

Consciousness in the EBT

Dhammānupassanā Series

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Thus, Ānanda, for beings hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving, kamma is the field, consciousness the seed and craving the moisture for their consciousness to be established in an inferior [... repeated also for middling and superior] realm. (AN 3.76)

Consciousness (*viññāṇa*) as represented in the early Buddhist texts (EBT) has received relatively little attention in modern Buddhist literature, in view of its centrality in human cognition. It is highlighted in the EBT as the third of the twelve links of dependent co-arising (*paṭicca-samuppāda*), to which I will make frequent reference in this essay:

**(1) ignorance → (2) formations → (3) consciousness →
(4) name-and-form → (5) sixfold-sphere →
(6) contact → (7) feeling → (8) craving →
(9) attachment → (10) becoming → (11) birth →
(12) old age, death, this mass of suffering.**

In this role consciousness and name-and-form are said to whirl continually around each other to produce our whole conceptual world. In fact, in the seminal *Mahānidāna Sutta*, which omits the two links prior to consciousness consciousness, we learn that consciousness and name-and-form are mutually conditioning:¹

(3) consciousness ↔ (4) name-and-form.

1 DN 15, ii 63-64, see also SN 12.67.

Therefore, consciousness actually depends on two conditioning factors, formations and name-and-form. Through form, according to the same *sutta*, it is also subject to the impingement of new sense data.

Consciousness also appears as the last of the five aggregates (*khandha*) – which are form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness – that represent aspects of phenomenal experience, to which we will also make frequent reference in this essay. We will also see that consciousness tends to arise in the presence of craving. Consciousness is also mentioned as a dependent component of **(6) contact**.

This essay attempts a coherent overview of consciousness based on earliest texts, but also from the perspective of a (retired) cognitive scientist. I will begin with an illustrative example, then point out the various properties attributed to consciousness in the EBT, and finally outline how consciousness gets us into trouble and what we do about it.

The challenge of consciousness

Let me start with an example from everyday cognitive experience, which is more representative of consciousness than it first appears.

An example. I am a walking, talking phenomenal world, as are you.² In my world my friend Waldo's house is now looming. His front door passes around and the living room assumes a position

2 The phenomenal world is the world as it is experienced. See Cintita (2018b, 2018d) on the metonymical connection between the “person” and the phenomenal world. The twelve links of dependent co-arising play out entirely within the phenomenal world.

at the center of my world, in one corner a sharp black shape, a television and a softer brown form, a sofa. Waldo offers me a place on the sofa and popcorn. The television displays a field of colors and shapes and produces audible noise. In a flash John Wayne manifests, recognizable by name, and in two flashes something even more astonishing: An arid landscape in the nineteenth century wild west has come to dominate my world, along with the complex affairs of very real three-dimensional people, buggies and horses, dusty streets and saloons. For the next hour or so, I laugh and cry with the protagonists and feel anger and fear toward the antagonists. And I eat popcorn.

Whoa, how did all this happen? A substantial level of content and realism seems to have arisen that is entirely out of place in my everyday world. Such is the creative, magical, power of consciousness, to turn shapes, colors and sound waves into a remote time, place and situation, to place me there as an invisible witness and to make it seem so real, an hallucination, but an oddly coherent one.

The properties of consciousness. In the *Phena Sutta*, the Buddha describes the *five aggregates (khandha)* that make up my phenomenal world,³ with consciousness as the fifth and the others integral to consciousness:

Form is like a mass of foam,
And feeling but an airy bubble.
Perception is like a mirage,

3 A common alternative interpretation of the aggregates, as factors constituting the human personality, is discounted by Hamilton (1996), Reat (1990, 310) and Cintita (2018d). In this case, Thanissaro (2010) points out that this interpretation is found only long after the early Buddhist period.

And formations a plantain tree.
Consciousness is a magic show,
A juggler's trick entire. (SN 22.95)

The Buddha likens consciousness to magic in that it fabricates an experienced reality, often outrageously, by slight of hand and illusion, but one which the wise are able to see through if they look carefully:⁴

Now suppose that a magician or magician's apprentice were to display a magic trick at a major intersection, and a man with good eyesight were to see it, observe it, and appropriately examine it. To him — seeing it, observing it, and appropriately examining it — it would appear empty, void, without substance: for what substance would there be in a magic trick? In the same way, a monk sees, observes, and appropriately examines any consciousness that is past, future, or present; interior or exterior; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near. To him — seeing it, observing it, and appropriately examining it — it would appear empty, void, without substance: for what substance would there be in consciousness?” (SN 22.95)

Students of Buddhism generally assume that consciousness belongs to mind. However, this is as misleading as saying that words belong to ink (or any other of its physical media), for consciousness, like words, consists significantly of meaningful content, this content is the better part of the experience of consciousness, and this content is most typically physical rather than mental.⁵ Consciousness is, above all, consciousness *of*

4 Nāṇānanda (2007) elaborates and modernizes this simile in a wonderfully illustrative way.

5 Johannason (1979, 33) makes the point that there is no material-mental

something, something beyond consciousness as a mere mental event. For instance, suppose consciousness of a cow eating grass arises in the phenomenal world. The cow eating grass is very physical and substantial, even if it is an optical illusion, a dream or a TV cow. It seems so real. The mental aspects of consciousness may even disappear behind the vivid physical presence of the cow.

