



**Dharma Gathering 2010**

# **Painting the sky**

**by Patrick Kearney**

## Udāna 80 — 83

This is how I heard it. Once the Blessed One was living near Sāvattḥī, at Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's park. The Blessed One was then teaching, arousing, inspiring and encouraging the bhikkhus with a dharma talk on nibbāna. The bhikkhus — receptive, attentive, concentrating with their whole heart, ears open — listened to the dharma.

Then the Blessed One, realising the significance of this, cried out in inspiration [*udānaṃ udānesi*].

“There is, bhikkhus, a realm with neither earth nor water nor fire nor air; neither the sphere of infinite space, nor that of infinite awareness, nor that of nothingness, nor that of neither-perception-nor-non-perception; neither this world nor the other world; neither moon nor sun.

“There, I declare, is neither coming nor going nor standing. There is neither falling nor arising. It is unlanded, unevolving, unsupported.

“Just this is the end of dukkha.” (Udāna 80)

...

“It's hard to see the unnamed,  
Truth is not easy to see.

“Craving is mastered by one who understands;  
For one who sees, there isn't anything.” (Udāna 81)

...

“There is, bhikkhus, the not-born, not-become, not-made, not-constructed. If there was no not-born, not-become, not-made, not-constructed, then a departure from the born, the become, the made, the constructed could not be discerned.

“But *because* there is a not-born, not-become, not-made, not-constructed, then a departure from the born, the become, the made, the constructed *is* discerned.” (Udāna 82)

...

“One who leans is unsteady, while one who does not lean is steady.  
When there is no unsteadiness, there is tranquility.  
When there is tranquility, there is no naming.  
When there is no naming, there is no coming-&-going.  
When there is no coming-&-going, there is no passing away-&-arising.  
When there is no passing away-&-arising, there is neither here, nor there, nor in between the two.

“Just this is the end of dukkha.” (Udāna 83)

## The constructed & unconstructed

There is, bhikkhus, the not-born [*ajāta*], not-become [*abhūta*], not-made [*akata*], not-constructed [*asañkhata*]. If there was no not-born, not-become, not-made, not-constructed, then a departure from the born, the become, the made, the constructed could not be discerned.

But *because* there is a not-born, not-become, not-made, not-constructed, then a departure from the born, the become, the made, the constructed *is* discerned.  
(Udāna 82)

This is a famous *udāna*, or “inspired declaration,” from the prefix *ud*, indicating “up,” and *√an*, “to breathe.” An *udāna* is a “breathing up,” an inspired cry, a spontaneous verse or declaration. In Udāna 82, given at the end of a dharma talk on *nibbāna*, the Buddha declares that experience is made up of that which is constructed (*sañkhata*) and that which is unconstructed (*asañkhata*) — or, to put it another way, *saṃsāra* and *nibbāna*. Not only that, but *because* there is an unconstructed — *nibbāna* — liberation from the constructed — *saṃsāra* — is possible. Awakening, liberation, is real, and a genuine possibility.

This particular passage is the third in a series of four *udānas*, in poetry and prose, that open the eighth chapter of Udāna Pāli, a book of mixed prose and verse found in Khuddaka Nikāya, the fifth of the five Nikāyas, or “collections,” of the Buddha’s teaching. These five Nikāyas together make up the Sutta Piṭaka, or “basket of discourses,” that contain most of the Buddha’s dharma talks, along with his poetry. In this essay we will explore these four *udānas*, teasing out some of their images and underlying logic. Let’s begin by becoming familiar with the idea of the constructed and the unconstructed.

### The constructed

What does the Buddha mean by “constructed” (*sañkhata*)? This word is the past participle of the noun *sañkhāra*, which is derived from the prefix *saṃ*, “with, together,” and *√kr*,<sup>1</sup> “to make,” “to do,” from which we get the verb *karoti*, “to make, build, produce, act, do.” (“Karma” and “kamma” are derived from the same verb.) A *sañkhāra* is something — anything — that is complex and constructed, created from different parts; *and*, a *sañkhāra* is anything that in turn constructs another complex something that is created from different parts. What sort of thing would fit this description?

The room within which I sit is constructed, complex, made up of parts. The computer with which I write these words is constructed, as is the view I can see outside, as is the essay that emerges from this process. This situation of a writer in a room containing a computer who is looking at the view is complex, constructed. More than that, the room, computer, view and essay that together constitute this constructed situation are also *construct-ing*, for together they construct a writer at work.

The entire universe, both physical and non-physical, is complex, constructed and constructing. The “I” that is sometimes writing this essay, sometimes playing freecell and

<sup>1</sup> The symbol “√” indicates “root,” indicating the foundational sound from which a word is composed.

sometimes looking at the view — the “writer” — is complex, constructed. Your activity of reading these words is complex, constructed. Reading, for example, entails understanding the meaning of the words read. Isn't “meaning” complex and constructed? After all, reading requires language, which is very complex, along with all the operations that together form the mind of the reader. And of course, different readers bring different meanings to what they read or hear, showing how they, and their reading, are complex, even unique, products. Writing is constructed, and in turn constructs — the writer. Reading is constructed, and in turn constructs — the reader.

In one discourse the Buddha describes one of his previous lives as King Mahāsudassana, and the power and wealth he enjoyed — towns, people, cattle, clothing, jewels, and so on. All of these were saṅkhāras. The Buddha concludes:

All of these saṅkhāras of the past have vanished, transformed. So, Ānanda, saṅkhāras are impermanent and unreliable. They offer no satisfaction. The essential point is to be disenchanted with all saṅkhāras, for obsession regarding them to fade, to be liberated from them. (D17 Mahāsudassana Sutta).

Mahāsudassana's possessions are saṅkhāras because they are complex and constructed, and most importantly because they construct *him*. The royal possessions and attributes transform an ordinary human being into a great king, acknowledged as such by the world, and by his own sense of identity — “I am the king! I'm the one in charge here.” Who we think we are and what we think the world is — these are complex, changing, vanishing and unreliable constructions that sooner or later fall apart. And when they do — what's left?

Normally, what's left is something else. Constructions construct and then disappear, but not before they have constructed something else, and so the process goes on. This is saṃsāra, the “wandering on,” or “wandering together,” that characterises our world. One thing vanishes, but another takes its place. We are no longer the people we once were — the boy or girl of our childhood is long gone — but here we are, someone else, already transforming into another someone else. Is there an end or limit to this process? And if so, what might it be?

## The unconstructed

This brings us back to our passage — “There is the not-born, not-become, not-made, not-constructed ...” This not-constructed, or unconstructed, represents something very significant — the very possibility of liberation. What is it? We first notice that the Buddha uses only negative words to describe it — “not-born, not-become, not-made, not-constructed.” Similarly, in Udāna 80 he describes a realm defined by negatives — “with neither earth nor water nor fire nor air ... neither this world nor the other world; neither moon nor sun.” He does not tell us what it is, but what it isn't.

Let's look at another example of how the Buddha talks about the unconstructed, here from Kāyagatāsati Sutta (*Mindfulness immersed in body*).

And what, bhikkhus, is the unconstructed? The exhaustion of obsession [*rāga*], the exhaustion of aversion [*dosa*], the exhaustion of delusion [*moha*]: this is called the unconstructed. (Asaṅkhata Saṃyutta)

This seems clearer — no movement of obsession, aversion or delusion in the heart. But even here, the description is negative. The unconstructed is an absence, a gap. Things we take for granted as normal — the everyday movements of the heart — are missing. But what fills their place?

Finally, notice the verbs the Buddha uses to speak of the unconstructed. When he begins, he says “*There is (atthi) the not-born ... not-constructed ...*” The verb he uses is “to be,” or “to exist,” and this passage could be translated as “The not-born ... not-constructed exists.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, it’s real! It’s not a fantasy, but real, possible, and therefore *desirable*. The Buddha gave this udāna after a dharma talk on nibbāna, motivated, according to the commentary, by his suspicion that some among his audience were thinking along the lines of, “Yes, well, this nibbāna business *sounds* good, but is it real? What’s it got to do with me and my life?” A very common response to talk of nibbāna. So the Buddha here was saying, “No, it’s not just some pious fantasy. It’s real, and therefore worth striving for!”

At the end of the udāna he concludes, “Because there is a not-born ... not-constructed, then a departure from the born ... the constructed is discerned” — in other words, *experienced* in some way. The Buddha is reluctant to say what the unconstructed is, but has no hesitation speaking about its availability.

## The logic of the unconstructed

The Buddha says that because there is a constructed, there must be an unconstructed, and so liberation from the constructed is possible. I can’t help but think that a philosopher would be unimpressed by this argument, but it’s one the Buddha intuitively believed in, even before he became a buddha.

As a young man living in luxury, the Bodhisatta<sup>3</sup> was shocked by the discovery of the suffering inherent in human life, which he summarised as birth, ageing, sickness and death. This shock stimulated his initial awakening, as he woke up to what had always been here, but hidden by the dullness of habit and normality. He discovered what everyone discovers — pain, limitation, death. But while the rest of us learn to accept this to some degree and get on with our lives, the Bodhisatta was plunged into an existential crisis, one that demanded a response from his whole being.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Steven Collins. *Nirvana and other Buddhist felicities. Utopias of the Pali imaginaire*. Cambridge Studies in Religious Traditions 12. Edited by John Clayton et al. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998: 164-66 & 173-74.

<sup>3</sup> An “awakening-being” (*bodhi-satta*), one endowed with bodhi, or one “devoted to awakening” (*bodhi-sakta*). See Bodhi, *The connected discourses of the Buddha. A translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya*. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000: 728-9.

<sup>4</sup> Ralph Flores. *Buddhist scriptures as literature. Sacred rhetoric and the uses of theory*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008: 24-25.

His response was based on what he intuitively understood, but that everyone else missed. If the pain of birth, ageing, sickness and death is universal, part of the inherent fabric of existence, then the *counterpart* of pain — something that is not so subject — must equally be part of the fabric of existence. And if this is the case, he needed to find it. Years later he spoke to his students about the two kinds of search, which he called the noble (*ariya*) and the ignoble (*an-ariya*).<sup>5</sup>

What is the ignoble search? Here, someone subject to birth searches for what is also subject to birth; subject to ageing ... subject to sickness ... subject to death ... subject to sorrow ... subject to affliction, searches for what is also subject to affliction. ...

What is the noble search? Here, someone subject to birth, understanding the downside [*ādīnava*] of what is subject to birth, searches for the unborn [*ajāta*], the supreme security from bondage, nibbāna; being subject to ageing ... sickness ... death ... sorrow ... being subject to affliction, understanding the downside of what is subject to affliction, searches for the unborn, the supreme security from bondage, nibbāna. This is the noble search.

