

Dhammānupassanā seeing through the eyes of the Buddha

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Samādhi (concentration) is the dominant factor of the higher training toward awakening in the early Buddhist texts (EBT),¹ and yet it is lamentably misunderstood. It folds all of the energies of the previous seven path factors into a unified whole:

There are right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort and right mindfulness. The unification of mind equipped with these seven factors is called noble right concentration with its supports and accessories. (SN 45.28)

It then provides the incubator for that liberating knowledge that may burst forth into awakening.

Bhikkhus, develop concentration. A monk with concentration understands in accordance with reality. (SN 22.5)

Yet many have doubts that *samādhi* can possibly fulfill these functions. The problem seems to be that the tight integration of (1) *Dhamma*, of the contemplative disciplines of (2) mindfulness and (3) *samādhi*, and of (4) liberating knowledge, as put forward in the EBT, seems to have come apart, for many maintain that the

1 The Early Buddhist Texts (EBT) are parallel texts shared by the early Buddhist sects, including the first four Pali *Nikāyas* and key texts of the fifth, some Vinaya material, particularly the *Patimokkhas* of the different sects, as well as parallels in the Chinese *Āgama* texts. See Sujato and Brahmali (2014) for a thorough discussion.

Dhamma cannot reach the stillness of *samādhi* and that *samādhi* does not have the cognitive strength to produce liberating knowledge with any kind of meaningful content.

Dhammānupassanā (watching or observing of phenomena) is at the center of this issue. It is the practice of examining phenomenal experience in accordance with the categories of *Dhamma*² – in this sense, seeing through the eyes of the Buddha – articulated most prominently as the fourth establishment of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*). But, as we will see, it functions almost entirely in *samādhi*, and leads to an array of liberating insights. It is here where the full integration of *Dhamma*, mindfulness, *samādhi* and liberating knowledge is realized.

Overview of *dhammānupassanā*

Let's begin with a representative example from the EBT of *dhammānupassanā*.

Bhikkhus, develop *samādhi*. A bhikkhu who has *samādhi* understands things as they really are. And what does he understand as it really is? He understands as it really is: “This is suffering.” He understands as it really is: “This is the origin of suffering.” He understands as it really is: “This is the cessation of suffering.” He understands as it really is: “This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering.” Bhikkhus, develop *samādhi*. A bhikkhu who has *samādhi* understands things as they really are.

Therefore, bhikkhus, an exertion should be made to understand: “This is suffering.” An exertion should be made to understand: “This is the origin of suffering.” An exertion

2 Ñānamoli and Bodhi (1995, 1194).

should be made to understand: “This is the cessation of suffering.” An exertion should be made to understand: “This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering.”
(SN 56.1, *Samādhī Sutta*)

Notice that this passage involves a variant of the doctrine of the four noble truths. However, it is in a rudimentary nuts-and-bolts form, rather than as a sweeping philosophical statement about the ubiquity of suffering, etc. The specific wording suggests a contemplative environment in which we are attending to phenomena as they arise in experience, for the determiner “this,” and in particular the Pali equivalent (*idam* or *ayam*), is used to refer to something immediately present.³ This is typical of many EBTs, which we will later call *examination trainings*. The examined phenomena in this case are of four categories, corresponding to the doctrine of the four noble truths.

Two stages are described in this passage: (1) the arising of understanding through *samādhī* and (2) the development of understanding through exertion. The process that ties these together is described in the standard seven *factors of awakening* (*bojjhaṅga*) (MN 118, SN 46.*):

factors of awakening

1. mindfulness (*sati*) (mindfulness)
2. examination of phenomena (*dhamma-vicaya*)
3. energy (*virīya*)
4. delight (*pīti*) (bridge)
5. calm (*passaddhī*)
6. *samādhī* (*samādhī*)
7. equanimity (*upekkhā*)

3 Shulman (2014, 139), who notes that the four noble truths actually occur almost always in this particular form in the suttas.

The first three factors constitute the development of understanding through exertion (grouped as mindfulness), providing the mindful, ardent investigation required to understand the phenomena of suffering, its origin, its cessation and the way to its cessation. The final two describe the carrying forth of this process into the stillness of *samādhi*, where a bhikkhu can directly see things as they really are. Equanimity is certainly a reference to the fourth and highest *jhāna* (level of *samādhi*), where equanimity as well as heightened mindfulness come forth in the factors that characterize this *jhāna*. The intermediate two factors, delight and calm, bridge these two stages, flipping from the energy of mindful examination to the serenity of concentrated contemplation. One's mind is "well developed" if the factors of enlightenment line up in direct order.⁴

The *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* focuses on the mindfulness end of this process, and other texts on the *samādhi* end, which seems to have lead some to forget that the two ends are conditionally integrated.⁵ We will be interested here in the entire process, since we can thereby come to fully appreciate the integration of doctrine, mindfulness, *samādhi* and liberating knowledge in the EBT. Liberating knowledge itself is not mentioned among the seven factors of awakening, but is rather a product the entire process,⁶ consummated in *samādhi*:

4 Ñāṇanada (2009, 2).

5 The primary mindfulness discourse, *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (MN10, DN 22), makes no direct mention of the *jhānas* or *samādhi*, but the *Ānāpānasati Sutta* (MN 118), the second most significant mindfulness discourse, describes the *satipaṭṭhāna* as fulfilling the seven awakening factors (iii 82).

6 The *Ānāpānasati Sutta* goes on to describe the seven awakening factors and the seven awakening factors as fulfilling knowledge and liberation (iii 82)

The knowledges are for one with *samādhi*, not for one without *samādhi*. (AN 6.64)

The integration of doctrine, mindfulness, *samādhi* and liberating knowledge seem also to be highlighted in the *five faculties* or *five strengths* (SN 48.10), listed by the Buddha among the factors that lead to awakening. They are:

faith – effort – mindfulness – *samādhi* – wisdom

Faith (*saddhā*) represents, among other things, the taking to heart of *Dhamma*. Although this is an act of trust, the *Dhamma* has the quality of “come and see” (*chīpassiko*) (AN 11.11). Slicing and dicing through the contemplative trio of effort, mindfulness and *samādhi* produce wisdom or liberating knowledge as doctrine is internalized and verified in deep states of *samādhi*. Faith is more active in wanting to know, wisdom in coming to know.⁷

Those phenomena which were previously only heard by me, I now dwell having experienced them with my own body, having penetrated them by wisdom, I see them.

(SN 48.50)

A key question arises at this point: How can conceptually complex understandings of *Dhamma* persist through this process as it proceeds into cognitively attenuated, deep states of *samādhi* to become liberating knowledge? It seems, and has often been argued, or at least presumed, that the *cognitive load* necessary for examination of phenomena is incompatible with deep states of *samādhi*. This question of cognitive load is actually *the* pivotal question of this essay, for without its answer we cannot understand the full integration of *Dhamma*, mindfulness *samādhi* and

7 Gethin (2001, 111).

liberating knowledge. We will work our way toward an answer in what follows.

Dhamma and mindfulness

Our contemplative practice begins with mindfulness and with the mindful examination of a topic of contemplation.