Consciousness is not a fixed thing, but is forever dependently arising anew,⁶ like fireflies rather than the beam of a flashlight. The lifespan of an instance of consciousness is characterized by two phases:

- **Descent.**⁷ Consciousness begins by *focusing* on, or finding a *footing* in, something already experienced within the phenomenal world. For instance, we might give attention to an unusual bird sound.
- **Growth.** Consciousness then generally⁸ undergoes growth from its footing, thereby augmenting the content of the phenomenal world. For instance, we might begin to notice additional details about the source of the bird sound and even identify a species.

Accordingly, the Buddha once said,

That which is called mind, mentality or consciousness arises as one thing and ceases as another all day and all

dualism in Buddhism, that consciousness is not altogether mental, and form is not altogether material.

6 MN 38, i 258.

7 The Pali word *okkanti* is often used here. Though it means descent literally, it is also used generally for the arising of any phenomena, like craving or thinking.

8 The exception might be in a state of “bare awareness.”

night.⁹ (SN 12.61)

Within dependent co-arising, name-and-form represents the phenomenal world. Therefore consciousness depends on name-and-form for its footing and name-and-form depends on consciousness for new content. This explains the mutual dependence **(3) consciousness ↔ (4) name-and-form**.

Unfortunately, consciousness does a poor, albeit convincing, job of representing with how things really are, which creates critical inconsistencies in the phenomenal world. Most significantly, the stream of consciousness fabricates the illusion of the organic person, who stands in relation to the rest of the phenomenal world, who perpetuates itself through feeding on the world and defending itself from it, and who exhibits every human woe. This is played out in the downstream links of dependent co-arising that step by step produce these results, and is completed at **(11) bhava**.¹⁰ As in the case of the other links, Buddhist practice seeks liberation in the cessation of all consciousness.

Our job as practitioners is to become that man with good eyesight who discovers the magician's tricks, to understand consciousness as fabricated and conditioned, for the illusion gets us into trouble, and finally to let go of the delusion. In this essay I seek to assume that man's perspective on the basis of what the early texts say about consciousness.

9 Here mind is *cittam*, mentality is *mano* and consciousness is *viññāṇam*.

10 According to a later tradition, a special kind of consciousness is involved in dependent co-arising, rebirth-linking consciousness, which carries *kammic* results directly into a new rebirth. Cintita (2018d) argues that there is no such second kind of consciousness in the EBT. This would accomplish the fabrication of the organic person prematurely, in any case, at **(4) name-and-form**, leaving us wondering what the remaining links are supposed to explain.

Consciousness descends

The influx of the John Wayne fantasy into my phenomenal world did not just come from anywhere or everywhere, it came when my attention was drawn to Waldo's television and that is where it began growing. Indeed, consciousness does not grow the phenomenal world evenly nor arbitrarily, but has a very particular focus within the range of name-and-form at any particular time, just as a painter – after his lunch of croissant, Camembert and Cabernet – returns to work and chooses a particular point on the canvas to which to add a boat, a nude or a tree, or as a young LEGO® engineer places the next pieces systematically at a particular planned locations in the spire currently under construction. The footing of consciousness is found within the phenomenal world as currently constituted.

The phenomenal world itself is analyzed in alternative ways in the EBT. The five aggregates and name-and-form are the alternatives that will interest us here. They are of similar composition but significantly, consciousness itself is one of the aggregates, yet external to name-and-form, replaced instead by two hallmarks of consciousness: attention and contact:

name-and-form

form
name
feeling
perception
volition
contact
attention

five aggregates

form
feeling
perception
(volitional) formations
consciousness

We can think of name-and-form, along with the first four aggregates, as aspects of consciousness, for no part of them is

independent from consciousness,¹¹ but they represent a more latent part, an accumulation of the content produced over time by the more active center of consciousness per se. Additionally, form (*rūpa*) within name-and-form is associated somewhat abstractly with impingement of the sense faculties which seems to have a somewhat autonomous role in determining phenomenal experience.¹² Overall, these various factors involved in the cognitive apprehension of the phenomenal world are hard to tease apart in any strict way, much like mountains with their ridges and foothills. They are perhaps best viewed as centers around which particular qualities predominate. Because of these aspects of name-and-form the interplay between consciousness and name-and-form is complex and often contrary, as name-and-form plays out over time in a manner inconsistent with the immediate expectations of active consciousness.

The first four aggregates are sometimes referred to as the four footings of consciousness (*viññāṇaṭ-thīta*),¹³ providing places of descent, and accordingly:

Consciousness gains a footing either in relation to form [... repeated for feelings, perception and formations], with form [...] as object and basis, as a place of enjoyment, and there it grows, increases and flourishes .