Bhikkhus, before my awakening, while I was still only an unawakened bodhisatta, I too, myself subject to birth, sought what was also subject to birth; ... ageing ... sickness ... death ... sorrow; myself subject to affliction, I sought what was also subject to affliction.

Then I thought: “Why, being myself subject to birth ... ageing ... sickness ... death ... sorrow ... affliction, do I seek what is also subject to birth ... ageing ... sickness ... death ... sorrow ... affliction? Suppose that I, myself subject to birth ... ageing ... sickness ... death ... sorrow ... affliction, understanding the downside of what is subject to affliction, seek the unborn, the supreme security from bondage, nibbāna.”

Later, while still young, a black-haired young man endowed with the blessing of youth, in the prime of life, though my mother and father wished otherwise and wept with tearful faces, I shaved off my hair and beard, put on the ochre robe, and went out from home into homelessness. (M26 Ariyapariyesanā Sutta *The noble search*)

When the Bodhisatta abandoned everything he knew and plunged into the unknown, what propelled him was the certainty that the “unborn” (*ajāta*), that which is not subject to birth, ageing, sickness, death, sorrow and affliction, really did exist. It *had* to exist — because its counterpart, that which was subject to birth, existed. If one existed, so must the other. This is not the logic of the philosopher but of the practitioner, one sensitive to how each experience somehow contains its counterpart. If there is up, there is down; if there is pain, there is joy; if there is victory, there is defeat. In later years, when he tried to reassure his students of the reality, and so the availability, of the not-born, not-become, not-made, not-constructed, he returned to the same logic that inspired him when he began his quest.

We find a similar logic in Pañcattaya Sutta (M102 *The five and three*), where the Buddha uses a template to balance the development of practice over time with the immediacy of

<sup>5</sup> Or refined (*ariya*) and crude (*an-ariya*); or cultivated (*ariya*) and vulgar (*an-ariya*).

insight, now. Here we will look at just one part of this teaching, where the Buddha is describing the practice of a “*samaṇa* or *brāhmaṇa*.”<sup>6</sup>

Here, bhikkhus, some *samaṇa* or *brāhmaṇa*, letting go habitual views [*anuditṭhi*] about past and future, completely disregarding the fetters of sensual pleasure, attains and lives in the rapture of seclusion.

“This is peaceful, this is sublime, that I attain and live in the rapture of seclusion.” His rapture of seclusion ceases. With its cessation grief arises, and with the cessation of grief, the rapture of seclusion arises.

The “rapture of seclusion” (*paviveka pīti*) refers to the pleasure experienced in the first two levels of *jhāna*, or meditative absorption. This attainment requires letting go of past and future, both of which exist only in our “habitual views.” These are *anuditṭhi*, from *anu* indicating “along” and *ditṭhi*, “view.” *Anuditṭhi* implies “following along with views,” a habitual slide into perceiving the world through our unquestioned assumptions of normality, instead of staying present to the actualities of experience. The attainment of *jhāna* also involves letting go of our obsession with the pleasures obtainable through the five physical senses, so the heart is no longer running about looking for pleasurable stimuli some-where and some-when else.

We have a practitioner gaining great peace and rapture and then, inevitably, losing it. Practice always involves this coming-&-going. Sometimes, I am in a peaceful state; sometimes not. Conditions change, nothing is stable. Practice itself is largely a matter of riding conditions, cultivating certain states and discouraging others, and in the process swinging through every conceivable kind of experience. During this process my relationship to pleasure changes, as I begin to find the pleasure of presence more satisfying than what I previously thought of as desirable. Before, what was present to me was central — “It this satisfactory, or not?” Now, the quality of presence itself becomes most significant. As practice continues I find myself moving between presence and distraction, pleasure and pain. The Buddha then says:

Just as light pervades where shadows are abandoned, and shadow pervades where light is abandoned, so with the cessation of the rapture of seclusion, grief arises, and with the cessation of grief, the rapture of seclusion arises.

This image of light and shadow conveys a fundamental aspect of duality. The movement from *samādhi* to distraction, from pleasure to pain, is inherent within nature, and the two sides belong to each other as light does to shadow and shadow to light. We cannot have light without shadow; we cannot have shadow without light. If there is light, there is shadow; if there is shadow, there is light. Light does not exist independently of shadow, and shadow does not exist independently of light. This is the world of duality, and its inherent logic.

<sup>6</sup> A *samaṇa* is a contemplative and/or philosopher who does not belong to the hereditary priesthood caste, and who may have no commitment to Vedic beliefs and customs; a *brāhmaṇa* is a member of this caste, and follows Vedic beliefs and customs.

We all experience this swing from light to shadow, but tend to get caught up in whatever side we currently experience. When I am caught in a difficult emotion, I assume it will always be like this; when I am enjoying a pleasant meditation, I assume it will always be like this. I must be making that assumption, because when my meditation crumbles I feel somehow cheated. Conditions change, but I quickly forget how unstable they are and cling to whatever is happening in the present. The Buddha is suggesting that when we have a less sticky relationship to changing events, our hold on them loosens. We begin to notice the gaps between things, the absences that help define them, and come to realise that these gaps are always here; they are an inherent aspect of the very existence of things.

The Buddha goes on to speak of how a *tathāgata*,<sup>7</sup> an awakened one, understands this situation:

“This is constructed and gross, but there is the cessation of constructions.” Knowing this, seeing the exit, a *tathāgata* has gone beyond.

The Buddha steps back from the coming and going of particular *samādhi* states and recognises the general pattern being revealed. This recognition is conveyed in the image of the inherent duality of light and shadow, the universality of patterns of construction and deconstruction. “*This is constructed.*” Every experience arises because of something other than itself, and ceases because of something other than itself. Nothing is independent. “*This is gross.*” Along with this cognitive understanding comes an affective response, an appreciation of the grossness, the inherent unsatisfactoriness, of the constructed world as it slips and slides from light to shadow and back again. Every experience of peace is something that has to be struggled for, over and over again, because everything constructed ultimately falls apart. The flows of duality become tedious and futile; there must be something better. The constructed is gross and painful, the unconstructed promises something quite different, and so the heart turns away from the constructed and inclines towards the unconstructed, leaping beyond the whole mess. This is the leap into *nibbāna*, the *asaṅkhata*.

This leap is immediate. It is available now; it can only be made, now; and once made, it's finished. The unconstructed is the unconstructed — nothing can be added to it, since the very act of adding is just more construction. Nothing can be taken from it, since the very act of taking is just more construction. Yet, this leap is part of practice, and practice has depth. Leaping must be repeated, over and over again, for the constructed has limitless depths.

The commentary to *Mahānidāna Sutta* (D15 *Greater discourse on causation*) states that the “principle of conditionality” (*paccayā-kāra*) is harder to realise than *nibbāna* itself.<sup>8</sup> It is the depth of this understanding that determines how awakened a person is. Intimacy with

<sup>7</sup> “*Tathāgata*” is an ancient title of the Buddha, one which he used to refer to himself. It means the one who is in “a state of” (*gata*) “thus, just” (*tathā*); or, one who has “just (*tathā*) gone (*gata*); or, one who is “just (*tathā*) come (*āgata*).” In any event, one who lives in a state of “just-this-ness” (*tathatā*).

<sup>8</sup> Bhikkhu Bodhi. *The great discourse on causation: The Mahānidāna Sutta and its commentaries*. 2nd edition. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1995: 68.



nibbāna, the unconstructed, is not enough. The constructed must be understood through to the bottom.

Continued practice uncovers deeper levels of the constructed. The Buddha has already spoken of going beyond “the rapture of seclusion,” indicating the first and second jhānas; he then gives the same message regarding “immaterial happiness” (*nirāmisa sukha*) indicating the third jhāna, and “neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling” (*adukkha-(m)a-sukha vedanā*), indicating the fourth jhāna. The Buddha then takes one more step:

Some samaṇa or brāhmaṇa, letting go habitual views about past and future, completely disregarding the fetters of sensual pleasure, going beyond the rapture of seclusion, immaterial happiness, and neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling, regards himself in terms of “I am at peace [*santa*],” “I am cooled [*nibbuta*],” “I am without clinging [*anupādāna*].”

The path has matured. The peaceful (*santa*) and the cool, or extinguished (*nibbuta*), has been attained — this is nibbāna, the asaṅkhata. But something is still niggling, a subtle view, based on the deepest habits of conceptual proliferation and clinging. The Buddha comments regarding this practitioner:

This venerable one certainly declares the path suitable for nibbāna, yet still clings, ... for when this venerable one regards himself in terms of “I am at peace,” “I am cooled,” “I am without clinging,” that also is declared to be clinging on the part of this good samaṇa or brāhmaṇa.

The “path suitable for nibbāna (*nibbāna-sappāyam-(y)eva paṭipadam*)” is being declared, so there is nothing wrong with the path — the practice, and therefore the result that comes from the practice. Nibbāna is being attained; this practitioner is familiar with the unconstructed. Yet, there remains a problem, the sense that the peace, coolness and absence of clinging which indicates nibbāna points to someone who is at peace, cooled, and no longer clinging — “I am at peace,” “I am cooled,” “I am without clinging.” “I am” (*asmi-māna*), the innermost sense of separation and comparison, the perspective from which we construct an experiencer, remains. The depths of the constructed have not yet been fully penetrated.

This is conditioned and gross, but there is cessation of constructions — knowing this, seeing its exit, a tathāgata has gone beyond.

Recognising this last hold-out of clinging, a tathāgata sees it, too, is constructed and gross, and abandons it. It’s not just that the unconstructed is realised, but that the patterns of the constructed are fully understood, to their depths. As this understanding develops, the constructed ceases to be so attractive, and so our hold upon it ceases. Finally, when we have had enough, we let go — into what?

## The experienced world

### Introduction

We have seen how the dyad of the constructed (*saṅkhata*) and unconstructed (*asaṅkhata*) play a vital part in the Buddha's understanding of reality. Both are equally real, because they are counterparts of each other. Their relationship is like that of light and shadow. They are different, even opposite, yet if one exists, so must the other. Even before he was awakened, the Bodhisatta was intuitively convinced of this pattern. If dukkha exists, which it certainly does, then the cessation of dukkha must also exist. If dukkha arises, it must also cease; if there is arising, there must also be cessation. This intuition was at the heart of his quest for awakening.

How are we to touch the unconstructed? It seems very obscure, even invisible. How can we find the unborn (*ajāta*)? The Buddha's teaching about insight (*vipassanā*) consists of a profound analysis of the constructed, the born. He examines what we take for granted as real and begins to break it down into parts and functions. He does this to create the cracks through which the unconstructed can shine. We cannot *do* the unconstructed, because anything we do is just more construction. We cannot do anything to escape our dukkha, because anything we do is more construction — of dukkha. But we can get to *understand* the constructed, to become intimate with it, so we know its shifting patterns and recognise it to be far more provisional and contingent than we originally thought. We discover the unconstructed to be much closer to us than we could ever imagine.

