knows 'understanding without lust;'
>
> understanding with aversion knows 'understanding with aversion,' understanding without aversion knows 'understanding without aversion;'
>
> understanding with ignorance knows 'understanding with ignorance,' understanding without ignorance knows 'understanding without ignorance;'
>
> understanding contractedly (*saṅkhittaṃ*) knows 'understanding contractedly,' understanding distractedly (*vikkhittaṃ*) knows 'understanding distractedly;'[177]
>
> understanding with greatness (*mahaggataṃ*) knows 'understanding with greatness,' understanding without greatness knows 'understanding without greatness;'
>
> understanding that has something higher (*sauttaraṃ*) knows 'understanding that has something higher,' understanding without something higher (*anuttaraṃ*) knows 'understanding without something higher;'[178]

176 Notice the original construction: *bhikkhu sarāgaṃ vā cittaṃ 'sarāgaṃ cittan'ti pajānāti*. The clause '*sarāgaṃ ... cittaṃ*' qualifies the subject (*bhikkhu*), who knows (*pajānāti*) his own state (*'sarāgaṃ cittan'ti*). The qualification, then, expresses an activity of the subject itself, which presupposes that *cittaṃ* is not working here as a noun or a substantive (as it would sound if one would translate it with 'mind'), but rather as a participle.

177 This couple, 'contracted' and 'distracted,' can be referred to the presence of specific hindrances, such as sloth and torpor (which induce a form of contraction) or restlessness and worry (which lead to distraction). But they can also be interpreted more broadly as expressing general symptoms of the way in which the experience of attention progresses and unfolds between two extremes that should be *both* avoided.

178 The quality of 'greatness' (*mahaggataṃ*) is also mentioned in the standard formula that portrays

understanding composedly (*samāhitaṃ*) knows 'understanding composedly,' understanding without composure knows 'understanding without composure;'

understanding being freed (*vimuttaṃ*) knows 'understanding being freed,' understanding not being freed knows 'understanding not being freed'.

(MN 10)

Developing boundlessness completely transforms the understanding and the way in which it reacts to feelings and to the result of actions. The same feelings and events are experienced in a completely different way when the context in which they are received is no longer a limited and contracted understanding, but rather a boundless and expansive one. The following excerpt (AN 3.100) stresses this point by showing the importance and implications of boundlessness for the way in which one relates to actions and their results.

'Mendicants, if one would say: 'when a person does an action such and such, that is experienced in such and such a way' then, if this was true, Mendicants, there would be no training, and no chance of rightly putting an end to suffering could be known.[179]

the development of boundless friendliness, cf. §3, AN 3.65. The couple *sa-uttaraṃ* and *an-uttaraṃ* is based on *uttara* which means 'higher,' and it is usually employed in the discourses to discuss whether a certain meditative stage admits any further progression. Discerning whether the understanding 'has something higher' (*sa-uttaraṃ*) or not is thus a way of ascertaining whether one can progress even further in one's exploration of boundlessness and freedom, or if one has reached a completely 'unsurpassable' point (*anuttaraṃ*).

179 The statement to be refuted reads: *yathā yathāyaṃ puriso kammaṃ karoti tathā tathā taṃ paṭisaṃvediyatī*. An action 'such and such' (*yathā yathā kammaṃ*) refers to an action that is either good or bad, wholesome or unwholesome. The general theory of *kamma* entails that all intentional actions bear a result, which has to be felt either immediately or at a later time (in this life, or in any subsequent life). However, the unfolding of *kamma* is neither linear nor strictly deterministic (see, e.g. SN 36.21). More importantly, if it was true that a certain intentional action necessarily had a similar action (as it is entailed by this statement) as a result, then it would not be possible to end the proliferation of non-virtuous actions since any action of greed in the past will generate a new similar action of greed in the future, and this in turn would keep fueling the whole process. Hence, if this view was right, bringing about the end of *dukkha* (which entails the end of greed, aversion, and ignorance) would be impossible. Since the Buddha *did* realize the end of *dukkha* and he teaches that this realization can be achieved by others as well, this view has to be false from a practical point of view (namely, the confutation here is factual, not theoretical).

Mendicants, if one would say: 'when a person does an action to be felt in such and such a way, that is the way in which the result is experienced' then, if this is true, Mendicants, there is the training, and a chance of rightly putting an end to suffering is known.[180]

Mendicants, on the one hand, a person who has done an insignificant evil action is reborn in hell, while on the other hand, a person who has done the same insignificant evil action experiences it in this life, and if it appears at all, it could not be less.[181]

Mendicants, what sort of person is reborn in hell having done an insignificant evil action?

Mendicants, this is a person whose body is not developed (*abhāvitakāyo*),[182] whose honesty is not developed (*abhāvitasīlo*), whose understanding is not developed (*abhāvitacitto*), whose wisdom is not developed (*abhāvitapaññño*), who is limited (*paritto*), has a small self (*appātumo*),[183] and dwells with little

180 The statement that is now accepted as valid reads: *yathā yathā vedanīyaṃ ayaṃ puriso kammaṃ karoti tathā tathāssa vipākaṃ paṭisaṃvediyatī*. Differently from the previous formulation, this latter statement adds a direct reference to *vipāka* (the fruit or result) as what is actually experienced as a result of action. 'To be experienced' in this context means to be *felt* (*vediyatī* is the passive form of *vedeti*, 'to feel,' from which comes *vedanā*), namely, through an unpleasant, pleasant, or neutral feeling. The result of an action is not another action of the same kind, but a feeling. Feelings are a condition for action, since actions are intentions and intentions are most often reactions to how one feels. In the scheme of conditioned co-origination (e.g. SN 12.2), feelings are the condition for thirst, while on other occasions, actions are based on stimulation (*phassa*), which is the basis of feelings, AN 6.63. However, actions are *not* feelings and certain feelings do not necessitate certain (re)actions. Hence, even if past evil *kamma* will entail that one will have to experience some unpleasant feeling, this does not entail that one will have to produce new evil *kamma* in reaction to that feeling (consider, for instance, the example of Angulimala's lapidation, MN 86). As it will become clear from the following discussion, as one's overall understanding changes, the way in which one reacts to feelings changes as well, and this will allow past *kamma* to ripen *without* engendering the rehearsal of past non-virtuous behaviors. This principle is then connected with what is illustrated in other discourses with the simile of seeds (e.g. AN 3.34): a seed has the potential to reproduce the same plant that generated it. However, whether the seed will actually produce the same plant depends on a number of circumstantial conditions, and if these are not present in the right way, the seed will be spoiled. Similarly, actions bear fruits and results (seeds), which have the potential to reproduce similar actions, but only if the right conditions are in place. If one meanwhile changes these conditions, those actions will not ripen (or they will not ripen in the same way).

181 *Nāṇupi khāyati, kiṃ bahudeva*. Bhikkhu Bodhi renders it as 'without even a slight [residue] being seen, much less abundant [residue],' Ajahn Ṭhānissaro with 'and for the most part barely appears for a moment.'

182 This might be interpreted as referring not much to a physical underdevelopment, but rather to not having developed right bodily behavior or right recollection of the body (§1, MN 10).

183 The term *ātuma* is a variant of *attan*, hence 'self.' In this context, it means that one is 'small-hearted' or 'petty.'

pain (*appadukkhavihārī*).[184] Mendicants, this sort of person is reborn in hell for an insignificant evil action.

Mendicants, and what sort of person having done the same insignificant evil action, experiences it in this life, and if it appears at all, it could not be less?

Mendicants, this is a person whose body is developed, whose honesty is developed, whose understanding is developed, whose wisdom is developed, not limited, great, who dwells in boundlessness (*appamāṇa-vihārī*). Mendicants, this sort of person having done the same insignificant evil action, experiences it in this life, and if it appears at all, it could not be less.

Mendicants, suppose that a person put a crystal of salt into a limited bowl of water. Mendicants, what do you think, would that limited amount of water become salty and undrinkable due to that crystal of salt?'

'Yes, Venerable.'

'And why is that?'

'Venerable, since the water in the bowl is limited, that water would become salty and undrinkable due to that crystal of salt.'

'Mendicants, suppose now that a person put a crystal of salt in the river Ganges. Mendicants, what do you think, would the river Ganges become salty and undrinkable due to that crystal of salt?'

'Surely not, Venerable.'

'And why is that?'

'Venerable, the river Ganges is such a great mass of water that it could not become salty and undrinkable due to that crystal of salt.'

'In the same way, Mendicants, on the one hand, a person who has done an insignificant evil action is reborn in hell, while on the other hand, a person who has done the same insignificant evil action experiences it in this life, and if it appears at all, it could not be less.'

...

(AN 3.100)

184 Some translators (Bhikkhu Bodhi, Ajahn Ṭhānissaro, Ajahn Sujato) correct this compound by removing the prefix *appa-* (little) since they assume that this person cannot dwell with 'little suffering.' However, it is also possible to see one reason for keeping the text as it is: one who happens to experience little unpleasant feelings at the moment might become complacent, negligent, and petty, especially if this person is not developed in wisdom and understanding. And this is why even just a trifling evil dead might be sufficient to make their whole life collapse and bring them to 'hell' (psychologically or eschatologically).

Friendliness and the other 'divine dwellings' are a suitable basis for developing composure. In turn, developing these states in the direction of a deepening of composure allows them to become boundless. The following short discourse (AN 5.27) presents five intuitions that are directly accessible to the practitioner and that can be used also as touchstones for assessing one's progress.

> 'Mendicants, being wise (*nipakā*) and recollecting (*patissatā*), develop a composure that is boundless (*appamāṇaṃ*).[185] Mendicants, developing composure that is boundless, being wise and recollecting, five knowledges (*ñāṇāni*) arise directly (*paccattaññeva*).[186] What five?
>
> The knowledge 'this composure is pleasant (*sukho*) now and brings to a pleasant result in the future' arises directly.
>
> The knowledge 'this composure is outstanding and not associated with the flesh (*nirāmiso*)' arises directly.
>
> The knowledge 'this composure is not practiced by contemptible people' arises directly.[187]
>
> The knowledge 'this composure is peaceful (*santo*), excellent (*paṇīto*), providing tranquility (*paṭippassaddha-laddho*), the attainment of unification (*ekodibhāvādhigato*), not obtained by having repressed or restrained one's coactions'[188] arises directly.
>
> The knowledge 'I enter in this state with recollection (*sato*), and with recollection I abandon it'[189] arises directly.

185 Boundless composure is based on the full development of friendliness and the other three 'divine dwellings,' as they are fully cultivated, see §3, AN 3.65.

186 This means that one knows by themselves, immediately, without the need of being told by someone else or confirmed by any external authority, since one knows face-to-face (so to say) the truth of this knowledge.

187 Proper composure based on friendliness is nourished and supported by moral behavior, a point made at greater length also elsewhere, see for instance AN 10.219.

188 The last clause derives from a quite dense compound: *na sasaṅkhāraniggayhavāritagato*. The suffix *-gato* entails possession of something (although in other editions it reads *-vato*, meaning 'checked'), *-vārita-* is the past participle of *vāreti* '(cause to) hinder', 'repressed', *-niggayha-* the passive gerund of *niggaṇhāti*, 'to hold back,' 'to restrain,' and *sa-saṅkhāra* can be interpreted as 'one's own (reading the prefix *sa-* as indicating possession) coactions.' Hence, the compound means that this condition that one possesses (*-gato*) is not (*na*) due to having repressed (*vāreti*) or restrained (*niggayha*) one's own coactions (*sa-saṅkhāra*). In other terms, boundless composure does not arise from a forceful effort to get rid of one's coactions or defilements.

189 It is crucial to see that boundless composure is not accessed randomly or without recollection and metacognitive awareness, but rather with a deliberate intention and through dedicated mastery. This point stresses the deep connection between right composure and right recollection, as the

Mendicants, being wise and recollecting, develop a composure that is boundless. Mendicants, developing composure that is boundless, being wise and recollecting, these five knowledges arise directly.'

(AN 5.27)

The following discourse (SN 41.7) offers an important explanation of the nature of boundless friendliness, how it relates to other meditative practices, and how they contribute the goal of freedom.

On one occasion, the excellent Godatta was dwelling near Macchikasanda, in the Mango Grove. Then, Citta the householder went to the excellent Godatta. Having arrived and paid homage to the excellent Godatta, he sat to one side. Once seated, the excellent Godatta addressed Citta the householder:

'Householder, there is the liberation of the understanding (*cetovimutti*) through boundlessness (*appamāṇā*), the liberation of the understanding through 'no thing' (*ākiñcaññā*), the liberation of the understanding through emptiness (*suññatā*), and the liberation of the understanding without characteristic (*animittā*).[190] Are these realities different in meaning and different in name, or are they rather the same in meaning and different only in name?'

'Venerable, there is a perspective (*pariyāyo*) by means of which these realities are different in meaning and different in name. But there is also a perspective by means of which these realities are the same in meaning and different only in name.

Venerable, what is the perspective by means of which these realities are different in meaning and different in name?

seventh and eight factors of the eightfold path.

190 As it will be explained below, the first kind of liberation is associated with friendliness (or the other three 'divine dwellings'); the second corresponds to the seventh stage of composure (in the ninefold division of composure, see below §6), the domain of 'no thing;' the third corresponds to the contemplation or perception of 'not myself' (*anattā*); the fourth is relatively rarely mentioned in the discourses, but it can be interpreted as the sort of composure in which no specific object is discerned anymore *because* one is attending to the fact that no object can ever be appropriated. This is a way of interpreting what is elsewhere rather commonly phrased as attending to the element of the 'deathless' (*amatadhātu*), e.g. AN 3.32; 3.33; 10.6; 10.7; 11.9, see also below §7.

Venerable, here a mendicant dwells having pervaded the eastern direction with an understanding endowed with friendliness (*mettāsahagatena cetasā*), the same with the southern direction, the same with the westerner direction, the same with the northern direction. So, they dwell having pervaded above as below, all around, everywhere, in every respect, the whole world, with an understanding endowed with friendliness, abundant, great, boundless (*appamāṇa*), free from enmity, free from ill-will. In the same way, they dwell with an understanding endowed with compassion (*karuṇā*) ... In the same way, they dwell with an understanding endowed with sympathy (*muditā*) ... In the same way, they dwell with an understanding endowed with serenity (*upekkhā*), having pervaded the eastern direction, the same with the southern direction, the same with the westerner direction, the same with the northern direction. So, they dwell having pervaded above as below, all around, everywhere, in every respect, the whole world, with an understanding endowed with serenity, abundant, great, boundless, free from enmity, free from ill-will. Venerable, this is called the liberation of the understanding through boundlessness.

Venerable, and what is the liberation of the understanding through 'no thing'? Here, Venerable, a mendicant, having completely overcome the domain of indefinite consciousness (*viññāṇañcāyatanaṃ*), having entered upon it, dwells in the domain of 'no thing' (*ākiñcaññāyatanaṃ*): 'there is no thing' (*'natthi kiñcī'ti*). Venerable, this is called the liberation of the understanding through 'no thing.'

Venerable, and what is the liberation of the understanding through emptiness? Here, Venerable, a mendicant gone to the forest, to the root of a tree, to an empty hut, reflects thus: 'this is empty of myself, or of anything belonging to myself.'[191] Venerable, this is called the liberation of the understanding through emptiness.

Venerable, and what is the liberation of the understanding without characteristic? Venerable, here a mendicant, not paying attention to all characteristics (*sabbanimittānaṃ amanasikārā*), having entered upon it, dwells in the composure of the understanding (*cetosamādhiṃ*) that has no charac-

191 *Suññamidaṃ attena vā attaniyena vā.* Same formula also discussed, for instance, in MN 106. Notice that emptiness is here linked with the impossibility of appropriating anything as 'myself' or 'belonging to myself,' see further discussion in §7.

teristic. Venerable, this is called the liberation of the understanding without characteristic.

Venerable, this is the perspective by means of which these realities are different in meaning and different in name.

Venerable, and what is the perspective by means of which these realities are the same in meaning and different only in name?

Venerable, lust (*rāgo*) is a maker of boundaries (*pamāṇa-karaṇo*),[192] aversion (*doso*) is a maker of boundaries, ignorance (*moho*) is a maker of boundaries. For a mendicant whose intoxicants (*āsava*)[193] have been destroyed they have been abandoned, their root destroyed, like a palm with its base destroyed, deprived of existence, so that their reality will not arise again. Venerable, insofar as the liberation of the understanding through boundlessness is unshakable (*akuppā*), this is called 'the utmost irreversible (*aggamakkhāyati*) liberation of the understanding.'[194] And this unshakable liberation of the understanding is empty of lust, empty of aversion, empty of ignorance.[195]

Venerable, lust is about something (*kiñcanaṃ*),[196] aversion is about something, ignorance is about something. For a mendicant whose intoxicants have been destroyed they have been abandoned, their root destroyed, like

192 *Pamāṇa* literally means 'measure' or 'size.' In this context, however, the term does not have a purely quantitative connotation (the 'how much' of something), but it rather concerns the fact of having a certain boundary, a de-termination with respect to something else. For instance, in virtue of being an object of lust, something is differentiated from what is not an object of lust and it is treated differently or considered to be more valuable (hence, it counts 'more'). Appropriation (which underpins lust or greed, aversion, and ignorance) also sets a 'boundary' around things by discriminating between what is (or was, will be, or could be) 'mine' and what is not.

193 The term *āsava* originally indicates the toxic and poisonous effects of certain substances, especially alcoholic; hence they are factors that contribute to obnubilate and hinder one's understanding and produce defilements (*kilesā*). In the discourses, the *āsavā* can be spelled out in a broader or narrower sense. In the broader sense (see MN 2), they include all factors that hinder and intoxicate one's understanding, including the five hindrances. In a narrower sense (SN 47.50), they refer to defilements due to three main conditions: ignorance (*avijjāsavo*), sensuality (*kāmāsavo*), and existence (*bhavāsavo*).

194 Liberation of the understanding through friendliness is not by itself permanent and unshakable (*a-kuppa*). However, *insofar as* it becomes so, it leads to full awakening, and it is the 'top' (*agga*) and 'non-decaying' (*a-k-khāya*).

195 Notice that what makes the liberation unshakable and complete is the fact of having completely exhausted the three bases of lust (or greed), aversion, and ignorance.

196 Literally, 'lust is (a) something' (*rāgo … kiñcanaṃ*). Lust, aversion, and ignorance not only have an object ('something'), but they are also different ways of appropriating 'something' as 'mine.' The domain of 'no thing' can be developed in such a way as to make it a basis for relinquishing any appropriation, and hence undermining the structure that underpins lust, aversion, and ignorance.

a palm with its base destroyed, deprived of existence, so that their reality will not arise again. Venerable, insofar as the liberation of the understanding through 'no thing' is unshakable, this is called 'the utmost irreversible liberation of the understanding.' And this unshakable liberation of the understanding is empty of lust, empty of aversion, empty of ignorance.

Venerable, lust is a maker of characteristics (*nimitta-karaṇo*),[197] aversion is a maker of characteristics, ignorance is a maker of characteristics. For a mendicant whose intoxicants have been destroyed they have been abandoned, their root destroyed, like a palm with its base destroyed, deprived of existence, so that their reality will not arise again. Venerable, insofar as the liberation of the understanding without characteristics is unshakable, this is called 'the utmost irreversible liberation of the understanding.' And this unshakable liberation of the understanding is empty of lust, empty of aversion, empty of ignorance.

Venerable, this is the perspective by means of which these realities are similar in meaning and different only in name.'

'This is a gain for you, householder! A wonderful gain, householder, it is for you to plunge into the depths of the Buddha's teaching with the eye of wisdom!'

(SN 41.7)

The following discourse (SN 22.55) presents one further approach to the relinquishment of appropriation, based on a direct contemplation of cessation as inherent in any content of experience. This teaching can be very helpful to both develop boundlessness and to eventually learn how to relinquish any appropriation towards that as well.

At Savatthi the Fortunate uttered this inspired utterance:

'it might not be, it might not be mine;

197 This point is very important: perception (*saññā*) is shaped by intentionality and attention. Insofar as they are in turn shaped and based on lust, aversion, and ignorance, these three bases determine perception and how different objects are experienced.

it will not be, it will not be mine.[198]

Mendicants, a mendicant that is fully established in this, could cut the lower yokes to existence (*saṃyojanānī*).'

When this was said, a certain mendicant addressed the Fortunate: 'Venerable, in what way would that happen?'

'Mendicant, here an uninstructed ordinary person (who has no regard for the outstanding ones (*ariyānaṃ*), not versed in the reality (*dhamma*) of the outstanding ones, not trained in their reality, who has no regard for righteous people, not versed in their reality, not trained in it), regards physical form as being himself (*rūpaṃ attato*), or himself as possessing form (*rūpavantaṃ vā attānaṃ*), or form as being in himself (*attani vā rūpaṃ*), or himself as being in form (*rūpasmiṃ vā attānaṃ*).[199]

In the same way, he regards feelings (*vedanaṃ*) ..., perceptions (*saññaṃ*) ..., coactions (*saṅkhāre*) ..., consciousness (*viññāṇaṃ*)[200] as being himself, or himself as possessing consciousness, or consciousness as being in himself, or himself as being in consciousness.

198 *No cassaṃ, no ca me siyā, nābhavissa, na me bhavissatī.* This saying occurs also in MN 106, AN 7.55 and 10.29; Ud 7.8. The initial *c'assaṃ* can be interpreted either as *ce assa* (hypothetical 'if') or *ca assa* (paratactic 'and'). Ancient commentators opt for the former, interpreting the saying in terms of how past actions influence present existence (*if* there was no action in the past, there would be no present existence now). Here, however, the saying is taken to reflect the evident possibility of cessation of whatever is currently present, which entails that this present content of experience cannot be appropriated as 'mine.'

199 *Attan* is a reflexive pronoun, which can also be understood as 'self' in the sense of a metaphysical principle or 'soul.' However, the Buddha does not make a metaphysical claim about the existence (or lack thereof) of an individual 'soul,' but rather outlines different ways in which one can appropriate certain basic contents of experience (here listed according to the scheme of the five aggregates). Hence, from the point of view of the person who does the appropriation, what is appropriated is regarded by this person as something belonging to himself or herself. The use of the pronoun should thus reflect this attitude.

200 Note that the function of consciousness (*viññāṇa*) is that of making any content of experience available as such; that is, of 'cognizing' their presence in the most basic sense. This differentiates it from *saññā*, which is best understood as 'perception' and 'recognition,' namely, the ability to label different contents, group them on the basis of certain similarities or characteristics, and recognize new contents based on past experience and categories. Moreover, *viññāṇa* is never presented as a unified entity, but it is rather qualified and associated with the six sensory bases (the five physical senses plus thought), and their respective objects. *Viññāṇa* is *not* a faculty or an entity, but an 'aggregate' (*khanda*) conditioned by a stream of discrete intentional acts and coactions (*saṅkhārā*); hence, it is dependently originated and inherently empty of existence, as any other aspect of experience.

He does not recognize according to nature that form is uncertain,[201] that feelings are uncertain, that perceptions are uncertain, that coactions are uncertain, that consciousness is uncertain.

He does not recognize according to nature that form is suffering,[202] that feelings are suffering, that perceptions are suffering, that coactions are suffering, that consciousness is suffering.

He does not recognize according to nature that form is not himself,[203] that feelings are not himself, that perceptions are not himself, that coactions are not himself, that consciousness is not himself.

He does not recognize according to nature that form is coacted,[204] that feelings are coacted, that perceptions are coacted, that coactions are coacted, that consciousness is coacted.

He does not know according to nature that form will cease to exist (*vibhavissati*),[205] that feeling will cease to exist, that perceptions will cease to exist, that coactions will cease to exist, that consciousness will cease to exist.

201 *So aniccaṃ rūpaṃ 'aniccaṃ rūpan'ti yathābhūtaṃ nappajānāti.* Literally: he does not know (*nappajānāti*), according to nature (*yathābhūtaṃ*), of an uncertain form (*aniccaṃ rūpaṃ*) [that] 'form is uncertain.'

202 Variation of the previous formula: *dukkhaṃ rūpaṃ 'dukkhaṃ rūpan'ti yathābhūtaṃ nappajānāti.*

203 Third variation: *anattaṃ rūpaṃ 'anattā rūpan'ti yathābhūtaṃ nappajānāti.* Notice, that with these three variations, this discourse makes a nice parallel of the more famous discourses on the 'characteristics of not-myself' (SN 22.59).

204 *Saṅkhataṃ rūpaṃ 'saṅkhataṃ rūpan'ti yathābhūtaṃ nappajānāti.* The term *saṅkhataṃ* is a past participle of *saṅkharoti*, 'to put together' in the sense of being fabricated or concocted. The rendering 'co-acted' is meant to stress the fact that production is always dependent on other factors, which are different from the thing that is produced. This point is essential to appreciate the nature of uncertainty, suffering and 'not-myself.' Since things are produced based on other factors, they do not exist or sustain themselves by themselves; hence, they not only arise, but they have also to cease necessarily since their being there is not necessary. Hence, appreciating that all aggregates are 'co-acted' entails appreciating that they are all uncertain (*anicca*), and for this reason dissonant (*dukkha*) and not-ownable (*anattā*).

205 Notice that 'ceasing to exist' (*vi-bhava*, literally 'separation from existence') does not have to be interpreted in ontological terms as a commitment to some sort of movement from 'being' to 'nothing.' This commitment entails a whole array of metaphysical assumptions and it actually runs against the Buddha's teaching that both 'existence' and 'non-existence' are extremes that should ultimately be rejected (SN 12.15) because the notion of 'existence' itself is flawed (see below, §7 *Reflections*). In this sense, interpreting *vibhava* as an ontological annihilation makes it fall into *vibhava-taṇhā*, the 'thirst for annihilation,' which is a leading factor in the origination of suffering (SN 56.11). In the context of the *no cassa* formula illustrated in this discourse, instead, *vibhava* works as a vehicle of liberation; hence, it must be understood differently. The fact that form will 'cease to exist' simply means that whatever existence one attributes to form, this existence will face its own cessation, namely, at some point it will be impossible to ascribe that existence to form.

Instead, Mendicants, an instructed outstanding disciple (who has regard for the outstanding ones, who is versed in the reality of the outstanding ones, who is trained in their reality, who has regard for righteous people, who is versed in their reality, trained in it), does *not* regard form ..., feelings ..., perceptions ..., coactions ..., consciousness as being himself, or himself as possessing them, or them as being in him, or him as being in them.

He recognizes according to nature that form ..., feelings ..., perceptions ..., coactions ..., consciousness are uncertain ... that they are suffering ... that they are 'not himself' ... that they are coacted ... that they will cease to exist.

With the cessation of the existence of form (*rūpassa vibhavā*), feelings, perceptions, coactions and consciousness, a mendicant who reflects 'it might not be, and it might not be mine; it will not be, and it will not be mine' is fully established in this and could cut the lower yokes to existence.'[206]

'Venerable, a mendicant who is fully established in this could cut the lower yokes to existence. However, Venerable, how should one know, how should one see for the complete destruction of the intoxicants (*āsavānaṃ*)?'

'Mendicant, here an uninstructed ordinary person is scared (*tāsa*) by a situation (*ṭhāne*)[207] that is not scary. Mendicant, the uninstructed ordinary person is scared by this: it might not be, it might not be mine; it will not be, it will not be mine.

Mendicant, an instructed outstanding disciple is not scared by a situation that is not scary. Mendicant, the instructed outstanding disciple is not

206 Contemplation on the *no cassa* formula can be summarized as follows: (i) for any of the five aggregates, one realizes the possibility that they might not be in the future (since they have arisen, hence they are co-acted, they are not always present, thus they *can* cease to be present); (ii) what can cease in the future could not be owned anymore; (iii) if something might really cease in the future, this means that there is necessarily a time in which this will happen (from the mere hypothesis of cessation, one can thus realize that cessation is a real possibility that will surely obtain), the certainty of cessation is thus established; (iv) the certainty of cessation entails the impossibility of ownership *even in the present* since what will inevitably cease and is not ownable in the future cannot be claimed to be 'my own,' even right now, since 'I' cannot do anything to prevent its cessation. This breaks apart *sakkāya diṭṭhi*, 'personality view' or the 'belief in the stability of any of the components of experience,' and the other lower yokes (see *Afterword*).

