The eye seems like a commonplace enough and useful thing. Who would imagine that it would be so implicated in the human pathology, nor that understanding the eye would play such an important role in its resolution?

The Buddha attributes many, at first sight, puzzling properties to the eye in the Early Buddhist Texts (EBT), and equivalently to the other sense faculties – ear, nose, tongue, body and oftentimes mind. We learn that the eye is something that can be guarded or restrained, by not grasping signs and features of the forms it contacts, for Māra is constantly trying to gain access through the eye. Moreover, “it is better for the eye faculty to be lacerated by a red-hot iron pin … than for one to grasp the features in a form cognizable through the eye” (SN 35.235). We learn that the eye is that by which one is “a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world” (SN 35.116). On the other hand, we learn that the eye is impermanent, and that its rise and fall can be discerned, and moreover reveals itself as impermanent with the development of concentration. Since the eye is impermanent, it is suffering and cannot be a self.

We learn that “that sphere should be understood where the eye ceases and the perception of forms fades away” (SN 35.117). It is possible not to conceive the eye, in the eye, from the eye, or “this
eye is mine,” and, as a result, it is possible to end conceptualizing and clinging. As we gain such direct knowledge of the eye, we are able to develop dispassion for the eye, revulsion for eye and thereby abandon the eye. Surprisingly, we also learn that the eye itself is old *kamma*, fashioned by volition and something to be experienced.

So, what is this eye the EBT speak of? And analogously, what are the ear, nose, tongue, body and oftentimes mind?

**The eye as experience**

We have two eyes. I don't mean the right eye and the left eye, but the objective eye and the subjective eye, the one that exists in the world, and the one that arises in experience. This is a simple distinction, but very important to keep clear about in what follows, so let me say a few words about it here. From the beginning, it is important to recognize the strongly subjective orientation of the early Dhamma, particularly with regard to mind. The field of inquiry is almost completely restricted to elements as they occur in *experience*, with almost no interest in mechanisms that might exist outside of experience. In fact, “the world” itself is understood as not something “out there,” but as the *world of experience*.

In this fathom-long living body, along with its perceptions and thoughts, lies the world, the arising of the world, and the cessation of the world. (AN 4.45)

Until this is pointed out, we become easily disoriented in our understanding of early Buddhist psychology, since many of us tend to give the objective realm primacy, although this was not the
case in ancient India.¹

In general the objective world is regarded as vast and the subjective world as limited. In the objective world things exist or are true, in the subjective they just arise, or not, empirically.² This distinction is evident in optical illusions, mirages and hallucinations. Most people see dots appearing and disappearing at the intersection of the image to the right. Subjectively they are there (or may or may not there under different conditions), but objectively they are not. The subjective realm to some extent is assumed to reflect the objective real, but it is assumed that most of the objective realm is unknown in the subjective, perhaps waiting to be discovered.

In the Theravāda commentaries the eye is described from the objective perspective: it is classified as belonging to the aggregate of form, or materiality, and described in anatomical terms.³ Analogous descriptions are provided for the ear, nose, tongue and body organs. Modern anatomy and neurology might provide an even more precise account, including optic nerves and the relevant neural circuitry of

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¹ Ronkin, 2005, 4.
² Philosophers would say that our concern in the objective realm is with ontology or metaphysics, and that in the subjective realm it is with epistemology and phenomenology.
³ Buddhaghosa, 1999, XIV.37, 47, p. 443, 445.
the brain. We can call this a *biological description* of the eye.\(^4\)

However, the biological description of the eye stands outside of how we actually experience the eye in all-day every-day cognition, and therefore, while perhaps useful for the study of anatomy in the objective realm, is of little use for *dhammānupassanā*\(^5\) practice, which is the practice of examining experiential phenomena.\(^6\) Our *dhammānupassanā* practice only makes sense in the subjective realm, since that is where our soteriological concerns are.\(^7\) How else would its rise and fall be interpreted, and how could concentration help us discern its rise and fall? How do we abandon such an eye?