What is mindfulness? *Sati*, the Pali word translated as mindfulness, is a derivation of a root meaning *memory*. In fact, the Buddha offers the following definition:

And what is the faculty of mindfulness? Here, monks, the noble disciple is mindful, possessed of superior judgment, remembering and calling to mind even things that were done and said long ago. This is called the faculty of mindfulness. (SN 48.9)

Let's call this *definition one*. Such active memory that makes complete sense with respect to *dhammānupassanā*, in which we recall doctrine to interpret present experience. A process of active memory is similarly at hand when we chant scripture. Every morning and evening the monks at our monastery happily chant –

♪ ... *avijja-paccayā saṅkhārā*, ♪
♪ *saṅkhārā-paccayā viññānaṃ* ... ♪

– also bringing to mind in the present what was memorized long ago. At the time of the Buddha the prior memorization of scripture word-for-word would have provided much of the context for *dhammānupassanā*.⁸

8 Anālayo (2014, 30-31) dismisses *definition one* on the grounds that virtually all perception is a matter of remembering patterns learned long ago, that all of us must therefore be mindful, in this sense, virtually all the time. This is certainly a good point; however, when restricted specifically

Nonetheless, there is a second, broader, closely related, but not so explicitly stated definition of mindfulness that can be gleaned from many examples and is at least equally relevant to *dharmānupassanā*. Gethin, in his study of the meanings of *sati*, describes it as follows:

“... if we have mindfulness then we will remember what it is that we should be doing in a given moment.”⁹

In this sense, mindfulness is keeping firmly in mind what our present task is and staying on that task. Let's call this *definition two*. In fact, the English word “mindfulness” captures this, as when we are mindful to have our tires rotated, or mindful not to allow the miso soup to boil. In *definition two*, mindfulness performs a regulating function. There are many examples of this second sense of mindfulness in EBT, which do not fit so obviously under *definition one*:

... One is mindful to abandon wrong action and enter and remain in right action: This is one's right mindfulness. ...
(MN 117)

This pericope is repeated to cover the first five folds of the noble path, aside from right action. Similarly, we are mindful to observe a precept, to recognize our skillful and unskillful thoughts, to guard the sense faculties at the right time. Again this speaks to the regulating function of mindfulness. Mindfulness is like a thermostat, ever attentive the temperature and ready to trigger recovery when some threshold is crossed. Mindfulness of posture or mindfulness of breathing, simply maintains, as its task, giving

to memory of the *Dhamma*, as is the case in *dharmānupassanā*, *definition one* is quite coherent with regard to the practice of mindfulness.

9 Gethin (2011, 272).

attention to an object and returning attention should it become distracted. Remaining on any task generally requires avoiding distractions that might take us away from our present task, as well of remaining fully cognizant of some aspect of our present circumstances.

Notice that *mindfulness is something that we do*, either under *definition one* or under *definition two*. Examination of phenomena, the second factor of awakening, is also something that we do and it is the task we are mindful of. This is why it makes sense that the third factor of the awakening is energy. I draw attention to this because most modern definitions of mindfulness, often found among Western meditation teachers and among proponents of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, generally describe mindfulness not as something we do, but as a kind of mental space, one of “bare attention,” of “non-judgmental” or “disinterested” observation, of being “in the present moment,” or of “open awareness.” No such definition of *sati* as a state of mind can be found in the EBT, and, in fact, such descriptions seem to be entirely a product of the twentieth century.¹⁰

Actually, the modern definition naively confounds cause and effect, in this case the actions that give rise to this stable and calm mental space and the mental space itself. In fact, the seven awakening factors tell us exactly what is going on here: active engagement in mindfulness and examination leads to a progression of mental states. *Samādhi* is the still space in which we continue our task. Mindfulness as something we do produces and sustains that stable state, much as a thermostat produces and sus-

10 Gethin (2011, 267-9) traces the modern history of such definitions. There we find that the great German monk Nyanaponika Thera seems to have been a primary source, and the first to use the phrase “bare attention.”

tains a consistent room temperature (a stable “thermal state”).

Attending to mindfulness. According to the *Satipaṭṭhāna* (“establishment of mindfulness”) *Sutta*,¹¹ the Buddha recommends attending to four specific topic areas of examination, most of which promote insight into the nature of our experience and so can in principle turn right view into seeing things as they are. This is the passage that introduces the four establishments of mindfulness.

And what, monks, is right mindfulness? Herein:

1. a monk dwells watching the body [*kāya-anupassī*] in the body, ardent, clearly comprehending and mindful, having put away covetousness and grief concerning the world.
2. He dwells watching feelings [*vedanā-anupassī*] in feelings, ardent ...
3. He dwells watching mind [*citta-anupassī*] in mind, ardent ...
4. He dwells watching phenomena [*dhamma-anupassī*] in phenomena, ardent, clearly comprehending and mindful, having put away covetousness and grief concerning the world. (DN 22, MN 10)

And so enters the word *dhammānupassanā* (observing phenomena), at least in one of its inflectional variants, alongside *kāyānupassanā* (observing body), *vedanānupassanā* (observing

11 *Satipaṭṭhāna* is traditionally translated as “foundations.” However, Bodhi (2000, 1504), Gethin (2001, 31) and others argue that the word derives from *sati* + *upaṭṭhāna* (stand near, serve), rather than the traditionally assumed *sati* + *paṭṭhāna*, so a better translation is “establishing” or even “attending to.”

feelings) and *cittānupassanā* (observing mind). The word *anupassanā*, generally translated as “contemplating,” is literally *anu* (along) + *passanā* (seeing), hence “observing” or “watching.” Notice that it is also close to “examining,” the second awakening factor.

Satipaṭṭhāna thereby begins by choosing a topic of contemplation within one of the four categories of body, feelings, mind and phenomena. Watching body, for instance, we might attend to bodily postures and movement, or attend to the breath, or attend to the decay of a body at death. In watching feeling we attend to what pleases us and what irks us (but not complex emotional states), most typically bodily sensations of comfort and discomfort. In watching mind we attend to the present general quality of mind, for instance, whether it is calm or agitated, sharp or dull, etc. In each case, we are mindful to stay on task as we attend to our topic.

The last category, phenomena (*dhamma*), is the most broad and targets individual experiential factors specifically elucidated categorically in the *Dhamma*.¹² The consummation of wisdom entails insight into all the factors of *Dhamma*, so mindfulness of phenomena should be taken very broadly indeed. We will see that it is this last category that firmly integrates *Dhamma* with mindfulness, *samādhi* and liberating knowledge.

What are these common factors of mindfulness in the passage above?

12 I am not aware that this fourth establishment is ever defined this way in the EBT, but the many examples in the literature confirm this definition without exception, and it is widely recognized as such in modern scholarship, e.g., by Nānamoli and Bodhi (1995, 1194), Gombrich (1997, 36-37), Ronkin (2005, 27), etc.

Watching the body in the body, watching feelings in feelings, etc. is to see directly, without conceptual proliferation, the object directly as it presents itself without wrapping ideas or preconceptions around it, and so without distraction.

Ardent refers to the energy we commonly associate with mindfulness as something we do. It is also reflected in the third awakening factor.