207 Also 'theme,' but in this case 'situation' captures the fact that this is not just a theme for reflection since it represents a general and fundamental predicament of all living beings.

scared by this: it might not be, it might not be mine; it will not be, it will not be mine.[208]

Mendicant, when consciousness is standing by taking up form, it can stand, with form as its object, with form as its ground, sprinkled over with joy for it, and then it can undergo increase, growth, full development.[209]

Mendicant, when consciousness is standing by taking up feelings … by taking up perceptions … by taking up coactions, it can stand, with coactions as its object, with coactions as its ground, sprinkled over with joy for them, and then it can undergo increase, growth, full development.

Mendicant, it would be impossible for one to say: 'I shall declare the coming back and going away, disappearing and reappearing, the increase, growth and full development of consciousness apart from form, apart from feelings, apart from perceptions, apart from coactions.'

Mendicant, if lust (*rāgo*) for the phenomenon of form (*rūpadhātuyā*) has been abandoned (*pahīno*) by a mendicant, with the abandonment of lust the object is cut off (*vocchijjatārammaṇaṃ*) and there is no establishment (*patiṭṭhā*) of consciousness.[210]

208 This second part of the exposition (outlining the path from non-return to full awakening) uses the *no cassa* formula to overcome a subtle but profound 'fear' (*tāsa*), which is the fear of not having a ground, support, or anything to hold onto. This unfolds at the most subtle cognitive level as the need to rely always on some object (hence, establishing consciousness always on the basis of some content of experience) and fearing the possibility of not being able to do this. Since this attitude of seeking objects *is* a subtle form of appropriation (the subtlest form, indeed), the *no cassa* formula can be further used to uproot this attitude, overcome the fear that underpins it, and then reach full awakening. In this way, *no cassa* is used to relinquish appropriation towards the cognitive process itself.

209 *Rūpupayaṃ vā, bhikkhu, viññāṇaṃ tiṭṭhamānaṃ tiṭṭheyya, rūpārammaṇaṃ rūpappatiṭṭhaṃ nandūpasecanaṃ vuddhiṃ virūḷhiṃ vepullaṃ āpajjeyya*. In this statement, the verb *tiṭṭhathi* ('to stand') can also be interpreted as 'being established,' in the sense that consciousness (*viññāṇa*) has always an object in virtue of which it is established as the consciousness of *this* or *that* content. Hence, consciousness *can* be established (*tiṭṭheyya*, optative mood) only when it is standing (*tiṭṭhamānaṃ*, present participle) by means of an object, like form (*rūp-upayaṃ*, with *upayaṃ* meaning literally 'taking up,' 'approaching,' not dissimilar in sense from *upādāna*, 'appropriation'). The term *ārammaṇa* can mean 'ground' or 'foundation,' but it can also be intended more specifically as 'sense object' (namely, as an object of a sense consciousness). Notice that what is at stake here is not necessarily any gross and coarse attitude of greed or aversion, but the bare fact of discerning a content of experience and indulging in that act, even when this is done only for the sake of contemplating its nature or reality. This attitude remains present even in the subtler stages of composure, which are sometimes identified as the sort of 'serenity that is diversified' discussed elsewhere (see MN 137, §7).

210 The sort of lust at stake here is no longer any lust and desire for sensual pleasures, which have already been completely abandoned at the stage of *anāgāmitā*. The *rāga* still operative at this more refined level is *rūparāga* and *arūparāga*, namely lust for existence in the form realm or in the formless realm, which is best understood as lust towards meditative attainments and stages of composure (see *Afterword*).

Mendicant, if lust for the phenomenon of feelings ..., for the phenomenon of perceptions ..., for the phenomenon of coactions has been abandoned by a mendicant, with the abandonment of lust the object is cut off and there is no establishment of consciousness.

When consciousness is not established in this way, it does not grow, and having nothing more to do, it is freed.[211]

Being thus freed, it remains firm (*ṭhitaṃ*). Being thus firm, it is content (*santusitaṃ*). Being thus content, it does not thirst for anything (*na paritassati*). Without thirsting, it directly experiences supreme extinction (*parinibbāyati*).[212]

One knows: 'birth is destroyed, the training has been completed, what should be done has been done, there is nothing more to this end.'

Mendicant, here it is how one should know, how one should see for the complete destruction of the intoxicants.'

(SN 22.55)

211 *Tadappatiṭṭhitaṃ viññāṇaṃ avirūḷhaṃ anabhisaṅkhacca vimuttaṃ*. The term *appatiṭṭhitaṃ* can also be rendered as 'without footing,' meaning that consciousness does not have anything (any object) on which it could stand and be grounded. The term *anabhisaṅkhacca* is the gerund of *abhisaṅkharoti*, which in general means 'to prepare,' 'to perform,' 'to get to work.' In order to understand this point, it is helpful to keep in mind that in the teaching of conditioned co-origination (see, e.g. MN 38, SN 12.2) consciousness depends on coactions (*saṅkhārā*), which force it 'to work,' namely, to discern and make available for experience those objects that they seek (interpreting coactions as the set of intentional attitudes based on greed, aversion, and ignorance). In this way, consciousness is enslaved by coactions and has always 'something to do,' i.e. it has to 'keep busy' all the time. However, with the cessation of lust for objects (due to the further refinement and application of the *no cassa* formula to the cognitive process itself and to its subtlest aspects), this compulsion ceases, consciousness has no more 'work to do,' and hence it is freed.

212 This is a stock progression that expresses the last few steps into the achievement of full awakening, cf. e.g. SN 22.59. Notice that this entails that the un-establishment of consciousness in sensory objects described above is nothing but a means to reach this point, and it does not yet constitute in and of itself the achievement of complete awakening.

6. Composure

Directions

Establish awareness of your bodily posture (§1). Abandon the hindrances or just notice if they are momentarily absent (§2). Arouse a sense of contentment and non-aversion and pervade your whole bodily space with it (§3). After having perceived your own vulnerability, arouse and dwell in an attitude of friendliness towards it, and extend this attitude towards all living beings (§4). When the feeling of friendliness is stable enough, make it boundless in all directions and dwell in it (§5).

When this experience of boundlessness is fully established, gently shift your attention from the feeling of friendliness to *how* that feeling is perceived, in particular to its pleasantness and the sense of enthusiasm that subtly accompanies it. See it as fully encompassing and pervading your body, as a sense of complete and unconditioned acceptance towards yourself, a sense of perfection, in which you clearly recognize that nothing has to be pushed away, nothing is lacking. You can silently contemplate how gorgeous and even energizing it is to be completely free from the harassments of the hindrances as you dwell in boundless friendliness. Or you can simply savor the joy that arises from this experience. Explore what makes it particularly pleasant and gently let your attention gravitate to that sense of enthusiastic pleasantness.

Notice that this pleasantness is always felt immediately and evidently in the body, while the body itself remains still, tranquil and relaxed. Initially this sense of pleasantness might be intermitting or perhaps it might arise only in a limited area of the body. When it seems stable enough, see whether you can spread it in the whole body. You can use attention to distribute this pleasantness throughout the body as if attention was a paintbrush, pleasantness a bright color, and your body an empty canvas. You can focus more

intensely where pleasantness feels more intense, as if you were piercing and penetrating that feeling of pleasure with your gaze, and from there let it spread around, like spring water welling up from the ground. Or you can simply receive the experience of pleasantness in awareness, allowing it to arise, spread and grow on its own, by remaining receptive to its manifestation, like lying on a beach enjoying the sun and the sea breeze. You can experiment using the breath to spread pleasantness throughout the bodily space, or any other means that you might find helpful. Play with ingenuity in order to remain fully engaged and interested in this activity.

Encourage as much as possible the sustenance and growth of this experience of enthusiasm and pleasantness. Fully allow yourself to enjoy this experience, do not hold back from it, abandon any resistance against it, but without compromising your metacognitive awareness of how this process is unfolding and of whether any adjustments are needed at any moment.

As you engage with the experience of pleasure and enthusiasm, you can find a balance between the different factors that it involves: the feeling of pleasure itself, the workings of attention that sustain it, the metacognitive awareness that finetunes and drives the process, a profound sense of relinquishment and abandonment to the experience itself, and an ability to fully enjoy it. They are all present, but they need to be present in the right amount, so that they mutually support one another. When you strike the right balance, then the experience will seem to sustain itself on its own without any further need for you to intervene. Try to encourage this shift and see what is needed to reestablish it when it is lost. The balance needs continuous sustenance, but as this sustenance grows subtler and more refined, at times it feels like experience is unfolding effortlessly.

Notice how the experience of composure is simpler than the previous experience of boundless friendliness. It is even less densely populated by contents of experience, which are held in awareness in an even lighter way. The very notion of 'friendliness' might drop from your experience, although the taste and color of friendliness will still profoundly pervade it. Explore how composure contributes to this process of simplification of experience. You can also discern a specific characteristic or texture that this first stage of composure has, which is associated with relief and freedom from having to compulsively engage with sensory contents and stimulations. When this becomes clear, you can realize that the cessation of this compulsion is in itself blissful. Dwelling in the cessation of something might then be revealed as positively freeing, and freedom might be seen as the ability of letting certain contents and attitudes cease.

When your session is coming to its conclusion, gently come back first to feeling of boundless friendliness (§5), then focus on friendliness towards yourself (§4), and then to the even simpler awareness of the whole body (§1). Stay there for a while before ending your session.

Refinements

Refine your intimacy with the feeling of enthusiastic pleasantness that arises out of friendliness by trying to extend the duration for which you can remain in the contemplation of that experience. Fully familiarize yourself with the factors that contribute to sustain and stabilize composure. They include the quality of attention paid to the feeling of enthusiasm and pleasure, the spreading of this feeling in the whole bodily space, the openness of awareness, the ability of savoring and enjoying the experience. This all requires some degree of effort. However, too much effort would be disturbing and would induce some subtle restlessness, while too little effort would let the experience drift away. Try to develop an intuitive sense of the amount of effort that is just right

to sustain the various factors involved and allow them to blend together in a smooth and seemingly effortless process. Be sensitive to the way in which this mixture can change and evolve over time, both during one session and definitively across multiple sessions; be ready to adapt accordingly.

In the long term, you can notice that the amount of effort needed to sustain the same stage of composure will naturally decrease. The experience of that same stage will also evolve over time, growing calmer and subtler. Also, as you might move to a further stage, you can appreciate that even less effort will be necessary. Progress in the mastery of composure and the journey in its depth is marked by a tendency towards effortlessness.

At this level of contemplation, some thoughts might arise, but they will be most often about practice itself. They are not necessarily a problem, insofar as they remain fleeting background phenomena. It is possible, however, that at some point they can become distractions and make the experience collapse, even slightly. In this case, as usual, just notice what happens and re-establish composure. However, try to notice the conditions where disruptions are more likely to happen. How is attention working when thoughts become distractions? Are there signals that anticipate this event? You might notice that when you relinquish your effort too much, your experience might sustain itself inertly for a little while, but then it will drift away. Alternatively, if you try to fix too much on one aspect or factor, it will seem to intensify for a bit, but then the whole experience will be dragged away by some other stream of thoughts. If you manage to swiftly move and dance between the various factors of composure, balancing them, giving right emphasis to all of them, the process will become a sort of smooth flow, like swimming or walking, or riding a bike. This fluidity will contribute to make the whole experience much more stable and distractions will be more unlikely to arise or be disruptive.

In general, you might notice that the experience of composure is more easily sustained by two key attitudes. First, you manage to keep it profoundly rooted in the experience of the body as being pervaded by the feeling of enthusiastic pleasantness that has been evoked. Whenever the reflective activity seems to take over or drag the experience away from the body, bringing it back to how the body experiences composure will consolidate it. Second, after having initially established a degree of composure, just enjoying it will contribute to sustain it. Enjoying means not having to reach something else or move further; it means being happy with the state that is currently present and fully plunging into it. Not having to strive for something else, it will be easier to simply remain with what is present.

A skillful way of seeing composure is by appreciating how it results from relief, from the absence of something. In its first stage, the experience of composure is the enjoyment of not being bothered by the manifestation of any hindrance. This enjoyment is positively summarized in the experience of boundless friendliness. There is a sense of confidence, even faith, due to the lack of doubt; a sense of tranquility and serenity due to the vanishing of worry. Alertness and brightness arise instead of dullness and torpor. The whole field of experience is suffused with friendliness instead of aversion and contentment born from the disappearance of sensual greed. Noticing the absence of the hindrances and how the space left empty by them is filled with these beautiful qualities might increase one's intimacy with the whole experience of composure, allowing a genuine enjoyment that does not seek to hold on to something, but rather rejoices in the absence of what is not there.

In any case, do not push or hurry the process and make sure you take ample time to fully familiarize yourself with this experience and its components, so that it becomes easy to access and available any time you wish. In the beginning, your main goal is just to get to a sufficiently clear experience of compo-

sure, even if this is very unstable and can be sustained only for a few minutes. When access is easier, your new goal becomes gaining more stability. Even if the experience remains relatively short-lived, for that period it is fairly stable and continuous. You also become more and more skillful in revamping this experience when it seems to fade or be lost. When this mastery begins to consolidate, your next goal is to become able to enjoy the same stable experience for longer uninterrupted periods, until you can deliberately decide for how long you wish to enjoy it and you are able to do so regardless of anything else that might happen. At this point, you master this stage of composure and you can naturally discover reasons that will invite you to move further.

You are fully and directly in touch with the whole bodily space, profoundly listening to it and to the pleasantness of the experience of composure. When you wish to experiment with moving to the next stage, simply notice how this experience makes you truly happy. This happiness is a whole-encompassing, holistic sense of well-being, arising from a gentle and almost implicit reflection on your current condition. Happiness lies just beyond the enthusiastic pleasantness of the first stage of composure, or at its borders. If you gently open your attention so that happiness is brought to the foreground, you'll experience a subtle shift in the whole experience. Happiness suffuses the space of awareness, enthusiastic pleasantness is still present, but it takes now a different tone, since it no longer needs to be sustained by the same sort of active engagement and reflection; it becomes stiller. There is a sense of confidence, certainty, trust, which in turn reinforce the feeling of happiness. This is the second stage of composure.

Both the first and second stage of composure entail pleasantness and happiness. The crucial difference is that the pleasantness of the first stage is something you reach by moving from somewhere else. You have travelled through the contemplation of the hindrances, cultivated friendliness, made it bound-

less. Eventually, you arrived at such a pleasant experience that you could simply rest in it (first stage). But now that you are there, you can look around. You are safe, no need to travel anymore, you are in the best possible place you could ever imagine. This realization brings a new form of enthusiasm and pleasantness, which is however somehow more static, still, concentrated, silent. It is no longer a profound relief, but an inner happiness that encompasses and pervades the whole field of experience. Instead of rejoicing for having arrived at a safe place, you can now rejoice for being in a safe and wonderful place (second stage).

A sense of profound confidence and even faith is typical of this second stage. There is a stillness and gentle firmness that arises from the ability of letting go the need for checking in and controlling the unfolding of composure. Full of trust, supported by a sense of certainty, you no longer need to ascertain what is happening, you simply know it and can rest in this immediate awareness. This gives rise to a greater sense of unification, in which verbalized and articulated thought processes fade way because they are no longer needed. There is simply nothing to say. Verbalized thoughts are replaced by a beautiful inner silence.

Before this new experience starts collapsing on its own, you can deliberately return to the previous stage of composure by redirecting attention to the initial experience of enthusiastic pleasantness connected with relief, which you will discover remained just nearby, a small step outside the new stage you entered.

Moving back from the second to the first stage can energize and invigorate the experience of the first and can make it feel more intense and clearer. When the first stage of composure is fading, you might sometimes try to deliberately move to the second stage, even for just a little while, and then deliberately return to the first in order to gain more vigor and stability in it. Play with the options available at any moment and try to develop a sense of

what might be the best strategy to pursue. Composure is a creation of art; do not put barriers to your own ingenuity.

Along the way, it is important to remain alert to the fact that subtle manifestations of the hindrances (or their underlying roots) can emerge from time to time, even in the purified space of composure. At first glance, these manifestations have little in common with the gross and coarser forms that one was used to in the beginning of practice. The very fact that one is now able to access composure means that those coarse manifestations have been subdued. Nonetheless, the principles that underpin the hindrances are still in place to some extent, and to that extent their flavor might still tinge the terse and purified experience of composure. At this stage, just fully recognizing the meaning of this event (discerning that this or that aspect of experience is indeed a subtle trace of a hindrance manifesting) will be enough to counter it, especially if the understanding is capable of looking at this event with friendliness, leaving behind any remaining trace of aversion.

One particular way in which subtle hindrances might manifest at this point is by shaping one's attitude towards the practice of composure itself. At some point, one might find oneself somehow trapped in the implicit thought that the current experience should match with some idealized view about how a proper experience of composure should look like. One catches oneself checking back and forth between what is currently unfolding in experience and what one expects or wants to be the case, based on what one assumes should be present. The result of this comparison always comes with some tension, contraction, dissatisfaction and frustration. Or else, one tries to grasp at some positive reality that composure is supposed to have and make sure that such a reality is steadily possessed. It is very important to learn how to recognize when this happens and step outside from this mechanism. Composure

requires developing skillfulness in building it. However, the attitude just described is a negative parody of right skillfulness.

Understanding how the experience of composure unfolds, one learns that composure progresses in the direction of letting go, as a progressive simplification of experience, as a sequence of cessations, which leave experience more and more spacious, open, and empty. The ability of letting this or that component cease (for instance, the ability of overcoming the hindrances) is coupled with an ability of enjoying the new condition and the greater spaciousness that results from it (for instance, enjoying the enthusiastic pleasantness born from the relief of not being harassed by the hindrances). Understanding all of this, one gains criteria to judge what would be appropriate to progress further and what would undermine the process instead. Nevertheless, in no way does this understanding provide a picture of how the experience of composure will or should feel like. All that one can understand in developing composure is how to make it possible, allowing then the experience itself to reveal how that state will feel and look. All instructions, suggestions and reflections in this regard are nothing but a music sheet, which might be very accurate, but that remains only a piece of paper covered by ink, which is by nature incommensurably different from the quality of the musical experience that can arise out of a skillful interpretation and translation of it into actual playing. Hence, one's commitment to gain skillfulness in composure should encompass the constant awareness that there is no objective state, no well-defined experience, no external criterion that one's own experience should fulfil, embed and resemble. *How* to cultivate composure can be explained and developed, but how composure will actually *feel* needs to be tasted directly; it will never (nor ever could) match any abstract or extrinsic model or ideal. By losing this awareness, one once again falls prey to the subtle manifestations of the hindrances.

Reflections

Stillness flowing

Intentionality entails movement, which is often towards, against, or away from contents. With a lessening in the intensity of intentional activity, there is less movement. The lesser the movement, the more still is the whole of experience. Greater stillness is experienced as peace, easiness, and spaciousness, and it is pervaded by increasingly subtler feelings of pleasure and happiness, contentment, and serenity. This is the progression of composure, the gentle gesture with which one's body and understanding coalesce together. Regardless of how still one can become at any given moment, the key insight arises from comparing any degree of greater stillness with more ordinary conditions. Greater stillness and composure are most often associated with less aversion, greed, and ignorance, hence greater freedom from habitual coactions. Experiencing and mastering this difference indicates the direction in which genuine freedom can be discovered, and the direction one should move away from to avoid unnecessary suffering, stress and contractions.

It is worth reflecting on the way in which stillness arises. This phenomenon seems in fact more complex than what it might appear at first glance. Composure is shaped by a lessening and abandoning of grosser forms of intentional activity, beginning with all those attitudes (summarized by the five hindrances) that are inherently painful and stressful. Hence, stillness is partially a consequence of the absence and cessation of factors that can create disturbance, steering and movement. However, at any stage of composure, *some* intentional activity remains present, and that activity is responsible for the particular way of sustaining attention and understanding experience that constitutes a certain stage of composure. Sustaining attention is never a passive state, but always an active process. The progression through the stages of composure is surely a progression through subtler and subtler ways of sus-

taining attention, which requires less and less movement, effort and energy in order to give rise to the experience of continuity. This reduced level of activity is connected with the progressive simplification of experience that characterizes composure. Since the contents experienced are less dynamic and much grosser forms of activity have been abandoned, there are fewer factors that can disrupt attention, and the process established requires less energy itself to be maintained. In other words, composure is a progression through lighter and lighter experiences, each of which requires less force to be sustained because it has less weight.

But subtlety is no passivity or inertia. The stillness of composure is *not* a simple state or condition in which one just rests. Closer inspection reveals that some degree (even just minimal) of activity is always present all along, and in this sense the stillness reached through composure is always actively fabricated, albeit in the most refined and terse ways. Appreciating this fact is key not only in developing composure further and becoming sensitive to how best to sustain each stage, but also in fully understanding the nature of the experience that arises from it.

In a nutshell, this consists in appreciating from within how any experience is constructed, how anything constructed is uncertain, and how anything uncertain is unsuitable for appropriation. Letting this insight sink deeply into one's understanding, composure allows the practitioner to realize the full scope of the impossibility of appropriation and thus eventually to come face to face with the naturally impersonal nature of any of the components of experience. In this sense, composure brings one to the threshold of ultimate freedom.

Exploring the whole spectrum of the stages of composure, till the most refined ones, might be worth the time and effort that this investigation will take (for an overview of the four main stages, see the *Appendix*). Nonetheless, it might not be strictly necessary to understand how the experience of composure works and how it unfolds, what are the conditions that support it, and

why it feels the way it does. This understanding requires only *some* experience and even mastery in cultivating *some* stage of composure. One cannot understand the nature of composure without properly experiencing it, namely, without being able to engage with it skillfully and fluently. Yet, no matter what the degree of refinement and subtlety that composure reaches, the principle behind it always remains the same: fabricate less and make more empty space by abandoning unnecessary burdens. The only essential threshold is represented by the ability to overcome the hindrances themselves to such an extent as to make composure fully accessible, since this experience already provides in itself the template for any further refinement. Mastering this, one could in principle (time and practice allowing) learn how to master any degree of composure. In actual practice, if one gets to this point, it will be natural to progress towards further stages, as the exploration of composure is profoundly beautiful and deeply interesting.

Composure and sensual desires

Composure provides a stable and satisfying reservoir of well-being, freely accessible and potentially inexhaustible, without which abandoning sensual desire and aversion will never become fully possible. Sensual desire is rooted in the experience of non-fulfilment. Since this experience is unpleasant in itself, desire is always intermingled with some aversion for its own unpleasantness and the resulting effort to get rid of it by trying to fulfil the sense of unfulfillment through sensual pleasures. Desire and aversion work in tandem. Friendliness already reveals that they can also be softened and relinquished together. Composure arises out of this realization. As the pleasure of composure becomes easily available at will, the sense of unfulfillment on which desire thrives will be first reduced and eventually exhausted. As this happens, the last reservoir of aversion (namely, aversion for the unpleasantness that surrounds desire itself) will also dry up.

Moreover, desire and craving for sensual pleasures are inherently rooted in the assumption that pleasantness has to be generated by engaging with external objects or conditions. This assumption is but an instance of a broader and more profoundly rooted view about the fact that whatever comes from the outside is more 'natural,' more 'real,' more 'objective,' and more 'reliable.' Nourishment and food only come from the outside, do they not? Composure proves that this is false on many levels. External objects can be nourishing and provide satisfaction, pleasure or contentment only because of one's own way of interpreting them. The same external object can be experienced in extremely different ways by different beings or by the same being at different times. In general, the usefulness or pleasantness of external objects is entirely dependent on who engages with them and how. Pleasantness and happiness, in particular, cannot be found *in the objects* themselves that are experienced as pleasant or as a source of happiness, but only in the understanding that interprets them as being so.

By assuming that one has to depend on the outside, one actually allows one's understanding to remain enslaved and constantly at the mercy of external objects and conditions. Composure reveals that this is not the only option. Happiness and well-being are not (have *never* been) an external business. External objects or conditions can be an occasional circumstance that facilitates or hinders to some degree one's ability to tap into one's own ability to feel happy and at ease. Mastery of composure disempowers these external circumstances to the point that they will become ultimately irrelevant. This reveals that one's own happiness, ease and well-being are entirely dependent on how one understands one's own experience and construes it. They are not a thing; they are a *meaning*. Seeing how this process works and mastering it, one is freed from external dependencies, released from the state of need and no longer subject to external objects and conditions. The path of composure is a path of emancipation, and emancipation itself brings a profound sense of contentment, independence, and imperturbability.

Composure makes it possible to progressively leave behind the indefinite (and infinitely frustrating) quest for sensual pleasures nurtured by desire and aversion by resting in a much more easily available satisfaction, based on friendliness, letting go, and emptiness. The pleasure of composure is non-sensual in nature since it does not rely on a pursuit of sensual objects, but rather on the relinquishment of desire and aversion towards them and on the sense of relief that results from that. However, the relationship between composure and sensuality cannot be established through a categorical and immediate rejection of sensuality in the name of composure. At least, this is not how it works from the point of view of the process of development that leads to establish, develop and bring composure to maturation.

Composure arises out of some degree of gladness and happiness. For someone lost in dread and sadness, composure is not accessible. As already mentioned (§3, SN 36.6), one of the main reasons for seeking sensual pleasures is the relief they offer with respect to unpleasant feelings. For this reason, desire for sensual pleasures (as a hindrance) is compared with a debt (§2, DN 2). Lacking money and resources, one asks for a loan, but if the money gained in this way is immediately spent, one will fall back into the initial condition of poverty, now further worsened by the new debt one has contracted. In a similar way, if one seeks sensual pleasures in order to find some relief from unpleasant feelings, then the major risk is that, on top of the aversion for those original unpleasant feelings, one also creates new needs for sensual satisfaction, which in turn create and amplify further unpleasant feelings of unfulfillment. This easily becomes a vicious circle. However, if one borrows some money and then invests it in some business, and this business succeeds, it is possible to both repay the debt and overcome the initial state of poverty. Similarly, if one uses the relative and momentary degree of relief that even some sensual pleasures can provide in order to access a degree of contentment, by then capitalizing on that and further dwelling in that state, it is possible to make composure accessible. This is like

establishing the successful business that not only repays the old debt, but also provides extra revenues that free one from the very need to ask for any new loans. For sure, sensual pleasures by themselves do *not* lead to composure. However, some of them might be instrumentally exploited to some extent in order to create a sufficient level of well-being and contentment in which one can begin to more quietly reflect on one's condition, understand it, and then find the resources to make the right kind of investments (in terms of time, life-choices and aspirations).

This does not mean that one can indulge in sensual pleasures with the idea of making them a basis for developing the pleasure of composure. This will not work because indulging in sensual pleasures *is* a hindrance to composure. Nonetheless, an equally unworkable approach would be to harbor a more or less explicit or subtle form of aversion for all sensual pleasures, thus lingering towards self-mortification (see §4, SN 56.11). The quest for sensual pleasures must eventually be abandoned, but it is key to remember that this takes up almost three quarters of the whole path towards awakening (see §4, AN 5.57, and the *Afterword*), which is a way of saying that it does not happen quickly or by simply willing it. Even sense restraint, despite being necessary, is *not* yet a way to gain freedom from sensuality since this freedom does not depend on the fact of currently not indulging in it, but rather on the understanding that no sensual object (no object at all, in fact) could be appropriated as 'mine.' Since sensuality is ultimately an attitude of the understanding that wants to engage with sensual objects, one cannot abandon sensuality by removing the objects themselves; sensuality can be abandoned only by changing (deepening, clarifying) one's understanding of the meaning of sensuality, its risks, and the benefits of turning away from them.

A skillful way of relating to the task of leaving sensual pleasures progressively behind consists in trying to make them a provisional ally. Insofar as one dwells in deep sorrow and grief, some degree of sensual enjoyment might provide an immediate relief and help re-establish a minimum of well-being,

without which any further development would be impossible. Wisdom lies in the ability to not misjudging this relief for an actual cure or solution, and rather trying to use it to walk one's way towards a more reliable and stable form of satisfaction (accessible through composure). This might entail having first to progressively purify one's attitude towards sensual pleasures and moving away and abandoning the most clearly obnoxious ones, especially those directly at odds with moral behavior. Moving in this way, one can thus invest the newly gained sense of well-being and happiness in the further development of one's understanding of how this whole process works, which will indicate both the inherent side effects of any greed for sensual pleasures and the possibility of escaping from it by tapping into non-sensual pleasures. As this possibility is cultivated, developed, and sustained enough, even the seemingly most acceptable sensual pleasures (from a worldly ordinary perspective) become obsolete and no longer needed. Hence, the point is not only to abandon sensual pleasures for the sake of developing composure, but much also depends on *how* this is done. Without a degree of wisdom and friendliness, even the most noble intention might easily fall prey to aversion and self-mortification.