So, how do we experience the eye? Within the process of seeing, a little introspection tells us, the eye is experienced in opposition to the form that is seen, as subject in opposition to object. Accordingly, the eye sphere is sometimes separated into the interior (ajjhattika) and exterior (bāhira) spheres. Each exists in space and we are aware that the eye can move or be moved to get a better view of the object. Moreover, an eye has a range within which forms are visible. The eye can choose to turn toward or turn away from its object. An eye can discern, focus more intently, or cognize, so that forms and their features become more apparent to perception. An eye can choose to interpret a form in a specific way, for instance, as convex or concave. It is clear that the eye be-

\(^4\) See also Ėnānānanda, 2008, sermon 26.

\(^5\) *Dhammānupassanā* is the fourth foundation of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*), roughly seeing the world of subjective experience through the eyes of the Buddha.

\(^6\) Kalupahana (1992, 106) points out that the Pali commentaries have a metaphysical perspective quite distinct from the EBT. Hamilton, 2000, 140, states that if we forget that Buddha's focus is on the world of experience we will misunderstand his teachings.

\(^7\) See Ronkin, 2005, 3-5.
longs primarily to the formation aggregate (sankhārak-khandha), as it is experienced in relation to other factors and has a volitional component.

On the other hand, the objects of the eye – that is, forms – are experienced as belonging to the objective realm, as having an existence independent of the eye in a vast and vibrant world in time and space, full of forests, people, roads and cars, houses, shopping malls, office buildings and so on and many many things still unseen, which exist whether we are looking or not. The eye stands in relationship to these in time and space as our little window into this vast world, standing as polar opposite, as perceiver and perceived. Consciousness comprehends the correspondence between subject and object. This is how the eye makes contact. Within the eye is a cognitive and emotional complex that pays close attention to what in the vast world the eye is moment by moment contacts, attempting to understand and evaluate.

**The eye of the sixfold-sphere**

The eye is the leading factor of the sixfold-sphere (saḷāyatana, sometimes translated as sense bases), a prominent framework in the EBT for arraying the world in terms that highlight the role of the six sense faculties in initiating all cognitive and affective experience. This is where we will center our exploration. The sixfold-sphere looks like this (MN 137):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>faculty</th>
<th>object</th>
<th>dhamma</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>eye</td>
<td>form</td>
<td>eye-consciousness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ear</td>
<td>sound</td>
<td>ear-consciousness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nose</td>
<td>odor</td>
<td>n-consciousness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tongue</td>
<td>taste</td>
<td>t-consciousness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>body</td>
<td>touch</td>
<td>b-consciousness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mind</td>
<td>dhamma</td>
<td>m-consciousness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Pali word for sphere, āyatana, like the English, suggests a space or location, or a realm of activity, in contrast to the sense faculty (indriya) itself. The object of the eye stands in the objective realm as described above. The subject-object dualism is the primary highlight of the sixfold-sphere. Within the eye sphere, with eye and a form, eye-consciousness arises and the meeting of the three is defined as eye contact:

\[
(\text{eye + form} \rightarrow \text{eye-consciousness}) = \text{eye-contact}
\]

From eye contact a series of additional factors are set in motion, starting with feeling and craving, but eventually including reasoning and planning and run-away conceptualization, attachment, becoming and saṃsāra. The EBT give us many understandings and practices that focus specifically on the eye, and equivalently on each of the other sense faculties as initiators of it all, with the mind faculty an occasional exception. The sixfold-sphere are described as the world, as “the all,” as aflame, as hell, as the domain of Māra.