Clearly comprehending suggests a degree of examination or evaluation, as we let objects in our experience speak to us. This is, in fact, the locus of insight, where liberating knowledge develops. *Clearly comprehending* seems roughly to correspond to the second awakening factor discussed above. At this level phenomena are seen to a certain extent, but only in *samādhi* will they be penetrated.¹³

There is a kind of art to clear comprehension. It is a kind of immediate conceptual examination of experiences as they rise and fall. It serves to develop wisdom or insight, but stays clear of superfluous intellectual reasoning, for reasoning intellectually would be to wrap ideas or preconceptions around what is experienced. It is a matter of noting or verifying, sometimes as far as noting a conditioning relation between two factors. For instance, in contemplating feeling in feeling, one might note an instance of suffering, perhaps a twinge of anxiety, and note right before that a covetous thought, then recall the second noble truth. *Feeling in feeling, etc.* places a constraint on how far a thought might wander.

Finally, *putting away covetousness and grief concerning the*

13 Ñāṇananda (2009, 3).

world admonishes us to avoid worldly distractions. This is often equated with holding the *hindrances* (*nīvaraṇa*) at bay, five factors that tend to disrupt contemplative practice:

hindrances

- lust
- ill-will
- sloth-and-torpor
- restlessness-and-remorse
- doubt.

Together these factors determine a strict kind of mental discipline that we apply to the exercise of watching our particular chosen topic of contemplation. Mindfulness² (*definition two*) performs the regulating function that holds these factors together, and mindfulness¹ (*definition one*) brings *Dhamma* into our contemplations.

Although modern meditation practice tends to chose topics within body, feelings or mind for contemplation, rather than within the broad category of phenomena,¹⁴ it can be argued that the first three foundations of mindfulness are but warm-ups for the fourth, for it is in the fourth that *Dhamma* itself comes fully alive in direct experience, and indeed the EBT provide particularly abundant resources for practicing with a range of phenomena that fall within the scope of *dhammānupassanā*. It is *dhammānupassanā* that floods our meditation with *Dhamma* to evoke liberating knowledge. This is where we get at the heart of, and internalize and develop, liberating knowledge of impermanence, suffering and non-self, of the five aggregates and the six sense

14 Among the most popular *vipassanā* methods, Mahāsi centers on mindfulness of bodily postures, Goenka on feelings and Pa Auk on elements.

spheres, of the twelve links of dependent co-arising, and so on.

Examination of phenomena. *Dhammānupassanā* is distinguished from the other foundations of mindfulness in that it in the purest sense fulfills both definitions of mindfulness, as well as the awakening factor of examination of phenomena. Examination of phenomena, or *dhammānupassanā* itself, can be pictured as follows. *Dhamma* is what is asserted doctrinally and phenomena as they arise form the subjects of questioning.

Dhamma (!) ☞ phenomena (?)

Dhamma drives our interpretation of phenomena. In doing so we are engaging our memory of *Dhamma* in an active way, effectively testing and amending our understanding empirically by matching it against experience as we deepen our ability to fully comprehend that experience. All the while, we are intent on stabilizing the mind on that task.

It will be appreciated that something like the process of examining phenomena must begin analytically with *study* of the teachings. Wide-eyed with faith in the *Dhamma*, we begin to learn *Dhamma* conceptually or intellectually by giving ear, by reading or committing texts to memory, by analyzing the meanings of these texts and by discussing the meanings with admirable friends, all in an attempt to develop *right view*. We may initially take these teachings as theoretical abstractions, but at some point we will begin to wonder what the heck these terms “suffering,” “craving,” “delight,” “*jhāna*,” “collectedness,” etc. might really mean in our experience, and we begin to examine their correlates, even as we try to get a conceptual handle on what these doctrines are getting at. At this point there may be more analysis than observing, and we can think of this as a scholarly pursuit rather

than as *satipaṭṭhāna* or *dhammānupassanā*. However, such study seems to be a necessary prerequisite to the latter, for it is important in developing a correct understanding of what the Buddha was getting at.

Where study ends, *dhammānupassanā* begins. *Satipaṭṭhāna* is often described as beginning with the abandonment of the hindrances, much as *samādhī* is often described:¹⁵

[Sāriputta speaking:] Whatever *arahants*, perfectly enlightened ones arose in the past, all those blessed ones had first abandoned the five hindrances, corruptions of the mind and weaknesses of wisdom; and then, with their minds well established in the four establishments of mindfulness, they had developed correctly the seven awakening factors; and thereby they had achieved the unsurpassed perfect awakening. (SN 47.12)

So, the point at which we sit on our cushion and observe phenomena in meditation seems to be where the practice of *dhammānupassanā* properly begins. At that point we choose under what doctrinal category we will examine phenomena.

So, what are the categories of *Dhamma* in which we might examine phenomena in order to fulfill the fourth establishment of mindfulness? The various texts that describe this generally come up with different examples.¹⁶ The Pali *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* and the corresponding discourses in the Chinese *Āgama* collections all list:

15 See Gethin (2001, 53, 162-3). MN 125 (iii 136) also describes how one abandons the hindrances, then “abides contemplating body as body,” etc., then enters into the second *jhāna*, implying that *satipaṭṭhāna* practice has already begun in the first *jhāna*.

16 Anālayo (2014, 164) provides the summary that follows.

- the five hindrances
- the seven factors of awakening

These are hardly surprising since these are factors intimately related to meditation itself, and therefore immediately at hand. Others listed in at least one, but not in all, of the mindfulness texts are:

- five aggregates (*khandha*)
- sixfold sphere (*saḷāyatana*), aka “six sense bases”
- four noble truths

The Pali *Ānāpānasati Sutta* (MN 118) lists four qualities to be examined with respect to the breath, said to satisfy the fourth establishment:

- impermanence
- dispassion
- cessation
- relinquishment

These last are factors familiar from the contemplations found in many discourses concerning the five aggregates and the sixfold sphere.

In the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* itself, many of the topics listed among the first three establishments are, at the same time, *Dhammic* categories, presumably placed before the fourth establishment because they are of relatively low cognitive load. Most other simply illustrate the ubiquitous qualities of impermanence, suffering and non-self.

My view is that this variation in factors implicated as objects of *dhammānupassanā* in the different parallels of the mindfulness *suttas* does not represent disagreements among the texts, but

alternative abbreviations of what would be an unmanageably inclusive list of phenomenological categories.¹⁷ Wherever doctrine says something about phenomenal experience, that doctrine should be applicable to examination of phenomena. If not here, where else is this wide swath of *Dhamma* subject to deep contemplation, and how would it be related to liberating knowledge?

We began this section with a contemplation involving a variant of the four noble truths, in which the wording “this is suffering,” suggests reference to certain phenomena as they arise in direct experience. Alongside examining suffering (as the first truth), we examine the “origin of suffering” (as the second truth), which well-studied readers will expect to be craving, thereby related as condition and result. In our practice, we further examine the conditions under which suffering ceases, and we examine the way to fulfill those conditions.