### A first person discourse

We begin with a technical term central to the Buddha's understanding of experience: "dharma" (Pāli, *dhamma*). This word has complex layers of meaning — the PTS Pāli-English Dictionary devotes almost four pages of small print to its definition. Very briefly, the dharma, singular, refers to reality, what's really happening, and to the teaching that points to reality. So we can speak of the "Buddha Dharma," the view of the world as taught by the Buddha, what we would call "Buddhism." Dharmas (Pāli, *dhammā*), plural, refer to "phenomena," experienced events that arise and cease dependent upon conditions.

The emphasis here is on *experienced*. The Buddha was a meditator, not a scientist or a philosopher. His teaching is a first person discourse — what we might call a phenomenology. Science is a third person discourse. Science studies an objective world on the assumption that it exists independently of the observer. The Buddha studies the subjective world of experience, where the experiencer remains central because in the absence of an experiencer there can be no experience, and therefore no experienced world. This experienced world is not merely subjective, however. We cannot have a (subjective) experience unless there is an (objective) something that is experienced. The subjective, for the Buddha, does not exclude the objective, it contains it, just as the objective contains the

subjective — for there could be no (experienced) thing out there without the experience of it. He explains this perspective in Sabba Sutta (*Discourse on everything*):

I will teach you everything (*sabba*) ... And what is “everything?” The eye and forms; ear and sounds; nose and odours; tongue and tastes; body and tangible things; mind and phenomena.

Whoever would say, “Rejecting this everything, I declare another everything,” the basis for that would only be words, and if questioned would have no response. Furthermore, one would become distressed.

Why? Because it is beyond range. (Saḷāyatana Saṃyutta)

“Everything” (*sabba*) is the totality of our experience. Anything beyond experience is unknowable. Anything said about what is unknowable is just speculation — “only words.” The range of experience is the known universe, and therefore it *is*, for us, the universe. If any other universe exists it can mean nothing to us, for we can never have contact with it, and so we can have no basis for any belief regarding it. The only world the Buddha is interested in is the experienced world. Since we are humans, endowed with and defined by a particular set of sense sensitivities, this is the human world (*manussa loka*).

For the Buddha, the world is not an independently existing entity out there which, within our limits, we perceive and relate to; the world *is* our-experience-of-the-world. This does not mean that the world is merely subjective, that there is no world actually out there, for we can't have sense perception without some (objective) sense object. Nor is the world merely objective, for any sense objects out there remain unknown to us except for our (subjective) perception of them.

What do we experience? We experience dharmas. Let's say I have a glass of water beside me. The glass is a “thing,” an object, as is the water in it. Its physics can be studied and mapped. It exists independently of me — if I walk away, the glass of water is still there, entirely unaffected. This is the objective, independently existing world that we are all familiar with. This is the world of the constructed as it appears when we have lost sight of the fact that it is constructed and constructing, and see it as simply given, independent of our participation.

The Buddha lives in a world of dharmas. I have a glass of water beside me. I feel thirsty. I reach for the glass. I lift it. I drink, swallow, and replace the glass. I feel better. All these experienced events are dharmas. “Feeling thirsty” is a dharma; “seeing the glass” is a dharma; “wanting the water” is a dharma; “reaching for the glass” is a dharma; and so on. Each of these dharmas requires my participation for its existence. None exist independently of me. If I walk away, the collection of dharmas which together constitute drinking-from-the-glass-of-water ceases entirely. Their existence depends on my participation. This is the world of experience that we are *already* intimately familiar with, but which is so familiar that we usually overlook it. This too is the world of the constructed, but more intimate than the one we normally take for granted as given, as simply out there.

Dharmas are not “things” which are out there or in here; they are *our-experience-of-things*. A dharma is a thing-as-experienced, or the experience-of-a-thing. And remember that this is *not* a denial of the objectively existing world that is studied by science. It’s a different discourse about the same world. The Buddha’s central concern is the problem of dukkha, of human limitation and pain, which keeps him always close to the feel of experience itself, rather than getting lost in abstract metaphysics. He is not concerned with speculating about what is real, but in clarifying how we can experience, realistically.

## Six sense fields

When the Buddha taught “everything,” he defined this everything as “The eye and forms; ear and sounds; nose and odours; tongue and tastes; body and tangible things; mind and phenomena.” These are the six sense fields (*saḷāyatana*). When we investigate how we are (already) experiencing, we arrive at the moment of our encounter with these sense fields. The Buddha calls this encounter “contact” (*phassa*), or “stimulus.” As Mahā Kaccāna explains:

Depending on eye sensitivity and forms, visual awareness arises. The meeting of the three is contact [*phassa*]. Contact conditions feeling.

Depending on ear sensitivity and sounds, auditory awareness arises ... depending on nose sensitivity and odours, nasal awareness arises ... depending on tongue sensitivity and flavours, gustatory awareness arises ... depending on body sensitivity and tangible things, body awareness arises ...

Depending on mind sensitivity and phenomena [*dhammā*], mind awareness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. Contact conditions feeling. (M18 Madhupiṇḍika Sutta *The sweet essence*)

*Phassa*, usually translated “contact,” is derived from from the verb *phusati*, “to touch.” *Phassa* is the arena where a stimulus strikes a sensitivity, the place where we are “touched” by our world. *Phassa* represents the meeting, or presence-together, of sense sensitivity, sense object and awareness. It is the *immediacy* of experience.

Our experienced world is defined by our senses. Each sense is a sensitivity to a particular and unique form of stimulus. Let’s take the five physical senses. The eye is that part of the body which is sensitive to forms; the ear is that part of the body which is sensitive to sounds; the nose is sensitive to odours; the tongue to tastes; and the body to touch.

Remember that when the Buddha says “eye,” “ear,” and so on, he is not referring to physical organs in the way that a doctor would. He is not referring to a third person, objectively existing body, but to a first person sensitivity. In seeing, the external world appears to me. This happens at a certain location on my body — to the front, up high. So by “eye,” the Buddha means our-experience-of-seeing; “ear” means our-experience-of-hearing; and so on.

Each sensitivity has a single, specialised “field” (*āyatana*) within which it operates. The eyes are sensitive only to the field of forms; the ears are sensitive only to the field of

sounds; and so on. The stimulus that each sensitivity registers is unique. The eyes cannot hear, and the ears cannot see. We function within five very different, distinct and unique physical realms.

Yet we think we live in one undivided world. When I speak to others, for example, they may imagine they see me speaking. But they don't *see* me speaking; they can only *hear* me speaking. They *see* the movements of the mouth and the accompanying gestures of the body, and from these different sets of data construct a unitary picture of me, speaking. Where does this perceived unity come from?

The Buddha counts six senses, the familiar five physical senses and mind (*mano*) as the sixth. The mind sensitivity provides our perception of unity. This sixth sense is not "paranormal" in any way; it's just another sensitivity. We see, for example, with the eyes; but if we shut our eyes and imagine our home, could we not "see" it — with the mind? Just as the eyes are (experienced as) a specific sensitivity to forms (*rūpa*), so the mind is a sensitivity to non-physical events, dharmas (*dhammā*), in this context often translated as "mental objects" because they are the experienced events that correspond to the mind's sensitivity. Here I translate *dhammā* as "phenomena."<sup>9</sup>

*Mano* (a word cognate with our "mind") absorbs all the data from the five physical senses and gathers them into one place, creating our experience of sensual unity. All this is happening *here*. The mind then adds its own unique touch, by creating a conceptual unity. All this is happening here — *in me and for me*. For am I not the centre of my own universe? And doesn't this network of sensual experience have *meaning*? What is experienced signifies something, and this process of signification is the work of the mind. And of course, if there is meaning, there is meaning *for someone*. Mind creates both the meaningful world that appears, and the self to whom it appears, for whom all this physical experience means something.

### The nature of contact

Depending on eye sensitivity and forms, visual awareness arises. The meeting of the three is contact.

Contact is the arena where the six sense fields unite to create experience. A specific sensitivity, with its unique stimulus, gives rise to a corresponding awareness. Only in the coming together of these three phenomena — their "touching" — does experience arise, and the experienced world arises and ceases within the field of this meeting. As we have seen, the word *phassa*, "contact," comes from the verb *phusati*, "to touch." We are "touched," or "stimulated" by some event, whether internal or external. Our sensitivities collide with something, and in that collision the world appears, along with us in it.

Take the everyday example of driving along a familiar road and suddenly realising we have no memory of passing a particular section. How could this happen? How could we

<sup>9</sup> Or should we learn to use the English and Sanskrit word "dharmas"? If we began to use the same terms as the Buddha, making his language our own, perhaps we would develop a better idea of what he is saying to us.

have no experience of something we have just done? During this period of oblivion the eyes were functioning — we did not suffer sudden blindness. And forms were present — the physical universe did not disappear. Which means that the eyes were receiving those forms — they were being struck, “touched,” by their appropriate objects. But awareness did not arise within this field. Why? Because during this time attention (*manasikāra*) was directing awareness to the sixth sense field of mind, where it was busy with mental phenomena. The visible world did not arise, not because for that period of time there was no such world out there, but because it did not arise *within experience*. So the arising of any experience involves a complex network of at least three different aspects, which in turn are embedded in a broader network the Buddha calls “name-&-form.”

## Nāma-rūpa

Nāma-rūpa, literally “name-&-form,” is sometimes translated as “mind-&-body” or “mentality-materiality.” The Pāli word *nāma* is cognate with our “name,” and is derived from the verb *namati*, “to name.” The Buddha inherited this term from the broader Indian yoga tradition, where it was used to speak about how we differentiate between things, and so develop our perception of a diverse and meaningful world.

In the Śāthapatha Brāhmaṇa, *nāma* is whatever one knows by its name (in the sense of “it is called so-and-so”) and *rūpa* is whatever one knows by its form (in the sense of “it looks like such-and-such”). *Nāma* (“name”) here is the process of differentiating between things by naming them. *Rūpa* (“form”) is the process of differentiating between things by their visible appearance.<sup>10</sup> The Buddha borrows from this tradition in his use of the term *nāma-rūpa*. He says:

What is name-&-form [*nāma-rūpa*]? Feeling [*vedanā*], perception [*saññā*], choice [*cetanā*], contact [*phassa*] and attention [*manasikāra*]: this is called “name.” The four great appearances [*cattāro mahābhūta*] and the form derived from the four great appearances: this is called “form.” Thus is name and form; this is called “name-&-form.” (Vibhaṅga Sutta, *Analysis*, Nidāna Saṃyutta)

*Nāma* is a complex of mental activities that are all *intentional* in nature. “Intention” in this sense comes from *intendere arcum in*, “to aim a bow and arrow at ...,”<sup>11</sup> and it refers to the fact that mind always has an object, and therefore a *direction*. The mind knows the world. It actively directs awareness out to this world (or inwards, to the non-physical world) to engage with and understand it. This is *nāma*, reaching out to and “naming” the experienced world.