In the six the world has arisen,
In the six it holds concourse.
On the six themselves depending,
In the six it has woes. (SN 1.70)

**The dependently co-arisen eye**

To broaden the context a bit in which the eye is understood, the sixfold-sphere itself occurs as one of the links within the standard twelve links of dependent co-arising:

\[
\text{ignorance} \rightarrow \text{fabrications} \rightarrow \text{consciousness} \rightarrow \text{name-and-form} \rightarrow \textbf{sixfold-sphere} \rightarrow \text{contact} \rightarrow
\]
feeling → craving → attachment → being →
birth → old age, death, this mass of suffering

The twelve links of dependent co-arising describe the unfolding of the human pathology. Notice that the sequence “contact → feeling → craving” occurs redundantly within the sixfold-sphere, where it is made clear that these downstream factors unfold independently, at least to a certain point, within each sense sphere. More generally, the sixfold-sphere and contact are differentiated as matters of detail, and, in fact, the sixfold-sphere is often referred to as the sphere of contact (phassāyatana). The Mahānidāna Sutta (MN 15), the most comprehensive discourse on dependent co-arising, omits the sixfold-sphere from the standard sequence altogether, presumably folding its role into contact.

Indeed, contact gets us into a heap of trouble. It presupposes subjective and objective realms, with a kind of kind of fence between them over which to peer. This suggests a perceiver on one side of the fence in opposition to the perceived on the other, and therefore easily suggests a sense of “me” and “mine.” It is with regard to the opposition of “me” to the perceived that the downstream factors of feeling, craving and attachment make sense, in terms of a subject seeking personal advantage with regard to the dangers and opportunities among the things of the objective realm present. As Ēnānānanda puts it, “Where there is a fence, there is offense and defense.” On the other hand, if we do not “recognize either a self or anything belonging to self in the six spheres of contact,” then craving will not arise and we will “not cling to anything in the world.” (SN 35.234)

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8 Cintita (2017, chapter 11) provides an overview of dependent co-arising compliant with the discussion here.
9 Ēnānānanda, 2008, sermon 15.
Contact is thus the root of affective misapprehension. It is also the root of conceptual misapprehension; it is highlighted in the *Brahmajāla Sutta* (DN 1) as the origin of each of sixty-two false views, with the statement “that too arises from contact.” In this way greed, aversion, attachment, obsession, scheming, speculation, views, self-identity, and the perpetuation of *samsāric* existence unfold on the basis of contact. And contact depends on the eye, … and on the other sense faculties.

**Practicing with the eye**
The eye must be understood, because:

Without directly knowing and fully understanding the eye, without developing dispassion for it and abandoning it, one is incapable of destroying suffering. (*SN* 35.111)

The causal structure of the eye sphere highlights the eye and its relationship to its object as the initiators of the human pathology carried forth by contact and all of the other downstream factors. This is why the Buddha could state,

Where the eye exists, Samiddhi, where visible forms, eye consciousness and *dhammas* cognizable by the eye exist, there Māra or the manifestation of Māra exists. (*SN* 35.65)

As an initiator, the eye represents a point at which Māra's offenses can be brought under some degree of control or eliminated. This is where we practice with the eye. In this regard, the Buddha admonishes us to understand …

- the origin  - the cessation
- the allure  - the danger  - the escape
..., with regard to the sixfold-sphere of contact (SN 35.13, SN 35.103). If one does not understand these, one is “far from the dhamma and vinaya” (SN 35.71). Before his awakening, the Buddha asked himself,

“What is the allure, what is the danger, what is the escape in the case of the eye?” … Then, bhikkhus, it occurred to me: “The pleasure and joy that arise in dependence on the eye; this is the allure in the eye. That the eye is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change: this is the danger in the eye. The removal and abandonment of desire and lust for the eye: this is the escape from the eye.” … [and so on for ear, nose, etc.] So long, bhikkhus, as I did not directly know as they really are the allure, the danger and the escape in the case of these six interior spheres, I did not claim to have awakened … (SN 35.13)

The allure of the eye

“The pleasure and joy that arise in dependence on the eye; this is the allure in the eye.” Through contact with pleasant objects of the eye, pleasure and joy arise downstream as feelings. Moreover, (unless lust, hatred and delusion have been abandoned) even trifling forms that enter the range of the eye obsess the mind (SN 35.231). Forms cognizable by the eye are like fishermen's hooks. The eye seeks delight in them, welcomes them, remains holding them. At this point we have swallowed Māra's hook (SN 35.230).