One might wonder whether the experience of composure is by itself sufficient to completely overcome desire for sensual pleasures and aversion or whether some further degree of understanding and wisdom is needed to make this breakthrough. Some discourses seem to suggest the first option (see, for instance, the excerpts from MN 14 and AN 9.41 here below), and others the second (see, for instance, the excerpt from AN 9.36 in §7). While this worry might seem genuine from a theoretical or speculative point of view, it dissolves by itself when it is approached from a more practical point of view.

The sort of insight and wisdom that is often advocated as necessary to irreversibly end sensual desire and aversion is connected with the fact that composure is by itself uncertain, and then it cannot possibly be appropriated

as 'mine.' This understanding allows one to experience composure without appropriating it, and thus dwelling without holding on to any characteristic or content of experience (this is the composure 'without characteristic' mentioned in §5, SN 41.7, elsewhere rephrased as the 'phenomenon of the deathless,' for instance in §7, AN 9.36). This understanding is often presented as arising out of a deliberate reflection on the nature of composure itself, somehow detaching oneself from the current stage of composure. The reason for this presentation is didactic since it is meant to single out and distinguish this liberatory understanding born from reflection on the nature of composure from the path and practice that lead to establish composure in the first place. However, one who fully masters composure cannot fail to understand how composure works, how it is fabricated, and hence its inherently uncertain nature, just because in order to master composure one needs to have gained quite a degree of virtuosity in playing with the fabricated nature of composure and its uncertainty. Hence, while composure can be seen as a basis for further refining understanding and wisdom, the very process of cultivating it and trying to gain mastery in it is also the factor that will naturally lead to the arising of that understanding and wisdom. For this reason, some discourses (such as SN 22.5 here below) also suggest that composure *by itself* leads to fully understand the structure of fabrication, and thus it develops the wisdom necessary to be freed from it.

As one dwells composed, fully aware of one's own state and how that state is sustained through subtle but continuous intentional activity, one is directly faced with the process of fabrication as it happens in the moment. In the stillness of any state of composure, the whole of one's experience becomes the state that is currently fabricated, and one can directly see that there is nothing beyond the process of fabrication itself. The more profound the composure is and the more refined and terse the contents are, the clearer and more glaring this insight becomes. In any case, composure does not aim to reveal some objective reality or hidden world or any other metaphysical mystery.

Composure is just a wonderful way of fabricating spaciousness, a light and empty experience which allows one to observe the very process through which experience is always fabricated. Seeing fabrication in this way, face to face, one sees that there is nothing beyond fabrication that one could grasp or appropriate as some 'real stuff.' Since there is also nothing in a fabricated reality that can be really grasped or claimed as one's own property (it would be like trying to grasp an image reflected on water or a dream), the fact that there is nothing beyond fabrication means that it is utterly impossible to claim ownership of any aspect of one's own experience. Without appropriation and ownership there is no worry or problem that can be taken to be 'mine.' Without problems, there is no suffering. Without suffering one is simply free, at ease, and in peace.

Five benefits of composure

To summarize, the cultivation of composure has at least five essential benefits. First, composure arises from the temporary overcoming of the hindrances. Since the hindrances are obstructive of clarity and knowledge, progressing towards composure is necessary to reach a sufficient degree of clarity for deepening one's investigation and understanding.

Second, composure is intrinsically pleasant, but this sort of pleasure is mostly based on relief, openness, emptiness, and spaciousness. It arises from a lessening of irritants; hence it does not depend on particular external objects to trigger it, and it can be sustained in a more continuous and autonomous way. The pleasure of composure is a crucially important reservoir of deep well-being and happiness, which is pivotal in one's effort to emancipate oneself from the quest for sensual pleasures. Wisdom and friendliness are essential here to navigate safely away from sensuality without falling into the trap of self-mortification.

Third, the experience of composure tends to be simpler and less densely populated by contents of experience, which also contributes to simplify any

analysis of the fundamental characteristics and structure that underpin all experience.

Fourth, composure requires mastery and skillfulness in order to be developed. For this reason, composure directly exposes the fabricated nature of experience, which provides a privileged entry point for appreciating the impossibility of appropriating it. Even if it were possible to enter almost by chance a certain stage of composure without seemingly knowing how, this experience would not have lasting benefits, and it could also be subtly detrimental if it were misinterpreted as some sort of access to any mystic or metaphysical reality (or anything of this sort). Mastery of composure provides a direct acquaintance with the way in which composure is (and can be) constructed, making it not only available at will, but also vanishing any over- and misinterpretation of the meaning of that experience. Composure is an art that can be learnt; and precisely *this* is what makes composure an unavoidable and essential factor in any deeper understanding of how the experience of reality is built and unfolds.

Fifth, a result that is most surely gained from having reached some mastery in composure is freedom from the need to rely on sensual pleasures as the only source of contentment. Beneath this freedom, there is a completely new way of relating to experience, and especially to those contents of experience that would be normally approached based on aversion and ill-will. Contentment makes aversion weaker, and the weaker aversion is, the stronger contentment becomes. Composure fully develops this virtuous circle to the point that even the most terrible contents of experience could be met without harboring any aversion or disturbing one's inner contentment and peace. In this way, full mastery in composure fulfills and brings to perfection the attitude of friendliness that was essential since the beginning to make composure itself accessible, and which sustained it all along during its maturation and development. Dwelling in contentment and friendliness one is thus left

on the edge of the world, no longer bound to it, just one step away from complete release.

Readings

One of the essential roles played by the cultivation of composure is that of providing a profound sense of well-being and happiness, which is independent from external conditions and sensory objects. This form of satisfaction is thus free from the grosser turbulences associated with attitudes of greed, aversion, and ignorance, and in fact arises out of a relinquishment of these attitudes themselves. The following excerpt (MN 14) illustrates how the experience of composure is an essential ingredient for a complete relinquishment of any engagement with greed, aversion, and ignorance.

> It has been heard by me that, on one occasion, the Fortunate was dwelling among the Sakyans, near Kapilavatthu,[213] in the Banyan Tree Park.
>
> Then, Mahanama the Sakyan went to the Fortunate. Having arrived, he paid homage to the Fortunate and sat to one side. Once seated, Mahanama the Sakyan addressed the Fortunate thus: 'Venerable, since long I understand this reality expounded by the Fortunate: greed is an intoxicant (*upakkileso*) of the understanding, aversion is an intoxicant of the understanding, ignorance is an intoxicant of the understanding. And yet, even if I understand this, from time to time realities of greed (*lobhadhammā*) after having subjugated the understanding, remain there; realities of aversion, after having subjugated the understanding, remain there; realities of ignorance, after having subjugated the understanding, remain there. Venerable, I wonder what is the reality (*dhammo*) present in me (*ajjhattaṃ*) that I did not yet abandon, which causes from time to time realities of greed,

213 The Buddha is traditionally described as belonging to the Sakyans, a clan that established itself since the first millennium before the common era as an oligarchic republic across modern-day south-Nepal and north-India. Kapilavatthu was the capital-city of that republic, and the Buddha was originally the son of one of its dignitaries.

aversion, and ignorance, after having subjugated the understanding, to remain there.'[214]

'Mahanama, there is indeed a reality present in you that you did not yet abandon, because of which, from time to time, realities of greed, aversion, and ignorance, after having subjugated your understanding, remain there. Mahanama, if this reality present in you was abandoned, you would not live the homelife, you would not enjoy sensual pleasures.[215] But, Mahanama, because this reality present in you has not been abandoned, you then still live the homelife and enjoy sensual pleasures.

'Sensual pleasures give little enjoyment, but much suffering, much tribulation, and the danger in them is great.' Mahanama, even if an outstanding disciple has well seen this, with right wisdom, according to nature, if nonetheless he has not then attained a form of enthusiastic pleasantness (*pītisukhaṃ*) that is apart from sensual pleasures, apart from non-virtuous realities, or something even more peaceful than that,[216] then he might still return to sensual pleasures.[217]

However, Mahanama, if one has well seen with right wisdom, and according to nature, that sensual pleasures give little enjoyment but much suffering, much tribulation, and the danger in them is great, and has attained a form of enthusiastic pleasantness that is apart from sensual

214 This declaration suggests that Mahanama is a 'once-returner' (*sakadāgāmin*), a disciple that has reached the second stage of awakening in which the first three lower yokes to existence have been relinquished and desire for sensual pleasures and aversion are weakened, but not yet fully abandoned. What the Buddha says in response suggests that he is instructing Mahanama to reach the third stage of the 'non-returner' (*anāgāmin*), and this stage requires not only having understood the danger of sensual pleasures, but also being established in the non-sensual pleasure of composure (*samādhi*).

215 In this context, 'living the homelife' and 'enjoying sensual pleasures' can be taken as synonyms (cf. also MN 137, §7). Homelife (or household life) should be understood more as a lifestyle based on sensuality than as the material fact of living in a fixed residence or even having to engage with family and relatives.

216 This is a reference to the first or second stage of composure. For a comment on the rendering of *pītisukhaṃ*, see footnote 220 below and the *Appendix*.

217 This suggests that the one reality that Mahanama has not yet abandoned (and which leads to the manifestation from time to time of greed, aversion, and ignorance) is the dependence on sensual pleasures for finding some degree of satisfaction and contentment. Abandoning this dependence is the same as developing a way of fully enjoying a non-sensual source of pleasure, see further discussion in the excerpt below from AN 9.41. Nonetheless, one might also understand this 'one reality' to be a reference to a subtle attitude of aversion and self-mortification. Mahanama is an outstanding disciple who has understood that greed should be abandoned, but he might have established it in such a way to fall from the extreme of indulgence into the opposite extreme of aversion (§4, SN 56.11), and this aversion would hinder the access to composure.

pleasures, apart from non-virtuous realities, or something even more peaceful than that, then one does not return to sensual pleasures.

Mahanama, even myself, before my awakening, when I was still a non-awakened being destined to become awakened (*bodhisatta*), I saw well, with right wisdom, and according to nature, that sensual pleasures give little enjoyment, but much suffering, much tribulation, and the danger in them is great; but not having attained a form of enthusiastic pleasantness that is apart from sensual pleasures, apart from non-virtuous realities, or something even more peaceful than that, I recognized that I could still return to sensual pleasures.

However, Mahanama, when I saw well, with right wisdom, and according to nature, that sensual pleasures give little enjoyment, but much suffering, much tribulation, and the danger in them is great, and I did attain a form of enthusiastic pleasantness that is apart from sensual pleasures, apart from non-virtuous realities, or something even more peaceful than that, then I recognized that I could no longer return to sensual pleasures.'

...

(MN 14)

In the discourses, the cultivation of composure is articulated in stages. The most encompassing map of these stages include nine: the first four are contemplations (*jhānā*), followed by four 'formless attainments' (*arūpa samāpattī*), the nineth stage is called 'cessation of perception and feeling' (*saññā-vedayita-nirodha-samāpatti,* see e.g. SN 41.6). Standard analytical explanations of the eightfold path (e.g. SN 45.8 or the relevant section in DN 22) present the four contemplations as the way in which the path factor of right composure is developed. For a synoptic presentation of these, see the *Appendix*.

One way to understand this classification is by connecting it with the cultivation and development of the seven factors of awakening. While all factors might be involved to some degree at any stage of composure, some factors take a more central or prominent role at a particular stage. The first

three factors (recollection, investigation, and energy) are essential for preparing the ground for the arising of composure by countering the hindrances. Together they also constitute an implementation of the factor of right effort, the sixth factor of the eightfold path. The first stage of composure is predominantly characterized by the awakening factor of enthusiasm, and naturally leads to the arousing of the awakening factor of tranquility. The second stage develops the factor of tranquility while verging towards the awakening factor of composure. The third stage develops the factor of composure while sharpening serenity and recollection (which operates as a guiding thread throughout the practice of composure). The fourth stage purifies recollection through serenity, by pacifying any discriminative engagement with the contents of experience. The next four 'formless attainments' can be envisaged as ways of refining further the quality of serenity, by bringing it to a higher degree of simplicity and unification (see the excerpt from MN 137 in §7).

It is essential to appreciate that composure entails a degree of understanding and wisdom. The first stage of composure arises from having profoundly understood the danger of sensuality and having fully tasted the advantage of being free from it. The following excerpt (AN 9.41) presents a method for practicing this way of looking to cultivate composure. The full discourse covers all the nine stages of composure with a similar pattern, but here only the first two are included.

> On one occasion, the Fortunate was dwelling among the Mallans, near a town of the Mallans called Uruvelakappa. The Fortunate, then, early in the morning, having dressed and having taken his bowl and outer robe, entered Uruvelakappa for alms. Having gone for alms into Uruvelakappa, after his meal, upon his return, he addressed the excellent Ananda: 'Ananda, stay here, while I go into the great forest for the daily dwelling.'
>
> 'Yes, Venerable' the excellent Ananda replied to the Fortunate. Then, after that the Fortunate had entered the great forest, he sat down at the root of a certain tree for his daily dwelling.

Then, Tapussa the householder went to the excellent Ananda. Having arrived and having paid homage to the excellent Ananda, he sat to one side. Once seated, Tapussa the householder addressed the excellent Ananda:

'Venerable Ananda, we are householders who are devoted to sensual pleasures, who delight in sensual pleasures, who are delighted by sensual pleasures, who rejoice in sensual pleasures. Venerable, for householders like us, who are devoted to sensual pleasures, who delight in sensual pleasures, who are delighted by sensual pleasures, who rejoice in sensual pleasures, this appears like an abyss, namely, non-sensuality (*nekkhammaṃ*). Venerable, it has been heard by me that in this reality and discipline (*dhammavinaye*) the understanding of mendicants very young jumps (*pakkhandati*) into non-sensuality, finds satisfaction (*pasīdati*) in it, is established (*santiṭṭhati*) in it, and is freed (*vimuccati*) having seen it as peace (*santanti passato*). Venerable, this is the difference between the mendicants that follow this reality and discipline, and the majority of people, namely, non-sensuality.'

'Householder, this is subject of conversation for which we should see the Fortunate. Householder, let us go to the Fortunate. Having arrived, we will tell him this matter. In whatever way the Fortunate will reply, we will remember it in that way.'

'Yes, Venerable' Tapussa the householder replied to the excellent Ananda. Then, the excellent Ananda went together with Tapussa the householder to the Fortunate. Having arrived, and having paid homage to the Fortunate, they sat to one side. Once seated, the excellent Ananda [reported to the Fortunate what Tapussa said].[218]

'So it is, Ananda! So it is, Ananda! Ananda, before my awakening, when I still was a non-awakened being destined to become awakened, even myself thought this: 'Non-sensuality is good! Non-sensuality is good!'

However, Ananda, my understanding did not jump into non-sensuality, did not find satisfaction in it, was not established in it, and was not freed, not having seen it as peace.

Then, Ananda, I thought: 'what is the cause (*hetu*), what is the condition (*paccayo*), because of which my understanding does not jump into non-sen-

218 In the original Pāli, Ananda repeats verbatim the previous discussion.

suality, does not find satisfaction in it, is not established in it, and is not freed, having not seen it as peace?'

Then, Ananda, I thought: 'the danger (*ādīnavo*) in sensual pleasures (*kāmesu*) has not been seen (*adiṭṭho*) by me, nor did I make this vision grow (*abahulīkato*); and I did not find the advantage (*ānisaṃso*) in non-sensuality, nor did I practice it (*anāsevito*). Because of that, my understanding does not jump into non-sensuality, does not find satisfaction in it, is not established in it, and it is not freed, having not seen it as peace.'

Then, Ananda, I thought: 'if having seen the danger in sensual pleasures I would make this vision grow, and having found the advantage in non-sensuality, I would practice it, then it is possible that my understanding might jump into non-sensuality, might find satisfaction in it, might be established in it, and might be freed, having seen it as peace.'

Sometime later, Ananda, having seen the danger in sensual pleasures I made this vision grow, and having found the advantage in non-sensuality, I practiced it.

Then, Ananda, my understanding jumped into non-sensuality, found satisfaction in it, was established in it, and was freed, having seen it as peace.

Then, Ananda, secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from non-virtuous realities, having entered upon it, I dwelt in the first contemplation (*paṭhamaṃ jhānaṃ*), which is accompanied by ascertainment (*savitakkaṃ*) and investigation (*savicāraṃ*),[219] and by an enthusiastic pleasantness (*pītisukhaṃ*)[220] born from seclusion (*vivekajaṃ*).

219 The contemplations (*jhānā*) constitute the first four stages of composure, and each of them is usually presented with several accompanying factors. In the first contemplation the standard formula usually lists four of them. *Vitakka* and *vicara* are variously rendered as 'thinking and pondering' (as rough synonyms of 'thinking') or more technically as 'applied and sustained thought' (referring to the practice of first establishing an object as a main focus of attention, and then sustaining attention on it for prolonged periods of time). Here, *vitakka* is rendered as 'ascertainment,' which plays with the idea of destroying (*vi-*) doubts (*takka*); while *vicara* with 'investigation,' as a way of moving (*carati*) 'inside' (*vi-*) the object by exploring it (cf. MN 19 in §2). This is a way of stressing that *vitakka* and *vicara* are not a generic 'thought process,' but a rather specific way to contemplate a specific theme (in this case sensuality, its dangers and the advantage of non-sensuality), as described just before. Hence, these two factors are present in the first contemplation because they contribute to establish the contemplation itself.

220 This compound is usually rendered with two separate factors: *pīti* and *sukha*, often translated as 'joy and happiness' or 'rapture and pleasure.' However, *sukha* has a very broad meaning and in general indicates a positive and pleasant feeling. In this context, *pīti* seems to add a qualification to this general term by stressing that it is not *any* pleasant feeling, but a particular form of pleasure,

Ananda, while I was dwelling in this way, attention to perceptions connected with sensuality[221] assailed me. This was an affliction (*ābādho*) for me. Ananda, just as the unpleasantness (*dukkhaṃ*) would arise as an affliction for one who is happy (*sukhino*), attention to perceptions connected with sensuality assailed me, and this was an affliction for me.

Then, Ananda, I thought: 'what if, with the pacification (*vūpasamā*) of ascertainment and investigation, having entered upon it, I would dwell in the second contemplation (*dutiyaṃ jhānaṃ*), with an enthusiastic pleasantness born from composure (*samādhijaṃ*), without ascertainment and without investigation, with internal confidence (*sampasādanaṃ*) and unification (*ekodibhāvaṃ*) of the understanding?'[222]

However, Ananda, my understanding did not jump into non-ascertainment (*avitakke*), did not find satisfaction in it, was not established in it, and was not freed, having not seen it as peace.

Then, Ananda, I thought: 'what is the cause, what is the condition, because of which my understanding does not jump into non-ascertainment, does not find satisfaction in it, is not established in it, and is not freed, having not seen it as peace?'

Then, Ananda, I thought: 'the danger in ascertainment has not been seen by me, nor did I make this vision grow; and I did not find the advantage in non-ascertainment, nor did I practice it. Because of that, my understanding does not jump into non-ascertainment, does not find satis-

which is born from non-sensuality (and hence counts as 'not associated with the flesh' according to the classification in MN 10, cf. §3 above). The pleasant enthusiasm of the first contemplation is mostly a sense of profound relief from the fact that one has (even temporarily) abandoned the harassments of sensuality (and of the five hindrances based on it); hence, one feels freed and released, with a pleasant burst of energy throughout the body.

221 *Kāmasahagatā saññāmanasikārā*. This stresses that even *while* dwelling in the first contemplation, a not yet fully awakened understanding is still subject to the resurgence of sensuality and the instability of attention, which shows that dwelling in the first contemplation is by itself only a temporary relief from sensuality.

222 In the passage from the first to the second contemplation, some factors (*vitakka* and *vicara*) are first pacified and then drop away. Others are transformed, *pītisukha* is no longer born from seclusion, but it is now born from composure, namely, it is the much quieter sense of pleasant enthusiasm that arises from contemplating how composed one's understanding has become. Since *vitakka* and *vicara* entail a subtle form of restlessness and the need for 'checking' what is happening, their disappearance leads to an internal sense of confidence and assurance (*sampasādanaṃ*), which was not present in the first contemplation. Also, because of this inner certainty and stillness, the understanding reaches a much higher degree of unification (*ekodibhāvaṃ*).

faction in it, is not established in it, is not freed, having not seen it as peace.'

Then, Ananda, I thought: 'if having seen the danger in ascertainment I would make this vision grow, and having found the advantage in non-ascertainment, I would practice it, then it is possible that my understanding might jump into non-ascertainment, might find satisfaction in it, might be established in it, and might be freed, having seen it as peace.'

Sometime later, Ananda, having seen the danger in ascertainment I made this vision grow, and having found the advantage in non-ascertainment, I practiced it.

Then, Ananda, my understanding jumped into non-ascertainment, found satisfaction in it, was established in it, and was freed, having seen it as peace.

Then, Ananda, with the pacification of ascertainment and investigation, having entered upon it, I dwelt in the second contemplation, with an enthusiastic pleasantness born from composure, without ascertainment and without investigation, with internal confidence and unification of the understanding.

Ananda, while I was dwelling in this way, attention to perceptions connected with ascertainment assailed me. This was an affliction for me. Ananda, just as the unpleasantness would arise as an affliction for one who is happy, attention to perceptions connected with ascertainment assailed me, and this was an affliction for me.'

...[223]

(AN 9.41)

The cultivation of the first four stages of composure is often illustrated with the use of similes, which might be helpful to provide a more concrete sense

223 The discourse continues with the same pattern through the other stages of composure until the cessation of perception and feelings. Then, wisely understanding the meaning of that state, the Buddha reaches full awakening. This does *not* mean that full awakening consists in the cessation of perception and feelings, or that one can find true peace only in complete cessation. Rather, the exploration of the whole spectrum of composure reveals the potential danger inherent in any constructed (and hence uncertain) state, and shows how real escape consists in not appropriating anything in any possible state.

of the experience they entail and how to sustain it. The following excerpt (AN 5.28) presents the similes used for the first two stages of composure.

> '... Mendicants, a mendicant secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from non-virtuous realities, having entered upon it, dwells in the first contemplation, which is accompanied by ascertainment and investigation, and by an enthusiastic pleasantness born from seclusion.
>
> One makes fully flow (*abhisandeti*) in this body that enthusiastic pleasantness born from seclusion, makes it flow in the whole body (*parisandeti*), replenishes (*paripūreti*) it, pervades (*parippharati*) it;[224] so that there is no part in this whole body that is not pervaded by that enthusiastic pleasantness born from seclusion.
>
> Mendicants, suppose that there was a dexterous bath-attendant or their apprentice,[225] who having strewed bath powder over a metal basin, would mix it with water, by sprinkling it all around little by little, so that the lump of bath powder absorbs the moisture, is taken by the moisture, pervaded inside and outside by the moisture, but does not trickle.[226]
>
> Just in the same way, Mendicants, a mendicant makes fully flow in this body that enthusiastic pleasantness born from seclusion, makes it flow in the whole body, replenishes it, pervades it, so that there is no part in this whole body that is not pervaded by that enthusiastic pleasantness. Mendicants, this is the first development of the fivefold right composure of the outstanding ones.[227]

224 This progression, based on seemingly synonymic expressions, suggests an order in which one proceeds: first one causes the feeling of enthusiastic pleasantness to move through the body (notice that verbs used here are in the causative), then allows this flow to pervade the whole body; hence, one makes it sure that the whole body is not only pervaded, but completely filled by that feeling and eventually that each and every bit of it is soaked with that feeling. The verb *parippharati* is close to the verb *pharati*, which is used to describe the practice of boundless friendliness (§3, AN 3.65).

225 *N[a]hāpako vā n[a]hāpakantevāsī.* In ancient India, barbers were also responsible for preparing and giving baths to high-class people. This included preparing the soap needed for the bath, which is the activity described in this simile.

226 In this simile, the bath powder is a dry element that is gently sprinkled with water to create a consistent mass of soap, which is moist and soft, but also consistent and does not melt away. The bath powder stands for the body, while water stands for the feeling of enthusiastic pleasantness that allows the body to 'melt' and become 'soft.'

227 This sentence refers to the context of this discourse, in which the four contemplations are presented together with a fifth stage in which one reflects upon the nature of composure itself.

Moreover, Mendicants, a mendicant, with the pacification of ascertainment and investigation, having entered upon it, dwells in the second contemplation, with an enthusiastic pleasantness born from composure, without ascertainment and without investigation, with internal confidence and unification of the understanding.

One makes fully flow in this body that enthusiastic pleasantness born from composure, makes it flow in the whole body, replenishes it, pervades it, so that there is no part in this whole body that is not pervaded by that enthusiastic pleasantness born from composure.

Mendicants, suppose that there was a lake with a water source in its depths, and the lake had no water provision from east, west, north or south, nor would it receive provisions from the sky from time to time. Then, that source of cool water welling up in the lake would make the cool water flow in the lake, make it flow in the whole of it, replenish it, pervade it, so that there would be no part of the whole lake that is not pervaded by cool water.[228]

Just in the same way, Mendicants, a mendicant makes fully flow in this body that enthusiastic pleasantness born from composure, makes it flow in the whole body, replenishes it, pervades it, so that there is no part in this whole body that is not pervaded by that enthusiastic pleasantness born from composure.

Mendicants, this is the second development of the fivefold right composure of the outstanding ones.'

...

(AN 5.28)

228 Notice that the task of pervading the body with enthusiastic pleasantness is the same, but the simile suggests that this unfolds quite differently in the second stage of composure, due to the different nature of enthusiastic pleasantness (which is now born from composure). Instead of actively massaging it into the body (as it happens with the bath-attendant simile), now the feeling of enthusiastic pleasantness wells up from within the body itself, like spring water in a lake without other water provisions (the four directions and the sky might be taken as a metaphor for the five physical senses). The happiness of composure seems to sustain itself and arise from within, and one is not actively 'doing' anything to spread it, but it rather spreads seemingly on its own (notice that in the simile there is no longer a human agent involved). This does not mean that all activity ceases at the second stage of composure, but rather that this activity becomes much subtler and no longer identifiable as an agent-based sort of activity. There is something going on, but there is no longer a 'doer' of it.

While the discussion of composure is pervasive throughout the discourses and it constitutes a key aspect of the eightfold path, it is never presented as an end in itself. In fact, the experience of composure is just the best means of gaining a direct and deep insight into the way in which any experience is constructed. In particular, composure allows one to immediately face the connection between appropriation and suffering on the one hand, versus non appropriation and release on the other hand. Since composure requires a degree of relinquishment with respect to appropriation, it directly teaches how to let contents go and makes it possible to appreciate how genuine freedom and relief arise from this letting go. The following discourse (SN 22.5) reflects systematically on this point.

> 'Mendicants, cultivate composure! Mendicants, a mendicant who is composed knows according to nature. And what does one know according to nature? The origination and fading away of form,[229] the origination and fading away of feelings, the origination and fading away of perceptions,

229 *Rūpassa samudayañca atthaṅgamañca*, the formula is repeated with due variation for the other aggregates. Notice that the couple *samudaya-atthaṅgama* is the same that occurs in the refrain of the four establishments of recollection (§1, MN 10). The genitive case (*rūpassa*) can also be interpreted more loosely as expressing whatever originates and fades away *in relation to* form and the other aggregates. But in this context, origination and fading away are understood as structural features that characterize each and every constituent of experience. In this sense, even if something is currently enduring, its nature is such that it has originated, and it will necessarily fade away (see §4, SN 56.11, and §5, SN 22.55). In turn, this insight is connected with an understanding of the inherently conditional nature of all components of experience, which is expressed by a reference to an abridged sequence of conditioned co-origination (see e.g. SN 12.2). The element of origination is here identified with *nandī*, which can be taken as an equivalent of *taṇhā* (SN 56.11). Hence, with the cessation of *nandī*, the process also ceases. Ordinarily, the experience of the five aggregates is the experience of appropriation towards them, and this appropriation is rooted in delight or thirst for them. The origination of an aggregate thus manifests as its appearing as 'my' body or feeling and so forth (namely, as the aggregate affected by appropriation). With the cessation of delight or thirst, appropriation ceases, and with it the flavor of personality that surrounds the experience of the five aggregates dissolves. In a sense, the five aggregates remain present, but they are no longer experienced as 'mine,' and in this respect what previously appeared to me as 'my body' or 'my feelings' and so forth has ceased. Composure leads to the realization of this possibility (how ordinary experience arises, and how it can cease) by bringing the practitioner to a point of sufficient stillness and equipoise to discern that, in and of themselves, none of the aggregates is inherently personal, and their constructed nature entails a fundamental uncertainty that makes any genuine appropriation of them impossible.

the origination and fading away of coactions, the origination and fading away of consciousness.