The *Sammādiṭṭhi (Right View) Sutta* (MN 9) describes each of a long list of factors in terms of origin, cessation and way, in a manner exactly analogous to suffering and its origin in craving. We might therefore expect each of these to be likely implicated in *dhammānupassanā*:

- Aging and death, whose origin is birth,
- Birth, whose origin is becoming,

17 Anālayo (2014), in his later work, comes to the opposite conclusion. In the introduction of this book he declares by way of methodology that he will take what is common to parallel texts as most reliably authentic (p. 4), which seems reasonable. Finding the hindrances and the awakening factors common to all *Satipaṭṭhāna* parallels, he concludes that only those are original, and that therefore the function of *dhammānupassanā* is only to monitor the mind on the path to liberation (p. 176). But thereby he fails to account for why alternative lists are found in these texts.

- Becoming, whose origin is attachment,
- Attachment, whose origin is craving,
- Craving, whose origin is feeling,
- Feeling, whose origin is contact,
- Contact, whose origin is the sixfold-sphere,
- The sixfold-sphere, whose origin is name-and-form,
- Name-and-form, whose origin is consciousness,
- Consciousness, whose origin is fabrications,
- Fabrications, whose origin is ignorance,
- Ignorance, whose origin is the taints,
- The taints, whose origin is (reciprocally) ignorance.

The astute reader will recognize in this list the twelve links of dependent co-arising, a chain that wends its way through the center of Buddhist psychology, in which it exposes the near-universal pathology that characterizes the human condition. Some of these factors, it will turn out, are conceptually more suited for *dhammānupassanā* than others.

It should come as no surprise that some of the *Dhammic* factors we've just listed are supplemented by detailed, exhaustive instructions in the EBT for how to go about examining the corresponding phenomena. Let's call these *examination trainings*. The *Samyutta Nikaaya* is a particularly valuable resource for examination trainings.¹⁸ For instance, the *Khandasamyutta*, constituting 131 pages and 159 suttas in the Wisdom edition, look at the aggregates from every angle, asking us repeatedly to notice their impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and selflessness, as well as their allure, their danger and the escape from them. The *Sal-*

18 Shulman (2014, 85) points out that the repetitive, highly redundant nature of these texts, which from a theoretical point of view could be reduced to precise general statements, reveals their function as meditative exercises with many subtle variations on common themes.

āyatanasaṃyutta, 127 pages and 248 suttas, does something similar for the sixfold-sphere (“sense spheres”). This raises an very interesting, but not critical, thought: Were the suttas that convey such examination trainings delivered by the Buddha initially as *guided* meditations?

As we approach the role of *samādhi* in *dhammānupassanā*, it is important to consider just how much cognitive effort is needed to examine conceptually complex phenomena. It will turn out that the repeated practice of examination trainings significantly attenuates the cognitive load of phenomena.

The conceptual life of a phenomenon

We have seen that liberating knowledge arises in the context of *samādhi*. We anticipate that this liberating knowledge also depends on examination of phenomena grounded in *Dhamma* as described in the establishments of mindfulness and in the awakening factors, and that *dhammānupassanā* practice or its results carry over into *samādhi*:

Dhamma → phenomena → liberating knowledge (!)
samādhi

However, there are those who argue that the conceptual content of *Dhamma*, and therefore the process of examination of phenomena, would simply carry an impossibly great cognitive load into this still space of *samādhi*. It is therefore incumbent on us here to look at the conceptual complexity of *Dhammically* interpreted phenomena more closely, at the cognitive load required to examine such conceptual complexity, and at the capacity of *samādhi* to admit such a cognitive load. Just what are we claiming is carried

forth into *samādhi*? It may, we hope, turn out that it is less cognitively laden than we think. That is the topic of this section. It may, we hope, turn out that *samādhi* is more cognitively accommodating than we think. That will be the topic of the following section.

In short, our concern is to verify the statement of the awakened nun Dhammadinnā, which explicitly asserts the connection between the phenomenal topics of examination and the objects of *samādhi*.

Unification of mind is *samādhi*, the four establishments of mindfulness are its themes, the four right efforts are its requisites, and any cultivation, development and pursuit of these qualities are its development. (MN 44)

Internalizing concepts. Shulman, in a very important study to which I will refer frequently, views the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna* as one in which “philosophy” is internalized to become perception, in which the *Dhamma* becomes woven into the very structure of our perception, as an active way of seeing.¹⁹ We thereby come to see through the eyes of the Buddha.²⁰ This is a perspective that directly integrates *Dhamma* and liberating knowledge.

Internalization of the kind required is, in fact, a natural and ubiquitous process found throughout our cognitive lives as part of learning through familiarization with our conceptual and physical world. Many years ago, when my daughter was a teenager, I once mentioned how late it was getting, pointing to the round clock on the wall. Her response surprised me: “I have trouble telling what

19 Shulman (2014, 106, 111).

20 Gombrich (1997, 36) similarly describes the task of the fourth establishment as learning to think with the teachings, rather than about them, or to learn to see with the Buddha's spectacles.

that kind of clock says.” What?! It was an ordinary analog clock with three hands sweeping across its face. What could be simpler? Then I realized: She had grown up in the digital age. The difference between her and me was *familiarity*.

In fact, the logic of an analog clock is conceptually quite complex: While the hour hand completes one sweep, the minute hand completes twelve. While the minute hand completes one sweep, the second hand completes sixty. The little marks mark seconds and minutes, and the numbers mark hours but group seconds and minutes into units of five. Two sweeps of the hour hand represent the time from noon to noon, or midnight to midnight. Yet we, of the older generations, have internalized this complex conceptual structure so thoroughly and with so much familiarity that we can take it all in at a glance, even quickly to calculate the hours and minutes until our next appointment, all with virtually no cognitive load. Similarly, consider that a dentist who moves a probe or drill around that he can often only see in his little mirror must, at first, reason through each move logically based on the premise that the mirror reverses everything. He will quickly learn through practice to move his instrument more reliably and without thought, to his patients' great relief.

Malcolm Gladwell's book *Blink: the power of thinking without thinking*²¹ provides many examples of the human expert's capacity for reliably assessing enormously complex content in the blink of an eye, as hunch or as intuition: basketball players that have “court sense,” generals who have the power of a glance in their tactical planning, birdwatchers who see the slightest movement in a tree, art dealers who find something “just not right” about some

21 2005, Little, Brown and Company.

what we hate. We are told that suffering has an origin in craving.

We then take our suffering onto the cushion, much as a musician takes his instructions to the cello. We begin to discover what suffering looks like that in our experiential world, generalize the concept to additional factors, and become alarmed to discover the ubiquity and depth of our suffering, even in situations where we once thought were having “fun.”

Through continued and repeated contemplation these factors become increasingly familiar parts of the fabric of our experience, and less and less cognitively laden. Eventually they become intuitive, requiring virtually no effort to perceive or to respond to complex conceptual content. We begin to see with crystal clarity that suffering is always accompanied by craving, a sense that something in the experiential situation demands change, and we learn to see suffering as the shadow of craving, always accompanying craving, but disappearing as soon as craving disappears.