When one abides inflamed by lust, fettered, infatuated, contemplating allure, then the five aggregates of attachment are build up for oneself in the future and one's craving – which brings renewal of being, is accompanied by
delight and lust and delights in this and that – increases.
(MN 149)

Allure is thus found largely downstream in the factors that dependently arise from contact.

**The danger of the eye**

“That the eye is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change: this is the danger in the eye.” Moreover, to seek delight in the eye is to seek delight in suffering (SN 35.19). The Buddha equates “the all” with the sixfold-sphere (SN 35.23), then rather graphically declares in the famous *Fire Sutta*,

Bhikkhus, all is burning. And what, bhikkhus, is the all that is burning? The eye is burning, forms are burning, eye-consciousness is burning, eye-contact is burning, and whatever feeling arises with eye-contact as condition … that too is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of lust, with the fire of hatred, with the fire of delusion; burning with birth, aging and death; with sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure and despair, I say. [and so on for ear, …, nose, …, etc.] (SN 35.28)

There is no small challenge in recognizing the impermanence and suffering of the eye. Because the subject-object dualism naturally reinforces a sense of self – in particular that the eye faculty itself
is “me” or “mine” – is hard to shake. Since what is impermanent or suffering is seen with correct wisdom as non-self (SN 35.1-2), it is inversely also difficult to see the impermanence or suffering with respect to the eye itself.¹⁰

Naturally we can close the eye at will, and in that sense witness its impermanence, a kind of privilege not found in the other sense faculties. More importantly, there are occasions in which, even while seeing, the eye and object of the eye simply fade away in favor of pure seeing, an experience undifferentiated in terms of subject and object. The Buddha makes an important claim about how we can bring about such occasions: through the development of concentration or through making an exertion in seclusion, one “sees things as they really are” and the eye becomes “manifest as impermanent” (SN 35.99-100, SN 35.160-161). I will explore what seems to be going on here when I take up the origin and cessation of the eye below.

Impermanence is also a quality of the forms that constitute the objects of the eye. In fact, the eye-form dyad is “tottering, impermanent and becoming otherwise” (SN 35.93). Since these objects are typically also what are craved and attached to, we already practice with the impermanence, suffering, non-self and loathsomeness of these in other contexts, particularly with regard to the five aggregates of attachment. Since we generally attribute to these objects an existence that persists beyond the eye's contact with those objects, it is easy to experience these objects as permanent.

We should acknowledge the enormous implicit danger of the eye that lies in the many dangers that lie downstream from the eye,

¹⁰ Notice that the biological eye would not be particularly impermanent in any case; we expect it to persist fundamentally unchanged until death.
that are directly conditioned by eye and form, including craving and attachment.

**The escape from the eye**

“The removal and abandonment of desire and lust for the eye: this is the escape from the eye.” There are three kinds of exercises provided for facilitating an escape from the eye. The first is recognizing the absence of the three characteristics as a basis for abandoning. The second is the guarding of the eye, which mostly works on the downstream factors. The third is deconstruction, which realizes the dependent co-origination of the subject-object dualism.