Mendicants, and what is the origination of form, feelings, perceptions, coactions and consciousness? Mendicants, here a mendicant seeks delights in (*abhinandati*),[230] welcomes (*abhivadati*), and being bound to (*ajjhosāya*), stands there (*tiṭṭhati*).[231]

And with regard to what does one seeks delight in, welcome, and being bound to, stand there? One seeks delight in form, welcomes it, and being bound to it, stands there. For one who seeks delight in form, welcomes it, and being bound to it, stands there, delight (*nandī*) arises. That delight in form is appropriation (*upādānaṃ*). Conditioned by that appropriation, there is existence; conditioned by existence, there is birth; conditioned by birth there is aging and death, and sorrow, lamentation, suffering, sadness, grief come to be. This is the origination (*samudayo*) of this whole mass of suffering.

One seeks delight in feelings ..., in perceptions ..., in coactions ..., in consciousness, welcomes it, and being bound to it, stands there. For one who seeks delight in consciousness, welcomes it, and being bound to it, stands there, delight arises. That delight in consciousness is appropriation. Conditioned by that appropriation there is existence; conditioned by existence, there is birth; conditioned by birth there is aging and death, and sorrow, lamentation, suffering, sadness, grief come to be. This is the origination of this whole mass of suffering.

Mendicants, this is the origination of form, feelings, perceptions, coactions, and consciousness.

Mendicants, and what is the fading away of form, feelings, perceptions, coactions, and consciousness?

Mendicants, here one does not seek delight, does not welcome, and not being bound to, one does not stand there.

230 *Abhinandati* might also be rendered as 'to greatly delight' or just with 'to delight,' 'to rejoice.' However, since the discourse shows that this is the basis for the arising of *nandī* (which is already included in the root of the verb), it seems appropriate to interpret the verb as indicating a more initial and preliminary stage in the process, connected with the arousal or quest for delight in something, a sort of 'looking forward (*abhi-*) for delight (*nandī*).'

231 Compare this sequence with the opposite attitude that is relinquished through the use of the *no cassa* formula in the second part of SN 22.55 (§5).

And with regard to what does one not seek delight in, does not welcome, and not being bound to, does not stand there? One does not seek delight in form, does not welcome it, and not being bound to it, does not stand there. For one who does not seek delight in form, does not welcome it, and not being bound to it, does not stand there, that delight in form ceases (*nirujjhati*). With that cessation of delight, appropriation ceases; with the cessation of appropriation, there is the cessation of existence; with the cessation of existence, there is the cessation of birth; with the cessation of birth, there is the cessation of aging and death, and sorrow, lamentation, suffering, sadness, grief do not come to be. This is the cessation (*nirodho*) of this whole mass of suffering.

One does not seek delight in feelings ..., in perceptions ..., in coactions ..., in consciousness, does not welcome it, and not being bound to it, does not stand there. For one who does not seek delight in consciousness, does not welcome it, and not being bound to it, does not stand there, that delight in consciousness ceases. With that cessation of delight, appropriation ceases; with the cessation of appropriation, there is the cessation of existence; with the cessation of existence, there is the cessation of birth; with the cessation of birth, there is the cessation of aging and death, and sorrow, lamentation, suffering, sadness, grief do not come to be. This is the cessation of this whole mass of suffering.

Mendicants, this is the fading away of form, feelings, perceptions, coactions, and consciousness.'

(SN 22.5)

7. Freedom

Directions

Establish awareness of your bodily posture (§1). Abandon the hindrances or just notice if they are momentarily absent (§2). Arouse a sense of contentment and non-aversion and pervade your whole bodily space with it (§3). After having perceived your own vulnerability, arose and dwell in an attitude of friendliness towards it, and extend this attitude towards all living beings (§4). When the feeling of friendliness is stable enough, make it boundless in all directions and dwell in it (§5). When this is established, gently shift attention from the feeling of friendliness to the enthusiastic pleasantness and sense of relief associated with it. Nurture this experience until composure becomes stable and sustained (§6).

While you dwell in any degree of composure accessible at a given moment, use your metacognitive awareness to notice how this state in which you are (which is the whole of your current experience) is entirely produced by your own intentional activity.

You can notice that in the experience of composure there is nothing beyond your deliberate effort of creating and sustaining that experience. There is no reality, being or objectively existent state that you are approaching as if you were coming from the outside of it. The way in which your intentionality and attention function shapes your current experience and the contents you perceive. None of these contents exist independently from the way in which you fabricate them moment by moment.

Moreover, since intentions are discrete acts, they are also inherently uncertain in the sense that they arise only as determined by the real possibility of their cessation. Any stage of composure is determined by this real possibility

of its own cessation. If you can subtly shift your attention to this real possibility of cessation, you can see that it brings a sense of profound relief, as if a heavy burden has been dropped. What is uncertain and determined by the real possibility of its cessation cannot be owned, and what is not ownable by anybody cannot be seen as 'mine.' What is not 'mine' cannot be 'my' problem. Without problems there is no worry, without worries there is freedom. Delve into this sense of freedom that the discernment of the entirely fabricated nature of experience brings, and let it pervade the whole of your experience. You might also notice that you are not bound even to this blissful sense of freedom.

As you reflect in this way, try not to lose your state of composure. Simply contemplate its uncertain nature indirectly, as something in the background of your field of vision, without having to turn your gaze directly to it. Freedom is not discerned as a specific content that stands in front of you, but rather as if you were to discern the meaning of a word. You see the word in front, and you discern the meaning, although the meaning is not in the word itself, in its written shape, or in any of its graphical components. The meaning is in your understanding as it understands the word for what it is and for what it means. Freedom is discerned in the same way, by contemplating any aspect of your experience or even your experience as a whole and by then understanding its most profound and genuine meaning.

Deliberately decide how long you want to dwell in the sense of freedom, and whether after having dwelt in it long enough, you prefer to return to your state of composure or move towards ending your session.

When you decide to end your session, you can return first to feeling of boundless friendliness (§5), then to friendliness towards yourself (§4), and then to the even simpler awareness of the whole body (§1). Alternatively, you

can try to keep sustaining the sense of freedom gathered so far as you progressively and naturally emerge from composure. As you become more familiar with the sense of freedom, you will realize that it can be sustained effortlessly, and it can accompany any perception, both during formal practice and outside of it. In fact, you do not have to leave it at any point.

Refinements

Freedom arises out of discerning the fabricated nature of experience, which allows one to see that there is nothing that one could possibly appropriate as 'mine' (remember §4, *Reflections*). Freedom, however, is not contemplated in the way in which any other object is contemplated. Freedom is not a particular content of experience, but rather a quality that accompanies all contents. It cannot be discerned directly but only indirectly, by realizing what is not present (or cannot be present) in whatever is experienced. In this sense, freedom is discerned in the way in which emptiness, absence, and cessation are discerned, namely, negatively, peripherally, and indirectly. Also, since freedom is not a positive content, but an absence, it does not require effort to be produced and fabricated; for this reason, its contemplation is the only genuinely effortless contemplation one can ever experience.

In order to explore this sense of freedom, you can practice in a more analytical or in a more synthetic way. In a more analytical way, you can try to discern each and every component or factor that contributes to make up the current state of composure and discern how each of them is a factor of fabrication, without which the whole experience would not be there. In a more synthetic way, you can simply be aware that the state you are experiencing is the product of your practice so far, there is nothing more or above it, hence it is fabricated through and through. In either case, this observation unfolds at the level of metacognitive awareness, without having to disturb or disrupt the state of composure. If composure has become so intense and still that

metacognitive awareness is seemingly frozen, then you have first to come back to a degree of composure in which metacognitive awareness is working again in a more fluid way.

Notice, however, that some minimal degree of metacognitive awareness is always present in right composure, and definitely well available in the first stage of composure (§6). States of seemingly deep stillness in which metacognitive awareness is completely absent are states in which you either sink semi-unconsciously into some experience or just fall into a complete non-perception of anything. These states are *not* suitable for cultivating freedom; hence they are better avoided altogether.

Insight into the fabricated nature of experience is something that has been growing all along during your practice. You can review previous steps and see how even then fabrication was glaringly apparent, even if you might not have noticed it so clearly. The sort of insight arising in composure is more like a summary of something that has been piling up for a long time, which now becomes particularly evident; so evident that it needs no words to be articulated and no argument to be proved. It is simply apparent here and now, in your direct experience, beyond any possible doubt.

You can also observe how the sense of freedom that discloses at this point is deeply connected but also different from what has been cultivated in previous stages. Consider the practice of working with the hindrances (§2 and §3). Here, you first try to establish a degree of stable attention on an object (like the bodily posture), enjoying it with openness, until some hindrance arises. When a hindrance is recognized as such, it is detected as a way in which attention contracts and shrinks. Hindrances are acknowledged as painful and unpleasant to some degree and require antidotes to restore the sense of openness established previously. This pattern (initial peace, arising of a hin-

drance, abandoning of the hindrance, reestablishment of peace, and so on) can occur at any level of experience and with any degree of subtlety. However, when you deliberately cultivate and discern the sense of freedom that arises from non-appropriation, you are *not* facing the presence of a certain hindrance, but rather observing the nature of a peaceful condition as it is disclosed in an experience of composure. Here, hindrances are *not* currently present, and yet you can discern that the very nature of this seemingly peaceful experience (composure itself) is inherently dissonant and subtly stressful since it is produced by intentional acts, which are uncertain. Freedom arises from the *understanding* that this is just the nature of *any* possible experience, and since this entails that no experience can be appropriated, you understand that freedom is non appropriating any experience, regardless of how peaceful or stressful it might be. Freedom lies not in the particular content of experience (whether it is good or bad, stressful or blissful), but in one's attitude towards it (trying to appropriate contents or not). While working with the hindrances you move from a condition of stress to a condition of greater peace (namely, from less to more composure); discerning the sense of freedom, instead, allows you to go even beyond this peacefulness (namely, beyond composure itself). The first approach (working with the hindrances, moving towards composure) is thus a necessary but only preliminary step for the second (understanding the nature of freedom, and not appropriating any experience whatsoever, including the experience of composure).

When you are more familiar with the taste of freedom experienced in composure, see whether you can carry that same sense of freedom as you progressively emerge from your session, and eventually sustain it also during informal practice throughout day and night. The basis for freedom is clearly seeing the uncertain nature of experience as it unfolds, and this is an insight that is accessible at any moment in which there is any experience. Composure allows it to appear more clearly because composure is less dense in terms

of contents and less heavy in terms of intentional pulls and pushes. Sometimes, subtler or grosser manifestations of the hindrances might make this sense of freedom unavailable. However, sufficient familiarity with it might also allow you to arouse it at any point and make it in turn a basis for cultivating composure itself. Since freedom allows to relinquish the basis for the hindrances, it leads gently to more tranquility, in which composure naturally arises. Freedom and composure can thus feed back into one another.

In terms of understanding, it is important to discern more and more clearly the mutual relationship between appropriation and the weight that contents (seem to) have. This weight is usually articulated in terms of their imputed existence, which underpins thoughts and intentions aimed at those contents. The stronger the appropriation, the stronger the sense that the contents of experience really exist on their own, and that their existence somehow calls for a (re)action (grasping, reject, avoid, and so on). This sense of existence is a sort of exclamation mark that surrounds contents and make them stand out as foci of attention and concern. The more appropriation is recognized as impossible (the more one sees that all contents of experience are unsuitable for appropriation), the less the weight of existence is projected on contents. The lessening of appropriation is experienced as a lightening of experience. Contents still appear (and they are real as such), but they are experienced as having nothing behind, they have less weight, perhaps they are apprehended as floating appearances, ungraspable, empty. When this experience becomes stronger, it feeds back into the realization of the impossibility of appropriation by making it even more apparent, which in turn strengthens the experience of emptiness. Eventually, this is applied even to the one who seemingly does the appropriation and approaches experience from the point of view of attitudes of I-making and mine-making. Even that alleged subject or character is entirely fabricated, dependent on the structure of experience, uncertain, lacking any inherent 'real stuff' as anything else.

Reflections

Seeing the impossibility of appropriating contents

Experience is the horizon, experience is the playground, experience is where anything that happens can be encountered and faced. If there is anything that is beyond any possible experience, something completely unreachable in any way, then that thing, whatever it is, is surely irrelevant in the most profound way. No need to bother about it. Even the idea of moving beyond experience remains fully within the domain of experience since it is indeed experienced as an idea. Experience is the world, and the world is experience.

Experience has a twofold structure: appearing and content. Any experience whatsoever is always structured as the appearing of some content. Without some content, there could not be any experience. Even the most refined, the most terse, the emptiest content is still a content, something that is experienced as *that* most refined, terse, empty experience. Without appearing, no content could be experienced. A content that is assumed to exist without appearing is a content whose existence does not appear, hence a content that in fact is manifest only for its complete absence. Such a content would be indiscernible from sheer nothingness.

A common ordinary assumption postulates that 'being' or 'existence' are some real and objective 'stuff' that contents possess on their own, and in virtue of which they can appear, although they would be or exist regardless of whether they appear or not. This assumption is misleading since it pretends that 'being' or 'existence' can be separated from their appearing as contents. A 'being' or 'existence' that is inherently non-appearing cannot be predicated of anything at all; hence, no content could ever possess this sort of 'being' or 'existence.' In fact, appearing is more fundamental than any 'being' or 'existence' in the sense that anything that is or exists could not

appear for what it is independently from the fact that it appears as a content of appearing.

The twofold structure of experience thus acknowledges that all experience is the appearing of some content. There is no content that does not appear (or that could exist without appearing), and there is no appearing that is not the appearing of some content. The twofold structure is inviolable (since there could not possibly be any experience of such a violation), and its members cannot be taken apart from one another. This structure also reveals that any effort or attempt to experience contents as 'my own' is doomed to fail.

All contents are contents of appearing and there is no further reality beyond or behind their appearing since 'being' or 'existence' are themselves contents of appearing. Hence, all contents inherently depend on their appearing in order to be experienced. They take shape within the appearing itself, like in a womb, and appearing shapes them and fabricates them. The way in which a content is results from the way in which the content appears; the quality, manner or modality of the appearing is responsible for how a content is perceived and experienced. Appropriation of any 'real stuff' that lies beyond appearing is thus impossible.

Contents are like banknotes. They might look as if they refer to some inherently valuable amount of gold stored somewhere in a secure place. However, upon closer inspection one realizes that the value of the banknote is not linked to the value of any gold anywhere. Banknotes are just pieces of paper that are agreed to have a certain value, but this value cannot be inherent in them since they are just pieces of paper in themselves. They might *pretend* to have value because of some inherently valuable amount of gold stored somewhere, but there is actually no gold storage that ensure the value of banknotes and even gold does not have any value in itself since it is just a metal. Value is not inherent in anything; it is an assumption (it is a *meaning*). It can be used, but it cannot be found as something that exists on its own.

Hence, one can use banknotes to exchange goods or play with them, but one cannot appropriate the *value* of banknotes because they have none.

When one seeks to appropriate something, one seeks to appropriate that thing, not just the appearing of that thing (one wants the valuable good itself, not just a piece of paper stating that there is some value somewhere else). One might be greedy for money and dreaming of a large quantity of banknotes. However, greed concerns the imputed value of banknotes, not their physical nature as pieces of paper. A greedy person is not greedy for fake banknotes with no currency since they will be perceived (understood) as having no value. Appropriation always concerns an imputed value (existence) that is assumed to lie beyond appearance (the currency value beyond the banknote itself). Yet, there is nothing beyond appearing (there is no inherently valuable good beyond the statement that there is some value); hence, nothing can be appropriated in this way.

Appropriation also fails to grasp and firmly hold contents of appearing *as* contents of appearing. Having realized that contents are just contents of appearing, one might find that is enough to appropriate those contents for what they are, and just appropriating their appearing would be enough. However, contents are inherently uncertain; hence, they are unsuitable for any form of appropriation. Any content is always a determinate content. A determinate content is a content that is defined by its difference with respect to something else: *this* is not *that*.[232] The appearing of *this* is not the appearing

232 From what has been seen so far, it should be apparent that determination is *not* rooted in any objective reality established in its own right beyond appearances. Nevertheless, since appearing is not its content, the appearing of determinations (contents) cannot be derived from the nature of appearing itself. To use Western philosophical jargon, both realism (there is a really existing objective external world, whose reality is independent of any experience of it), and idealism (there is no such an objective external world, all experience is dependent upon the source of appearing) are fallacious, since they are at odds with the structure of appearing. Moreover, determination entails its own structure (based on the difference between the actual appearing of a content and the inherent real possibility of its cessation), which holds regardless of how determination is spelled out or which particular contents are determined. This structure simply ensures what determination is. Notice that no appearing could appear if it was not the appearing of some content, and appearing of some content has to be the appearing of a determinate content. If the content of appearing were

of *that*. In this sense, appearing is always the appearing of a determinate content. If the content was not determinate, then the appearing would not be the appearing of any content; there would be no appearing, no experience. Even the idea of an indeterminate content is determinate insofar as it is *this* idea and not any other idea. However, to be determinate, any content must have in itself the immanently present real possibility of its cessation. The fact that *this* content is not *that* means that the appearing of *that* content is a real possibility, and when *that* content appears instead of *this*, then *this* content no longer appears but has ceased.[233] If the cessation of a content of appearing

just the pure appearing of itself and nothing else, and if this content is supposed to be indeterminate, then the appearing of the pure appearing could not be different or discernible from the sheer non appearing of anything at all (since an indeterminate content, not being determinate, is also not discernible from the appearing of no content at all). In this case, appearing could not appear as a pure appearing of itself because it would be indiscernible from the non-appearing of anything at all, which is not supposed to be the same as the pure appearing itself (given that the pure appearing is taken to be a positive content that actually appears, and that is different from the sheer non appearing of any content at all, otherwise the pure appearing would not be the appearing of an indeterminate content). Hence, the hypothesis of a pure appearing of an indeterminate content is impossible. Since the structure of appearing entails that appearing is appearing of a *determinate* content, the structure of determination is part and parcel of the structure of appearing.

233 Notice that a difference might be conceived in two ways: (i) the synchronic difference between A and B, while both appear at the same time as one different from the other; (ii) the diachronic difference between A and B, where B is the absence or cessation of A. This absence or cessation, however, cannot be a purely void or empty content since any appearing is the appearing of *some* content. Hence, the cessation of A can be experienced only as the appearing of B, which is non-A. In this sense, B is implicitly present in the actual appearing of A as the real possibility of its cessation. This case of diachronic difference subsumes the case of synchronic difference. In order for A and B to simultaneously appear as both actually present *and* different from one another, both A and B need to be determinate contents. This entails that both A and B are determined with respect to the real possibility of their own cessation. But the real possibility of the cessation of A is the real possibility of the appearing of B-which-is-not-A; and the real possibility of the cessation of B is the appearing of A-which-is-not-B. Hence, it is in virtue of their own determination with respect to the real possibility of their cessation that two different contents can appear simultaneously next to one another as different from one another. For instance, say that the chair is not the table, and yet the chair appears next to the table. To recognize that the chair is not the table (for their difference to appear), the chair must appear as *this* determinate content (a chair) and the table as *that* determinate content (a table). However, for the chair to appear in this determinate way, it must have the real possibility of its cessation (the absence or the non-appearing of this chair). This real possibility includes whatever is not a chair, hence also a table. The appearing of a table is the actual non-appearing of a chair. It is in virtue of this real possibility that a chair can appear different from a table *while simultaneously appearing with it*, since in the determination of a chair as such is included the real possibility of its cessation, which in turn includes the table as a possible way in which the real possibility of the cessation can appear. Diachronic difference subsumes synchronic difference because diachronic difference is based on the real possibility of the cessation of what

was impossible, then that content would not be determined with respect to the possibility of its own absence; its presence would be indiscernible from its absence, and hence, the content would not be determinate, and thus could not appear. For this reason, the appearing of any content whatsoever is always such that it immanently entails in itself the real possibility of its cessation. This possibility is a *possibility* in the sense that the cessation of a content does not appear in actuality at the same time when that same content also appears. Otherwise, the appearing itself would be impossible in the first place. Yet, that possibility is *real* in the sense that, sooner or later, it will be actualized and that content will really cease to appear at some point. Hence, its appearing is inherently uncertain, both in the sense that it will have to cease (it will not last forever), *and* in the sense that when this cessation will occur or how is not encoded in the content itself. What is inherently uncertain cannot be appropriate as 'mine' since it does not obey or abide by what 'I' might want to get from it or do with it. One can relate with inherently uncertain contents in many ways, but one cannot pretend that they will remain at one's own mercy since contents are what they are because they are inherently uncertain and thus, at any moment, can cease to appear in the way in which they currently do (from a slight change to their complete disappearance), regardless of how or who is engaging with them.

In synthesis, appropriation of any content could be envisaged only with respect to (i) a content of experience that is assumed to exist in its own right (beyond or regardless of its appearing) or (ii) a content of experience that is considered as a content that appears and manifests. In other words, appropriation concerns either (i) the existence of something or (ii) its appearing.

is actually appearing, and this real possibility can be instantiated by all the contents in which the actually appearing content does not appear, which includes all the content that can appear (synchronically) next to the actually appearing content and result *different* from it. In other terms, the real possibility of cessation can be determined in many ways (whatever is not a chair counts as the appearing of the absence of a chair, or the non-appearing of a chair), and synchronic difference is just one determinate manner in which some of these ways can manifest together within the same field of experience in the same moment.

Since the whole of experience can be analyzed in terms of contents of appearing, and contents can be understood as existing in their own right or not (which means they are just contents of appearing), this dichotomy is exclusive and no third option is available. However, appropriation is impossible in both cases. On the one hand, contents of experience cannot be experienced as existing in their own right; hence, the very idea of this independent existence is just a contradictory content of appearing. On the other hand, contents of experience considered just as contents of appearing are necessarily determined contents. Whatever is determined is determined by the real possibility of its cessation, which makes the determination inherently uncertain. Whatever is uncertain cannot be appropriated. Hence, contents of experience considered purely as contents of appearing cannot be appropriated either.

Seeing the impossibility of appropriating appearing

Appropriation fails at other levels too. Even appearing itself cannot be appropriated *as* appearing because it cannot be separated or divorced from those very contents that appear. The appearing as such does not have any particular quality, property, being, or reality independently from the sheer fact of being the manifestation of a content. Besides and beyond the content that appears there is nothing left in appearing *as* appearing that one might appropriate as one's own property or claim ownership of. Moreover, if the contents are uncertain, their appearing is uncertain as well, hence equally unsuitable for any appropriation to take hold of it.

Even the structure of appearing itself is unsuitable for appropriation. One cannot appropriate either of the two members of this structure (appearing or contents), and one cannot appropriate their relationship since this relationship is nothing over and above the way in which contents appear. The structure of appearing can be experienced only insofar as it is a content of appearing (or rather is part of any content of appearing). Hence, it shares the same properties of all contents and of all appearing, and the same impossibility for

anyone to claim ownership of it. As one tries to appropriate a content, one finds out that all that there is, is just the uncertain appearing of that content. As one tries to appropriate appearing as such, one finds out that all that there is is nothing above, beyond or below the uncertain content that appears. None of the two sides of the structure of experience is suitable for appropriation; they both refuse and escape from any attempt to hold onto them. Only ignorance and delusion about this basic structure can create the illusion of any more concrete and tangible reality available for appropriation.

This way of looking at the structure of experience is itself a way of making that structure appearing; hence it is itself the appearing of a content. Even in this way of looking there is nothing that can be appropriated. The content of this view is a certain way of understanding the fundamental grammar of experience. Yet, this understanding does not refer or lead to some deeper reality, existing outside or beyond the view itself that reveals it. At the same time, the pure fact of seeing reality in this way is nothing in and of itself beyond the appearing of this particular content, namely, of this structure of experience. Contents of experience do appear, and the appearing of contents manifests itself. This manifestation as such is not a problem. Appropriation pretends to grasp at those contents in one way or another, claiming that 'this is mine.' This claim is ungrounded and ultimately collapses against the impossibility of obtaining what it wants to obtain (namely, control and mastery over the contents that are appropriated). Hence, it can only be sustained by ignorance and bad faith.

Notice that what has been mentioned so far concerning the structure of experience entails that appearing cannot be somehow grounded in a subject to whom contents appear.[234] In order for a subject to relate to appearing, the

234 The fact that experience (appearing) reveals a certain *perspective* on contents, and that this perspective somehow indicates a specific point of observation, does *not* entail that there is any real entity that grounds this perspectival construction. In other words, experience can have (i) a subjective perspective without entailing (ii) the existence of a real subject as its ground. Ordinarily, these two points are conflated, which leads one either to assume that any appearing is for its subject, or

subject must appear. A subject that does not appear at all is not within the field of experience; hence, it is not real, nor can it have anything to do with experience. However, if the subject appears within experience, then the subject itself is a *content* of appearing, not its ground, because appearing does not need to be the appearing of a subject, nor does it need to appear to a subject, while instead a subject needs to appear in order to claim to have any function in experience. Only under the assumption that a subject must be the ground of appearing (which is a variant of the assumption that 'being' can be real independently or prior to appearing) is it possible to assume that appearing must appear to someone. This assumption runs against the very structure of appearing; hence, it must be discarded.

Appearing does not have to appear to anything else or different from appearing itself. In fact, appearing could *not* appear to anything different from itself. If appearing (A) appears to something (X) that is inherently different from appearing, then this something (X different from A) would not appear in itself; but if appearing appears to something that does not appear, then the thing in which appearing appears (X) does not appear. Hence, appearing (A) does not appear either. If appearing appears to something that is only numerically different from appearing itself (A', another appearing), then this difference must be more fundamental than the appearing of appearing (since it is only in virtue of that difference that an appearing, A, can appear to another, numerically different appearing, A'). However, in order for this difference to be present, it must appear; hence, appearing (A') must already be in place. As a consequence, this difference cannot be the ground of appearing itself (namely, it cannot be that in virtue of which appearing, A, can appear to another appearing, A'), since it requires appearing (A') as something already established *before* the

that by rejecting the real existence of this subject appearing must also become purely objective. This latter option is also impossible since the subjective perspective of appearing is part of the structure of determination, which is necessary in order for the contents of appearing to appear *as contents* (objects, something determinate with respect to a non-object, namely, a subject) and for them to be discerned from appearing as such.

difference could manifest in order to be part of experience.[235] As a result, appearing appears only to itself; it is naturally self-reflexive. Any idea of a subject (empirical, transcendental, or of any other sort) can only be a content of appearing, a way in which a certain appearing manifests, not its ground. As a consequence, appearing is inherently and naturally impersonal, in the sense that it precedes any further distinction that would qualify *this* appearing as different from *that* appearing.[236]

Weightlessness

In ordinary experience, appearing is shaped by appropriation. Appropriation is a way of experiencing the weight of contents. Like the force of gravity that attracts and pulls bodies towards a center and makes them belong there as much as possible, appropriation pulls and attracts contents (sometimes by

235 In this case, the grounding relation between two different appearing*s* is taken to be asymmetrical not because of any assumption regarding grounding relations in general, but because of the structure of appearing: a difference in appearing cannot appear if appearing is not firstly established since any difference is just a content of appearing and it could not appear if there was no appearing at all. The phenomenon of 'two' has no meaning and cannot be established or manifest if the phenomenon 'one' has not been understood first and if it is not manifest already. Hence, a difference in appearing ('two') cannot ground appearing ('one') since it would require that very appearing in order to appear as a grounding difference. The impossibility at stake here is not logical but phenomenological or experiential; it concerns what can or cannot appear, not what is logically consistent or not.