Controlling cognitive load. We can also break the cognitive load of our meditation topic down. For instance, we can examine suffering by itself until we are highly adept at identifying instances of suffering as they arise, then examine craving in the same way, and only later examine the relationship of suffering to craving. Or we can examine the whole suffering package from the start, with its full cognitive load. Likewise, we can examine percepts, then, after mastering that, examine in turn the arising of percepts, then the ceasing of percepts, then the suffering of percepts, then the non-self of percepts, then the allure of percepts, then the danger of percepts and then the escape from percepts. Or we can examine the whole percept-aggregate package from the start. The examination trainings for examining the aggregates, the sense spheres,

impermanence, suffering, non-self and the rest break content down in this way, much like musical scales are used to break down large musical works.

Full internalization of complex conceptual content requires *samādhi*, just as internalization of musical skill requires deep and wholehearted immersion for long hours in the experience of melodies, harmonies and rhythms. We have some choice in the cognitive load we undertake, through choice of topic or subtopic. A less laden topic can be brought more quickly and deeper into *samādhi*, where, through immersion, we gain familiarity and reduce its future load. A more laden topic gets more conceptual work done up front, but lacks this depth of experience. Accordingly we routinely face a choice of how to balance load and depth. *Vipassanā* (introspection) and *samatha* (settling) are terms sometimes used in the EBT for these contrasting qualities in the meditator's tool kit.²³

The limits of what can be internalized. Not all of what we understand of *Dhamma* is easily subject to internalization through *dhammānupassanā*. Much of it is simply too abstract or theoretical to relate to the tangible phenomenal world. In particular, historically, the *Dhamma* seems to have turned from being largely a support for practice with clear soteriological goals, to being more significantly an intellectual plaything, an object of specul-

23 Notice that later Theravāda tradition treats *vipassanā* and *samatha* as distinct *techniques* of meditation, since the *Visuddhimagga* – see Shankman, 2008, 84). This has no support in the EBT – see Shankman (2008, 123) – where these terms, in their rare occurrences, clearly describe a continuum in the space of options available in selecting topics of examination in the single, coherent *satipaṭṭhāna*/awakening factors framework. See, for instance, AN 4.170.

ative philosophy pursued for its own sake.²⁴ Nonetheless, *dhammānupassanā* is very much a nuts-and-bolts practice, ever tracking direct phenomenal experience as it arises:

Dhamma (!) ☞ phenomena (?)

When abstract theory replaces nuts-and-bolts, things don't work out so well. We can represent this situation as follows.

theory (!) ☞ phenomena (?)

A theory is less likely to be descriptive of phenomena as they arise in experience, but rather to be descriptive of broad principles or hidden mechanisms unobservable behind phenomenal experience. Abstract theory does not internalize well through *dhammānupassanā*, just as, I daresay, musical theory probably is not internalized in the same way scales are.

In fact, we often find a particular teaching, such as the four noble truths, with two alternate interpretations: (1) an *observable* one and (2) a *theoretical* one. The observable one is the one that we have been considering here, phrased as “this is suffering,” etc. descriptive of direct experience.²⁵ Alongside this in the EBT is a less common, yet more prominently displayed formulation, found, for instance, in the Buddha's first discourse,²⁶ in which the second truth, for instance, is described like this:

The noble truth of the origin of suffering is this: It is the craving which produces rebirth accompanied by passionate greed, and finding fresh delight now here, and now

24 We might also say that the Buddha gave us a religion and it later became a philosophy, to turn a common secularist sentiment on its head.

25 Shulman (2009, 139, 190).

26 *The Turning-of-the-Wheel, Dhammacakkappavattana, Sutta*, SN 56.11.

there, namely craving for sense pleasure, craving for existence and craving for non-existence. (SN 56.11).

This is so broad and sweeping that it leaves us with little sense of how to go about observing this in moment by moment experience.²⁷ This is not, however, to say that the theoretical formulation is wrong, for it takes a useful and more panoramic perspective of how craving and suffering play out that may serve to contextualize and inspire our nuts-and-bolts practice. The point is that it is less supportive of *dhammānupassanā*. Some aspects of the *Dhamma* have possibly always been theoretical, but it is important to distinguish theory from the observable requirements of *dhammānupassanā* and also to guard against the allure of theory.²⁸

Similarly, the five aggregates (*khandhas*) in the suttas – form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness – have two common interpretations in Theravāda: (1) the observable interpretation is as the world of experience itself and (2) the theoretical interpretation as the components of the psychophysical organism.²⁹ The observable factors arise as sense

27 Shulman (2009, ix, 139-146, 188) suggests that the observable formulation is original and that the theoretical formulation is a later development that arose through later theoretical elaboration, less integral in the EBT.

28 Hamilton (2000, 140) also warns that we often forget the the focus of early Buddhism is the world of experience, and when that happens we begin to misunderstand Buddhism. Ronkin (2005, 8) writes of a tension between the rational/systematic and experiential/practical dimensions, and holds that early Buddhism presented human experience as not held together by any underlying substrate (p. 14). Her book overall illustrates the way in which the various *Abhidharma* traditions tended historically toward theoretical elaboration. Kalupahana (1992, 23) maintains that the Buddha laid down a “non-metaphysical” (non-theoretical) explanation of experience.

29 Hamilton (1996), Cintita (2018a). In this case, Thanissaro (2010) points out that the abstract interpretation is found only long after the period of the EBT.

appearances, as emotive impressions, as percepts (for instance when a vague appearance manifests as a book, a bird or a bottle), as relations, compositions or plans, or as attention and proliferation of details. The theoretical interpretation seems to involve interpreting each of the aggregates as a kind of faculty or capability – “form,” “feeling,” “perception,” “formations,” “consciousness” – possessed by the psychophysical organism that then underlies, but does not constitute, one part of the cognition of experience.

The difference between these two interpretations of the aggregates reveals itself in the examination trainings of the *Connected Discourses on Aggregates* in SN. Repeatedly, these exercises ask us to regard a perception (a feeling, a form, etc.) as impermanent, as suffering and as non-self. If these are faculties, rather than experiential phenomena, then it is difficult to imagine in what way they might be impermanent (how would we know?), and regarding them as non-self seems difficult to reconcile with their standing as a component of the psychophysical organism. It seems clear that the exercises are intended for the observable interpretation. My assessment is that theoretical aspects of Dhamma – insofar as they are not simply idle speculation – generally provide a practical wider context in which to place or orient our nuts-and-bolts practice.

Integral to observable *Dhamma* is *conditionality* (*idappaccayatā*), the radical contingency of phenomena. We have seen conditionality in the four noble truths and also in the factors of dependent co-arising. The teaching of conditionality, is most often formulated in the suttas in terms of observables as follows:

When this is, that is. From the arising of this, comes the

arising of that. When this isn't, that isn't. From the cessation of this, comes the cessation of that. (Ud 1.3)

This in a nutshell might be considered the Buddha's greatest insight, the one which cracked open our deluded and persistent misperception of the world to reveal the true nature of reality. Cognitively it involves holding two factors in mind at the same time as conditionally related: suffering and craving, craving and feeling, etc.

More generally, observable *Dhamma* requires that we recognize the strongly subjective orientation of the early *Dhamma*.³⁰ The field of examination is almost completely restricted to phenomena as they occur in experience, with almost no interest in mechanisms that might underly experience or persist behind the scenes, which would not be observable. In fact, the world itself is understood not as something “out there,” but as the world of experience itself.