*Rūpa* is here defined as “the four great appearances and the form derived from the four great appearances.” The “great appearances” (*mahā-bhūta*) are the four elements (*dhātu*) of

<sup>10</sup> Sue Hamilton. *Identity and experience: The constitution of the human being according to early Buddhism*. London: Luzac Oriental, 1996: 121-3. In the Bible we find this idea in the story of Adam who named all the animals (Genesis 2:19-20) and therefore, in a sense, helped create them

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Dennett. *Consciousness explained*. Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1991: 33.

earth (*paṭhavī*), fire (*tejo*), water (*āpo*) and air (*vāyo*), the elemental building blocks of the experienced physical world.

Earth element is the experience of resistance, from hard to soft. Air element is the experience of movement in all its forms, such as pressure, vibration, expansion, contraction, and so on. Fire element is the experience of temperature, from cold to hot. Water element is the experience of liquidity (wetness-dryness) and cohesion (stickiness-slipperiness).

Each of the dharmas mentioned above can be experienced at different levels. The more closely I pay attention, the more dharmas become apparent. "Feeling thirsty," for example, consists of a series of discrete moments of thirst. "Reaching for the glass" becomes a series of separate, distinct moments of reaching, each physical moment of moving stimulated by a mental moment of the choice to move. If I closely attend to the dharmas, they resolve into elements.

Take "breathing" as an example. How do I know that I'm breathing? What is my *experience* of breathing? I take up my meditation posture and direct my awareness to ... what? Mostly it's the different movements I sense within the body. In other words, air element (*vāyo dhātu*), the elemental experience of movement, pressure, tension, vibration, expansion, contraction and so on. Where do I breathe? In the lungs, obviously. Yet I can follow my "breathing" in, for example, the abdomen. While "breathing" is confined to the lungs, air element is found throughout the body, and beyond. I change my posture because of pain — the experience of movement, which is air element. I feel the breeze upon my face — the experience of movement, which is air element.

Getting to know the elements is important because they undermine our sense of self. I begin using breathing as a meditation object with the unconscious attitude "I am watching my breathing." As breathing becomes a flow of changing elemental experiences — dharmas — any sense of "my breathing" tends to evaporate, along with the owner of the breathing. Only elements remain, the physical elements of earth, air, fire and water, and the additional elements of awareness (*viññāna*) and space (*ākāsa*). All these are dharmas, experienced events that arise and cease dependent upon conditions. None of them are me; none of them belong to me.

In Mahānidāna Sutta (D15 *Great discourse on causation*), the Buddha gives a brief but profound analysis of contact. He is instructing Ānanda on dependent arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), the fundamental principle of his teaching. In particular, he is speaking of specific conditionality (*idappaccayatā*), how this specific event gives rise to that specific event. In this case, he is explaining how name-&-form conditions the arising of contact.

### Contact in two aspects

"Name-&-form conditions contact should he understood in this way:

If those qualities [*ākāra*], traits [*līṅga*], signs [*nimitta*], and indicators [*uddesa*] through which there is a description [*paññatti*] of the mental body [*nāma-kāya*] were all absent,

would designation-contact [*adhivacana-samphassa*] be discerned [*paññāyetha*] in the physical body [*rūpa-kāya* ]?"

"Certainly not, bhante."

"If those qualities, traits, signs, and indicators through which there is a description of the physical body were all absent, would impingement-contact [*paṭigha-samphassa*] be discerned in the mental body?"

"Certainly not, bhante."

What is the Buddha getting at here? He begins by distinguishing between two aspects of contact: designation contact (*adhivacana-samphassa*), the work of mind (the "mental body") and impingement contact (*paṭigha-samphassa*), the work of body (the "physical body"). The Buddha uses two words for body, depending on context. *Rūpa* is "body" in the Upaniṣadic meaning of that which is visible. *Kāya* is "body" in the sense of a collection of things, including those things that together constitute the physical body. *Kāya* is derived from  $\sqrt{ci}$ , "to collect," "to accumulate." Hence the "mental body" (*nāma-kāya*), the collection of non-physical events that constitute the mind (in its naming function); and "physical body" (*rūpa-kāya*), the collection of physical events that constitute the body (in its function of being named).

"*Adhivacana*" comes from  $\sqrt{vac}$ , "speak," and designation contact represents the mind reaching out to the physical world to make sense of it by naming it. "*Paṭigha*" comes from the prefix *paṭi*, "against," and  $\sqrt{han}$ , "to strike," and represents the physical world "striking against" the mind, its felt impact on our subjectivity. The mind goes out to the world, impacting the world by naming it; the world comes into the mind, impacting the mind by striking against it. "Mind" indicates the world of meaning, necessarily associated with language, and "body" indicates the objective basis of meaning, what this meaning is grounded upon. The meeting of the two is experience itself, and this experience already has concept built into it.

For example, I sit here looking out the window. Impingement contact provides the location of the experience — here, looking out there — and is physical. Designation contact provides the meaning of this simple physical experience — inside is different from outside — and is mental. All experience has this complex character.

The Buddha in this passage is trying to explain the workings of contact to Ānanda, but notice how he is not simply speaking about the "mental body" and the "physical body," but "those qualities, traits, signs, and indicators through which there is a description" of *nāma* and *rūpa*. Why not just speak directly about *nāma-rūpa*? Why take this detour?

These terms — qualities, traits, signs and indicators — are close synonyms which all express the conveying of meaning. A "sign," for example, is something that points to something else; an "indicator" indicates something else. All these terms convey reference, a *pointing out* of something — something else, not simply "this." Mind and body are not experienced directly, but through a layer of meaning. Everything means something,



meaning implies “description” (*paññatti*), and it is this description which allows contact “to be discerned” (*paññāyetha*) — to be *experienced*.

Contact, remember, is the immediacy of experience, the collision between sensitivity and sensed. For the Buddha, to say something exists is to say that it is experienced; if it cannot be experienced, then it does not exist. And if it exists, it is *described*, for contact requires description. But it is also true that description does not exist on its own; description needs that which is described. Reference requires referent, and referent requires reference. Neither is more or less real, more or less necessary, than the other. Which means, if there is a world, there is a-description-of-a-world, and if there is description, there is a (described) world. To give an example at an obvious level of description, I am addicted to thinking because I describe myself into existence. When I stop thinking, “I” seem to stop.

*Paññatti*, “description,” is derived from  $\sqrt{\text{ñā}}$ , “to know,” “to understand,” through the verb *paññāpeti*, “to make known,” “to point out,” “to recognise,” “to define.” *Paññatti* indicates a concept — description — by which something becomes known, is pointed out or defined. Since *paññatti* points to or indicates something, it is always the case that the *paññatti* of a thing is *not* that thing. But *paññatti* is what makes the experience of a thing possible — remembering that for the Buddha, a thing is our-experience-of-a-thing. So what would happen if there was no *paññatti* of a particular thing? It’s not that the thing does not exist; but it would not be described, conceptualised, discerned — *experienced*.

And if something is experienced, then *paññatti* conditions that experience, and to change our-*paññatti*-of-a-thing is to change our-experience-of-a-thing — and therefore, for all practical purposes, to change the thing itself. If *paññatti* is bound up in (our experience of) the six sense fields, then to change our *paññatti* of the six sense fields is to discover a new set of sense fields, one belonging to a different world altogether.

Consider the experience of breathing. This is as simple an experience as we might ever have. Yet, there are many ways in which this act of breathing might be discerned, described, conceptualised. I could be breathing without taking any notice of it, just taking it for granted. I could be breathing as a meditation practice, seeking to stay with it and calm it. I could be breathing caught up in an asthma attack, struggling for the next breath to stay alive. The Buddha is suggesting here that the difference in the experience lies in the *paññatti* of it, and the change of *paññatti* is not simply a matter of thinking of the experience differently. *Paññatti* conditions the very nature of the world itself. Which leads to the question — is there a world beyond *paññatti*? And if so, *could* it be experienced?

The Buddha thinks there is such a world, as we have seen:

There is a realm with neither earth nor water nor fire nor air; neither the sphere of infinite space, nor that of infinite awareness, nor that of nothingness, nor that of neither-perception-nor-non-perception; neither this world nor the other world; neither moon nor sun.

There, I declare, is neither coming, going nor standing. There is neither death nor birth. It is unlanded, unevolving, without support.

Just this is the end of dukkha. (Udāna 80)

But if experience has concept built into it, how could such a realm ever be *experienced*? The Buddha goes on to say:

It's hard to see the unnamed,  
Truth is not easy to see.

Craving is mastered by one who understands;  
For one who sees, there isn't anything. (Udāna 81)

Now we can begin to appreciate why it's so hard — because if an experience is unnamed, it is not even experienced. To see is to see “something,” and something — any something — requires paññatti, description, and nāma, naming, for both of these are inherent aspects of experience (contact) itself. How can we experience something without experiencing it?

For one who sees, there isn't anything.

## Dependent arising

When we speak of the constructed we are speaking of a particular aspect of dependent arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), the central principle of the Buddha's teaching. The importance of dependent arising cannot be overestimated. If we understand dependent arising, we understand what the Buddha is talking about; if we don't, we don't. It's really that simple.

Whether tathāgatas appear or do not appear, the element that endures [*thitā va sā dhātu*] is nature's stability [*dhamma-(t)thitā*], its order [*dhamma-niyāmā*], which is specific conditionality [*idappaccayatā*].

This is what a tathāgata awakens to, this is what he realises. After awakening to and realising it he explains, teaches, declares, lays it out, reveals, analyses and clarifies it, saying: "Look!" (Paccaya Sutta, *Conditions*, Nidāna Saṃyutta)

The universe has an objectively enduring nature, which the Buddha calls "dharma." Dharma has an inherent stability, it functions according to natural laws, and this situation constitutes an objective reality regardless of whether or not awakened ones exist. When a buddha wakes up, s/he wakes up to this natural order, and "Buddhism" — any Buddhism — is an attempt to explain and clarify this order.

The Buddha began his first formal discourse, Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (*Turning the dharma wheel*) with the "middle way" (*majjhimā paṭipadā*). What is the middle way? Dependent arising itself, as he explains to Kaccānagotta:

This world, Kaccāna, is normally reliant on the duality of existence [*atthitā*] and non-existence [*natthitā*]. But for one who sees, realistically and with perfect wisdom, the *arising* of the world, there is no "non-existence" regarding the world. And for one who sees, realistically and with perfect wisdom, the *cessation* of the world, there is no "existence" regarding the world. ...