236 In Western philosophy (especially from Kant onwards), the 'transcendental subject' is taken to be different from the 'empirical subject' (the set of phenomena that qualify and characterize a certain human individual or personality). The transcendental subject is the condition of possibility for experience to appear as the experience of *one* subject or the condition for accounting for the unity of experience. The transcendental subject is usually established as the result of some inference aimed at proving that this subject *exists*, although it does not appear as a content of experience. What has been said so far about the fact that appearing is self-reflexive is opposite to the idea of such a transcendental subject for at least two main reasons. First, appearing is wholly apparent, and its self-reflexivity does not leave any space in experience for anything that might 'exist' without having to appear (hence, there is no space where a transcendental subject can be without having to appear in actual experience as a *content* of appearing). Second, existence itself is a matter of appropriation and the self-reflexivity of appearing is just a further way of establishing that nobody can appropriate anything anywhere; hence, no thing properly 'exists' in the sense that no thing possesses any 'real stuff' beyond its appearing that could be appropriated. As a result, all arguments aimed at inferring the existence of anything (including the existence of a transcendental subject) are just devices used to claim ownership of that thing and, for this reason, they are inherently illegitimate and ultimately impossible.

moving towards them, sometimes by moving away from them, and sometimes by ignoring them) in order to include them in a way of experiencing reality that is centered around 'me' and what 'belongs to me.' Appropriation is the force of gravity that indexes any contents to a first-person perspective based on intentional attitudes of greed, aversion, and ignorance towards them. In doing so, appropriation attributes to those contents a certain weight. Realizing the impossibility of appropriation is realizing that contents do not have any inherent weight, but they receive a weight only in reason of the force of appropriation that they are subject to. Considered on their own, contents of experience are all indefinitely light, weightless.

There is a difference in the quality of experience between realizing the impossibility of appropriation and actually experiencing this inherent weightlessness of all contents. Imagine someone living on the surface of the earth, knowing how the force of gravity of the planet creates the sense of weight ordinarily experienced. In this situation, one might well know that bodies do not have this intrinsic weight on their own (on their own they have only mass, not weight), and how this weight depends on the intensity of the force of gravity exercised on them. However, this would not allow one to directly *experience* how things would appear (feel) if the force of gravity would suddenly cease. One can know that weight is an extrinsic property, and still not be able to experience the weightlessness of things since one is still confined within the range of the force of gravity. Nonetheless, knowing that the force of gravity is dependent on a certain core and can extend only around it, one can realize that if it was possible to move sufficiently far away from that core, then the reach of that force would cease and the weightlessness of anything present there would become directly manifest. If one would learn how to fly far enough into the open space outside the earth, it is certain that one would be able to verify the phenomenon of weightlessness by direct experience. In fact, any step taken in this direction would be sufficient for proving that with the lessening of gravity there is a lessening of weight; and this is already

sufficient to demonstrate that weight cannot be intrinsic. In the same way, once one has realized that appropriation is impossible, any step in the direction of the lessening of appropriation can be used to experience the lessening of the inherent weight of existence imputed to contents. In turn, the experience of this lessening will reinforce the conviction and evidence of the impossibility of appropriation, which will allow to progress even further away from it. This creates a feedback loop that reinforces the understanding of the mutual implication between appropriation and existence by thus revealing the emptiness of all experience in a progressively deeper way.

Weightlessness is nothing but the emptiness of inherent existence, namely, the lack of any 'real stuff' that one could appropriate and hold as 'my own.' This impossibility is due to the fact that there is nothing that one could appropriate. If one calls 'existence' or 'being' (*bhava*) the target of appropriation (the weight of contents), then emptiness itself is the impossibility of understanding existence or being as inherent in contents of experience or taking them at face value (as if they were not conditioned by the force of appropriation). Emptiness is the fact that, in and of themselves, contents of experience (and their appearing) do not belong to anybody. Emptiness of existence is emptiness of ownership.

The fact that existence *depends* on appropriation has momentous consequences, the foremost of which is that existence itself is not something ultimately real, it is *just* an effect of appropriation. Existence is not something that might be there or not in contents, but that it is nonetheless genuinely *conceivable* in its own right. Existence, like weight, is a result, a product, something fabricated by a more fundamental force, which is the force of appropriation.[237] Seeing the emptiness of inherent existence is thus seeing

237 Philosophers of all ages, both in the West and in the East, sought to define existence in different ways. Some of the most common definitions connect existence with the 'presence' of something (something exists because it is present) or its 'reality' (something exists because it is really there) or maybe with the 'non-nothingness' of what exists (something exists because it is different from a sheer nothing) or in relation to what can be or be conceived by a consciousness (then existence

the impossibility of appropriation and vice versa. This means that appropriation is not only responsible for imputing the sense of existence (weight) in contents, but also for conceiving and fashioning the very notion of existence in the first place, even before one investigates whether existence can be found somewhere or not.

Without appreciating the deep link between existence and appropriation, it will be inevitable to still conceive existence itself as something that *could* have been there, something that *could* be real in its own right because it can be conceived in its own terms. However, appropriation is not only responsible for projecting existence onto contents, as if existence was some sort of light that could be used to show their presence or not. Appropriation not only projects existence, but it creates the very conceptual scheme through which one understands experience in terms of existence or lack thereof. Hence, the relinquishment of appropriation and the fading of existence is the collapsing of a whole way of understanding the world and experience. It is not the case that things cease to be, they rather cease to be understood in a certain way (as existing or not) using a certain set of assumptions and presuppositions. The meaning of 'to be' is actually 'to have,' and with the cessation of appropriation this meaning becomes obsolete, it is left behind.

can encompass something that is beyond consciousness itself or one can reach the conclusion that only consciousness and its content genuinely exist). The main problem with these approaches is that they assume that existence can be understood in its own right, as something fundamental, primitive, and basic. If this assumption is not uprooted, then any discussion of emptiness as a lack of 'inherent existence' would still entail that what is lacking (inherent existence) is nonetheless a property that could at least be defined in its own right. One might assert that all things are empty of inherent existence while still assuming that this 'inherent existence' that cannot be found anywhere is in itself something definable in a valid way. The fact that inherent existence is declared not to be found does not necessarily undermine the way in which inherent existence itself is conceived of in the first place. However, closer contemplation of the connection between appropriation and existence reveals that existence is *not* a fundamental or primitive property, but it is derivative on appropriation. Existence is a property projected on those things that, as targets of appropriation, are conceived of as being available for grasping. Existence is the assumption that there will be something in these objects to grasp and take hold of, some 'real stuff' one can appropriate.

Understanding emptiness

These reflections show that emptiness is not primarily a concept but rather a way of directly experiencing the weightlessness of contents once (and insofar as) appropriation is relinquished. Nonetheless, it might be important to reflect on *how* this experience could unfold, in order to prevent some potentially misguiding expectations. Emptiness cannot be experienced in the way in which all other contents are usually experienced because emptiness is not a *determinate* content of experience. Emptiness cannot be determined with respect to the real possibility of inherent existence because inherent existence is an impossible content, it cannot be a real possibility in the first place. Hence, the experience of emptiness cannot be the experience of a determinate content, comparable with that of any determinate content. One cannot simply look at one's field of experience and spot emptiness hanging around somewhere in it.

For a similar reason, emptiness cannot appear as some special experience of just an absolute absence of inherent existence, an absolute void, a sort of experiential black out. If emptiness could appear as a content in this way, then its appearing would be the appearing of a sheer void, a pure absence of any other content. If this pure absence is itself a content, it would not appear as a pure absence, but as a currently appearing content. If this pure absence is not itself a content, it could not appear either because only contents appear, while a pure appearing absolutely void of contents does not appear because there would be nothing there that could appear. Hence, emptiness cannot appear as an experience or manifestation of some absolute void of experience. Even the subtlest experience of the emptying of experience is still an experience; it is not absolutely void.

More importantly, emptiness concerns something lacking in contents themselves (their inherent existence); hence, it cannot be experienced if some content is not experienced as well. In order to deepen this point, it is crucial to distinguish emptiness from any experience of zero-intensity that can be

associated with phenomena. Contents of experience can be experienced in a more or less intense and vivid way, with greater or smaller complexity, and with more or less weight. Intensity, vivacity, and weight can be reduced to the extent that contents almost fade completely, and experience is just a blank acknowledgment that no particular content is experienced at a certain moment. This cessation of determinate contents is in itself a determinate content of experience, which is determinate with respect to the higher degree of intensity and vivacity that any other content usually has. This experience of cessation is not emptiness since it is itself a determinate content, and it does not qualify or characterize other contents. Progressing towards cessation (or just simply appreciating that contents can be experienced with different intensity, depending on the weight given to them by the force of appropriation) might be helpful to understand the nature of emptiness since it reveals that weight is not inherent in contents, and it could not be since it is relinquished in proportion as appropriation is relinquished. However, emptiness as such is not the cessation of contents; rather, it has to be manifest with its own brightness at the core of any content that appears. Emptiness is the impossibility of inherent existence; hence, it concerns something that *cannot* be a possible content of experience. Emptiness is not the zero of experience; rather, it is the acknowledgment of the impossibility of something that cannot be part of any experience at all.

The only way in which the emptiness of contents could appear is by *somehow* appearing already *in* the appearing of all the contents themselves. The appearing of any determinate content is simultaneously the appearing of the real possibility of its cessation. This real possibility does not appear in the content manifesting as an actual cessation, but as a shadow, a dissonance, a taste of freedom, and as their more genuine *meaning*. If this real possibility was appearing as an actuality rather than as a possibility, the determinate content could not appear. Hence, the actual appearing of the determinate content is possible only because the real possibility of its cessation is both

present (in its own way) and not currently actualized. The real possibility of cessation is present as an immanent absence of that very content that is presently appearing. In this sense, the real possibility of cessation (the real possibility of the absence of what is manifesting) allows any content to be experienced as inherently void, empty, and hollow, as if that content was not there, since to be there the real possibility of its not being there must be there as well. The real possibility of the cessation of any content also exposes that such a content is uncertain, unsuitable for appropriation, and hence cannot have any inherent existence.

Balancing discernment and perception makes it possible to take this real possibility of cessation as the key aspect in one's experience of any content. As this happens, then the experience of any content becomes the experience of an empty content. This both requires a lessening of appropriation and feeds back into it by creating an even greater lessening of appropriation. Emptiness is not a content, but a process of emptying contents, or rather the process of emptying the way in which they are fabricated and determined. In this sense, emptiness itself is fabricated (as any other process of experience) and, for this very reason, it is also inherently empty and unsuitable for appropriation as anything else.

In this new space of experience in which emptiness is manifest, certain contents become brighter and make so much more sense. Friendliness is among these; from a remote star in the sky, it becomes like a sun. The same happens for all contents based or connected with goodness, skillfulness, and wholesomeness. Other contents lose their meaning and become obsolete, even inconceivable. Aversion is one of these, but also greed, lust, ignorance, and any attitude based on intentions of harm and possessiveness. Emptiness is not the disappearing of experience, but experience seen from its best profile. Emptiness is a way of understanding, and so it is freedom. Understanding is what sets one free. The path of understanding begins with a simple wish: may all be free from aversion.

Readings

On many occasions, the discourses instruct about how a certain way of looking at experience from the perspective of composure can lead to final awakening. In the following excerpt (AN 9.36), this process is explained with respect to the first stage of composure.

> '... Mendicants, I said that the first contemplation is a means (*nissāya*) for the destruction of the intoxicants (*āsavānaṃ*). This has been said, but for what reason was it said?
>
> Mendicants, here a mendicant secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from non-virtuous realities, having entered upon it, dwells in the first contemplation, which is accompanied by ascertainment and investigation, and by an enthusiastic pleasantness born from seclusion.
>
> Whatever there is connected with form (*rūpagataṃ*), feelings, perceptions, coactions, and consciousness, one regards these realities as uncertain (*aniccato*), suffering (*dukkhato*), a disease (*rogato*), a cancer (*gaṇḍato*), a dart (*sallato*), a pain (*aghato*), an affliction (*ābādhato*), something alien (*parato*), decaying (*palokato*), empty (*suññato*), 'not myself' (*anattato*).[238]
>
> One turns the understanding away (*cittaṃ paṭivāpeti*)[239] from these realities. Having turned the understanding away from them, one directs (*upasaṃharati*)[240] the understanding to the deathless phenomenon (*amatāya*

238 This list of characteristics is meant to convey a sense of dispassion towards any aspect of experience that is connected with the five aggregates (which in turn make up the whole of experience). Since the ordinary default attitude is that of appropriating these aspects and claiming ownership of them, one is invited to cultivate the opposite way of looking, by perceiving them as something not worth holding onto and ultimately unsuitable for been appropriated.

239 This 'turning away' does not necessarily or uniquely mean 'not paying attention' to them or ignoring them, but rather weakening and dissolving the attitude of seeking delight and being excited by and interested in the perspective offered by the five aggregates (see SN 22.5 in §6). As will become clear in a few sentences, the Buddha instructs to shift attention from the foreground contents of one's experience (which fall within the spectrum of the aggregates) towards a metacognitive attitude with respect to experience as a whole, in which any appropriation towards experience itself is relinquished. This move does not consist in changing the object of (foreground) attention, but rather zooming out and gaining a deeper perspective in which whatever manifests is understood within the meaning of non-appropriation (the 'deathless phenomenon').

240 *Upasaṃharati* comes from *upa-* ('on', 'upon'), *saṃ-* ('co-') *harati* ('to take', 'to bring'). It can be rendered with 'to collect,' 'to dispose,' in the sense of inducing the understanding to look at some-

dhātuyā): 'this is peaceful, this is sublime, namely: the pacification of all coactions, the letting go of all attachments, the destruction of thirst, dispassion, cessation, extinction.'[241]

As one stands there (*tattha ṭhito*),[242] one reaches the destruction of the intoxicants. If one does not reach the destruction of the intoxicants, because of lust and delight for that reality,[243] with the complete destruction

thing or bring the understanding 'upon' something. It should not be taken, though, as referring to a forceful attitude of concentrating on a certain object.

241 This is a stock formula often used to refer to the 'phenomenon' (the appearing) of extinction (*nibbāna*): *etaṃ santaṃ etaṃ paṇītaṃ yadidaṃ sabbasaṅkhārasamatho sabbūpadhipaṭinissaggo taṇhākkhayo virāgo nirodho nibbānan*. Notice that the description entails a progression into a wise stilling of the understanding, which begins with a pacification of coactions (intentionality), progresses through a relinquishment of attachment (*upadhi*), unfolds in the destruction of thirst and results in dispassion, cessation, and freedom. In ancient Indian thought (Buddhist and not) death is usually experienced and conceived of as a form of bondage, as a yoke. Since the older hymns of the *Ṛg-veda*, the 'deathless' or 'immortality' (Sanskrit *amṛta*) is connected with the gods as they enjoy the power of Soma (itself a god and manifest as a ritual drink, see §4, footnote 172). Most interestingly, 'immortality' is something discovered and acquired as a result of effort (*tapas*) and vision. The old Vedic seers celebrate their own visionary power through which they 'became immortal.' This historical context suggests that it would be misleading to interpret the 'deathless' as an ontological condition of eternity, opposed to a supposed annihilation with physical death. While the possibility of annihilation was entertained by certain ancient Indian schools, it was far from mainstream and surely not the standard view in the Vedic culture. Death was rather conceived of as a form of bondage, the emblem of what human life is subject to. Becoming immortal or reaching the deathless phenomenon is thus a synonym for freedom from all bondages, even overcoming the ordinary human condition. The Buddha sometimes says (e.g. Sn 5.11) that whoever sees extinction has 'conquered Death.' He is arguably appropriating a shared soteriological lexicon in order to convey a new characterization of what genuinely leads to the deathless. In the Buddha's teaching, the deathless (freedom) does not result from rituals, visionary powers, knowledge of the cosmos or of the gods (contrary to what the Vedic seers believed), but rather from non-appropriation towards any contents of experience (including all those revealed by visionary powers). In other words, the 'deathless' or 'immortality' should not be conceived of as a condition or way of *being*, but as a metacognitive attitude towards experience in general.

242 This clause is essential since it entails that one has gained not only the ability to direct the understanding towards the deathless phenomenon, but one can also sustain this contemplation and dwelling in it at will, namely, one has gained full mastery in it.

243 *Teneva dhammarāgena tāya dhammanandiyā*: entering and dwelling into the contemplation of the deathless phenomenon is extremely blissful and enjoying this blissfulness might even be necessary to gain mastery in the contemplation itself. However, for as long as one remains involved in this sort of lust and delight, the five higher yokes cannot be broken and full awakening cannot be achieved. This, however, is *not* a way to say that one should *not* enjoy this blissful reality, but simply a constatation that even that reality by itself does not yet constitute full awakening; one still has a bit more work to do. As an alternative construction of this sentence, one might also read: 'if one does not reach the destruction of the intoxicants, *then because of* lust and delight for that reality and with the destruction of the five lower yokes ...' by thus taking lust and delight as a cause (together with the destruction of the lower yokes) to reach the third stage of awakening. This latter reading stresses that the contemplation of the deathless phenomenon creates the conditions to reach the third stage, while the reading offered in the translation aims to stress why the contemplation of the

of the five lower yokes to existence (*saṃyojanānaṃ*) one is reborn without parents (*opapātiko*)[244] and attains extinction (*parinibbāyī*) without ever returning to this world.[245]

Mendicants, suppose that an archer or an archer's apprentice having practiced with a strawman or lump of clay, after some time is skilled in shooting long distances, to shoot in rapid succession, and to pierce large bodies. Mendicants, just in the same way, a mendicant secluded from sensual pleasures ...'[246]

(AN 9.36)

Letting go is a gradual process. Often, it is by provisionally holding on to something lighter and easier to handle that one can let go of heavier and grosser forms of attachment and clinging. This principle is illustrated in a systematic way in the following excerpt (MN 137), which first discusses joy, sadness and serenity with respect to the six sensory bases (the five physical senses plus thought), distinguishing between sensual and the non-sensual kinds (depending on whether they are aimed at fostering attachment or not). All of the thirty-six resulting states are basis for clinging and attachment, although in very different ways, since those based on non-sensuality are oriented towards the relinquishment of attachment and appropriation. Hence, the Buddha introduces a progressive deepening of letting go, which relies on non-sensuality in order to abandon sensuality, and then on non-sensual joy to abandon

deathless elements might not bring full awakening. Both readings seem to capture an important aspect of the process of awakening and the role of the deathless phenomenon in it.

244 The rebirth 'without visible cause' is a way to say that one is reborn without parents, namely, without coming from one's mother womb, hence, no longer as a human being, but rather as a deity. Cf. the last line of Sn 1.8, §3.

245 This is another way to say that one is an *anāgāmin*, one who has reached the third stage of awakening.

246 The entire passage above is repeated at this point, suggesting that the archer metaphor is intended to illustrate the whole contemplation. The metaphor itself entails two main elements: the two-step process of first training and then becoming proficient, and the activity of shooting. Shooting can be seen as a simile for the destruction of the intoxicants, while the two-step process can be linked with the last two stages of awakening (one first reaches the third stage of 'non-return' and then is ready to make the final step into the fourth, *arahattā*, see *Afterword*).

non-sensual sadness, and non-sensual serenity to abandon non-sensual joy. Yet, one would still be holding on to non-sensual serenity if it was not possible to abandon even this. It is by understanding that even this state cannot be appropriated as 'mine' that one can then relinquish the subtlest and most refined form of serenity, remaining holding on to nothing at all.

> '... The thirty-six bases of clinging[247] should be understood.' This has been said, but for what reason was it said?
>
> There are six forms of joy based on the household life (*gehasitāni somanassāni*), and six forms of joy based on non-sensuality (*nekkhammasitāni somanassāni*);[248] there are six forms of sadness (*domanassāni*) based on the household life, and six forms of sadness based on non-sensuality; there are six forms of serenity (*upekkhā*) based on the household life, and six forms of serenity based on non-sensuality.
>
> What are the six forms of joy based on the household life? There are forms discernible with the eye that are pleasing, lovely, charming, delightful to think, bound to the world (*lokāmisapaṭisaṃyuttānaṃ*). In one who acquiring these things (*paṭilābhato*) regards (*samanupassato*) this as an acquisition (*paṭilābhaṃ*) (or in one who recollects what is now gone, ceased, changed,[249] and regards that as a former acquisition), joy arises.[250] This sort of joy is called 'joy based on the household life.'

247 The compound *sattapadā* is difficult to translate. The commentarial tradition interprets it as 'positions (*padā*) of sentient beings (*sattā*),' referring to the wandering of sentient beings in *saṃsāra* and to those who try to escape from it. However, *satta* can be read also as the past participle of *sajjati*, 'to cling to.' In this rendering the thirty-six *padā* are the various bases that support clinging, and the thrust of the discussion is to show how they can be *all* progressively relinquished.

248 As the discussion makes clear, the distinction here does not concern the conventional divide between lay and ordained people, but rather the attitude and understanding towards contents of experience. When it is based on the quest for sensuality and appropriation, it counts as 'household life;' when it is based on the opposite, it counts as 'non-sensuality.'

249 Notice that 'change' (*vipariṇāma*) has here a negative connotation of 'change for the worse.'

250 The 'household' joy is based on a particular interpretation of sensual objects that elicit sensual pleasures. This joy arises from understanding the acquisition of these pleasures as a gain (*paṭilābha*, 'getting something'), something worth obtaining. This even includes the recollection of past pleasures that are now gone. In this latter case, one does not reflect on the evident uncertainty of those pleasures (if they were certain and reliable, they would not be gone now), but only on the joy of having 'got' something. Hence, beneath this sense of acquisition there is an underpinning intention of appropriation.

There are sounds discernible with the hear ..., odors discernible with the nose ..., tastes discernible with the tongue ..., touches discernible with the body ..., realities discernible with thought[251] that are pleasing, lovely, charming, delightful to think, bound to the world. In one who acquiring these things regards this as an acquisition (or in one who recollects what is now gone, ceased, changed, and regards that as a former acquisition), joy arises. This sort of joy is called 'joy based on the household life.' These are the six forms of joy based on the household life.

What are the six forms of joy based on non-sensuality? It is the joy that arises having known the uncertainty (*aniccataṃ*), changeability, dispassion and cessation (*vipariṇāma-virāga-nirodhaṃ*) in regard to visible forms, and having wisely known (*sammappaññāya*) according to nature (*yathābhūtaṃ*) that 'in the past, as it is now, all forms are uncertain (*aniccā*), suffering (*dukkhā*), they have the reality of changing (*vipariṇāmadhammā*).'[252] This sort of joy is called 'joy based on non-sensuality.'

The same in regard to sounds ..., odors ..., tastes ..., touches ..., realities discernible with thought: it is the joy that arises having known the uncertainty, changeability, dispassion and cessation in regard to these realities, and having wisely known according to nature that 'in the past, as it is now, all thoughts are uncertain, suffering, they have the reality of changing.' This sort of joy is called 'joy based on non-sensuality.' These are the six forms of joy based on non-sensuality.

What are the six forms of sadness based on the household life? There are forms discernible with the eye ..., sounds discernible with the hear ..., odors discernible with the nose ..., tastes discernible with the tongue ..., touches discernible with the body ..., realities discernible with thought that are pleasing, lovely, charming, delightful to think, bound to the world. In one who not acquiring these things regards this as a non-acquisition[253]

251 The sixth sense basis is 'thought' (*manas*) which consists in the internal sense that imagines, remembers, and produces the experience of objects and contents that do not come directly from the other five physical senses. This basis, like all the others, has its related form of consciousness (*viññāṇa*), which discerns the contents or realities (*dhammā*) peculiar to this basis, namely, 'thought-realities.'

252 The joy of non-sensuality is based on a sense of freedom and relief of not having to be bound and dragged away by what is seen as uncertain and doomed to change for the worse. Seeing a danger or a poison and seeing that one is not bound to it, one feels relief and joy.

253 The negative expression *appaṭilābhaṃ* has here a stronger connotation of 'lost:' one interprets the situation as a lost opportunity, and if this refers to the past, as a form of regret.

(or in one who recollects what is now gone, ceased, changed, and regards that as a former non-acquisition), sadness arises. This sort of sadness is called 'sadness based on the household life.' These are the six forms of sadness based on the household life.

What are the six forms of sadness based on non-sensuality? Having known the uncertainty, changeability, dispassion and cessation in regard to visible forms, and having wisely known according to nature that 'in the past, as it is now, all visible forms are uncertain, suffering, they have the reality of changing,' seen all of this one generates a desire (*pihaṃ*) for complete liberation:[254] 'when shall I enter upon and dwell in that basis (*āyatanaṃ*), in which the outstanding ones (*ariyā*) already now have entered upon and dwell?'[255] For one who generates this desire for complete liberation, sadness arises conditioned by that desire.[256] This sort of sadness is called 'sadness based on non-sensuality.'

The same in regard to sounds ..., odors ..., tastes ..., touches ..., realities discernible with thought: having known the uncertainty, changeability, dispassion and cessation in regard to thoughts, and having wisely known according to nature that 'in the past, as it is now, all thoughts are uncertain, suffering, they have the reality of changing,' seen all of this one generates a desire for complete liberation: 'when shall I enter upon and dwell in that basis, in which the outstanding ones already now have entered upon and dwell?' For one who generates this desire for complete liberation, sadness arises conditioned by that desire. This sort of sadness is called 'sadness based on non-sensuality.' These are the six forms of sadness based on non-sensuality.

What are the six forms of serenity based on the household life? Having seen a form with the eye, serenity arises for an ordinary person (*puthujjana*), ignorant, confused, an uninstructed ordinary person who has not con-

254 *Anuttaresu vimokkhesu*, also 'supreme, unsurpassable liberation.' In this case, the one generating this desire is already someone who achieved some stage of liberation; hence, the desire concerns the ultimate fulfillment of this process and the resulting sadness derives from not having achieved it yet.

255 This is a phrasing for the attainment of complete awakening or the state of 'perfection' (*arahattā*).

256 *Uppajjati pihapaccayā domanassaṃ*. The clause *pihapaccayā* ('conditioned by desire') is worth noticing since it stresses the general insight that desire always produces sadness or unpleasantness as a side effect, even when it concerns supreme liberation. In other words, in desiring one's freedom, one is not yet free from the dynamics of desire, and this prevents complete liberation.

quered his limitations or their consequences, and does not see the danger.[257] This kind of serenity does not go beyond form.[258] For this reason, it is called 'household-serenity.'

Having heard a sound with the ear ..., having smelled an odor with the nose ..., having tasted a taste with the tongue ..., having contacted a touch with the body ..., having discerned a reality with thought, serenity arises for an ordinary person, ignorant, confused, an uninstructed ordinary person who has not conquered his limitations or their consequences, and does not see the danger. This kind of serenity does not go beyond thoughts. For this reason, it is called 'household-serenity.' These are the six forms of serenity based on the household life.

What are the six forms of serenity based on non-sensuality? Having known the uncertainty, changeability, dispassion and cessation in regard to forms, and having wisely known according to nature that 'in the past, as it is now, all forms are uncertain, suffering, they have the reality of changing,' for one who sees this, serenity arises. This kind of serenity goes beyond form.[259] For this reason, it is called 'serenity based on non-sensuality.'

Having known the uncertainty, changeability, dispassion and cessation in regard to sounds ..., smells ..., tastes ..., touches ..., thoughts, and having wisely known according to nature that 'in the past, as it is now, all thoughts are uncertain, suffering, they have the reality of changing,' for one who sees this, serenity arises. This kind of serenity goes beyond thoughts. For this reason, it is called 'serenity based on non-sensuality.' These are the six forms of serenity based on non-sensuality.

257 *Anodhijinassa avipākajinassa anādīnavadassāvino*: the term *jina* means 'conqueror' while *odhi* indicates a limit, and *vipāka* the result of actions; *ādīnava* is the 'danger,' which one needs to see (*dassāvin*) in order to find the escape (*nissaraṇa*).