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 “objective reality,” that is, the world “out there,” primacy. Nonetheless, the move to a subjective perspective is very satisfying, precisely because it is based on observables, what we can verify for ourselves empirically in our own experience.

In summary. I have argued in this section that the cognitive load that is carried into *samādhī* is much smaller or easier to bring

30 Hamilton (2000).

under control than we might think. First, great conceptual complexity can be comprehended with the slightest cognitive gesture, given enough familiarity, which can come naturally or through ardent and repeated practice as a function of common human conceptual learning. What initially requires difficult analysis will eventually become intuitive, a matter of direct perception. Second, we have wiggle room along the *vipassanā-samatha* dimension to control cognitive load at any given time in our practice. Third, we are dealing in *dharmānupassanā* exclusively with conceptual content that maps directly into phenomenal experience, with the observable aspects of *Dhamma*, putting aside the theoretical aspects. This also limits the amount and type of conceptual required in examination of phenomena.

It remains to show how *samādhi* is cognitively more accommodating to such a cognitive load than we might think and how it provides the context in which examination of phenomena turns to liberating wisdom. That will be the topic of the following section.

Samādhi and liberating knowledge

The term *samādhi* can be aptly translated as “collectedness,” “composure” or “unification,” as well as the most conventional “concentration.” The word *jhāna* (meditation) is then used in the EBT most often to refer to four successively deeper stages of *samādhi*.

Samādhi is a conditioned space, conditioned by mindfulness and by the concomitants that constitute right mindfulness:

For one of right mindfulness, right *samādhi* springs up.
(SN 5.25-6)

The awakening factors, repeated here, fill in the details of this statement.

1. mindfulness
2. examination of phenomena
3. energy
4. delight
5. calm
6. *samādhi*
7. equanimity

Whatever qualities *samādhi* might exhibit are dependent on the upstream factors of mindfulness, examination of phenomena and the following factors. Since these factors differ from those applied to achieve common states of absorption in most forms of yogic meditation, we would expect the qualities of *samādhi* to differ from those of absorption, and, indeed, *samādhi* is reported in the EBT to be a space of relatively open awareness that admits of a significant degree of conceptual content rare in absorption. For example,

A monk in each *jhāna* regards whatever phenomena connected with form, feelings, perceptions, fabrications and consciousness as inconstant, stressful, a disease, a cancer, an arrow, painful, an affliction, alien, a disintegration, a void, non-self ... (AN 9.36)

In short, examination of phenomena, according to the EBT, has every opportunity to continue in the still space of *samādhi*, albeit subject to controllable limits on its cognitive load. We will look more closely at the qualities of this state in this section. We see, therefore, that Dhamma, mindfulness and *samādhi* are closely integrated in *dhammānupassanā*. We will add liberating knowledge to this list soon.

The qualities of *samādhi*. I refer to *samādhi* as a mental space, rather than a factor or a state, because it is determinant of our experience in general, determinant of what and how we experience. In the modern literature, two different kinds of mental space have been called *samādhi* ; there is some controversy about this. The first of these is often called *absorption* and is,

... about focusing the mind to a single point, unifying it, and placing it upon a particular object. ... If this process of steadying the mind on a single object is allowed to mature, it will eventually reach a stage called absorption In this state the mind is so thoroughly attending to a particular object that it is no longer aware of other objects that might present themselves at a sense door.³¹

On the face of it, absorption does not seem suitable for *dhamm-ānupassanā*, for it will cut off investigation of the dynamics and conditionality of phenomena. It is also unlikely to be the *samādhi* that arises among the awakening factors, for it has a different genesis as the following represent:

<u>awakening factors</u>		<u>absorption technique</u>
1. mindfulness		mindfulness
2. examination	≠	one-pointed attention
3. energy		energy
4. delight		...
5. calm		calm
6. <i>samādhi</i>	≠	absorption
7. equanimity		...

It seems inescapable that different conditions will produce different results downstream. Nonetheless, each technique relies

31 Olendzki (2009).

on the regulatory function of mindfulness to stay on task and presumably evokes a similar level of energy. Although staying on task similarly results in stability of the mind, the task is so restricted in the case of absorption that we can anticipate much deeper levels of stability and calm. It may be useful to consider one-pointed attention to be a special case at the limit of examination of phenomena, one at which the topic is chosen to minimize cognitive load – that is, *samatha* is strictly prioritized – and then sliced as narrowly as possible.³² Considered this way, absorption itself is a special form at the margin of the space of *samādhi*.

The second mental space sometimes identified with *samādhi* is the space of wide-open awareness that, as we have seen, is often called “mindfulness” in modern literature. (But please bear in mind that in the EBT mindfulness is consistently something we do, not a mental space.) Nonetheless,

... unlike one-pointedness and absorption, mindfulness tends to open to a broader range of phenomena rather than restricting the focus to a singular object. Like a floodlight rather than a spotlight, mindfulness illuminates a more fluid phenomenological field of ever-changing experience ... mindfulness practice is more about investigating a process than about examining an object. ... the concentrated mind is then directed to a moving target—the flowing stream of consciousness—rather than being allowed to stabilize on a single point. ... mindfulness

32 However, this is rather marginal in the EBT. For instance, *satipaṭṭhāna seems* seems consistently to spread attention, for example to maintain body awareness when the breath is taken as the topic. The claim of one-pointed attention to breath at the nose is unlikely. See Shankman (2008, 183-186) on this.

practice allows the mind to follow whatever is arising in experience. There is less a sense of controlling what the awareness is resting upon and more care given to how awareness is manifesting.³³

This sounds like exactly what we would expect to arise on the basis of investigation of phenomena. It seems that “mindfulness” is *samādhi*, the space that naturally opens from the practice of the establishments of mindfulness. How else would this open space arise? The various descriptions of *samādhi* found in the EBT repeatedly confirm this conclusion.

Just as if there were a pool of water in a mountain glen – clear, limpid, and unsullied – where a man with good eyesight standing on the bank could see shells, gravel, and pebbles, and also shoals of fish swimming about and resting, ... In the same way – with his mind thus in *samādhi*, purified, and bright, unblemished, free from defects, pliant, malleable, steady, and attained to imperturbability – the monk directs and inclines it to the knowledge of the ending of the mental fermentations. (MN 39)

This is a space unlike what is generally found in yogic methods of meditation – which seem to prioritize absorption – and may have been unknown prior to the Buddha. Significantly, the term *samādhi* may well have originated with the Buddha himself,³⁴ possibly suggesting a desire on his part to distinguish *samādhi* as what arises from investigation from the space that ensues from existing absorption techniques.