**Three characteristics.** Three characteristics (*lakkhaṇa*) generalize to all phenomena, namely impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*) and non-self (*anattā*) and guide our investigation of the phenomenal world. They are applied as reminders, particularly with regard to the five aggregates (*khaṇḍha*) as well as to the sixfold-sphere, domains in which we tend to personalize the various factors. Their reflection generally goes like this:

Bhikkhus, the eye is impermanent. What is impermanent is suffering. What is suffering is non-self. What is nonself should be seen as it really is with correct wisdom thus:

11 See Cintita (2008) for the case of the five *khaṇḍhas*,
“This is not mine, this I am not this is not my self.” [and so on for ear, nose, etc.] Seeing thus, bhikkhus, the instructed noble disciple experiences revulsion towards the eye, revulsion towards the ear, … Experiencing revulsion, he becomes dispassionate. (SN 35.1)

Reflecting in this way we learn no longer to personalize the eye. Furthermore, whatever is not ours should be abandoned and abandonment leads to “welfare and happiness” (SN 35.101, SN 35.138). Moreover, if one knows and sees eye as impermanent, then “wrong view is abandoned,” “identity view is abandoned,” and “the view of the self is abandoned” (SN 35.165-167).

What's more, the entire world is described as “empty of a self and what belongs to a self,” in that the eye is empty of a self, forms are empty of a self, eye-consciousness, eye-contact, and feeling are empty of self [and so on for ear, … , etc.] (SN 35.85).

Guarding. The Buddha refers to the volitional quality of the eye in a couple of places:

Where there are hands, picking up and putting down are discerned. When there are feet, coming and going are discerned. When there a limbs, bending and stretching are discerned. When there is the belly, hunger and thirst are discerned. So too, bhikkhus, when there is the eye, pleasure and pain arise internally with eye-contact as condition. [and so on for ear, etc.] (SN 35.236)

He also identifies the eye [ear, etc.] with old kamma:

The eye is old kamma, to be seen as specially formed and specially intended, as something to be experienced. (SN 35.146)
Old *kamma* is the body of dispositions that have accumulated dependent on previous volitional acts or perceptions. As an example of the acquired dispositions of the eye, where the farmer might see a cow, say, the hunter might see a moose. Where the shopkeeper might see broken glass, the jeweler might see spilled diamonds. Where the farmer might see a fertile field, the realtor might see an excellent home site. The eye faculty, etc. is conditioned to see in certain ways through past experience, to produce old *kamma* as accumulated dispositions, and thereby as a critical determinant of the entire world as experienced.

As the initiator of the cognitive playing out of human pathology, the choices of the eye concerning what forms to attend to are crucial in our practice toward overcoming that pathology. Our practice at this level is *sense restraint* (*indriya-saṃvara*) or *guarding of sense faculties* (*indriyānaṃ gutti*), whereby we avoid the sensual contact that gives rise to passion in the first place.

On seeing a form with the eye, do not grasp at any theme or details by which, if you were to dwell without restraint over the faculty of the eye, evil, unskillful qualities such as greed or distress might assail you. Practice for its restraint. Guard the faculty of the eye. Secure your restraint with regard to the faculty of the eye. (SN 35.199)

Sense restraint is implemented by physically averting the eye where passions might arise, for instance, as a monk might avoid association with women or a nun with men. Failing that, it is implemented by mentally, rather than physically, not pursuing themes and details of forms. If all else fails, it is implemented through contemplations of loathsomeness (*asubha*), such as of body parts or corpses, that tend to decondition our dispositions to-
ward lust. These contemplations constitute much of kāyānupassanā, the first foundation of mindfulness.

As another example, in order to moderate lust for women the Buddha recommended to the monks that they regard women old enough to be their mother as their mother, women old enough to be their sister as their sister and women old enough to be their daughter as their daughter (SN 35.127). In order to moderate lust for food, they should recall, “this food is not for the sake of amusement, but to sustain health of the body for the sake of practice …” (SN 35.120), a paragraph that we recite in Pali before each meal at the monastery at which I live.

It is widely recognized that restraint of the senses is an important factor in successful concentration (SN 35.97), which is why in meditation retreats social interactions and eye contact are generally discouraged, why lighting is generally dim and why participants are generally segregated by gender. In turn, without concentration we cannot see things as they really are. If we see things as they really are then the eye becomes manifest as impermanent (SN 35.99-100, SN 35.160-161), which leads us to our next practice.