258 *Yā evarūpā upekkhā, rūpaṃ sā nātivattati*: the problem at the basis of 'household-serenity' is that it arises in connection with sensory objects that do not cause sadness or joy themselves, and thus might offer a temporary form of relief or peace. However, this serenity is purely temporary, and it is not based on any proper understanding of what causes peace or distress; hence, it also remains dependent on the specific circumstances and sensory contents that one needs in order to experience it. Since the ordinary person has neither overcome their limits (especially their lack of understanding) nor the consequences that these limits have (the fact that indulging in greed, aversion, and ignorance foster these habits), they do not even see the danger of their condition, and hence they cannot escape from it.

259 *Rūpaṃ sā ativattati*: the contemplation of uncertainty (*anicca*) leads to dispassion and to a weakening of appropriation, which allows the letting go (*paṭinissagga*) of the content of experience. Hence, in regarding a content without being troubled by its nature, without being bound to it, one becomes 'serene' and goes beyond it in the sense that is no longer fettered and yoked to that content.

'The thirty-six bases of clinging should be understood.' This has been said, and it is for this reason that it was said.

'Behold, by relying on this, abandon that!'[260] This has been said. And for what reason was it said?

Mendicants, by relying on, and by means of, the six forms of joy based on non-sensuality, abandon and overcome the six forms of joy based on the household life. This is how they are abandoned; this is how they are overcome.

Mendicants, by relying on, and by means of, the six forms of sadness based on non-sensuality, abandon and overcome the six forms of sadness based on the household life. This is how they are abandoned; this is how they are overcome.

Mendicants, by relying on, and by means of, the six forms of serenity based on non-sensuality, abandon and overcome the six forms of serenity based on the household life. This is how they are abandoned; this is how they are overcome.

Mendicants, by relying on, and by means of, the six forms of joy based on non-sensuality, abandon and overcome the six forms of sadness based on non-sensuality. This is how they are abandoned; this is how they are overcome.

Mendicants, by relying on, and by means of, the six forms of serenity based on non-sensuality, abandon and overcome the six forms of joy based on non-sensuality. This is how they are abandoned; this is how they are overcome.

Mendicants, there is a serenity that is diversified (*nānattā*) and dependent on diversity (*nānattasitā*), and there is a serenity that is unified (*ekattā*), and dependent on unity (*ekattasitā*).

Mendicants, and what is the serenity that is diversified and dependent on diversity?

260 *Tatra idaṃ nissāya idaṃ pajahathā*. This formula is important since it shows that letting go does not happen suddenly or all at once, but rather as a gradual process. Throughout this process, one will still hold onto some content, although the amount, quality and intensity of this appropriation is progressively weakened. In this way, a degree of appropriation towards virtuous contents can become a skillful means of progressively overcoming appropriation altogether; although taking this last step will also require a developed degree of understanding.

Mendicants, there is serenity with respect to forms, sounds, odors, tastes, touches. This, Mendicants, is a serenity that is diversified and dependent on diversity.[261]

Mendicants, and what is the serenity that is unified and dependent on unity?

Mendicants, there is serenity dependent on (*nissitā*) the domain of indefinite space, dependent on the domain of indefinite consciousness, dependent on the domain where there is no thing, dependent on the domain of neither perception nor non-perception. This, Mendicants, is a serenity that is unified and dependent on unity.[262]

Mendicants, by relying on, and by means of, serenity that is unified and dependent on unity, abandon and overcome serenity that is diversified and dependent on diversity. This is how it is abandoned; this is how it is overcome.

Mendicants, by relying on, and by means of non-identification (*atammayatā*),[263] abandon and overcome serenity that is unified and dependent on unity. This is how it is abandoned; this is how it is overcome.

'Behold, by relying on this, abandon that!' This has been said; and this is why it has been said.'

...

(MN 137)

261 Notice that this kind of serenity is 'non-sensual' because it is based on a contemplation of the uncertain nature of all sensory contents. Yet, it is 'dependent on diversity' because this contemplation is still bound to the specific contents of experience that form the basis for it.

262 The four domains (*āyatanāni*) mentioned constitute the four 'formless' attainments (*ārūpa samāpattī*), which are often presented as stages of composure that unfold after the fourth *jhāna* and can be considered as a refinement of the degree of serenity obtained therein. Since the main experience of these stages of composure is determined by the structure of experience itself, rather than by specific or more determinate contents or objects, they entail a peculiar form of unification.

263 *Atammayatā* can be analyses as *a-tam-maya-tā*, where *maya* means 'made of,' 'consisting of,' 'created,' while *tam* is a demonstrative pronoun and the suffix *-tā* indicates that the term is made into an abstract noun (like the suffix '-ness' in English). Hence, the compound literally means 'the state of (*-tā*) not (*a-*) consisting of (*maya*) that (*tam*).' It can be rendered as 'non-fashioning' or 'non-fabricating,' which would make it more akin to the nineth and ultimate stage of composure (cessation of perception and feelings), which usually follows the other attainments mentioned so far and from which complete awakening often results (although awakening is different in kind and nature from the attainment of cessation). However, *atammayatā* is elsewhere (MN 113) applied to *any* stage of composure; hence, it does not have to be conflated with the meditative attainment of cessation. The expression itself suggests the realization 'I am not made of this,' namely, 'I am not *this*' content of experience, whatever it might be. In this respect, *atammayatā* is best interpreted as the relinquishment of the even subtle form of 'my-making' and 'I-making' that still survives in the subtlest forms of composure. By relying on this understanding, those forms of identification can be abandoned. This is structurally akin to the contemplation of the 'deathless phenomenon' in AN 9.36 above.

Non-identification or non-appropriation is not just a meditative device. It constitutes the essential insight that led the Buddha to his own awakening. The following discourse (Ud 3.10) articulates this insight in the way in which the Buddha expressed it to himself upon first emerging from that experience. The discourse makes a particularly clear connection between appropriation and existence and points out how the relinquishment of appropriation leads to the freedom from any form of existence.

> It has been heard by me that, on one occasion, the Fortunate was dwelling near Uruvela, on the bank of the river Neranjara, at the root of the Awakening Tree, in the first period after having attained awakening. At that time, the Fortunate sat in a cross-legged posture for seven days, experiencing the pleasantness of freedom (*vimutti-sukha-paṭisaṃvedī*).
>
> Then, the Fortunate, having emerged from that composure after seven days, surveyed the world with his awakened eye. Surveying the world with his awakened eye, the Fortunate saw sentient beings burned by countless fires, and consumed by countless fevers, born from lust, aversion, and ignorance.
>
> Then, having realized the meaning of this, the Fortunate, uttered this inspired utterance:
>
> 'This world is born from fire,
> oppressed by stimulations, it speaks of a disease as 'my self;'[264]

264 *Phassapareto rogaṁ vadati attato*. In the standard presentation of conditioned co-origination, *phassa* is the link between the sixfold sense basis and feeling. The term comes from the verb *phusati*, which means 'to touch' often associated with the bodily sense of touch or proprioception. However, *phassa* is also described in more analytical terms (e.g. SN 35.93) as the 'union' (*sangati*) of three components: a sensory object (a form, for instance), a bodily sense organ (the eye, for instance), and the related form of consciousness (eye-consciousness, for instance). The three are not really independent or ontologically distinct, since there is no possible experience of any of them without the other. But the experience of *phassa* consists in the experience of their complete intermingling, and since the bodily organ and its correlative form of consciousness are not in themselves contents of experience, *phassa* manifests as the appearing of the sensory object as the center of experience. This means that the sensory object appears as something that calls for attention and urges reaction, and hence as a 'pressure' (to keep close to the literal meaning of *phassa*) or more colloquially as a 'stimulus.' The more the object is taken seriously and at face value in this respect, the more the correlative assumption about the real presence of a subject is also taken at face value, and this underpins the view of an underlying self that must do something with this stimulation and react

for whatever it conceives,
that is becoming otherwise.[265]

From one existence to another, the world is attached to existence,
oppressed by existence, and yet it seeks delight in existence.
For one who seeks delight, there is fear,
for one who fears, there is suffering.
It is indeed for abandoning existence,
that the training is undertook.

Whoever among renunciants and brahmins said that liberation from existence is achieved by means of existence (*bhavena*), I say that all of them were not free from existence.

And whoever among renunciants and brahmins said that the escape from existence is achieved by means of non-existence (*vibhavena*), I say that all of them did not escape.

Indeed, conditioned by attachment (*upadhiñhi paṭicca*), this suffering originates. With the complete destruction of appropriation (*sabbupādānakkhayā*), there is no origination of suffering.[266]

to its pressure. But any stimulation is ultimately a disturbance (SN 12.63), and in this sense it is a 'disease' (*roga*), but also the root of the sense of self and all views based on it (DN 1). By contrast, the cessation of *phassa* consists in the realization that this seemingly certain and urgent stimulation is in fact the composition of three ingredients, each of which is in itself uncertain and impersonal. The cessation of *phassa* is not a cessation of experience, but the cessation of the experience of being pressured (stimulated) by whatever appears, which includes the cessation of assuming that what appears is a call for action addressed to 'me.' In this sense, the cessation of *phassa* is regarded as the basis for the cessation of action (*kamma-nirodha*, AN 6.63).

265 Cf. MN 113 (applied to all stages of composure): 'Mendicants, a good person reflects thus: 'The Fortunate has declared that the attainment of the first contemplation is not something to identify with. For whatever one conceives of it, that is becoming otherwise.' Having made non-identification his priority, he neither glorifies himself, nor does he despise others because of that attainment of the first contemplation. Mendicants, this is the reality of a good person' (*sappuriso ca kho, bhikkhave, iti paṭisañcikkhati: 'paṭhamajjhānasamāpattiyāpi kho atammayatā vuttā bhagavatā. Yena yena hi maññanti tato taṃ hoti aññathā'ti. So atammayataññeva antaraṃ karitvā tāya paṭhamajjhānasamāpattiyā nevattānukkaṃseti, na paraṃ vambheti. Ayampi, bhikkhave, sappurisadhammo*).

266 These two sentences condense two different perspectives on the origin of *dukkha*. The first, takes *upadhi* (attachment, synonym of 'thirst,' *taṇhā*) as the condition for the arising of *dukkha* (in line with SN 56.11). The second sentence indicates what is the more immediate condition for the eradication of this attachment and then of *dukkha* itself, namely, appropriation (*upādāna*). In the standard formula of conditioned co-origination (e.g. SN 12.1), these links are structured in the sequence: thirst (or attachment), appropriation, existence, (birth,) *dukkha*. In this sense, destruction of appropriation prevents attachment from leading to *dukkha* since it breaks the chain. However, it should be stressed that the mutual connections between these links should not be understood

Look at this world! Everywhere oppressed by ignorance, beings who delight in being (*bhūtaratā*) are not free. Whatever kind of existence there might be, in any way, in any place, all that existence is uncertain, suffering, its reality is to change.

One who sees this with right wisdom,
as it is, according to nature,
abandons thirst for existence,
and does not delight in non-existence.
With the destruction of all thirsts,
there is dispassion and cessation without residue, extinction.
For a mendicant who has reached extinction,
without appropriation (*anupādā*) there is no renewal of existence;
Death is defeated, the war is won,
one like this is gone beyond any form of existence.'

(Ud 3.10)

The following discourse (SN 22.95) explains further how all components of experience (here spelled out according to the scheme of the five aggregates)

as a linear chain of efficient causes. On another occasion (SN 22.82), the Buddha was asked what is the root of the appropriation (*upādāna*) towards the five aggregates, and he replied 'desire towards them' (*chanda*, in the sense of sensual desire, equivalent again for *nandi* and *taṇhā*). Then, at the further question of whether appropriation could be considered something different from the five appropriated aggregates or the same, he replied: 'mendicant, it is neither the case that appropriation is exactly the same thing as the five appropriated aggregates, nor it is the case that appropriation is one thing and the five aggregates are another; rather, the desire and lust there, *that* is the appropriation' (*Na kho, bhikkhu, taññeva upādānaṃ te pañcupādānakkhandhā nāpi aññatra pañcahi upādānakkhandhehi upādānaṃ, api ca yo tattha chandarāgo taṃ tattha upādānan'ti*). This suggests that appropriation cannot be neatly separated from desire and lust (or from thirst and attachment) and conceived of in itself independently from them; nor vice versa. The connection between the links of conditioned co-origination is such that each link is both constituted and sustained by other links, as the elements that together form an ecosystem. While there is a directionality in the way in which they work and connections might be more or less direct between them, their interaction is not linear but systemic or structural. Hence, in the passage at stake here, one might even take attachment and appropriation as roughly equivalent terms since removing or weakening either of them would bring about the eradication of the other and would result in the cessation of *dukkha*.

can be seen and experienced as inherently empty and void, and how this insight leads to freedom.

> On one occasion, the Fortunate was dwelling at Ayojjha, on the bank of the river Ganges. There, the Fortunate addressed the mendicants:
>
> 'Mendicants, suppose that this river Ganges was carrying away a large lump of foam. A person with good sight would look at it, scrutinize it, wisely (*yoniso*) investigate it. As he looks at it, scrutinizes it, and wisely investigates it, it would appear just void (*ritta*), vain (*tuccha*), without core (*asāra*). Because, Mendicants, what core (*sāro*)[267] there could be in a lump of foam?
>
> Mendicants, just in the same way, whatever form there might be (past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near), a mendicant looks at it, scrutinizes it, wisely investigates it. As he looks at it, scrutinizes it, and wisely investigates it, it would appear just void, vain, without core. Because, Mendicants, what core there could be in form?[268]
>
> Mendicants, suppose that in the autumn, when it is raining heavily, a water bubble arises and disappears in water. A person with good sight would look at it, scrutinize it, wisely investigate it. As he looks at it, scrutinizes it, and wisely investigates it, it would appear just void, vain, without core. Because, Mendicants, what core there could be in a bubble of water?
>
> Mendicants, just in the same way, whatever feelings there might be (past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near), a mendicant looks at them, scrutinizes them, wisely investigates them. As he looks at them, scrutinizes them, and wisely in-

267 The term *sāra* refers to the inner, most excellent, and most essential part of anything, its 'heart,' for instance the heartwood of a tree. It might be interpreted in a more metaphysical sense as referring to an 'essence,' but for the scope of this discourse this is not necessary. The lack of *sāra* is used to show that there is simply nothing to appropriate in any of the aggregates and not to demonstrate that they do not have an 'essence' (which is a claim with much further ramifications and implications).

268 The simile of the lump of foam stresses that physical form might seem to be solid and graspable, but in fact it has no inner core.

vestigates them, they would appear just void, vain, without core. Because, Mendicants, what core there could be in feelings?[269]

Mendicants, suppose that in the last month of the hot season, at noon, a shimmering mirage appears. A person with good sight would look at it, scrutinize it, wisely investigate it. As he looks at it, scrutinizes it, and wisely investigates it, it would appear just void, vain, without core. Because, Mendicants, what core there could be in a mirage?

Mendicants, just in the same way, whatever perceptions there might be (past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near), a mendicant looks at them, scrutinizes them, wisely investigates them. As he looks at them, scrutinizes them, and wisely investigates them, they would appear just void, vain, without core. Because, Mendicants, what core there could be in perceptions?[270]

Mendicants, suppose that a person needing heartwood (*sāratthiko*), seeking heartwood, wondering in search for heartwood, having taken a sharp axe, would enter a forest. There, he would see the large trunk of a plantain tree, straight, fresh, of enormous height.[271] He would cut it to the root, having cut it at the root, he would cut the top, having cut the top, he would turn the bark inside out. Turning the bark inside out he would not even find sapwood, much less any heartwood. A person with good sight would look at it, scrutinize it, wisely investigate it. As he looks at it, scrutinizes it, and wisely investigates it, it would appear just void, vain, without core. Because, Mendicants, what core there could be in the trunk of a plantain tree?

Mendicants, just in the same way, whatever coactions there might be (past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near), a mendicant looks at them, scrutinizes them, wise-

269 The simile of the bubble of water stresses that feelings might seem real and stable, but they are precarious and, like a bubble, are made of an empty space, where there is nothing to grasp.
270 The simile of the mirage stresses that perception might seem to refer to real and objectively existing things, given 'out there' in the real world, but they are actually more like mirages, which make it only *seem* as if there was something objectively given outside of their appearing. Note that the English term 'perception' is somehow a misleading translation since the phenomenon pointed out by the aggregate of *saññā* consists in the activity of recognition, labelling, and conceptualization, namely, in the 'reading' of what is perceived and in the attribution of a certain meaning to it.
271 Notice that the plantain tree (banana plant) is not a real tree but a giant herbaceous plant. Its trunk only resembles the trunk of a tree, but it is actually made of leaves closely rolled up one on the other.

ly investigates them. As he looks at them, scrutinizes them, and wisely investigates them, they would appear void, vain, without core. Because, Mendicants, what core there could be in coactions?[272]

Mendicants, suppose that an illusionist (*māyākāro*) or an illusionist's apprentice would display an illusion at a crossroad. A person with good sight would look at it, scrutinize it, wisely investigate it. As he looks at it, scrutinizes it, and wisely investigates it, it would appear just void, vain, without core. Because, Mendicants, what core could there be in an illusion?

Mendicants, just in the same way, whatever consciousness there might be (past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near), a mendicant looks at it, scrutinizes it, wisely investigates it. As he looks at it, scrutinizes it, and wisely investigates it, it would appear just void, vain, without core. Because, Mendicants, what core there could be in consciousness?[273]

Seeing in this way, an outstanding disciple is disenchanted with (*nibbindati*)[274] form, feelings, perceptions, coactions, consciousness. Being disenchanted, he is dispassionate (*virajjati*). Through dispassion, he is freed (*virāgā vimuccati*). Being freed, he knows: 'freed.' He understands: 'birth is destroyed, the training has been completed, what should be done has been done, there is nothing more to this end.'

The Fortunate said this. Having said this, the Happy One, the Teacher, further said this:

272 The simile of the plantain trees stresses that coactions might look like strong and substantial entities, but they are actually just a net of mutually dependent 'leaves' (discrete intentional acts), wrapped around no actual core (so subject or 'doer' of these intentions).

273 The simile of the illusion is not mean to imply that experience is illusory and that one should reach out towards some sort of 'hidden' reality. The illusion rather concerns the feeling of subjectivity that naturally accompanies consciousness. Whenever there is consciousness, there is a subjective perspective on experience. Any object or content of consciousness can be experienced as an object only insofar as it appears as something distinct from a non-object, namely, from a subject. Hence, consciousness introduces this point of view of a non-object for the sake of determining any content as the actual object of consciousness. But this is nothing over and above a *perspectival* construction. The illusion consists in assuming that the non-object (the subject) must refer to a really existing entity, endowed with its own being, ground and controller of what is experienced.

274 *Nibbindati* can also be rendered with 'revulsion,' or being 'weary of' something, meaning that sense of unpleasant fulness that prevents one from eating more. It can also be rendered with 'disenchantment' in the sense of no longer regarding something as alluring and appealing or having lost appetite for it. In any case, it indicates a crucial step towards full dispassion and non-appropriation.

Form is like a lump of foam,
feelings like a bubble of water,
perceptions like a mirage,
coactions like a plantain tree,
and consciousness like an illusion,
so explained the Kinsman of the Sun.

In whatever way one scrutinizes it,
and wisely investigates it,
it is but void and vain,
when one sees it wisely.

Referring to this body,
the one with great wisdom taught
that abandoning three realities,
one shall see form casted away.

Life, heat and consciousness:
when they depart from this body,
then it lies there, discarded,
food for another, without intentions (*acetanaṃ*).

This is how it keeps going on,[275]
like an illusion, the prattle of a fool;
it is declared to be a murderer,[276]
one cannot find a core here.

275 *Etādisāyaṃ santāno*: the term *santāna* can be used to refer to the 'continuity' of one's consciousness through several lifetimes as one is kept wandering in *saṃsāra*, the endless round of rebirths.

276 The body and the other aggregates are sometimes described as a 'murderer with drawn sward,' see e.g. AN 6.103 and 7.49. In SN 22.85, one finds a powerful simile: imagine that a murderer wants to kill a householder. The murdered might think that it is not possible to commit this crime immediately because the householder is too well protected. The murderer would then try to become the householder's servant and gain his complete trust. Only then, waiting for the right moment, he would be able to kill the householder. According to this simile, the five aggregates are like the murderer that sneaks in the householder's life, gaining his thrust and waiting for the right time to kill him.

A mendicant who aroused energy,
should look at the aggregates in this way;
whether at day or at night,
knowing and recollecting.[277]

One should abandon all yokes to existence,
one should make a refuge for himself;
one should live as if their head was on fire,[278]
aspiring to a state that does not go away.[279]

(SN 22.95)

277 *Sampajāno paṭissato*, in order to make the translation not too clumsy, here *sampajāno* is rendered with 'knowing,' but the more technical sense of 'metacognitively aware,' established in the context of MN 10 discussed previously (§1), should be kept in mind.
278 This is an often-used simile to refer to a sense of urgency in practice, see e.g. AN 4.93 and 6.20.
279 *Patthayaṃ accutaṃ padan*: here *a(c)cuta* can be interpreted as 'imperishable' in the sense of a state of eternity. What is referred to is clearly ultimate freedom, *nibbāna*. However, *nibbāna* is never described as 'eternal' in a metaphysical or ontological sense. These qualifications rely on a notion of existence that is itself discarded by the Buddha (SN 12.15). More likely, the goal is a condition of freedom that is irreversible, that does not go away, unlike any other more temporary attainments. This, though, does *not* require that freedom to be an 'eternal' state, but only to be such that once attained one could not return to one's previous condition.

Afterword

Groningen, Spring 2022

The potentials of practice

Practicing friendliness means methodically inclining one's intentionality towards a space of goodwill, fostering an intelligent sensitivity towards the vulnerability of others and oneself, and how to best face it. This practice naturally steers the overall tone of experience towards a more positive, relaxed, and warm baseline, which can be beneficial on many fronts. More importantly, a consistent practice sharpens the clarity of one's understanding. Increased clarity is in itself a relief, but it might also lead one to realize where the problems really lie.

Those who manage to see that temporary relief is not a genuine solution, and that the distress of ordinary life is but a symptom of a more fundamental predicament, can decide to develop practice further. In this case, the discourses provide several milestones that can be used to map the territory one is travelling through, orientate effort in the most promising direction, and

enable the practitioner to assess where they are, where they need to be, and how to get there.

The distinction between the mundane (*lokiya*) and supramundane (*lokuttara*) path (MN 117) might be helpful at this point.[280] A mundane practice remains fully inscribed, based on, and attached to the ordinary system of life. The practitioner who realizes the structural problems inherent with it should ask themselves: 'what are the factors and conditions that keep me bound here?' According to the discourses, one's attachments and bonds can be analysed in a tenfold scheme of yokes (*saṃyojanāni*, see AN 10.13, further distinguished in five 'lower' and five 'higher' yokes). The progressive and methodical relinquishment of these yokes provides a four-step model for tracing one's progress towards ultimate freedom (see DN 28.13; AN 3.86 and 4.241).[281]

The supramundane path offers an escape from the ordinary, mundane, system of life based on the roots of aversion, greed, and ignorance, and the attitudes of appropriation that they foster. It does not lead to another world

280 This distinction is an elaboration on the more common distinction between the 'ordinary person' (*puthujjana*) who has no knowledge of the Buddha's teaching, and the 'outstanding disciple' (*ariya-savako*) who trains on the basis of having understood that teaching. See e.g. SN 36.6 in §3.

281 In the discourses there are various accounts of the path to awakening. In some famous cases (e.g. SN 22.59) awakening is reached just after having heard a sermon of the Buddha. But in many other cases, it is presented as the result of a 'gradual training' (e.g. MN 27, 29, 39, 51). The progress on the path is further mapped and analyzed in more refined terms that can be helpful in tackling not only the set of activities and practices that one is supposed to engaged with (as in the rather linear scheme of the gradual training), but also how this practice progressively transforms one's understanding and experience through recursive feedback. The four-step model (often referred to as 'four-path model') belongs to this latter category, and receives more sophisticated elaboration in the later commentarial tradition. There, the four steps are associated with 'four persons' (one kind of person for each step, hence the idea of 'four paths'), and further subdivided so as to include both those who are in the process of training for a certain step, and those who have achieved it (resulting in eight groups in total). For a more historical and textual overview of these layers, see George Bond, 'The development and elaboration of the Arahant ideal in the Theravada Buddhist tradition,' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 52, no. 2 (1984): 227-242. Bond, like other scholars, tends to interpret these different schemes in terms of a chronological development internal to the early strata of the Buddhist tradition, assuming that greater complexity must correspond to a later stage of reflection. While a certain commentarial interpretation of the four-step model can appropriately be regarded as a later codification, the model as such might well be as old as the Buddha's teaching itself. Since there is a path towards ultimate freedom, there is the possibility of mapping out the milestones and stages on this path. And it is extremely common in the discourses to use both more synthetic and brief descriptions (like the simple opposition between ordinary person and instructed disciple) and more elaborated ones (like the four-step model).

or to an absolute reality of any sort. Its goal is not ontological or metaphysical, but practical: it aims at establishing a new way of living, a new way of walking on this earth, characterized by unshakable peace and freedom born from non-appropriation. The development of the supramundane path is not primarily concerned with uncovering some hidden mystery, some secret truth, some exoteric knowledge. The supramundane path is only concerned with the complete and irreversible abandoning of thirst in all its forms, and the full realization of its cessation (SN 56.11).

This understanding of the supramundane path might appear both straightforward and challenging. There are many insights, realizations, altered states, and experiences that different people or traditions might consider a form of 'awakening.' But the discourses set all these claims to one side (belonging to those of 'ascetic and brahmins' of other schools) and contrast them with an understanding of awakening that does not take any particular content of experience, state, or condition as its main goal, but rather identifies it with an overall attitude towards any experience and content whatsoever, in which thirst, greed, aversion, ignorance, appropriation, have been completely extinguished (see e.g. SN 38.1 and 43.1). This understanding makes awakening a metacognitive state, an attitude towards experience itself, rather than a particular kind or content of experience. When the Buddha is asked about the nature of his realization, he has no qualms about explaining it in clear and precise terms, very rarely appeals to ineffability, and never ventures into metaphysical or esoteric views. And yet, most people tend to look for something else, something deeper, something more. This is precisely because they are not free from the sort of thirst that the Buddha declares he has quenched.

Entering the stream

There are three main (lower) yokes that need to be broken for practice to move from the mundane to the supramundane level. The first yoke (*sakkāya*

diṭṭhi) is the 'belief in the stability of any of the components of experience.'[282] This is more commonly glossed as 'personality view' or the explicit conception of oneself as master and owner of one's own experience. This sense of ownership is misplaced, because nothing in experience is suitable for being appropriated as 'my own.' However, the condition that makes appropriation possible is being able to regard objects, contents, and fundamental features of experience as something that is available or suitable for appropriation in the first place, namely, as something that is endowed with a graspable core, as something truly existent in its own right. *This* attitude of regarding contents of experience as solid, certain, stable, is what supports appropriation and thus nourishes the sense of ownership and the consequent notion of oneself as endowed with a certain unique 'personality.'[283] It is *this* belief that

282 *Sakkāya diṭṭhi* literally means 'existing (*sat*)-body (*kāya*)-view (*diṭṭhi*).' But *diṭṭhi* in this context is better understood as a core belief (more or less explicitly articulated), an underpinning assumption that informs one's attitudes and actions towards various contents of experience. *Kāya* can refer to the physical individual body, but here it likely takes a broader meaning as 'body' in the sense of 'group' and it can be glossed in terms of the five aggregates that constitute the fundamental components of any experience and the basis for appropriation (*upādāna*). Existence (*sat*) is the quality that is attributed to these components in the process of appropriating them. When I take something to be 'mine,' what is appropriated is regarded as something suitable for appropriation, namely, as something that is stable, endowed with some sort of enduring 'core' (*sāra*). This is precisely what is denied in SN 22.95 (§7). Hence, *sakkāya diṭṭhi* is a false belief in the solidity of the constituents of experience. This false belief is what makes it possible to conceive of these constituents as suitable for appropriation, when in fact they are not since they are coreless and uncertain. In SN 22.82, *sakkāya diṭṭhi* is explained as the belief of an ordinary, untrained person, who regards any of the five aggregates in relation to him or herself (e.g. one regards form as oneself, or oneself as possessing form, or form as in oneself, or oneself as in form). Conversely, *sakkāya diṭṭhi* does not occur for an outstanding instructed disciple who does not entertain any of these views. However, the point concerns appropriation (regarding something in some relation to oneself is a way of stating one's ownership over it); it is not an ontological issue (where and how the self exists). Trying to overcome this yoke by forming a belief about the non-existence of the self, or any other belief about what the self is supposed to be (e.g. 'the self is only a process'), would fail (and thus leave this yoke intact). The problem is not how the notion of existence is applied (whether the self exists or not), and even less how the nature of the self is understood (what the self actually is), but lies in the very legitimacy that is attributed to the notion of existence, and more broadly in the implicit view that anything in experience has a graspable core that one could appropriate as 'mine.' It is only by seeing the whole of reality as ungraspable because it is coreless, that the first yoke can be relinquished.