I wish I could say that the case is thereby closed, that *samādhi* is

33 Olendzki (2009).

34 Walsh (1996, 556).

clearly, in its typical manifestation, an open space quite distinct from the closed space of absorption. Unfortunately, Theravāda tradition generally disagrees,³⁵ largely due to the great influence of the seminal *Visuddhimagga* (*Path of Purification*), a fifth-century work within the Sri Lankan commentary tradition.³⁶ On the other hand, other Buddhist schools see things differently. The centuries-old Zen technique of *shikantaza* (Japanese, just sitting), or Ch'an silent illumination involves just sitting in stillness and observing the experiential world unfold, attaching to nothing.³⁷

Back to the cushion. We enter into *dhammānupassanā* having appeased the hindrances. With minimal stabilization of the mind around our topic of examination we can expect to enter and to remain in the first *jhāna*. We would like to examine phenomena of

35 Shankman (2008) discusses in detail the different ways *samādhi* is interpreted in modern Theravāda traditions.

36 *Visuddhimagga* effectively breaks the sequence of awakening factors, even though they play such a prominent role in the EBT. In its stead, it produces into two distinct meditation techniques, which it calls “*vipassanā*” and “*samatha*.” “*Vipassanā*” begins with mindfulness and examination but never reaches *samādhi*. “*Samatha*” begins with mindfulness and one-pointed attention and reaches absorption, which it calls “*samādhi*,” with the claim that *samādhi* is not necessary for awakening. Some have argued that the *Visuddhimagga* had come under the influence of non-Buddhist yogic techniques to produce these results (Polak, 2011). Incidentally, a commonly cited argument that *samādhi/jhāna* is absorption is the occurrence of the term *ekagga* in the description of the *jhānas*, which is sometimes translated as “one-pointed.” This argument is not compelling since *ekagga* (*eka* 'one' + *agga* 'highest/best/furthest extent'), although it can refer to the tip of, say, a knife, is more generally and better translated as “having a single theme,” or “uniform,” just as *samagga* (*sam* 'together' + *agga*) is generally translated as “harmonious,” not “co-pointed.” See Shankman (2008, 42-43) on this.

37 Sometimes called objectless meditation, it manages to produce a floodlight-like condition of *samādhi* without even a fixed theme, but rather loosely centered in awareness of the body. Although it examines phenomena, what it seems to lack in contrast *dhammānupassanā* is consistent reference to *Dhamma* in its examination.

significant *Dhammic* content and we would like to take that examination into deeper *jhānas*. These aims must generally be balanced, insofar as unfamiliar complex content will have a large cognitive load, prohibitive of deep *samādhi*. This is the balance of *vipassanā* and *samatha* referred to in the EBT.

We must have a topic of contemplation, for instance, breath, or the elements, or the aggregates, or suffering and craving, or the sense spheres, or whatever. If the cognitive load of a given topic is too great we may have chosen to take up a slice of a topic, such as the wind element, or the arising of percepts, or the ceasing of the eye, in order to maintain the first *jhāna* or to attain to a higher *jhāna*. With long practice the same conceptual content, initially unfamiliar, will become more familiar and eventually we will become intimate with it. In this way it will become less and less cognitively laden and admitted into ever deeper *jhāna*.

This point of our exposition may give many meditators, not yet familiar with such open-ended meditation, pause. Each of us comes with history of training and practice in meditation – absorption, “*vipassanā*,” *shikantaza*, alternations absorption with “*vipassanā*,” etc. My impression is that most people became adamant about their accustomed technique and reluctant to make many changes, or even to acknowledge that something else might work better for them.³⁸ Entering and maintaining *samādhi* on the basis of any of a wide range of cognitively laden topics might accordingly seem a bit daunting. It is a skill to be learned. It is helpful to keep in mind that all of these techniques are related, all built on mindfulness, and that any skill developed in one easily

38 I personally trained in *shikantaza* for many years and, experiment as I might with other techniques, I maintain a strong affinity for this technique to this day.

transfers to developing skill in another.

For instance, in the *Ānāpānasati Sutta* is based on the common technique of following the breath, but then it broadens its topic to concomitant phenomena, such as experiencing the mind and experiencing cessation. This discourse develops four distinct practices for each of the four *satipaṭṭhānas* in this way. By anchoring one foot in the breath, one can explore rather freely with the other and always fall back on the breath should stability falter. In this way we learn new skills and may eventually let go of the breath altogether.

The first *jhāna* is a good place to stage the examination of phenomena because it is still a space of thought and deliberation (*vitakka-vicāra*), factors that characterize the first *jhāna* but are missing in the second. It is a kind of workshop in which previous study turns to concentrated effort, while still permitting a degree of reasoning and reflection, though in a purposeful and controlled form focused on the topic of examination, where the possibility of a significant cognitive load is still supported. In fact, the first *jhāna* is discursive in nature:

Thought and evaluation are the verbal formation, one breaks into speech. (MN 44)

For this reason, the second *jhāna*, where such thought and deliberation is absent, is referred to in the EBT as *noble silence*. Thought and evaluation, reasoning and reflection are effectively shut down there. However, through familiarity, we no longer have to reason and reflect, we just note and perceive things as they are. Once the cognitive load is light, due to familiarity born of practice, we can afford to proceed to these higher *jhānas*. Although reasoning does not survive in the higher *jhānas*,

conceptual content does and some degree of verbal noting and understanding are possible.³⁹ Note that *satipaṭṭhāna* is referred to as *samādhi-nimitta* in many texts, indicating that *satipaṭṭhāna* provides the topics also of *samādhi*.⁴⁰ The Buddha praises Sāriputta for his talents for examination of these topics in all *jhānas*:

Whatever qualities there are in the first *jhāna* ... he ferrets them out one by one. Known to him they remain, known to him they subside... (MN 111)

He then makes exactly the same statement but with regard to second *jhāna*, third *jhāna* and fourth *jhāna*.

In the higher jhanas, examined phenomena might seem suspended unmoving in space; for instance, suffering with craving right alongside, clear as can be. Eventually, we may go deeper into the undistracted crystal clarity of the higher *jhānas*, as if looking at our topics of contemplation through a microscope, all the while accelerating the process of internalization. This represents a particularly intense, penetrating, sustained and potentially transformative engagement with the *Dhamma*, something like intense study, but going beyond the limits of normal human perception.⁴¹ In this way we learn to see through the Buddha's eyes, which are quite a bit sharper than ours were to begin with, and so to see things as they really are.

Liberating knowledge. The wisdom that gives rise to liberation or awakening is generally called *knowledge and vision* (*ñāṇa-dassana*) or *knowing and seeing* or simply *insight*. The Pali word *ñāṇa* (knowledge), built on the same root as *paññā* (wisdom), is

39 Shulman (2014, 25).

40 Shulman (2014, 131).

41 Shulman (2014, 50, 83, 105).

most generally understood as intuitive wisdom. “Vision” or “seeing” roots knowledge in experience. The two words often are found together in the compound *knowledge and vision of things as they are* (*yathā-bhūta-ñāṇa-dassana*).

Knowledge and vision is for the most part a product of right *samādhi*. The following three passages illustrate this:

Bhikkhus, develop *samādhi*. A monk with *samādhi* understands in accordance with reality. (SN 22.5)

But there comes a time when his mind becomes inwardly steadied, composed, unified and concentrated. That *samādhi* is then calm and refined; it has attained to full tranquility and achieved mental unification; it is not maintained by strenuous suppression of the defilements. Then, to whatever mental state realizable by direct knowledge he directs his mind, he achieves the capacity of realizing that state by direct knowledge, whenever the necessary conditions obtain. (AN 3.100)

When right *samādhi* does not exist, for one failing right *samādhi*, the proximate cause is destroyed for knowledge and vision of things as they really are.