One has no doubt or confusion that what arises is only dukkha arising, what ceases is only dukkha ceasing. (Kaccānagotta Sutta, Nidāna Saṃyutta)

Dependent arising is the middle way between "existence" and "non-existence" These refer to our normal, everyday notion of reality, where we take our experience of ourselves and our world at face value. If we say something "exists," we mean it is really there; it is solid, substantial, existing independently of us. This implies it is worth hanging on to, worth defining ourselves by. Things are real, permanent, reliable. For example, I can see that much of my experience of life is insubstantial, even dream-like, but I remain convinced that "I" am real, because "I" am the one who sticks around long enough to experience this insubstantiality; all this dream-like experience is about *me*. It may not be real, but it gives *me* reality.

But there is a shadow side of existence, because although I strive to convince myself of my own solidity and permanence, I know one day I will die, will cease to exist — and this knowledge fills me with dread, for I define myself and my world by means of what I take to be real. From the Buddha's perspective, the deepest terror is not the fear of death some time in the future, but the fear that I right now I am not real, that there is not and never

has been any foundation to support my own separate existence.<sup>12</sup> This dread is dukkha — suffering or unsatisfactoriness.

Existence always entails non-existence, and both depend on our normal, everyday sense of our own reality. In denying “existence” and “non-existence,” the Buddha is denying the reality that we construct to solidify our sense of ourselves and our world, which enables us to hold our life together and papers over our dread of an abyss we are desperate to avoid. But he is not just denying the existence of solid “things;” he is denying the abyss we assume is the only alternative to the solidity of things. Each of these assumptions depends upon the other, and is unthinkable without the other. Instead, the Buddha is asserting the radical contingency of everything that exists, and of existence itself.

“Things” do not endure; only patterns of conditional relationships endure. There is only dependent arising and the dependently arisen. To see this requires that we face our dread, our dukkha, and when we do so we discover that there is no-one who exists, and so no-one who ceases to exist, only the radical contingency of ceaselessly changing experience and the pain of clinging to it in our futile attempts to solidify this flow into a solid self surrounded by a reliable world. “What arises is only dukkha arising, what ceases is only dukkha ceasing.”

Just as our normal sense of reality consists of two aspects, existence and non-existence, so dependent arising consists of the dyad of arising and cessation. The Buddha summarises the insight gained by himself and the six buddhas who preceded him:

“Arising!” Vision arose in me regarding dharmas previously unheard of; insight, wisdom, knowledge and intuition arose. ...

“Cessation!” Vision arose in me regarding dharmas previously unheard of; insight, wisdom, knowledge and intuition arose. (Gotama Sutta, Nidāna Saṃyutta)

The universe arises — not arbitrarily, nor by chance, but according to dharma, or natural law; and it ceases — not arbitrarily, nor by chance, but according to dharma. Furthermore, *what* arises and ceases are dharmas — dependently arisen phenomena — in specific patterns of conditionality. So we have three key terms that express the workings of dependent arising:

- *Idappaccayatā* (specific conditionality): the general principle that any given phenomenon is contingent. Each experienced event is dependent upon other experienced events and arises and ceases dependent upon those other events. Each individual thing depends on other things for its existence.
- *Paṭiccasamuppāda* (dependent arising): the *patterns* of arising and cessation. What is central here is the behaviour of phenomena rather than their identity; the conditional relationships *between* phenomena rather than the phenomena themselves. Together, specific conditionality and dependent arising comprise the enduring state of

<sup>12</sup> David Loy. *Lack and transcendence: The problem of death and life in psychotherapy, existentialism, and Buddhism*. New York: Humanity Books, 1999: 27.

ourselves and our experienced world, what gives stability and order to the experienced world.

- *Paṭiccasamuppanna dhammā* (the dependently arisen): *what* arises and ceases. There are no “things,” only our-experience-of-things, which are events in infinite and endless process. These events are dharmas — phenomena, appearances — and all dharmas are contingent, radically dependent upon other dharmas.

## Arising & cessation

The Buddha expresses dependent arising in two directions: by way of arising (*anuloma*, “along the hair,” or forward sequence); and by way of cessation (*paṭiloma*, “against the hair,” or reverse sequence). Here we see them in the classical twelfthfold formula:<sup>13</sup>

Depending on delusion (*avijjā*), constructions (*saṅkhārā*);  
 Depending on constructions, awareness (*viññāṇa*);  
 Depending on awareness, name-&-form (*nāma-rūpa*);  
 Depending on name-&-form, six sense fields (*saḷāyatana*);  
 Depending on six sense fields, contact (*phassa*);  
 Depending on contact, feeling (*vedanā*);  
 Depending on feeling, craving (*taṇhā*);  
 Depending on craving, clinging (*upādāna*);  
 Depending on clinging, becoming (*bhava*);  
 Depending on becoming, birth (*jāti*);  
 Depending on birth, ageing and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair.  
 Thus is the arising of this entire mass of suffering (*dukkha*).

This is called arising.

But from the complete fading away and cessation of delusion, constructions cease;  
 From the cessation of constructions, awareness ceases;  
 From the cessation of awareness, name-&-form ceases;  
 From the cessation of name-&-form, six sense fields cease;  
 From the cessation of six sense fields, contact ceases;  
 From the cessation of contact, feeling ceases;  
 From the cessation of feeling, craving ceases;  
 From the cessation of craving, clinging ceases;  
 From the cessation of clinging, becoming ceases;  
 From the cessation of becoming, birth ceases;  
 From the cessation of birth, ageing and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair dissolve.

Such is the cessation of this entire mass of suffering.

The Buddha, as we have seen, says “what arises is only *dukkha* arising, what ceases is only *dukkha* ceasing,” but in the reverse sequence there seems to be a lot more than *dukkha* ceasing. Everything seems to go! No awareness, for example. If there is no

<sup>13</sup> In the course of my research I have found 71 different versions of dependent arising, but normally when we think of dependent arising we think of the classical twelfthfold formula. Certainly, whenever the Buddha asked the question, “What is dependent arising?” this is the version he presented.

awareness, then what is there? No name-&-form, no six sense fields. If there is no seeing and world seen, no hearing and world heard, etc., then what's left? No birth. Apparently I won't be reborn — which seems to mean, I'll be dead. Then certainly I'll have no dukkha!

We can consider “cessation” in two aspects. The first is normal, everyday cessation — the cessation that is an inherent aspect of saṃsāra. This cessation is implicit in dependent arising. What arises, ceases. If certain conditions cause a phenomenon to arise, then changing or removing those conditions will cause it to cease. This situation we are experiencing now, ceases; and is immediately replaced by something else, which also ceases and is immediately replaced by something else. And so our lives roll on. This is cessation within the constructed (*saṅkhata*).

### Cessation of the constructed

There is another aspect of cessation, one which represents a dropping out from the whole system of arising and cessation; a cessation where the normal concepts of arising and cessation no longer apply. This is an attempt to express the not-constructed (*asaṅkhata*), where things become very mysterious indeed. Here too we find two aspects. In the classical Theravāda, this aspect of cessation presents as a discrete experience of the entire phenomenal universe disappearing entirely. Remembering that for the Buddha, if something is to be considered real it must be experienced, and experience, “contact,” requires the meeting of an appropriate sense sensitivity, its corresponding sense object, and a corresponding awareness. Cessation here is the direct experience of nibbāna as the *animmita dhātu*, the “signless element.” This experience of cessation is the goal of the Mahāsi method of insight meditation, and its realisation turns an ordinary person into an ariya, a cultivated one. Mahāsi Sayādaw gives a brief description:

Thereupon, immediately after the last consciousness in the series of acts of noticing ... the meditator's consciousness leaps forth into (taking as its object) Nibbāna which is the cessation of all formations [*saṅkhāras*]. Then there appears to him the stilling (subsidence) of all formations called “cessation.”<sup>14</sup>

The practitioner is thrown into an experience of that which does not move — entirely peaceful and lacking any sense of time — and within which no thing appears. This is nibbāna experienced as a sense object. As it is a discrete experience it begins and ends, and after it ends it becomes just a memory. This, for the Theravāda, is one aspect of the *dhamma-cakkhu*, the “vision of dhamma,” spoken of by the Buddha.

The second way in which the tradition speaks of cessation as the entry into the unconstructed is illustrated by a discussion we find in Madhupiṇḍika Sutta (M18 *The sweet essence*), where Mahā Kaccāna is describing the source of our sense of being harassed by time and identity, and its cessation. Zen students might find this approach to cessation more familiar.

<sup>14</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw. *The progress of insight. A treatise on Buddhist satipaṭṭhāna meditation*. Kandy. Buddhist Publication Society, 1985 :24

Depending on eye and forms, visual awareness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. Contact [*phassa*] conditions feeling [*vedanā*].

What we feel [*vedeti*], we perceive [*sañjānāti*]; what we perceive, we think about [*vitakketi*]; what we think about, we proliferate [*papañceti*].

Because of what we have proliferated, we are harassed by concepts of perceptions coloured by proliferation [*papañca-saññā-saṅkhā*] regarding past, future and present ...

Depending on ear and sounds ... Depending on nose and odours ... Depending on tongue and tastes ... Depending on body and tangibles ...

Depending on mind and phenomena, mind awareness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. Contact conditions feeling.

What we feel, we perceive; what we perceive, we think about; what we think about, we proliferate.

Because of what we have proliferated, we are harassed by concepts of perceptions coloured by proliferation regarding past, future and present.

## 1. Natural conditioned process

Depending on eye and forms, visual awareness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. Contact conditions feeling.

Experience arises dependent upon conditions, and *we are moved* by this experience. We are moved to hold to what we encounter as pleasant; to resist or reject what we encounter as painful; or to ignore or be confused about how to respond by what we encounter as neither-painful-nor-pleasant.

These movements of the heart are built into experience. Inevitably, we are moved by whatever happens to us. We have no choice about it. This is just natural process, and there is nothing wrong with it. There is no problem here, and there is no person here. No-one is seeing; it's just that eye-sensitivity, forms and visual awareness have come together to create what we call "experience," and some movement occurs as the result. Life moves; that's all.

## 2. Agency appears

What we feel, we perceive; what we perceive, we think about; what we think about, we proliferate.

*"What we feel, we perceive."* We began with sense experience, naturally coming and going dependent upon conditions. Contact is the coming together of sense object, sense sensitivity and awareness, and represents the immediacy of experience, that which is happening now. Contact conditions feeling — experience is already affect-laden; we are already moved, in some way, by this experience. But now, *someone has appeared*. "We feel." Not just physical and mental events arising and ceasing, but someone who is feeling and perceiving.