**Deconstruction.** Sometimes we can recognize that eye and objective form are contingent parts of experience, that is, the subject-object dualism in seeing may sometimes drop away. This is probably even more so with respect to ear and sounds: consider the way we listen to music. At first we are aware of a loudspeaker or an orchestra playing and the ear responding. However, as we relax into it, we may experience pure music for music's sake, as it bubbles up in the mind, whence we care not. This case is beautifully animated in the Tocata and Fugue scene of Disney's Fanta-
sia as contact fades away leaving pure subjective experience.\textsuperscript{12} We may also have a similar experience while sitting in \textit{jhāna} with open eyes. This gives us a clue that subject and object are unsubstantial fabrications added contingently to a more fundamental experience. This is seeing things as they really are. This is also how we begin to approach an understanding of the origin and the cessation of the eye.

\textbf{The origin and cessation of the eye}

\textit{Dhammānupassanā} is a process of mindful examination of subjective experience that results in insight. At certain points a phenomenon that seems solid reveals itself as illusory. By way of analogy, what we think of as a cloud will, from an airplane, reveal itself as an expanse water droplets, and what we think of as solid figures moving about on a video screen will, if we move closer, reveal itself as the individual fixed pixels undergoing changes of color, but not moving. Similarly, mindfulness of body reveals that the body is more like a workshop floor\textsuperscript{13} than a solid thing. In this way, we experience the origin and cessation of phenomena. In short, the same “raw sensual data” can be experienced contingently in different ways and these different ways might be conditionally related.

So it is with eye and forms, ear and sounds, etc. and the neatly arrayed dualism of the subjective and presumably independent objective realms. For the Buddha, the subject-object dualism was never substantial.\textsuperscript{14} Name-and-form, which provides the condition for the sixfold-sphere in the standard links of dependent co-

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{12}] The reader can find this on line.
\item[\textsuperscript{13}] Ñaññānanda, 2008, sermon 6.
\item[\textsuperscript{14}] Kalupahana, 1992, 54.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
arising, is a more fundamental way of experiencing that provides a conceptual framework in which the senses and their objects are revealed as illusions, as other than what we normally think. Name-and-form is a kind of factory for manufacturing illusions, and consciousness provides the employees that fabricate what we think is real, while formations provide the material from which they fabricate these illusions. The Sutta Nipāta nicely summarizes the role of name-and-form in two places,

Just see the world, with all its gods, fancying a self where none exists, entrenched in name-and-form it holds, the conceit that this is real. (Sn 3.12)

Having understood name-and-form as manifoldness, which is the root of both subjective and objective disease, he is completely released from bondage to the root of all disease. (Sn 3.6)

Nonetheless, as real as the experience of dualism seems – particularly the existence objective realm of grass, sunshine, rustling leaves, chirping birds, airplanes and furniture – seeing the sixfold-sphere is not seeing things as they really are, for the world in this sense is itself dependently co-arisen. In fact, the subjective and objective streams are actually aspects of a single process, and to understand this, through examination within dhammānu-passanā, allows us to fully understand the impermanence, the origin and the cessation of the eye and, with that, of the world.

Bhikkhus, I say that the end of the world cannot be known, seen or reached by traveling. Yet bhikkhus, I also say that without reaching the end of the world, there is no

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15 “Subjective and objective” translate “ajjhattam bahiddhā,” otherwise “internal and external.”
making an end of suffering. (SN 35.116)

Indeed, that sphere should be understood where the eye ceases and perception of forms fades away. (SN 35.117)

The dependence of the sixfold-sphere on name-and-form is possibly the most insightful, yet most critically misunderstood, link in the entire chain of dependent co-arising, for it marks the source of our pernicious subject-object dualism from which a self, contact, craving, attachment, views, suffering and samāsāra emerge. Name-and-form, like the sixfold sphere, is a means of arraying our experiential situation, but on a different basis before the subject-object dualism has fully coalesced.\(^\text{16}\) It is to the sixfold-sphere as fog is to the cloud or as flashing pixels are to moving images.