(AN 10.3)

That one could fulfill the wisdom group without having fulfilled the *samādhi* group that is not possible. (DN 18)

The question is, How does liberating knowledge arise in the still space of *samādhi*? Of course, we are now on the verge of answering this. However, let's stop to consider for a moment how vexing this question has been, for many have assumed (I daresay mistakenly) that significant conceptual content cannot survive in

samādhi, an assumption that clearly alienates *Dhamma* from *samādhi*.

This assumption admits of two options: (1) that *Dhamma* has little to do with the content of liberating knowledge, or (2) that liberating knowledge is not a product of *samādhi* after all. Both options seem unacceptable: If (1), what is the *Dhamma* for? If (2), why do the EBT explicitly attribute liberating knowledge to *samādhi*? Shulman⁴² points out that much modern scholarship tends, nonetheless, to accord with one or other other of these options: Gombrich, Conze, Rahula, Collins and Hamilton, he points out, seem to downgrade the role of *samādhi*, and to attribute liberating knowledge to a primarily intellectual endeavor. Wynne and Brokhorst, on the other hand, seems to view awakening as some (presumably mystical) form of the experience of *jhāna* itself, but without, or with unknown, conceptual content. Moreover, recall that the seminal *Visuddhimagga* had already accorded *samādhi* a marginal role. Historically these options have probably alternatively resulted in either the prioritizing of abstract theory in Buddhism⁴³ or the prioritizing of deep states of meditative absorption.⁴⁴

We have already shown how *dhammānupassanā* floods *samādhi*

42 Shulman (2014, 7-12).

43 Ronkin (2005) describes the gradual conceptual reframing of the *Dhamma* from what began as a description of the array of transitory phenomena to a metaphysics and ontology, particularly in the *Abhidharma* movement which held sway in many Buddhist traditions for many centuries. We have seen that abstract theoretical *Dhamma* is harder to to bring into *samādhi* and therefore encourages the separation of *Dhamma* from *samādhi*.

44 Polak (2011) argues that Buddhists began historically to embrace absorption largely under the influence of yogic traditions. The unhinging of *samādhi* from conceptual concerns would provide perhaps a critical enabling factor in that development.

with Dhamma. Since right *samādhī* depends on all the previous steps of the path, the mind, as it enters *samādhī*, already inclines toward wisdom and virtue, toward viewing reality in terms of impermanence, suffering and non-self, toward renunciation, kindness and harmlessness, toward purification of the mind from unwholesome factors and toward appropriate attention and mindfulness. Right *samādhī* consolidates all of the path practices, into a crystal clear state in which repeated practice toward thoroughly internalizing *Dhamma* really starts to cook, to produce the delectable odors of wisdom. Right *samādhī*, in effect, transforms right views into knowledge and vision.

When his mind is thus collected in *samādhī*, is purified, bright, rid of blemishes, free of taints, soft, workable, steady and attained to imperturbability, he bends and inclines his mind toward knowledge and vision. He understands “this my body is material, made of four elements. ... Just as if a man with good sight were to examine a beryl gem in his hand, saying ‘this beryl gem is beautiful, well made, clear and transparent, and through it is strung a blue, yellow, red, white or brown string.’” In just the same way he inclines his mind to knowledge and vision ... to potency ... understands the four noble truths. (DN 2)

Samādhī is a space beyond normal human cognition and reasoning that can nonetheless sustain stark conceptual content effortlessly and clearly for arbitrarily long periods, ensuring the development of familiarity and intimacy with topics of examination. This is the ideal incubator for the complete internalization of the Buddha's wisdom. This is why:

There is no *jhāna* for one with no wisdom, no wisdom for

one without *jhāna*. But one with both *jhāna* and wisdom,
he's on the verge of *nibbāna*. (Dhp 372)

The step that turns liberating knowledge into awakening is renunciation and cessation. To the extent that our entangled, fabricated experiential world is laid bare, we are repulsed by it, are no longer attached to it, no longer believe in it, no longer want to participate in it, and so we become free of it. As the *Dhammapāda* tells us,

Those whose minds have reached full excellence,
In the awakening factors,
Who, having renounced acquisitiveness,
Rejoice in not clinging to things
Rid of taints, glowing with wisdom,
They have attained *nibbāna* in this very life. (Dhp 89)

Summary and conclusions

During the last stage of his noble quest, before his awakening, the *Bodhisatta* – having studied with, and mastered the teachings of, two meditation teachers – remembered a remarkable incident from his childhood, an incident that was to change the world.

I recall once, when my father the Sakyan was working, and I was sitting in the cool shade of a rose-apple tree, quite withdrawn from sensuality, withdrawn from unskillful mental qualities. I entered and remained in the first *jhāna*, delight and pleasure born from withdrawal, accompanied by thought and evaluation. “Could that be the path to awakening?” Then, following on that memory, came the realization: “That is the path to awakening.”

(MN 36)

I imagine that he discovered therewith the value of sitting in stillness in the midst of his experiential world, able to examine it as it unfolded, and thereafter began to develop the *Dhamma* on the basis of what he discovered there. That *Dhamma* is what allows us to relive today what the Buddha discovered long ago, as we sit in the midst of our experiential world, to see with the eyes of the Buddha.

This essay has been about sitting with the nuts-and-bolts of experience, while informed by the nuts-and-bolts of Dhamma. Nevertheless, one might well ask, Why does writing about something so concrete and direct require so much intellectual argumentation, footnotes, cross references and cultural and linguistic analysis? As a former academic, I am comfortable with such a style, but the real reason is that, the stance advocated here must be justified: First, the very ancient early Buddhist texts require a lot of interpretation, both on the basis of a correct understanding of Pali (and sometimes Chinese) terms, and in terms of the cultural-intellectual milieu in which these texts arose. Second, understanding these texts requires some understanding of the cultural and intellectual mindsets of the *modern* student insofar as these may lead understanding of the EBT astray. Third, many aspects of the Dhamma have been traditionally misunderstood or subject to disagreement, and sometimes I am obliged to push back against contrary views. Sometimes this entails rescuing an underlying observable interpretation that has been eclipsed by later abstract theorizing. However, I submit that the EBT clearly verify the stance advocated here.

I have begun a series of essays, which I call the *Dhammānupassanā* Series, in which I discuss various aspects of *Dhamma* and their application to *dhammānupassanā* practice, in a similar style for similar reasons. The observable *Dhamma* must often be justified in contrast to the theoretical *Dhamma*, while an appreciation of *dhammānupassanā* brings with it also an appreciation of the observable *Dhamma* and a desire to value and discover or recover the observable Dhamma. So far I have posted some essays on the relevant categories of *Dhamma*,⁴⁵ which I will eventually supplement – including almost all of the factors of dependent co-arising in observable terms – and compile into a book with something like the present essay as the introduction.

At the same time, I also plan in parallel to begin a handy *dhammānupassanā* meditation manual in simple language, scrubbed of justification, intellectual argumentation, footnotes, cultural and linguistic analysis, to provide more immediate and direct support for the student of *dhammānupassanā* in isolation from the controversies that plague modern meditation practice.

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