283 Notice that the etymological meaning of *person* and *personality* (from the Latin *persona*) is theatrical or forensic. A person is a character that enacts a certain role. 'Personality view' is a yoke because it entails that the role enacted is taken at face value, without realizing that the mask that one is wearing is empty, hollow, and coreless.

constitutes a yoke to the structure of appropriation itself (and hence to a view of the self as master and owner of experience). By realizing that the whole of reality is coreless, that nothing is suitable for appropriation, and that the notion of 'existence' is itself misguided, thirst for ownership must face up to the realization of its own impossibility. This realization is what opens the door to the eventual collapse of appropriation and ownership.

The second yoke is a doubt (*vicikicchā*) about the Buddha's teaching on non-appropriation; doubt that the mundane way of life can or even should be escaped in the first place, and more generally doubt about whether the Buddha's teaching should really be taken seriously and practiced accordingly. Doesn't non-appropriation lead to the loss of something? What about my most cherished passions in life? What is this freedom proclaimed by the Buddha? Is it really worth striving for? Insofar as these doubts keep hunting practice, one will not be able to move further.

The third yoke is the belief that a degree of freedom and relief (including the possibility of escaping from the mundane way of life) is achievable through faithful execution of certain ritual actions (including the performance of meditation techniques of any sort), or by following a specific lifestyle. Just doing X and doing it in the right way (orthopraxis) is enough to be freed. This is a 'wrong grasping of morality and rituals' (*sīlabbataparāmāsa*). Notice: the problem is not necessarily in morality or rituals per se, but in one's attitude towards them (the 'wrong grasping' of them), namely, in how one understands their role in one's development—or, even worse, when one does *not* actually understand what the nature of the goal is and how certain actions might lead there. At a deeper level, this yoke can be interpreted as a sense of moral heteronomy. One relies on an external authority (including the Buddha himself, or a Buddhist sect, tradition, church, community) in order to receive instructions about what will have to be executed faithfully and properly in order to produce results almost automatically.

The primary factor that undermines the first yoke is a continuous and profound understanding of uncertainty (*anicca*) as a universal and structural feature of any experience, which makes appropriation ultimately impossible. One must first gain a clear intellectual understanding that 'whatever has the reality of originating, all of that has the reality of ceasing' (SN 56.11). But then one must begin to see and interpret any experience through this insight, until its validity becomes glaring and incontrovertible.

The primary factor that undermines the second yoke is confidence in the sense of ease, peace, well-being, and happiness that result from using practice to undermine appropriation. Despite what the world might have to say against it, the more one directly experiences the freedom and openness that is possible through non-appropriation, the more one will appreciate that the direction pointed at by the Buddha's teaching is the right one. Developing a certain level of composure (*samādhi*) is key for achieving this realization.

The primary factor that undermines the third yoke is understanding why and how exactly a certain form of practice can lead to the goal. For instance, how a certain contemplation can weaken or undermine appropriation. One clearly understands that 'in virtue of doing this, that follows.' The goal of one's practice is what decides the tools that need to be used, adjusted, and replaced at some point, in order for it to be achieved. No single ritual, technique, lifestyle, or other practice, in and of themself, has any inherent virtue when it comes to bringing about a particular result. Tools are only good insofar as one understands how they should be used, and for what purpose. Practicing for the sake of freedom entails realizing that one's own practice must also be a practice of freedom with regard to the way in which one decides to approach, refine, and manipulate one's experience.

At this level, there are also three conditions that might protect the yokes and prevent their uprooting. The first is a lack of sense restraint. In attempting to overcome appropriation, one works against the attitudes of greed, aversion, and ignorance. But ordinarily, these attitudes are so much taken

for granted that they become invisible, since the whole ordinary system of life is shaped by them. Ordinarily one simply goes with the grain. Practicing for the sake of breaking the first three yokes necessarily requires moving against the grain. In order to see the yokes at work, in order to feel their strength, one needs to put up some resistance against them. By undertaking sense restraint, one deliberately starts supporting intentions that go against the roots of appropriation for the sake of directly experiencing the pull that appropriation normally exercises on one's intentions. Sense restraint can be spelled out in terms of the eight uposatha precepts (AN 8.41), or more analytically, as the practice of 'guarding the sense doors' (e.g. DN 9, MN 27, SN 46.6). Restraint is a necessary condition for seeing the yokes at work in one's own experience. Without seeing them in this way, uprooting them will be impossible.

The second condition that might hinder progress is a lack of composure. For a mind agitated by the hindrances, there is simply not enough space, clarity, peace, happiness, and strength to undertake the task of overcoming the yokes. Composure does not have to be fully developed at this stage (most likely, it will not be), but it does need to be sufficiently established, at least to the degree that one can dwell for extended periods relatively free from the grosser manifestations of the hindrances (and, in turn, possibly be sufficiently familiar with the experience of the first contemplation).

The third condition that supports the yokes is a lack of understanding. Ignorance manifests at this level as the fact that one sees through the yokes and their working, without seeing how they actually shape one's experience. Ignorance is the transparency (or perhaps invisibility, *avijjā*) of the whole system of conditioning and bondage that surrounds ordinary life. If one does not understand what the task is (what needs to be done) or even why anything should be done at all, no development is possible. To sharpen understanding, wise reflection on the impossibility of appropriation is crucial. The most direct way of realizing this is by a sustained recollection of death ('noth-

ing in this life is ultimately my own'), possibly combined with a sense of friendliness towards the vulnerability that this theme evokes.

But understanding requires using the appropriate conceptual schemes to analyse experience. The discourses of the Buddha provide these schemes. Studying, memorizing, and practicing them is an invaluable resource for sharpening one's understanding. Unless one is bound to become a Buddha, there is no way one can figure out on one's own how to investigate reality for the sake of relinquishing appropriation, especially because this does not involve dealing with a particular content among others, but rather countering a background condition that affects the way in which all contents are experienced. Some direction is necessary, and the best direction available in this context is that provided by the discourses themselves.

If one manages to counter these three hindering conditions and develop sufficient sense restraint, composure, and understanding, the three yokes that bind practice to the mundane level are doomed to be broken. Most often, there is a moment in which their breaking apart becomes manifest, and that moment will bring the greatest relief that one has ever experienced in life, incomparable with anything else that has come before. This is a moment of extreme clarity, perfect certainty, and profound freedom. One truly awakes for the first time. Here the supramundane path begins. One has 'entered the stream' (*sotāpatti*).[284]

284 This turning point is somehow structurally akin to what in various traditions around the world is called 'conversion' (Greek *metanoia*, the 'turning or changing of the heart or mind'). But given the variability of experiences and beliefs proper of different traditions, this parallelism might be of limited help for understanding the nature of *sotāpatti* in the early discourses. What is sufficiently common and shared with other traditions is its being the *beginning* of a superior path of practice, and its marking a milestone that unmistakably sets apart what is prior to it and what comes next. In SN 12.41 the attainment of *sotāpatti* is presented according to a different scheme, in which one (i) is no longer bound to break any of the five precepts; (ii) has unwavering confidence in the Buddha, his teaching, and the community of practitioners (the 'Triple Gem'), plus is endowed with morally good behaviour; (iii) and 'the outstanding method (*ariyo ñāyo*) has been well seen and well penetrated by them with wisdom.' This outstanding method is spelled out in terms of contemplating conditioned co-origination, which can alternatively be seen as a contemplation of the four outstanding things (SN 56.11), or the contemplation of uncertainty and non-ownership (since the method of conditioned co-origination is derived from the meditative contemplation of the

Weakening sensual desire and aversion

At this stage, it will become clear that the next step to take is to completely uproot two other (lower) yokes: desire or lust for sensual pleasures (*kāmacchanda*) and any form of aversion (*byāpāda*). Sense restraint, by itself, can lead one to observe the workings of desire and aversion, and to some extent it can mitigate their manifestation, but it cannot uproot them completely. Thinking otherwise is part of the third yoke (faith in orthopraxis). This does not mean that sense restraint should be abandoned (thinking likewise will not make sense for a practitioner at this stage), but rather that it needs to be complemented by a deeper, more targeted strategy.

Desire and aversion for sensible objects, as the basis of the five familiar hindrances, might have been countered already to some extent. At the mundane level, one might appreciate the need to moderate these yokes and recognize their potential threats, and yet one will be afraid at the idea of having to leave them completely behind. But once the first step on the supramundane path is taken, it will become clear why there cannot be any genuine freedom while one remains yoked to them. In general, desire and aversion are two declensions of thirst (*taṇhā*, SN 56.11). Conditioned by thirst, there is suffering, and when suffering is faced with thirst (aversion and desire), there is even more suffering (SN 36.6). This general theorem is fully understood at this point. What remains is for it to be brought fully into practice as well.

In the four-step model, the uprooting of thirst is tackled directly in steps two to four (which indicates how difficult, profound, and complex this task actually is). The first step is the one mentioned above, through which one enters the supramundane path itself. This already requires a significant undermining of desire and aversion compared to how they manifest in ordi-

arising and ceasing of the five aggregates, SN 12.22). This third point is what directly counters the first yoke (*sakkāya diṭṭhi*), while the second and third points contribute to countering the other two yokes (*vicikicchā* and *sīlabbataparāmāsa*). AN 10.76 provides a more elaborate analysis of the factors that must be abandoned in order to relinquish the three lower yokes.

nary life, and it is accompanied by a fading of the hindrances; namely, of the more explicit and outward manifestations of desire and aversion. The second and third steps focus on desire and aversion taken as roots for any action or intention, hence, in their more implicit components, buried in the soil of one's experience. The second entails a substantial weakening of these roots, and the third their complete extinguishment with respect to sensible objects and contents. The fourth step concerns the final uprooting of the non-sensible residues of desire and aversion.

Imagine you want to extirpate a tree from a garden because you see how it undermines the thriving of anything else there (first step). Then you begin by cutting the branches (second step), next the trunk at the ground level (thirst step), and eventually dig out the roots (fourth step).

Desire and aversion for sensible objects are connected with ignorance and are best tackled by countering them directly, while also countering the way in which they are supported by ignorance. The best strategy to counter desire and aversion directly is to develop composure to a much deeper degree than before, which ideally would reach some proficiency with the four contemplations (*jhānā*). Composure is best developed on the basis of friendliness. This combination of positive qualities will naturally provide enough ease, enthusiasm, energy, happiness, and bliss to make desire redundant, and aversion meaningless. But to counter ignorance, it will be necessary to develop one's understanding further.

A more profound realization of the implications of uncertainty is key. Whatever is uncertain is such that it cannot possibly constitute a duty, or impose any order, commandment, or obligation. Desire and aversion manifest with a sense of urgency and necessity, but this is precisely what their nature does not entitle them to claim. Desire and aversion are uncertain, like anything else in experience, hence they cannot (and should not) bind anybody. Thinking otherwise is just ignorance. The ordinary person, faced with desire or aversion, thinks: 'I *must* do this, I *must not* do that, I *have to*, I

should, I *ought*.' The practitioner on the supramundane path realizes: 'Desire or aversion wants me to do this or that, but I do not have to, I have no obligation, and actually, I know better, I know something that is much more beneficial for me.' Thinking thus, one simply refuses to consent and execute the orders of desire and aversion, by disbanding the feedback loop that they create, and breaking the habitual patterns that sustain them.

Even when desire and aversion for sensible objects are sufficiently weakened, they might still surface occasionally. But if they do, they will be experienced with an entirely different meaning. They will no longer be felt as something that the practitioner could possibly endorse as their genuine intention. There will no longer be any belief that these drives actually constitute something valuable for one's life, something to be kept, preserved, even protected. They might be experienced as something that one allows to manifest occasionally and in a relatively limited and circumscribed form, mostly for the sake of some other value, like that of fostering a degree of compassion or friendliness for other beings. One might see them as a concession, a compromise, an exception. But desire and aversion will no longer have any currency of their own in one's life. One no longer buys into the story they tell.

This realization can manifest at some point in a particularly clear, explicit, and decisive form, once again connected with a profound sense of relief and freedom, although this experience might be less intense than the experience one goes through when one has just entered the supramundane path. The lessening of intensity in this realization is actually proportional to a deepening of its subtlety. When one notices how radically one's understanding of desire and aversion for sensible object has been transformed and thereby weakened, the second milestone has been passed (*sakadāgāmitā*).[285]

285 The *sakadāgāmin* is literally a 'once-returner,' which in the framework of the rebirth belief that is commonly associated with the four-step model, entails that one will return to a human life on this world only once (compared to the *sotāpanna*, who can come back up to seven times). More generally this indicates that one's attachment to the sensible world has been so weakened that any relapse in desire and aversion for sensible objects can be only occasional and extremely rare.

Overcoming sensuality

At this stage, the work that remains to be done becomes more apparent. One knows that whenever desire and aversion arise, there is an option, a choice to be made, but there is no compulsion. At the mundane level, when hindrances manifest, there is also a choice to make. But often enough, one's understanding is either too blurred and fuzzy to see the alternative, or one is not yet able to rely on another non-sensible source of contentment and strength which is necessary to say 'no' to the push and pull of desire and aversion. At the supramundane level, the process of eradication of desire and aversion is no longer episodic (as when one deals with the manifestation of the hindrances), but systematic. Effort is now applied not just to any specific manifestation of desire and aversion, but to the very possibility of any manifestation of them.

Having passed the second milestone, one is now developed enough to know that there is an alternative source of well-being that does not rely on desire and aversion. More importantly, one knows that desire and aversion have side effects that outweigh any short-term potential benefit they might promise. In fact, it is part of one's ignorance even to believe that occasionally indulging in desire and aversion for the sake of others might be acceptable. Desire and aversion are not beneficial for oneself and one's own well-being, since they create a feverish condition that leads to bondage, needfulness, entanglement, and drag one away from freedom. They are not beneficial for others either, since they are *the problem* that others do not know how (or even want) to escape. And indulging in them does not make the practitioner on the supramundane path more compassionate, since the best way such a practitioner can be genuinely helpful to other beings is by remaining as sober, lucid, unintoxicated as possible.

This subtle ignorance leads one to permit and even endorse desire and aversion from time to time. And this reveals the blind spot that needs addressing. Having an alternative is not enough if one does not *decide* to take

that alternative. Composure is the alternative to the system of life offered by desire and aversion for sensible objects. But then one must understand that this alternative should be chosen systematically and that there is no point in continuing to depend on anything else. The training offered by the Buddha is a training of intentionality, a practice about how to act (by body, speech, and thought). One should not be fooled by the spontaneity and naturalness that comes with a certain degree of acquaintance and proficiency. At any stage of practice, one is called upon to make choices; choices about what to pay attention to, about how to pay attention, and why. At different points, certain choices become so well established, ingrained, and fully assimilated, that they will no longer feel like choices, they will have become habits. But this does not take away from the fact that they are choices. For as long as one practices, one has to make choices all the time. Practicing itself is a choice. And practicing for the sake of freedom can only reveal the depth and breadth of the choices one has to make. The subtle ignorance that prevents the complete eradication of desire and aversion for sensible objects is *not wanting* to make this choice, not wanting to take this step, being afraid of it or of regretting it. And this *is* a choice, rooted in ignorance. Only when this fear is fully overcome, can one leave behind desire and aversion, embrace instead composure as one's inner source of happiness and force, freely decide that nothing else is really needed, and one is better off without.[286]

For this decision to make sense, one needs to develop composure to such an extent that the four contemplations can be gained at will and with proficiency at any time (which in turn might already require some adjustments in one's external conditions and livelihood). But this, in itself, is not enough to prompt the decision that desire and aversion for sensible objects are no longer needed and can be left behind entirely. This decision is based on two

286 In SN 12.66, not pursuing sensuality and relinquishing thirst for sensual enjoyment is explicitly presented as a matter of choice based on wise reflection through the metaphor of a thirsty person deciding not to drink an attractive but poisoned beverage and instead choosing to quench their thirst in some other way.

conditions, namely, composure and clear understanding. Without both these conditions in place, the decision will not make sense (short of understanding) or it will be ineffective (short of composure). But when both these conditions *are* in place, the decision can make sense and it can be effective. It just needs to be taken. 'Relying on this, abandon that' (MN 137).

This step is a positive intentional and deliberate action at the level of thought. It cannot be done by proxy; one must do it. It is a gesture of letting go and moving ahead. One radical step towards freedom. Only when this step is made is the third milestone of the supramundane path left behind. Unyoked to the world of sensible objects, one is no longer bound to come back to it (*anāgāmitā*).

Dissolving fear

After the third milestone has been passed, the practitioner is able to experience a state of peace and freedom born from the relinquishment of thirst. This begins with a sense of letting go of all the endless configurations of the five aggregates and stepping back from engagement with them based on the profound understanding that they are structurally uncertain (*anicca*) and hence unsuitable for appropriation. In light of this relinquishment, thirsting loses its pull and can be abandoned. As a result, a sense of dispassion (*virāga*) towards the whole world arises. Dispassion is accompanied by a unique joy and even beauty, based on non-sensuality (MN 137). Freedom manifests within this opening, as the cessation (*nirodha*) of coactions, the dropping of duties, of fading of the sense of 'having to do' imposed by thirsting. The game enforced by the habitual patterns of greed and aversion has no cogency anymore. One can then let go the ordinary character ('me') needed to play that game. The game is over. Because of that, letting go (*paṭinissagga*) takes a deeper twist, a more profound flavor. It is suffused by a complete absence of suffering, which makes it exquisite and blissful. But more importantly, the whole of experience loses its personal connotation, it is no longer experienced

as either 'mine' or 'alien.' This dichotomy is dismissed as irrelevant. Everything is light, weightless, perfect.

While accessible, this experience remains unstable. On the one hand, upon entering it, there is a tendency to make this condition one's final dwelling; there is a subtle instinct of wanting to remain there forever. On the other hand, there can be an equally subtle uneasiness with the sense of suspense and being unestablished which is engendered by freedom and letting go. The experience does not feel 'mine' and yet it does not feel 'alien.' This is confusing. Which is it? A subtle restlessness tends to dissipate the fuzziness that seemingly surrounds this condition, trying to resolving it in one way or another. In both cases, an implicit sense of 'me' resurfaces as the point of reference from which to judge experience and take a stance towards it, appropriate it, or control it somehow.

This is how four of the five higher yokes prevent the last step towards complete awakening. Lust for existence in the realm of form (*rūparāga*) and lust for existence in the formless realm (*arūparāga*) express the subtle thirst for existence that urges one to grasp at the experience of freedom, by thus losing it. Conceit (*māna*) lurks behind this thirst (since wanting to *be* in some state entails wanting to be *someone*), and it supports agitation (*uddhaccaṃ*), the uneasiness with respect to how fuzzy and unestablished experience has become. Trying to move towards the state of freedom (grasping at it), or trying to step back from it (making it more determinate again), are both ways of undermining it. By undermining freedom, thirst is reactivated, and an accompanying sense of self follows. With the (re)birth of this sense of self, struggle and stress (however refined and light they might be) are back. The experience of freedom is lost. The practitioner must thus restart the cycle, deactivate thirst again, return to that space of freedom, even if only to lose it once again.

In order to stop this cycle, it is necessary to cut the fifth yoke: ignorance (*avijjā*). At the superficial level, ignorance is a negative absence of knowing

and clarity. Prior to entering into the supramundane path, for instance, it manifests as a lack of understanding about the structural uncertainty of all constituent elements of reality and how this makes any form of thirst or appropriation stressful and doomed. But at this last stage on the supramundane path, ignorance reveals its more active nature, as the deliberate effort of diverting attention from and avoiding what is assumed to be a threat.

Thirst is rooted in this ignorance, since thirst *knows* the experience of being unestablished in the present (being discontent with what is there and launched towards the acquisition of something envisaged and yet currently absent). But thirst interprets this experience as *the* problem. Thirst is a way of facing the acknowledgment of being unestablished as a fault, something that needs treatment, which is provided by moving to an imagined state to be obtained and kept, possibly forever. Thirst *sees* what being unestablished means, but it does not like it, is afraid of it, and seeks an escape from it. This disliking is instinctive, unarticulated, implicit, and it makes thirst possible by creating a sense of need, a craving for change: this is ignorance. With the effort of ignoring what is envisaged as the threat of uncertainty, thirst for not seeing it or seeing something else arises. Thirst is conditioned by ignorance. To cut out thirst, one must cut out ignorance.

But ignorance too is conditioned (otherwise, it could not cease and there would be no escape from the whole cycle). Ignorance is based on an instinctive fear of the sense of fuzziness and being unestablished that is induced by dropping the dichotomy between 'mine' and 'alien.'[287] Fear of heights, fear of

287 AN 10.61 applies the scheme of conditioned co-origination to ignorance itself, showing that the first *cause* of ignorance (its origin in time) cannot be discerned, but that the *conditions* that sustain ignorance in the present are clearly discernible: the five hindrances. The five hindrances can in turn be considered as a complexification and intermingling of the three bases of desire, aversion, and ignorance, and (per SN 36.6) aversion is the root of them. Fear is not only a particular form of aversion, but perhaps the most fundamental. Cf. also SN 22.55 in §5 where the disciple at the third stage of awakening is described as 'not scared' by what does not have to cause fear, and Sn 4.15 below in which fear is identified as a structural problem of human existence and potentially as the deepest 'dart' that the Buddha aims to gain freedom from. The attitude of fearlessness is emphasized in Ud 2.10 (§0) and in DN 2, while in MN 4, the Buddha presents his own path to awakening as a progressive overcoming and subduing of fear and dread.

lightness, fear of being ungrounded, fear of losing oneself, fear for what cannot be determined, pinned down, bounded, measured, controlled. Fear of not having a terrain suitable for fully settling in. It is not a fear of a specific threat, but rather a more basic anxiety about the lack of control that uncertainty entails. Because of this instinctual fear, looking at uncertainty is dreadful, and becomes more and more dreadful as uncertainty is seen closer to one's own heart. Fear compels one to find ways of *not seeing* (ignoring) what is dreaded, hence it creates the unquenchable restlessness and agitation that constantly pervades the field of experience of anybody short of full awakening. Thirst is the natural offspring of this condition, which roams here and there, seeking relief in something to grasp, to possess, to control. The self is born to play the game of thirst, but since the game will eventually keep facing failures (appropriation is impossible, after all), the self has to be reborn again, and again, cycle after cycle.

At this stage, the practitioner is well aware that *in theory* there is nothing to be afraid of in uncertainty, and that the sense of being unestablished anywhere is in itself blissful. But this knowledge is not effective insofar as ignorance creates a shell of resistance to looking at it, listening to it, and understanding it. In order to pierce through this shell, it is necessary to relax the fear first, so that the knowledge already acquired can eventually dissolve all the remaining traces of ignorance. One has to face upfront that fear of freedom and infuse in it a drop of pure friendliness. With the cessation of fear, ignorance ceases, uncertainty is seen for what it is, as a blessing, nothing to be afraid of. With the cessation of ignorance, thirst ceases as well. Without thirsting, nothing in experience needs to be appropriated. With the cessation of appropriation, all problems cease as well. The resulting experience is not a new construction, but the cessation of a series of constructions. To construct and hold on requires constant effort and sustenance. But a state of cessation does not require any effort, since it has no positive content on its own to sustain. Cessation is not constructed, only realized.

Observing any of the five aggregates one sees just them, they are present for what they are, but there is nothing personal in them, indeed there has never been. Even consciousness, the very fact of experiencing anything at all, is just that, a purely impersonal phenomenon. And even the experience of experiencing the impersonality of the whole world of experience appears within this context, as just this particular experience and nothing more, without any grasping at it anymore (MN 72, SN 22.85). The five aggregates remain, functionally joined by conditional relations, but without any further glue to bind them, like a wall of bricks from which all cement has been removed. There is experience, but there is no underpinning unity of experience, no centre, no ground. Instead of that, there is a sense of suspense, openness, emptiness, freedom, imperturbability, evenness, serenity, peace, and friendliness.

The perception of uncertainty, when fully interiorized, leads to the breaking up of appropriation towards (*anupādāna*) and identification with (*atammayatā*) any of the constituent elements of experience (AN 7.49). When this understanding becomes the all-encompassing context within which any other experience is interpreted, proliferations based on identification disband, collapse, and are unable to resume their habitual course, like a fire deprived of fuel.

This way of looking at things takes a certain time to settle, like the first moments after waking up, in which one leaves behind dreams and sleep, and accustoms themself to the waking state. Eventually, the solution to the problem of rebirth becomes apparent. I am reborn because of my decision to take up this or that existence as my own. If rebirth did not depend on this decision, if it was a natural, involuntary, and necessary mechanism, there would be no escape from it. But that decision was and remains unwarranted, at odds with the reality of things, and leading to endless frustration. And yet, not appropriating even the most fundamental components of experience, including one's own understanding, clearly brings the experience of me being this person acting in this drama to its halt. Fearing to cease entirely, one keeps

holding on to what it is not one's own, hoping to buy some time to find a better solution. And so, one keeps stealing what will keep escaping and becoming otherwise. Only when fear has been completely overcome, the opposite decision becomes possible: end the endless stealing of what belongs to nobody! Give it back, let it go! Decide not to appropriate anything anywhere again, including the understanding itself that sees and listen to all of this! Like the untying of a knot, the structure of appropriation around which the effort of being someone is constructed dissolves (*kamma nirodha*): 'birth is destroyed, the training has been completed, what should be done has been done, there is nothing more to this end' (*arahattā*).[288]

Reading

The following poem (Sn 4.15) belongs to what might be regarded as one of the oldest segments of the Pāli canon, the *Aṭṭhakavagga* ('Collection of Octads') included in the *Sutta Nipāta.* The Buddha presents the motivations for engaging with practice as a sense of urgency arose by the realization that ordinary life is unsafe, as it is plagued by fear for one's condition. The poem then describes the qualities of the accomplished sage (which resonate with those mentioned for instance in the poem on *mettā*, Sn 1.8). The goal of practice is presented in terms of a state of emotional peace, based on an attitude of non-appropriation, independence, and freedom from any attachment to the world of sensuality. But the sage is not described as someone who no longer lives in the world or has attained some other metaphysical realm, but rather as someone who can walk on earth without being concerned or preoccupied by anything, simply because there is nothing there that they appro-

288 Comparing with the tasks associated with the four outstanding things (SN 56.11), understanding that there is nothing to be afraid of in uncertainty is having fully understood *dukkha*, which leads to fully abandon thirst, and hence to fully realize its cessation without remainder, which is the fulfilment of the task of developing the path. At the end of the path, the four things converge and coalesce in one unified insight.

priate or try to push away. The goal of practice is thus explained in terms of the personal traits and qualities that one can eventually embody in their life. In the unfolding of the poem, several canonical themes emerge (the five hindrances, the cultivation of moral qualities, non-sensuality, the overcoming of 'my-making,' 'I-making,' and conceit), but they are not introduced following any specific or more canonical formula, suggesting how they blend together for someone who has already achieved full realization.

Using violence, fear
is born;[289] look at people
fighting! Of urgency (*saṁvegaṁ*)
I shall talk, and how I was moved by it.

I've seen human beings trembling,
like fishes in little water;
hostile to one another,
I've seen them, and I was afraid.

The world is entirely coreless,
in all directions there is turmoil;
longing for a dwelling for myself,
I didn't see one that was not taken.[290]

Indeed, people are hindered by aversion till the end,
having seen that, I was disenchanted;
then I saw the dart, so hard to see,
anchored in the heart.[291]

289 *Attadaṇḍā bhayaṁ jātaṁ*. The word *daṇḍā* literally means 'stick' but figuratively 'punishment' and the compound *attadaṇḍā* can be taken to mean 'use of violence.'