With feeling comes self and agency. Perception, our sense of what the world is and who we are within it, comes from our affective or emotional responses to experience. Or, we could say, first comes the heart's response, then comes the head's understanding. First comes what we might call "emotion," then comes "reality."

*"What we perceive, we think about."* We use the commentary of thought (*vitakka*) to read into our experience, constructing a sense of meaning and identity from our attempts to understand, to justify, our emotional responses to the world. We seek to understand what the world is, and who is experiencing it.

*"What we think about, we proliferate."* The mind goes into hyper-drive in its determination to read more into experience than necessary, driven by affect and all that comes with affect. We create a world conditioned by craving (*taṇhā*) and delusion (*avijjā*).

### 3. Agency (apparently) lost

*"Because of what we proliferate, we are harassed by concepts (saṅkhā) of perceptions coloured by proliferation regarding past, future and present."* Agency appears lost, and we find ourselves driven by forces entirely out of our control, in a world that seems separate, alien from us. This is our normal, familiar world of "you" and "I," and it is the product of disorder, of out-of-control obsessive thinking that has left the world of natural process far behind.

*Saṅkhā* now dominates. *Saṅkhā* refers to concepts in the sense of calculation, estimation, definition. It implies working out, calculating, the nature and meaning of experience. When we are dominated by *saṅkhā*, we are inside our calculations regarding the world, our labels of the world, rather than directly intimate with it. We have lost touch with the directness of experience and live in a world of shadows. For notice how we are no longer in the world of perceptions, but concepts of perceptions. We are separated from ourselves and our world by a kind of cling-wrap. We may feel this in meditation, when we become unusually sensitive, and in trying to do something so simple as directly experience body and mind we find ourselves somehow not connecting, but drifting, out of touch, separated, isolated.

These concepts of perceptions take us into a world of experienced time, of what the Buddha calls "permanence." Only concepts provide permanence. "Proliferation" is directly experienced as change; but the concepts created by proliferation are perceived as permanent, and so containing time. *This* experience, now, of the mind proliferating is new, uniquely itself; but my concept of proliferation remains the same over time — "I always get lost in thought. And it's always like this." In other words, where there is concept, there is time; where there is no concept, there is no time. In brief, we find that our minds are running riot. They are out of control, and so our lives are out of control.

What lies beneath the apparent reality created by concept? Mahā Kaccāna goes on to say:

When there is eye, form and visual awareness, a ground [*thāna*] for describing the description [*paññattiṃ paññāpessati*], "contact," is found.



With a ground for describing the description, “contact,” a ground for describing the description “feeling” is found.

With a ground for describing the description, “feeling,” a ground for describing the description “perception” is found.

With a ground for describing the description, “perception,” a ground for describing the description “thinking” is found.

With a ground for describing the description, “thinking,” a ground for describing the description “concepts of perceptions coloured by proliferation” is found.

Mahā Kaccāna goes through the same process as before, but here looked at from a different angle. Previously he spoke of constructing a person from the natural phenomena of contact, feeling, perceiving, thinking and proliferation. Now he sees this situation in its radical simplicity of “ground” (*thāna*) and “description” (*paññatti*).

*Ground* (*thāna*), brings us back to dependent arising. Dependent arising states that any experienced event arises in dependence upon some other event. For something to arise it needs a base, a “ground.” Our experience is always grounded on something. For example, if I experience, I experience *something*; if I am aware, I am aware *of something*. That “something” functions as a ground of my experience.

What happens when we place too much importance on what grounds our experience? I experience thought. But I’m not simply experiencing thought, coming and going according to conditions; rather, grounded on something I am confined by that something. I find myself *stuck* on my thinking, and in the world created by my thoughts.

But am I stuck on what is really happening — or on a concept of what is really happening? In this passage, Mahā Kaccāna repeats the process from contact, the immediacy of experience, through to concepts of perceptions coloured by proliferation. But he adds that in every instance, what we are grounded on is the *description of* (*paññatti*) experience, rather than the experience itself. Notice how deep description — another aspect of concept — goes. Not just the concepts that emerge from my habitual obsession — “proliferation” — but feeling itself, experience itself, is necessarily bound up with description. We relate, not to the world, but to our descriptions of the world; and this is the “ground” of everything we take for granted as real.

This is a radical teaching. As meditators, we talk about cutting through thought to get to the cleanness of immediate experience. Here, Mahā Kaccāna is suggesting that we never get there. Experience must be grounded on something, and as long as experience is grounded it is wrapped up in description, concept. Deep layers of description, that we never even notice. We live in a prepackaged world, a world buried in an invisible web of concepts. A world of dream rather than reality.

We live in a dream world because we are creatures of meaning. We are structured to find meaning within experience, and for an experience to mean something, it requires some

kind of concept. In the absence of concept there is no meaning, so that whenever an experience *means anything to me*, I am caught up in concept.

Consider the simply physical activity of walking to the door. As we walk, we can see the visible world passing by us. This world is the product of our eyes, and we experience it as just seeing. But do we? For no matter how much we pay attention only to “seeing” as we walk to the door, it is clear that this activity *means something to us*: “I’m going there because ...;” “I like / don’t like walking here ...;” “I’m walking meditatively, with an empty mind;” and so on. Where does this meaning come from? Not from the visible forms, but from the mind — from “description” (*paññatti*). For if this experience *means* anything to me, then concept is involved.

Meaning entails interpretation. For example, “This is a thought,” is a description, and so an interpretation, of an experience. If my description of this situation was “This is *just* a thought,” it would have a different meaning. If the description was “This is *my* thought — and real,” then we have another meaning, and therefore another situation. These represent three different *paññattis*, three different meanings, and so three different experienced worlds.

Our experience is grounded on description. But description of what? What is the “it” which is being described? What underlies all this description and concept? Mahā Kaccāna continues:

When there is *no* eye, *no* form and *no* visual awareness, a ground for describing the description, “contact,” is *not* known.

In the absence of a ground for describing the description, “contact,” a ground for describing the description “feeling” is not known.

In the absence of a ground for describing the description, “feeling,” a ground for describing the description “perception” is not known.

In the absence of a ground for describing the description, “perception,” a ground for describing the description “thinking” is not known.

In the absence of a ground for describing the description, “thinking,” a ground for describing the description “concepts of perceptions coloured by proliferation” is not known.

What does Mahā Kaccāna mean by “no eye, no form and no visual awareness”? He is speaking of experience — ordinary, everyday experience — that has no ground whatsoever. Or rather, he is speaking of the discovery of the fundamental groundlessness of experience, a discovery that is always available.

Normally, we don’t see our concepts as merely concepts; we see them as the reality. We assume a ground (*thāna*) beneath the concepts (*sāṅkhā; paññatti*), but don’t actually see it. This concept must be about *something*; if there is meaning, there must be something that

possesses meaning. I describe an experience “*x*” confident in the knowledge that there exists an “*x*” to be described.

In contrast, “In the absence of a ground for describing the description, ‘contact,’ a ground for describing the description ‘feeling’ is not known.” When I know that the description “contact” is just a description, when I no longer assume that there must be something underneath it, grounding it, then there is no basis — no ground — for assuming the reality of what I call “feeling.” The same analysis holds for all aspects of experience. Whatever grounds “this” turns out to be just a description; and whatever grounds this description turns out to be just another description. And in the absence of these descriptions, what am I left with? What can we say about what remains after description?

In Mahā Koṭṭhika Sutta (ANII.161), Mahā Koṭṭhita questions Sāriputta on what remains after the six fields of contact fade away and finally cease entirely: “Is there something still left?” Sāriputta replies, “*Not that!*” Then is there nothing left? Both something and nothing left? Neither something nor nothing left? Sāriputta responds in the same way to each question: “*Not that!*” He explains:

To say that there *is* something left after the six fields of contact cease entirely is to proliferate what should not be proliferated. To say that there *is not* something left ... that there *both is and is not* something left ... that there is *neither something left nor nothing left* after the six fields of contact cease entirely is to proliferate what should not be proliferated.

As far as the range of the six fields of contact extends, that is the range of proliferation; and as far as the range of proliferation extends, that is the range of the six fields of contact.

From the fading away and complete cessation of the six fields of contact, there is the cessation of proliferation, the calming of proliferation.

Sāriputta rejects all four possible answers to the question of what is left behind after the cessation of contact, of experience itself. In Pāli, he says, “*mā hevaṃ,*” where *mā* functions as a particle of prohibition — “Not!; Don’t!” *Hevaṃ* is *hi + evaṃ*, where *hi* indicates emphasis and *evaṃ* is an emphatic “this.” “*Mā hevaṃ*” expresses prohibitive and emphatic denial, combining “No!” with “Don’t go there!” Why does Sāriputta respond like this? Because all answers to this question are themselves proliferation (*papañca*). Any answer creates more concepts, more descriptions, more proliferation, which takes both questioner and answerer away from the directness of experience, back to the cling-wrap.

Any concept or description that we produce as an answer to this question is an expression of our search for a ground to experience. But Sāriputta is speaking of a state in which there is no felt need to ground anything. We are content with the intimacy of this, now, with nothing whatever added. When the search for a ground of description is abandoned, all descriptions are cut through.

Further, in this state, the heart calms (*upasamati*). The cessation of proliferation indicates *vipassanā*, insight, while the calming of the heart indicates *samatha*, serenity, and with it, the transformation of desire itself.

Does that mean that a person in such a state has disappeared? Or died? No, it means proliferation has ceased and calmed. There is still contact — experience — but contact that does not serve as a ground for a concept or description of anything, including itself. This is a contact that is unconstructed, and therefore unconstruct-*ing*. A contact that has not landed anywhere, is not located anywhere, and so is entirely free.

In Udāna 80 the Buddha describes this realm as “unevolving” (*appavatta*), from the verb *pavattati*. This is a verb based on  $\sqrt{vrt}$ , to turn (a wheel). *Vatṭa* indicates the round, the turning wheel, of rebirth, and its opposite, *vivatṭa*, indicates the absence of the round. What turns, revolves, is the wheel of dependent arising. To be *appavatta* is to be beyond the turning of the wheel, beyond the normal processes of cause-&-effect, birth-&-death. A person who is *appavatta* does not construct anything; has leapt beyond *saṃsāra*, and therefore beyond description.

The realm of *nibbāna*, of the unconstructed, can be experienced but not conceptualised. We have reached the limits of language, where silence is the only adequate response. This may be why the Buddha is called a *muni*, usually translated as “sage,” but literally “silent one.” An awakened one is not bound by any concept or description. Such a person is silent even when she speaks.