Within name-and-form we find – rather than the fully formed objects in an objective world – an arising of a more modest external influence, which takes the form of the impingement of the four elements and which initiates an ongoing process of interpreting that produces a physical impression or impingement contact (\textit{paṭigha-samphassa}) (DN 15). In modern terms we can think of this impingement as that of raw sense data, which must be interpreted conceptually through a variety of processes driven by consciousness. The full objects of the senses as they arise in the sixfold-sphere must be fabricated from the raw data, as must be the very existence of an objective reality “out there.”

In fact, on the basis of raw sense data, the subjective and objective streams of eye and forms are fabricated together in name-and-form, that is, as aspects of a single process. A little reflection,

in modern terms, will convince the reader that the forms we experience in the vast objective realm can only arise within the subjective sphere of experience, not in some objective sphere “out there.” We cannot actually get outside of our experience to gain direct access to the objective world, and therefore what we perceive as the objective realm must originate in the subjective realm.\textsuperscript{17}

Consider that the brain is critically involved in our experience of the world “out there” and yet the brain sits totally in darkness and in silence. The brain’s only access to any objective realm is through nerves that collect neural impulses from objective eyes and ears and so on. Therefore, raw data must be (re-)constituted into our experience of forms, sounds and so on. So how are eye and form fabricated?

The sixfold-sphere arises as a bifurcation of name-and-form,\textsuperscript{18} driven by the discriminative function of consciousness.\textsuperscript{19} Specifically, consciousness is always consciousness of something, something outside of consciousness itself, and typically something outside of our subjective experience. For instance, we can be conscious of a dog barking or of the moon rising. It is the function of consciousness to discriminate in this way, and it does this with astonishing facility. The Buddha compares consciousness to “a magic-show, a juggler's trick entire” (SN 22.95).\textsuperscript{20} Likewise, the many manifestations of consciousness – for consciousness is never a single thing – provides the factory workers who fabricate wondrous products in the factory of name-and-form, including

\textsuperscript{17} Hamilton, 2000, 109-110.
\textsuperscript{18} Ānānanda, 2015, vol. 1, 49, sermon 2.
\textsuperscript{20} Ānānanda (2007) has an excellent commentary on this sutta.
subjects and objects and the appearance of an entire independent objective reality.

To see how this works, imagine you enter a room in which a television is turned on. At first you may be conscious of pixels or shapes and colors on the screen and sounds. However, the next moment you are conscious of an ongoing situation located in the nineteenth century American West, in which people are acting out their intentions both virtuous and evil. It’s magic! To a degree you are convinced that this situation is real, for you find yourself empathizing with the main characters, enraptured as their circumstances unfold. Such is the power of consciousness to evoke, and such is its power to conjure up the external world “out there,” and convince us that it is real.21 Notice that when we conceive dualistically, consciousness arises when form passes before the eye. When we see things as they really are, consciousness does not arise from eye and form; quite the opposite: consciousness fabricates eye and form and is therefore prior to it, for consciousness is that very discrimination that produces the dualism.22

**Realizing the cessation of the eye**

The objective world as we experience it is, in short, necessarily a construct of the mind. It sure seems like we see, hear, smell, taste and touch a real external world “out there,” things that really do

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21 Notice that we generally make a distinction between a fictional word a “really real” word in that we enjoy a high degree of detachment in the case of fictional worlds, even while we empathize with them – this is why we can watch a horror movie or cry through a drama and yet report, “I enjoyed that movie,” yet would be traumatized if the same things were to happen in the “really real world.” What happens when we realize that the “really real” world is also a fiction?

exist. However, what we see, hear, smell, taste and touch is, in fact, within our own subjective mind, fabricated to give the appearance of the world of the sixfold-sphere. One neuroscientist calls our experience of the world a “controlled hallucination.” It seems so real.