290 *Samantamasāro loko, disā sabbā sameritā; / Icchaṁ bhavanamattano, nāddasāsiṁ anositaṁ*. On the meaning of *sāra* in the first verse cf. SN 22.95, §7. In the compound *bhavanam-attano*, the word *bhavanam* (literally 'existence') has more the sense of 'dwelling,' although one's existence or life-form is in fact one's own 'dwelling place.' But, as the metaphor continues (cf. the stanza above about human beings compared to fishes), it becomes clear that there is no free spot that has not already been taken or that is not inhabited (*anositaṁ*) by someone, and hence no free spot that would not cost quarrel and fight to gain.

291 *Osāne tveva byāruddhe, Disvā me aratī ahu; / Athettha sallamaddakkhiṁ, Duddasaṁ hadayanissitaṁ.*

Pierced by this dart,
one runs in all directions;
but having extracted this dart,
one neither runs, nor sinks.[292]

Whatever bonds are in the world,
one should not pursue them;
having gone completely beyond sensual pleasures,
one should train for one's extinction (*sikkhe nibbānamattano*).

One should be truthful and not arrogant,
non-deceitful and free from slander;
without aversion, the evils of greed
and multifarious desires the sage should overcome.

One should vanquish sleepiness, torpor,
and sloth, and should not live intoxicated;
a person seeking extinction
should not persist in arrogance.[293]

One should not be led into falsity (*mosavajje*),
nor be fascinated by the love for forms;

The word *aratī* indicates a lack of passion, attachment, and love (*rati*). It could also be rendered as 'dispassionate' or 'weary,' although here it seems to point to a more fundamental realization about the overall nature of human predicament.

292 The dart can be understood as 'thirst' or its equivalent 'hunger' that is mentioned below, but also as the structure of fear itself (aversion) to which ordinary people are subject (cf. SN 36.6, §3 for the use of the same metaphor). Concerning the metaphor of neither running nor sinking, cf. SN 1.1. The commentarial tradition interprets this as a reference to not running towards rebirth, and not sinking in the 'four flood' of sensuality, existence, views, and ignorance (SN 45.171, AN 4.10). At this point an editorial annotation in the original Pāli signals that the following section contains the training rules to be chanted.

293 *Niddaṁ tandiṁ sahe thīnaṁ, pamādena na saṁvase; / Atimāne na tiṭṭheyya, nibbānamanaso naro.* The first part of the stanza seems to refer to what will become characterized more canonically as the hindrance of sloth-and-torpor (*thīna-middha*). The word *tandiṁ* is analogous in meaning with *thīna*, while *niddaṁ* means 'sleep(y).' Concerning the translation of *pamāda* as 'intoxicated' (instead of the more traditional 'laziness' or 'heedlessness,' see footnote 29 to AN 8.53 in §0. A more literal rendering of the second part would be 'in arrogance should not persist, a person [who is] extinction-thought.' Given that the context is that of training (hence *nibbāna* is a goal to achieve), the compound *nibbānamanaso* has the sense of 'thinking to, be intent to, having a mind set on *nibbāna*.'

and knowing conceit (*māna*) thoroughly,
one should behave abstaining from violence.

One should not seek delight in the old,
nor make expectations for the new;
not grieving for what is past,
one should not depend on the sky.[294]

I call greed 'the great flood,'
and I call 'hunger' being absorbed by it;[295]
the object on which attention is fixed,
is the swamp of sensuality (*kāmapaṅko*), so hard to cross.

The sage, not deviating from the truth,
is a brahmin who stands on dry land;
having let go (*paṭinissajja*) of everything,
he is called 'peaceful.'

He is indeed one who knows, truly accomplished in Wisdom,[296]
having known reality (*dhammaṁ*), he is unestablished (*anissito*);
he is one who walks rightly in the world,
not longing for anything here.[297]

294 *Purāṇaṁ nābhinandeyya, Nave khantiṁ na kubbaye; / Hiyyamāne na soceyya, Ākāsaṁ na sito siyā.* The word *khanti* usually refers to 'patience' and 'forbearance' but in this context it takes the meaning of 'preference, inclination,' hence (literally) 'one should not make (*na kubbaye*) inclinations towards the new (*nave*),' namely, avoid expectations about the future. In other words, one should not indulge in wishful thinking about the future. The general idea of neither remaining attached to the past, nor just hoping in the future, is restated in the second verse. The reference to the 'sky' (*Ākāsaṁ*) most likely means the need to not make one's life depend on hopes for what superior beings (like gods or spirits) might do or how they might help.

295 *Ājavaṁ brūmi jappanaṁ.* The word *Ājavaṁ* can be read as a variant of *ācamā*, 'being absorbed,' while *jappanaṁ* is analogous to *taṇhā* (the latter is 'thirst', the former is 'hunger,' but the metaphorical meaning is the same).

296 *Vedagū*, literally, someone who is knowledgeable of the *Vedas*, the sacred lore of the brahmins. In these verses, as often in the discourses, the Buddha is rephrasing and generalizing for his own purposes, epithets and values derived from the brahmin tradition.

297 *Sammā so loke iriyāno, Na pihetīdha kassaci.* The word *iriyāna* can be used to denote the four bodily postures: walking, standing, sitting, and laying down, hence it encompasses all ways of 'being in the world.'

One who has crossed beyond sensuality,
a bond in the world so hard to overcome,
he does not grieve, nor he is concerned,
he crossed the stream, he's unbounded.[298]

What is past, let it wither up,
and make sure that there is nothing more in the future;
if you do not grasp at what is in the middle,[299]
you shall live in peace.

No matter what appears,
there is nothing there that he claims as 'mine;'[300]
and when things are not there, he does not grieve,
indeed, in the world he does not lose anything.

For whom 'this is mine' does not occur,
nor anything belongs to another,
'myself' is not part of their experience,
one does not grieve: 'there is nothing mine.'[301]

298 *Yodha kāme accatari, Saṅgaṁ loke duraccayaṁ; / Na so socati nājjheti, Chinnasoto abandhano.* This stanza is crucial. Moving beyond any attachment for sensual pleasures is the fetter (*saṅgaṁ*, more generally 'bond') that is both difficult to leave behind (*duraccayaṁ*) and supports attitudes of greed and aversion. But having relinquished this bond, one is beyond sorrow, and safe. The reference in the same stanza to the overcoming of sensuality, the crossing of the stream, and the state of extinction suggests that, in this poem, the four-step model of awakening is not at play, since the steps are presented together and in no specific hierarchy or order. This might be explained by the fact that the Buddha is offering a retrospective account of his own experience from the standpoint of one who has achieved ultimate peace, and not from the point of view of someone in training who is still practicing to reach it.

299 *Majjhe*, 'in the middle,' but given the context: 'in the present.'

300 *Sabbaso nāmarūpasmiṁ, Yassa natthi mamāyitaṁ.* More literally, 'in the whole of name-and-form (*sabbaso nāmarūpasmiṁ*), for him there is nothing cherished.' *Nāmarūpa* is a technical term of Vedic origins used to indicate what appears in experience, and it is recognized has having a certain shape and identifiable meaning. In the discourses it is used to indicate the psycho-physical individual (except consciousness, see DN 15, SN 12.2). *Mamāyitaṁ* is derived from *mama* ('mine') and indicate emotional attachment based on appropriation and belonging.

301 *Yassa natthi idaṁ meti, Paresaṁ vāpi kiñcanaṁ; / Mamattaṁ so asaṁvindaṁ, Natthi meti na socati.* Another extremely important stanza that shows a very practical early understanding of the doctrine of *anattā*. The crucial insight here is the attitude of not making 'mine' anything in the world. Without appropriation of this or that as 'mine,' the distinction between what belongs to me and what belongs to others is also relinquished. For one who realizes this attitude, the concern for 'myself' (*mamattaṁ*) does not exist or cannot be found (*asaṁvindaṁ*). Notice that 'mine' and 'other' are co-de-

Being free from cruelty, free from greed,
thirstless (*anejo*), everywhere the same:
I say that this is the advantage,
if I'm asked about the imperturbable.

For a wise one, thirstless,
there is no coaction whatsoever;[302]
abstaining from arousing energy,
one sees safety everywhere.[303]

A sage does not talk in terms of
equal, inferior or superior;
at peace, free from misery,
they neither take, nor reject.[304]

(Sn 4.15)

pendent and hence they can only be relinquished together. No longer appropriating anything as 'mine' does *not* amount to experiencing everything as alien, but rather in no longer using the concepts of 'mine' and 'other' as a basis for interpreting experience. Contrary to ordinary expectations, relinquishing appropriation does *not* entail a sense of loss and lack (grieving over 'there is nothing mine') but rather a sense of lightness and freedom from any concern.

302 *Natthi kāci nisaṅkhati.* A variant offers *nisaṅkhiti*, which can be interpreted as 'non accumulating' (karmic consequences). But the etymology of *nisaṅkhati* remains *ni+saṁ+kṛ*, the same of *saṇkhāra* (co-action).

303 *Virato so viyārabbhā*, describes the state of the wise person who has attained ultimate peace and thus no longer needs any training or effort to get there. If one understands peace as being unestablished in any condition and no longer bound to any state, the cessation of effort becomes obvious: one needs to put in effort in order to retain and keep a footing in conditions and states, since their uncertain nature is to slip away; but when one no longer aims at being established anywhere, no effort is required anymore. Compare this result with the description in the first stanza, where the Buddha introduces instead the theme of 'urgency' (*saṁvegaṁ*) for practice.

304 *Na samesu na omesu, Na ussesu vadate muni; / Santo so vītamaccharo, Nādeti na nirassatī.* The first part of the stanza can be regarded as a standard reference to the form of conceit based on comparing oneself with others in terms of equal, inferior, or superior; an attitude left behind by the accomplished sage. The very last remark (*nādeti na nirassatī*) encapsulates in a pragmatic way the attitude of non-appropriation that is at the root of freedom, peace, and realization.

Appendix

Synoptic analysis of the four contemplations

	First *jhāna*	**Second *jhāna***	**Third *jhāna***	**Fourth *jhāna***
Formula (SN 45.8)	Secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from non-virtuous realities, having entered upon it, one dwells in the first contemplation, which is accompanied by ascertainment (*vitakka*) and investigation (*vicara*), and by an enthusiastic pleasantness (*pītisukhaṃ*) born from seclusion (*vivekajaṃ*).	With the pacification of ascertainment and investigation, having entered upon it, one dwells in the second contemplation, with an enthusiastic pleasantness born from composure (*samādhijaṃ*), without ascertainment and without investigation, with internal confidence (*sampasādanaṃ*) and unification of the understanding (*ekodibhāvaṃ*).	With dispassion towards enthusiasm, having entered upon it, one dwells in the third contemplation; one dwells serene (*upekkhako*), recollecting and metacognitively aware (*sato ca sampajāno*), and feels pleasure with the body, as the outstanding ones describe: 'one who is serene and recollects dwells in pleasure.'	With the abandoning of both pleasure and pain (*Sukhassa ca … dukkhassa*), with the previous disappearance of joy and sadness (*somanassa-domanassa*), having entered upon it, one dwells in the fourth contemplation, neither painful nor pleasant (*adukkham-asukhaṁ*), with recollection purified by serenity (*upekkhā-sati-pārisuddhiṁ*).
Cessation	Sensuality and the five hindrances.	Ascertainment and investigation.	Enthusiasm.	Pleasantness.
***Jhāna* factors**	(S1) ascertainment and investigation; (R1) enthusiastic pleasantness born from seclusion.	(R1→S2) enthusiastic pleasantness born from composure; (R2) internal confidence and unification of the understanding.	(R2→S3) serenity, recollection, and metacognitive awareness; (R3) body-pleasantness.	(R3→S4) neither pain nor pleasure (neutral feeling); (R4) recollection purified by serenity.
Awakening factors	Recollection, investigation, energy, enthusiasm.	Enthusiasm, tranquillity, composure.	Tranquillity, composure, serenity.	Composure, serenity, purified recollection.
Informal description of the experience	Considering and fully enjoying the relief that results from the absence of the hindrances, a profound sense of enthusiasm and pleasure pervades the whole body.	Setting aside any further consideration, there is just pure happiness for the current state, resulting in a sense of confidence that needs no reflection.	Centring experience on the sense of confidence, enthusiasm is abandoned, the understanding becomes serene and neutral, while the body is still suffused with pleasantness.	Withdrawing attention from the feeling of bodily pleasure, the understanding sinks in its own neutrality and in an even deeper peacefulness.
Dominant pitch	Pleasantness.	Happiness.	Restfulness.	Serenity.
Tempo of attention	Slower than ordinary.	Three times slower than in the first *jhāna*.	Five times slower than in the first *jhāna*.	Eight times slower than in the first *jhāna*.

Notes

On the jhāna factors

The commentarial tradition analyses the factors involved in each *jhāna* by identifying a different factor with almost each keyword included in the formula. However, in the presentation provided here, it becomes apparent that each *jhāna* has two main (and complex) factors, one sustaining it (marked with 'S'), the other resulting from it (marked with 'R'). In the first *jhāna*, the sustaining factor (S1) is ascertainment and investigation, while the resulting factor (R1) is enthusiastic pleasantness. Moving from one *jhāna* to the next, means abandoning the sustaining factor of the previous *jhāna* (S1) and transforming its resulting factor into a sustaining factor for the next *jhāna* (R1→S2). This follows the principle according to which something can be abandoned by relying on something else (MN 137). In practice, it unfolds as a progressive broadening and deepening of the context of experience. The abandonment of ascertainment and investigation (S1) makes enthusiastic pleasantness itself a sustaining factor for the second *jhāna* (R2). In this shift, enthusiastic pleasantness is transformed, since it is no longer based on seclusion, but on composure. In turn, this allows for the appearance of a new resulting factor peculiar of the second *jhāna* (confidence and unification, R2). With the abandonment of enthusiasm (S2), confidence and unification become serenity, recollection and metacognitive awareness (R2→S3), the new sustaining factor of the third *jhāna*. Any bodily pleasantness remaining in the background of experience from the previous stage is now deepened and sustained by the serenity of the understanding itself (R3). With the letting go of this bodily feeling of pleasure (R3→S4), the whole experience drifts towards serenity, which makes recollection still and restful, since there is no longer any need to assess anything (R4).

On the first jhāna

Traditionally, the compound *pītisukhaṃ* is interpreted as referring to two distinct factors that occur in both the first and the second *jhāna*. However, the way they occur in the two contemplations is different, since in the first *jhāna* they are characterized as born from seclusion, but in the second as born from composure. Moreover, the actual experience of *pītisukhaṃ* is hardly describable as that of two separate and independent elements, given that the enthusiasm involved (*pīti*) supports the pleasantness (*sukhaṃ*) and vice versa.

On the second jhāna

The resulting factors involved in the second *jhāna* are usually distinguished as internal confidence and unification. But it is important to emphasize that both elements are the result of the cessation of the process of ascertainment (*vitakka*) and investigation (*vicara*) that sustain the first *jhāna*. Ascertainment consists in checking and pondering the validity of one's achievement ('are the hindrances absent? Yes! Really? Yes! Isn't this awesome? Yes!'), while investigation concerns the more or less verbalized and articulated examination through which this ascertainment is carried out. In other words, the cessation of ascertainment and investigation consists in reaching a sense of full confidence, certainty, and intuitive assurance of the beauty and pleasantness of the state that has been constructed. Since there is nothing more to ascertain, there is confidence, and since there is nothing more to investigate, there is unification. Confidence and unification are the counterparts of the absence of ascertainment and investigation, or what is left when they are dropped. The commentarial tradition takes as a standard way of reaching this state to be a condition of exclusive attention to one chosen object, which excludes or filters out any other perception. While this *might* help in the establishment of the first or second *jhāna*, it is by no means the only possible method to follow and it is supported by scant textual evidence in the discourses, nor has any direct counterpart in the standard *jhāna* formula.

On the third jhāna

The main change between the second and the third *jhāna* consists in the cessation of enthusiasm. This leads the whole of experience to drift towards a calmer mood. It is in this shift that the factor of confidence and unification of the second *jhāna* becomes 'serenity, recollection, and metacognitive awareness.' Without the active engagement entailed by enthusiasm, the way of understanding the experience at the level of thought drift towards a more detached and disengaged observation. The sustaining factor of the third *jhāna* results from the way in which confidence and unification are experienced once there is no longer any enthusiasm for what happens, and one can simply observe the unfolding of experience from a distance. As the observation becomes calmer and more serene at the level of thought, this supports a background feeling of pleasure and relaxation in the body, which is a characteristic of the awakening factor of tranquillity (*passaddhi* SN 46.2).

On the fourth jhāna

There is some debate about how to interpret the 'abandoning of both pleasure and pain, with the previous disappearance of joy and sadness.' Apparently, there is already an absence of pain or sadness since the first *jhāna*, and it seems strange that these are now mentioned in the end of the progression. But the problem can be solved in two steps. The first, and less controversial step, consists in interpreting 'pleasure and pain' as bodily feelings, while 'joy and sadness' has feelings in the domain of thought or understanding (SN 36.6). The second, and perhaps more controversial step, consists in considering each pair as a way of referring to the actual *neutral* feeling (neither painful nor pleasant) either in the body or at the level of thought. Hence, the 'previous disappearance of joy and sadness' is a way of referring to the actual neutral feeling in the domain of thought that characterizes the third *jhāna* (which has been developed already), and the 'abandoning of both pleasure and pain' entails the transformation of the bodily feeling of pleasure that is

still present in the third *jhāna* into a feeling of neutrality. In other words, after having elicited a neutral feeling in the domain of thought, this feeling now extends to the body as well.

On the jhāna progression and recollection

The whole progression through the four *jhānā* can be regarded as a progressive stilling of experience, which leads to the threshold of what is described as the third way of practicing recollection in the refrain of the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* (MN 10, in the case of body): 'the recollection 'there is body' is established in him; only in the measure sufficient for knowledge and recollection, and he dwells unestablished, not appropriating anything in the world.' The fourth *jhāna* is where this way of recollecting becomes more apparent, since ascertainment and investigation have been left behind, and the whole of experience has drifted towards a neutral feeling that naturally leads to greater disengagement (R4). In turn, this is the ideal standpoint to observe that whatever is present is *just* a content of experience, and not 'my' content of experience ('there is body' means 'there is *just* body, this body is not *mine*'). This transition can also be connected with the shift from the active need of steering intentionality away from unwholesome options towards a serene realization that there is no further work to do (MN 19). In this sense, 'recollection purified by serenity' in the fourth *jhāna* represents a way in which recollection can be divorced from its active and discriminative elements (ascertainment and investigation, present in the first *jhāna*) and the emotional overtones of enthusiasm and pleasantness. The result is a more intuitive and immediate observation of how experience appears, namely, as naturally devoid of any personal flavour. Taking the fourth *jhāna* as a basis, one can recollect that 'there is *just* body' (which also encompasses the aggregates of form and perception, since there is no experience of body without some perception), 'there is *just* feeling' (the neutral feeling of the fourth *jhāna* itself, for instance), 'there is *just* understanding' (the state of composure, or

freedom itself, noticing that *citta* encompasses both the aggregate of coactions and that of consciousness, since the two necessarily work together), and eventually 'there is *just* reality.' This fourth domain is usually spelled out in the accounts of awakening as focused on the four outstanding things (MN 51). But at this stage of development, the four things will appear as just one ('cessation of thirst is cessation of suffering'), and even *this* will appear not as 'my' realization, but rather as the fact that 'there is *just* this reality.' Any personal traces (conceit) in one's understanding dissolve upon realizing that all that remains in experience is just the current reality itself, which is naturally devoid of any personal trait.

On pitch and tempo

While the standard formula presents the key elements to understanding the progression through the four contemplations, it might be helpful to complement it with a more informal, empirical description of how their experience might manifest. In this context, two aspects are perhaps more helpful from a practical point of view: the pitch of experience, and its tempo. The pitch refers to the fact that in each *jhāna* there is one element of experience that takes the foreground and somehow characterizes the whole contemplation in a more dominant way. Entering and dwelling in a *jhāna* is akin to tuning into its characteristic pitch. Notice that for each *jhāna*, the pitch becomes subtler and more refined, in such a way that the contemplation can be sustained only by allowing attention to adjust accordingly. The tempo refers to the fact that the progression through each subsequent *jhāna* entails a slowing down of the way in which attention works and unfolds. Attention (which is a process and hence naturally dynamic) still moves to some degree at any stage of composure before full cessation of perception and feeling. But the motion becomes slower and slower. Sometimes, paying attention to this aspect might be helpful for stabilizing each *jhāna*, although the ratios suggested here are purely empirical and indicative, and have no normative aim.

Further readings

The following suggestions are not meant as exhaustive references, but rather offer starting points for further deepening some of the key aspects touched upon in this introduction.

Primary Texts

The main body of the Pāli discourses of the Buddha is preserved in five collections: the *Long Discourses* (*Digha Nikāya*), the *Middle-Length Discourses* (*Majjhima Nikāya*), the *Connected Discourses* (*Saṃyutta Nikāya*), the *Numerical Discourses* (*Aṇguttara Nikāya*), and the *Minor Discourses* (*Khuddaka Nikāya*).

The best complete English translation currently available is published by Wisdom Publications and it is done by Maurice Walshe (DN) and Bhikkhu Bodhi (MN, SN, and AN). Ajahn Ṭhānissaro also provided valuable translations of most of the discourses (freely available on dhammatalks.org and accesstoinsight.org).

SuttaCentral (https://suttacentral.net/) is a free website that gives access to the original Pāli texts and several translations both in English and in other modern languages. The website offers some introductory information about

the discourses, a dictionary, grammatical references, and different versions of the root texts preserved in other ancient collections (e.g. Chinese).

A good way to start one's journey through the discourses is by beginning with the *Middle-Length Discourses* or perhaps with some collection of the *Minor Discourses*, like the *Udana* or the *Dhammapada*.

Among available anthologies, one could rely on:

Bodhi (Bhikku), *In the Buddha's Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pāli Canon*. Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2005.

Bodhi (Bhikku), *Reading the Buddha's Discourses in Pāli. A Practical Guide to the Language of the Ancient Buddhist Canon*. Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2020.

Bucknell, Rod and Kang, Chris, *The Meditative Way. Readings in the Theory and Practice of Buddhist Meditation*. Routledge: London and New York, 1997.

Shaw, Sarah, *Buddhist Meditation. An Anthology of Texts from the Pali Canon*. Routledge: London and New York, 2006.

Ṭhānissaro (Ajahn), *The Wings to Awakening. An Anthology from the Pali Canon*. Valley Center: Metta Forest Monastery, 1996 (available at https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/wings/index.html).

General introductions to Buddhist thought

Gethin, Rupert, *The Foundations of Buddhism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Keown, Damien, *Buddhism. A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Kornfield, Jack, *Living Dharma. Teachings and Meditation Instructions from Twelve Theravada Masters*. Boulder: Shambhala, 2010.

Introductions to meditation practice

Anālayo (Bhikkhu), *Satipaṭṭhāna. The Direct Path to Realization*. Birmingham: Windhorse, 2003 (available at https://www.buddhismuskunde.uni-hamburg.de/pdf/5-personen/analayo/direct-path.pdf).

Anālayo (Bhikkhu), *Satipaṭṭhāna Meditation. A Practice Guide*. Cambridge: Windhorse Publications, 2018.

Pasanno (Ajahn), *Abundant, exalted, immeasurable*. Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery, 2016 (available at https://www.abhayagiri.org/books/584-abundant-exalted-immeasurable).

Other relevant readings

Aronson, Harvey B., *Love and Sympathy in Theravāda Buddhism*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1980.

Anālayo (Bhikkhu), *Compassion and Emptiness in Early Buddhist Meditation*. Cambridge: Windhorse, 2015 (available at https://www.buddhismuskunde.uni-hamburg.de/pdf/5-personen/analayo/compassionemptiness.pdf).

Burbea, Rob, *Seeing that Frees. Meditations on Emptiness and Dependent Arising*. West Ogwell: Hermes Amāra Publications, 2014.

Cabezón, José Ignacio, *Sexuality in Classical South Asian Buddhism*. Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2017.

Chah (Ajahn), *Everything is Teaching Us*. Amaravati Publications, 2018 (available at https://forestsangha.org/teachings/books/everything-is-teaching-us?language=English).

Gethin, Rupert, 'On the Practice of Buddhist Meditation According to the Pāli Nikāyas and Exegetical Sources,' *Buddhismus in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 10 (2004): 201–221 (available via http://www.ahandfulofleaves.org/Articles.html).

Gombrich, Richard, *What the Buddha Thought*. Bristol: Equinox, 2013[2].

Martini, Giuliana, 'The Meditative Dynamics of the Early Buddhist Appamāṇas,' *Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies*, 7 (2011): 137-180 (available at https://thecjbs.org/archive-document-details/?id=121).

Ñāṇavīra Thera, *Clearing the Path (1960-1965)*. Path Press Publications, 2010[2] (available at https://nanavira.org).

(Ajahn) Pasanno, (Ajahn) Amaro, *The Island. An Anthology on the Buddha's Teachings on Nibbāna*. Redwood Valley: Abhayagiri Monastic Foundation, 2009 (available at https://cdn.amaravati.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/20/The-Island-Web.pdf).

Andrea Sangiacomo, 'The Meaning of Existence (*bhava*) in the Pāli Discourses of the Buddha,' *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 30, no. 6 (2022): 931–952, https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2022.2107998.

Ṭhānissaro (Ajahn), *The Mind Like Fire Unbound. An image in the early Buddhist Discourses*. Valley Center: Metta Forest Monastery, 1993 (available at https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/likefire.pdf).

Ṭhānissaro (Ajahn), *Selves & Not-Self. The Buddhist Teaching on Anattā*. Valley Center: Metta Forest Monastery, 2011 (available at https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/selvesnotself.pdf).

Ṭhānissaro (Ajahn), *Right Mindfulness: Memory and Ardency on the Buddhist Path.* Valley Center: Metta Forest Monastery, 2012 (available at https://www.dhammatalks.org/ebook_index.html#right_mindfulness).

Thiradhammo (Ajahn), *Working with the Five Hindrances*. Aruno Publications, 2014 (available at https://forestsangha.org/teachings/books/working-with-the-five-hindrances?language=English).

Alexander Wynne, 'The ātman and its negation. A conceptual and chronological analysis of early Buddhist thought,' *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies,* 33, no. 1-2 (2010-2011): 103-171.

Friendliness (*mettā* in Pāli) is an emotional and intentional attitude of goodwill and non-aversion towards all sentient beings, including oneself. It is rooted in both feeling and understanding. In the Pāli discourses of the Buddha, friendliness is repeatedly stressed and encouraged for its numerous benefits. It supports and develops a form of emotional intelligence and provides an ideal pathway to explore deeper aspects of one's experience and their philosophical implications. Friendliness is best understood not in isolation, but rather in the broader context of the Buddha's teachings. In that context, it plays an essential role as a catalyst for the unfolding of the whole Buddhist path. Friendliness, then, can be a particularly interesting thread to follow in order to unpack the meaning and practical implications of the core teachings conveyed in the discourses. This introduction combines meditation practice, philosophy, and the reading of ancient texts in order to show how friendliness can function both as an entry point to explore the landscape of the discourses, and how that same landscape unfolds from the perspective disclosed by friendliness.



Andrea Sangiacomo (1986) is associate professor of philosophy at the University of Groningen. His research interests include Western early modern philosophy and science, soteriological conceptions of selfhood in a cross-cultural perspective, and ancient Buddhist thought and practice.

> Venerable, in the past, when I was living the homelife, when I was ruling the kingdom, the inside of the inner quarters was well protected with guards, the outside of the inner quarters was well protected with guards, the inside of the city was well protected with guards, the outside of the city was well protected with guards, the inside of the country was well protected with guards, the outside of the country was well protected with guards. And yet, Venerable, even if I was protected and guarded in this way, I lived fearful, anxious, agitated, frightened. But now, Venerable, having gone to the forest, to the root of a tree, to an empty hut, I live alone, unafraid, unagitated, not anxious, fearless, at ease, confident, active, with the understanding of a wild animal. Venerable, this is the reason why, having gone to the forest, to the root of a tree, to an empty hut, I continuously utter this inspired utterance: 'Ah, what happiness! Ah, what happiness!'
>
> (Ud 2.10)

University of Groningen Press

9 789403 429410