We get a sense of this silence in those moments when we notice that we are not holding onto an experience to create something *for me*, defining *me*; when we are entirely intimate with experience, and not seeking to do anything with it, gain anything from it. When we put *any* description, no matter how subtle, between us and the experience, we are back in the constructed. When we are entirely intimate, the unconstructed is already manifest. “We,” of course, are not in the unconstructed. Entry into the unconstructed requires our disappearance. And the unconstructed does not mean anything. Entry into meaning requires the constructed.

## Non-indicative awareness

At the end of Kevaḍḍha Sutta (D11) the Buddha tells the layman Kevaḍḍha a story about a bhikkhu who had a question:

Where do the four great appearances — earth element, water element, fire element and air element — cease entirely?

The bhikkhu's question reminds us of the realm "with neither earth nor water nor fire nor air" that the Buddha spoke of in Udāna 80, but it is more naïve than that, for it concerns the physical universe. We would see this question as scientific: where does the physical universe come to an end? The bhikkhu travels as far as Brahma's heaven to find an answer, but even Mahā Brahmā himself can't answer him. Eventually Mahā Brahmā directs him to the Buddha, but he refuses to engage with the question as stated and reframes it.

Where do earth, water, fire and air find no ground?  
Where are long and short, refined and gross, good and bad —  
Where does name-&-form cease entirely?

Notice how the question has changed, from scientific to existential, from third to first person. Where does the *experienced* universe cease? This question is bound up with the issue of ground and groundlessness, and therefore name-&-form (*nāma-rūpa*) together with awareness (*viññāṇa*). "Name," as we have seen, is the mind's reaching out to the world to make conceptual sense of it; "form" is the raw material provided by the senses that name shapes into a coherent self-within-her-world. The arising of name-&-form together with awareness constitutes the arising of this entire meaningful world along with the person who experiences it; and the cessation of name-&-form together with awareness constitutes the cessation of this entire meaningful world along with the person who experiences it.

Name-&-form are inherently *conceptual*, because name (*nāma*) is the act of *naming* experience, and so giving it meaning. Dependent arising states that *nāma* — mind, or, more accurately, the activity of "mind-ing" — can only arise with the support of *rūpa*, the visible universe; and *rūpa* can only arise with the support of *nāma*. The two of them, in turn, can only arise with the arising of awareness, since without awareness of the universe, there is no experienced universe. Since the experienced universe entails this whole package, every experience includes an aspect of mind, and therefore of meaning, and therefore of concept. This relationship is expressed in dependent arising as: name-&-form condition awareness; awareness conditions name-&-form. And since all the dharmas that together constitute name-&-form together with awareness are impermanent, coming and going according to conditions, this entire world is arising and ceasing, continually.

When "name-&-form cease without remainder," so it does not arise again, what is left? According to the principle of dependent arising, awareness should certainly disappear along with name-&-form. Or, is it just that awareness in the normal sense is gone? Not that awareness which arises together with name-&-form, awareness grounded on name-&-

form; not awareness established on something, indicating something, and so defined and limited by that something; but another kind of awareness, which the Buddha calls non-indicative awareness (*anidassana viññāṇa*).

Awareness that is non-indicative [*anidassana*]  
 Limitless [*an-anta*], radiating everywhere —  
 Here water and earth,  
 Fire and air find no ground.  
 Here long and short,  
 Subtle and gross, good and bad —  
 Here name-&-form  
 Are entirely demolished.  
 With the cessation of awareness,  
 Here, this is demolished.

*Anidassana* is translated by Ñāṇavīra Thera as “non-indicative,” meaning awareness that does not indicate the presence of a subject, one who is aware.<sup>15</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu translates it as “without surface,”<sup>16</sup> not included within space and time. This non-indicative awareness is where the four great appearances “find no ground” — are groundless, and so non-existent in the normal sense.

This is an awareness that is “limitless,” *an-anta*, lacking any limit, or border. The absence of limit implies the absence of definition, since any kind of definition depends on limitation. Consider, for example, the concept of *māna*, usually translated as “conceit.” The conceit “I am” (*asmi-māna*) is the last barrier to full awakening. When that goes, all delusion and craving go with it.

*Māna* is derived from  $\sqrt{mā}$ , “to measure,” and manifests as a fundamental sense of separation. When we measure something, we establish its limits — it starts here and ends there. Once the borders of something are established, anything beyond those borders is something else. Measurement entails comparison, separation, and so the fundamental division of experience into identity and difference, self and other. But when there is *no* limit, no *anta*, then there is no basis for comparison, no basis for difference, and therefore no basis for identity. Such an awareness, freed from restriction, therefore “radiates everywhere.”

The meaning of *anidassana* is clarified in *Kakacūpama Sutta* (M21 *The simile of the saw*), where the Buddha asks:

“Suppose someone came with crimson, turmeric, indigo, or carmine and said: ‘I shall paint pictures in this space, creating an appearance.’ What do you think, bhikkhus? Could someone paint pictures in space, creating an appearance?”

“No, bhante.”

“Why?”

<sup>15</sup> Ñāṇavīra Thera. *Clearing the path: Writings of Ñāṇavīra Thera (1960-1965)*. Colombo: Path Press, 1987: 103-4.

<sup>16</sup> Ṭhānissaro. “A verb for nirvana.” *Insight Journal*, Barre Center for Buddhist Studies. Spring 2006: 18-21.

“Because space is formless and non-indicative [*anidassana*].”

We cannot paint on sky because sky has no ground upon which paint can rest; and it does not manifest as anything or indicate anything. Like the track of a bird, there is nothing to point to. Non-indicative awareness refers to a awareness that is not located anywhere, that is not defined by any thing. It is untraceable. It may be found in a *samādhi* that does not construct anything out of experience, but simply registers what is happening without either clinging or rejection. Pure presence, with nothing added.

With the cessation of awareness,  
Here, this is demolished.

Notice how specific this teaching is. The demolition of concept happens here; what what is demolished is this! And it happens now. Right now, there is nothing to hold to, nothing to ground or define ourselves by. Then, who are we? What’s left?

### The ubiquity of concept

The significance of what is being said here lies in the ubiquity of concept as our ground. Normal human experience is never free from concept; which means (among other things) that normal human experience is constructed (*saṅkhata*) — by concept. The unconstructed (*asaṅkhata*) is presented as being free from the limitations of concept. But this freedom requires more than just freedom from thought. It requires that experience itself be transformed. For if name-&-form is *inherently* conceptual, and if name-&-form includes feeling, perception, and so on, then an awakened one no longer experiences feeling, perception, and so on.

In brief, if (normal) experience is *inherently* conceptual, then the movement beyond concept is more radical than at first imagined. What could this movement beyond concept mean?

Does it mean a movement beyond “speech” — a recognition, within the very experiencing, that what is experienced (and therefore conceptualised) is not found in the concept. This is not what we experience it to be. Fundamentally, this is not our experience. Yet, it is ... because *something* is there. But, that something is “not,” and cannot be named, not just in the obvious sense, that I can’t speak of it adequately (for I can’t speak of *any* experience adequately), but in a deeper sense that it cannot be adequately “experienced” at all.

Which implies that any response towards an experience — whether holding, rejecting or ignoring — is inappropriate and, in the very response, *seen to be* inappropriate. Within that understanding, there is no grasping. For while the heart (*citta*) grasps — that’s what it does; grasping is built into experience — yet within that grasping there is no grasping, for in the very act of grasping there is a recognition that what is being grasped is not real, and that the activity of grasping itself is not real.

## Unlanded awareness

Awareness that is not bound by concept is also spoken of as “unlanded” or “unsupported” awareness (*apatitṭhita viññāna*). Atthirāga Sutta (*There is obsession*) uses this concept to convey the relationship between the constructed and the unconstructed. The Buddha begins with the four kinds of nutriment, or food.

“There are these four kinds of nutriment [*āhāra*] for the maintenance [*thiti*] of beings that have already come to be and for the entry of those seeking birth. What four? They are: physical food as nutriment, gross or subtle; contact as the second; mental volition as the third; and awareness as the fourth. These are the four nutriments for the maintenance of existing beings and for the entry of those seeking birth. (Atthirāga Sutta *There is obsession* Nidāna Saṃyutta)

The four nutriments or foods (*āhāra*) are found in a version of dependent arising that emphasizes four major conditions for personal continuity. These conditions “feed” our identity, and are therefore associated with personal continuity over time within this life, and continuity between lives. (Hence the reference to “those seeking birth.”) All the nutriments arise dependent upon craving (*taṇhā*), so “nutriment” can be seen as an alternative way of expressing clinging (*upādāna*), since in most formulas of dependent arising craving conditions clinging. Clinging as nutriment is also brought out in the way the Buddha uses the image of fire. The Pāli word for clinging, *upādāna*, is also the word for fuel, and fuel “feeds” or sustains a fire. Without its fuel, a fire dies. Without physical food, our bodies die. Without contact, experience dies. And so on. This text is an elaboration and clarification of the conditional relationship “craving conditions clinging,” with a particular focus on the role of awareness over time.

## Landed awareness

If there is obsession [*rāga*], delight [*nandī*] and craving [*taṇhā*] regarding physical food as nutriment, awareness lands [*patitṭhita*] and grows [*virūḥa*]. When awareness lands and grows, name-&-form enters [*avakkanti*]. When name-&-form enters, constructions [*saṅkhārā*] develop [*vuddhi*]. When constructions develop, there is renewed becoming in the future. When there is renewed becoming in the future, there is future birth, ageing and death. And future birth, ageing and death are accompanied with sorrow, grief and despair, I declare.

If there is obsession, delight and craving regarding contact as nutriment ... regarding mental volition as nutriment ... regarding awareness as nutriment, awareness lands and grows. When awareness lands and grows, name-&-form enters. When name-&-form enters, constructions develop. When constructions develop, there is renewed becoming in the future. When there is renewed becoming in the future, there is future birth, ageing and death. And future birth, ageing and death are accompanied with sorrow, grief and despair, I declare.

“Obsession, delight and craving,” the “entry of name-&-form,” the “development of constructions” and “renewed becoming in the future” all entail identity over time, the ongoing existence of a being with a past, a present and a future. All of these expressions



presuppose the support or landing place (*patit̥hita*) and growth (*virūlha*) or development (*vuddhi*) of awareness. This process is illustrated by the metaphor of the painting.

Just as an artist or painter, using dye or lac or turmeric or indigo or red, could create the form of a man or woman, complete in every part, on a well polished panel or wall or canvas; in the same way, if there is obsession, delight and craving regarding physical food as nutriment, awareness lands and grows. When awareness lands and grows, name-&-form enters. ...