Our mission, if we decide to accept it, is to see for ourselves into the fabricated nature of the subject-object dualism expressed in the sense spheres. This is how we ultimately bring the world to an end. In a number of passages the Buddha describes how to approach this task:

Then, Bāhiya, you should train yourself thus: In reference to the seen, there will be only the seen. In reference to the heard, only the heard. In reference to the sensed, only the

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23 It is another question altogether, but an interesting one, whether an external world “out there” really exists, and, if it does, how accurately our six-sphere fabrication reflects that external world. Although the human pathology arises in the subjective realm, and any answer to this question is likely to be speculative, this speculation may encourage the process of disenchantment. At one level, it is easy to make the case that our experience of objective reality is not perfect, for we experience optical illusions, mirages and hallucinations, and attribute beauty even while we understand it is in the eye of the beholder. At another level, quantum science propounds radically unfamiliar views of the objective realm, one in which even time and space may be absent, which is to say these would have to be purely fabrications of consciousness. At still another level, perhaps it is consciousness all the way, with no independent material reality, as some contemporary philosophers suggest.
sensed. In reference to the cognized, only the cognized. That is how you should train yourself. When for you there will be only the seen in reference to the seen, only the heard in reference to the heard, only the sensed in reference to the sensed, only the cognized in reference to the cognized, then, Bāhiya, there is no you in connection with that. When there is no you in connection with that, there is no you there. When there is no you there, you are neither here nor yonder nor between the two. This, just this, is the end of stress. (Ud 1.10, Bāhiya Sutta)

The Buddha offers very similar advice elsewhere (SN 35.95) to the elderly monk Mālunkyputta after being assured that the latter was no longer experiencing delight or lust with regard to forms, sounds, etc. In another discourse, he declares of himself:

Thus, monks, a tathāgata does not conceive of a visible thing as apart from sight; he does not conceive of an unseen; he does not conceive of a “thing-worth-seeing”; he does not conceive about a seer. (AN 4.24, Kālakārama Sutta).

There is, in short, a way of seeing, hearing, etc. that leaves the seer or the eye, and thereby the objective status of the seen, out of the picture. Seeing becomes pure experience, upon which we normally impose, artificially, the conceptual subject-object dualism, which results in the sixfold-sphere. With practice it is possible to flip between the two interpretations, the internal and the external, much as in staring at a Magic Eye picture we are able to flip between a two-dimensional (name-and-form) and a three-dimensional (sixfold-sphere) interpretation. This is generally not

24 “Sensed” here is normally interpreted as standing for the otherwise missing sense faculties: nose, tongue and body.
an easy practice (likewise, once we see a Magic Eye picture in three dimensions it is hard to rid ourselves of that interpretation).

Another place where this practice seems to come up is in the first sentence of the famous refrain of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta which, I for one am convinced, describes exactly this process of flipping between the dualistic and non-dualistic perspectives:

In this way he abides contemplating the body as a body internally, or he abides contemplating the body as a body externally, or he abides contemplating the body as a body both internally and externally. 25 (MN 10)

The same refrain, here with respect to body, is repeated but with respect to feeling, mind and phenomena in the course of the sutta. In this interpretation contemplating internally (ājjhatta) would be subjectively, from the non-dualistic or simple name-and-form perspective. Contemplating externally (bahiddhā) would be objectively, from the accustomed dualist or six-sphere perspective. Contemplating both internally and externally is interesting: it is apparently to witnesses the dualism as an active subjective construct, that is, it sees into the very process of fabrication of the dualism within the subjective realm.

**Conclusion**

An eye ia a dangerous thing. Left unguarded and misunderstood it unleashes a world “out there” that we become infatuated with, to our detriment. When we understand full that the eye, the world “out there” and the interface between them are fabricated, the world ends, the infatuation ends, saṁsāra ends.

25 “Internally” and “externally” translate “ājjhatta” “bahiddhā” respectively, otherwise “subjective” and “objective.”
References