The “form of a man or woman, complete in every part” refers to the person within his or her world, a person who maintains an identity through time, who is part of *saṃsāra*, the “flowing together” of life-after-life. Creating an image of such a person requires some kind of background, a backing upon which to paint — a “support” for the image, somewhere for the paint to “land.” Without this there can be no image; with it the image exists, but necessarily stuck right there, unable to move, bounded by limits.

### Unlanded awareness

“In the same way, if there is *no* obsession, delight and craving regarding physical food as nutriment, awareness does *not* land and grow. When awareness does not land and grow, name-&-form does not enter. When name-&-form does not enter, constructions do not develop. When constructions do not develop, there is no renewed becoming in the future. When there is no renewed becoming in the future, there is no future birth, ageing and death. When there is no future birth, ageing and death, there is no sorrow, grief and despair, I declare. ...

“Suppose there was a house or hall with a peaked roof, with windows to the north, the south and the east. When light enters a window at sunrise, where would it land [*patit̥hita*]?”

“On the western wall, bhante.”

“If there was no western wall, where would it land?”

“On the earth, bhante.”

“If there was no earth, where would it land?”

“On the water, bhante.”

“If there was no water, where would it land?”

“It would not land [*apatit̥hita*], bhante.”

“In the same way, if there is no obsession, delight and craving regarding physical food as nutriment ...

Just as a painting requires a canvas, something to land upon, so too light requires something to land upon. Although we have the expression, “He saw the light,” actually, we don’t see light; we see those things that are illuminated by light. If there is no light, we do not see things; if the light is faint, we see things, obscurely. If the light is strong, we see things, clearly. The things we see provide the support or landing for the light. But what

can we say of light when there are no things to be illuminated? Just as light requires something to be illuminated, so awareness requires an object; and just as light is bound to, constrained by, defined by, found only in relation to, those things that are illuminated, so is awareness bound to, constrained by, its object.

What does unlanded awareness mean? It has no meaning, for to provide a meaning is to provide a landing place, a ground for awareness — but there isn't one. But there is no denial of meaning either, for any such denial would again constitute a landing place — but there isn't one.

What happens to light when it does not strike a surface? Does it still exist in some way? Or is it non-existent? What happens to unlanded awareness? Does it exist, or not? Any explanation of unlanded awareness requires concept, and according to Mahānidāna Sutta (D15 *Greater discourse on causation*), concepts cannot exist without awareness together with name-&-form.

To this extent, Ānanda, one can be born, age, and die, fall and rise; to this extent there is a pathway for designation, a pathway for language, a pathway for concept, a sphere for wisdom; to this extent the round turns as far as can be discerned in this state — name-&-form together with awareness.

When awareness does not land, there is no name-&-form to provide a landing place. But without awareness together with name-&-form, there is no basis for discerning a world, and no basis for any kind of concept. This indicates a realm beyond language, one that can be experienced but not described, illustrated only by the use of simile and metaphor. This is the realm of nibbāna. This is why the Buddha refused to explain the fate of a tathāgata, a fully awakened one, after death — or the nature of a tathāgata's awareness in this life. As he explains, "That awareness by which one describing a tathāgata might describe him has been eliminated by the tathāgata, cut off at the root, dug up, made non-existent, incapable of future arising. A tathāgata is free from conceptualisation (*sañkhā*) in terms of awareness, he is profound, immeasurable, unfathomable like the ocean." (M72 *Aggivacchagotta Sutta, To Vacchagotta on fire*)

This state of a tathāgata is illustrated by stories regarding the relationship between Māra and dead arahants. Māra is "death," the Buddhist equivalent of Satan. Unlike Satan, Māra has no particular interest in seeing beings go to hell, but he does want beings to stay within *his* realm — that of birth, and therefore of inevitable death. This realm includes hell, the human realm and the heavens, so Māra is quite happy to see beings do good deeds and be reborn in heaven, because he knows heavenly beings are still bound by death.

But Māra is nervous regarding the Buddha and his students because they are practising for the cessation of birth, and therefore of death. They want to escape his realm, and so Māra has a particular interest in keeping his eye on them — especially when they die, and are due to proceed to another birth. And of course, the process of death and subsequent birth involves the stream of awareness (*viññāṇa-sota*) that continues to flow as long as it is supported by, landed on, something.

But an awakened one does not have a landed awareness. As long as she is alive, her awareness is connected with her body so Māra can find her — although not her mind, which bothers him. When the awakened one dies, and her body dissolves, then her awareness sticks to nothing at all. And Māra goes looking for her, as when the arahant Godhika dies:

Now on that occasion a cloud of smoke, a swirl of darkness, was moving to the east, then to the west, to the north, to the south, upwards, downwards, and to the intermediate quarters. The Blessed One said to the bhikkhus, “Do you see that cloud of smoke, that swirl of darkness, moving to the east, then to the west, to the north, to the south, upwards, downwards, and to the intermediate quarters?”

“Yes, bhante.”

“That is Māra the Evil One searching for the awareness of the clansman Godhika, wondering: ‘Where has the awareness of the clansman Godhika now landed?’ With awareness unlanded, the clansman Godhika is entirely cooled (*parinibbuta*).” (Godhika Sutta, Māra Saṃyutta)

Māra cannot find Godhika’s awareness, any more than he can find light unsupported by what it illuminates, or a painting unsupported by its backing, or a fire that has gone out. And if Māra cannot find it, what can *we* say about it? Not very much, it seems. For when we ask, “What does this mean?,” it doesn’t. It can’t mean anything. That’s the point. Unlanded awareness has no meaning, for to provide a meaning is to provide a landing place, a ground for awareness — but there isn’t one. But there is no denial of meaning either, for any such denial would again constitute a landing place — but there isn’t one. Then what do we have?

## On truth & the heart

We have problems in speaking about the unconstructed, for it seems that whatever we say about it is wrong. But the difficulty goes deeper than that, because whatever we *think* is going on, regarding anything at all, isn't, and we can't help but think about what's going on. The Buddha addresses this issue in Dvayatānupassanā Sutta (*Contemplating dyads*), where he presents a series of paired contemplations (*anupassanā*), each of which provides a perspective on the matter under discussion. Here he is discussing truth and falsehood — and the heart.

If any should ask, “Is there another way for the right contemplation of dyads?,” bhikkhus, you should say, “There is.” What would that be?

Whatever the world, together with its devas, māras and brahmās, its samaṇas and brāhmaṇas, its rulers and peoples, regards as “This is true,” exactly that the cultivated ones clearly see [*su-ditṭha*], realistically and with full understanding, as “This is false.” This is one contemplation.

Whatever the world, together with its devas, māras and brahmās, its samaṇas and brāhmaṇas, its rulers and peoples, regards as “This is false,” exactly that the cultivated ones clearly see, realistically and with full understanding, as “This is true.” This is the second contemplation.

For a bhikkhu rightly contemplating in a twofold manner in this way — living carefully, ardent and determined — one of two results can be expected: either perfect knowledge here and now or, if a touch of clinging remains, the state of non-return.

This is what the Blessed One said. Having said that, the Sublime One, the Teacher, then said:

See the world, together with its devas  
Projecting self in what is without self —  
Entrenched in name-&-form  
Conceiving “This is true.”

Whatever they conceive [*maññati*],  
Is something else;  
That is what's false about it —  
It's unstable, by nature unreal.

Nibbāna by nature is real —  
This the cultivated know as truth.  
Penetrating to the truth,  
Hunger gone [*nicchātā*], entirely cooled [*parinibbutā*]. (Mahāvagga, Sutta Nipāta)

The Buddha begins by distinguishing between the “world” (*loka*), the great majority of the population, and the “cultivated ones” (*ariya*), mature practitioners, who always constitute a small minority. Their minority status is emphasised by a fundamental disagreement on the subject of what is true and what is false. Whatever most people think is true, the cultivated ones “clearly see, realistically and with full understanding,” is false; and

whatever most people think is false, the cultivated ones “clearly see, realistically and with full understanding,” is true.

Notice the difference in how these two groups come to their conclusions. The world bases its understanding of truth and falsehood on concept; the cultivated ones base their understanding on “clear seeing” (*su-dit̥ṭhi*) and “understanding” or “wisdom” (*paññā*), terms that carry the implication of deep meditative practice and a direct engagement with experience. The Buddha then comments on his own teaching with a verse, pointing to our determination to project a self into what is without self, and basing our sense of truth on that. He goes on to say,

Whatever they conceive,  
Is something else;  
That is what’s false about it —  
It’s unstable, by nature unreal.

Whatever we think is going on — we are wrong! The verb translated here as “conceive” (another technical term for concept!) is *maññāti*, from  $\sqrt{man}$ , “to mentalise.” It is often used to convey distorted thinking — thinking driven by craving (*taṇhā*), conceit (*māna*) and view (*dit̥ṭhi*) and flowering in proliferation (*papañca*). Hence it is associated with the activity of “projecting self in what is without self,” creating a false world characterised by pain and frustration.

We think we know what is going on, and we are wrong, because whatever we think something to be — it’s already something else. The show has moved on. The referent of our concept has already changed, while our concepts remain frozen, forever failing to catch up with reality. More fundamentally, our concepts are “unreal” by their very nature, because a concept of the world is never the world.

Nibbāna by nature is real —  
This the cultivated know as truth.  
Penetrating to the truth,  
Hunger gone, entirely cooled.

What’s real is nibbāna, and this is known. And yet ... what is known? Nothing that can be pinned down in any concept, certainly. Then how can we recognise it if we see it? Is it even an “it” to be seen? Nibbāna can be recognised by its effect, or affect. The vanishing of hunger (*chāta*), of craving (*taṇhā*, literally “thirst”) indicates the presence of nibbāna. The unconstructed is not a something, nor is it part of the round of birth and death, yet it can be experienced and its experiencing has real effects. The experience of the unconstructed is not merely beyond the wheel of dependent arising; it brings that wheel to a halt. What drives the wheel forward is the power of craving, the drives of the disordered heart.

Hence the presence of the unconstructed is always associated with the end, or limit (*anta*) of dukkha; with the complete cooling (*parinibbutā*) of the heart. Nibbāna is the dying out of a fire, the fire of greed, hatred and delusion, and it is in its effect on the heart that the unconstructed can be recognised. Similarly, it is in its effect on the heart that the

constructed can be recognised, as dukkha. The false world created by our delusion is always characterised by pain.

We see here the unity of the cognitive and the affective. What is real, true, brings peace. The absence of peace indicates falsehood. Perhaps it's not so much a case of *seeing* the unconstructed, as *feeling* it.

And what, bhikkhus, is the unconstructed? The exhaustion of obsession [*rāga*], the exhaustion of hatred [*dosa*], the exhaustion of delusion [*moha*]: this is called the unconstructed. (Kāyagatāsati Sutta, *Mindfulness immersed in body*, Asaṅkhata Saṃyutta)