(DN 33, iii 228)

These footings exhaust the range of consciousness:

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- 11 Johansson (1965, 25) calls perception and feeling particular functions within consciousness, but with consciousness additionally possessing more abstract capabilities. We can also say that all of these are formations for they are built up from parts.
 - 12 See Cintita (2016) and the references found there on the structure and functions of name-and-form.
 - 13 DN 33, iii 228

Mendicants, suppose you say: “Apart from form, feeling, perception, and formations, I will describe the coming and going of consciousness, its passing away and reappearing, its growth, increase, and maturity.” That is not possible.

(SN 22.54)

We might expect that consciousness will find its footing in an area of interest, desire or, especially, craving. This is in fact the case:

Interest, friend, is the root of all things. (AN 8.83)

All phenomenal things grow in consciousness, and consciousness grows where interest is present. Interest is Ñāṇānanda's translation of Pali *chanda*, which he defines more specifically as the lightest shade of craving,¹⁴ something presumably beginning near the border between **(7) feeling** and **(8) craving**, but then present through **(9) attachment** as well. Likewise, where consciousness finds a footing, name-and-form grows:

For one dwelling, bhikkhus, watching the allure in phenomena, which leads to bondage, there is a descent of consciousness. Conditioned by consciousness there is name-and-form ... (SN 12.59)

Another passage seems to place the root of consciousness a little earlier, in feeling itself.

Whatever one feels, that one perceives, whatever one perceives, that one is conscious of. (MN 43, i 293)

Ñāṇānanda¹⁵ points out that whereas interest is the root of consciousness, attention is its origination, constituting an additional step before the full arising of consciousness. This is a

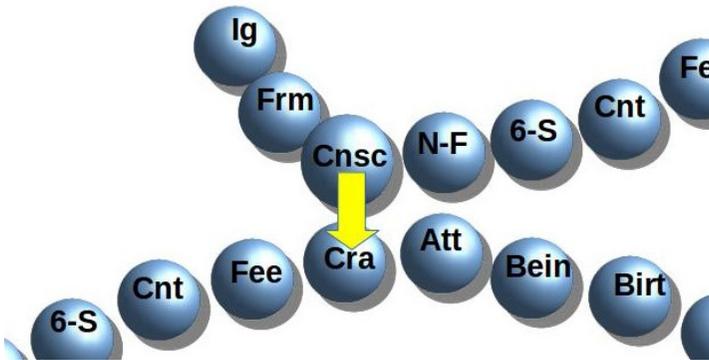
14 Ñāṇānanda (2016, 18).

15 Ñāṇānanda (2008, sermon 10).

important point: Attention (*manasikāra*) is a factors of name within name-and-form and can be directed in either an appropriate way (*yoniso*, from the source, “getting to the bottom of things”) or in an inappropriate way.

For a bhikkhu who is a learner, there is no other thing so helpful for reaching the highest goal as the factor appropriate attention. Wisely striving, a bhikkhu may attain the destruction of all suffering. (Iti 1.16)

Notice the dynamics here. The affective corridor of (7) **feeling** → (8) **craving** → (9) **attachment** occurs downstream from (is indirectly conditioned by) (3) **consciousness**, yet then acts as attractor for consciousness. This is possible because consciousness is always arising anew, seeking a footing in factors of interest within name-and-form, which have been grown by earlier instances of consciousness.



Another simile represents consciousness as seeds, the footings of consciousness as earth, and craving as the moisture that brings the seeds to growth:

The four footings of consciousness should be seen as like the earth. Relishing and greed should be seen as like the

water element. Consciousness with its fuel should be seen as like the five kinds of plants propagated from seeds.

As long as consciousness remains, it would remain involved with form [... repeated for feeling, perception and formations], supported by form [...], grounded on form [...]. And with a sprinkle of relishing, it would grow, increase, and mature. (SN 22.54)

The growth of consciousness

Consciousness is productive, it is a process of growth, it is the elaboration or unfolding of the phenomenal world. Before the entry into Waldo's house, Waldo's possession of a television, or a sofa, might well have been unknown, but is now known. The complex of characters and events of the John Wayne experience were also unknown, but then began to germinate, shoot up and proliferate into the phenomenal world. Likewise, a bird watcher takes an interest in a flutter in a tree, consciousness finds a footing there, his experience grows as color, size, voice, species, gender are discerned.

The cycle. *It is in name-and-form that consciousness finds an object. It is here that a world is created.*¹⁶ So, consciousness has an intimate relationship with name-and-form, whereby consciousness arises only when it finds a footing in name-and-form and name-and-form is sustained and grows only with the arising of consciousness. This interaction gives rise to all of phenomenal experience and the woes of *samsāric* existence. A number of similes describe this interaction between consciousness and name-and-form or, alternatively, the aggregates. Sāriputta

16 Ñāṇānanda (2015 v. 4, 108, sermon 20).

tells us:

Suppose there were two bundles of reeds leaning up against each other. In the same way, name-and-form are conditions for consciousness. Consciousness is a condition for name and form. Name and form are conditions for the six sense fields. The six sense fields are conditions for contact. ... That is how this entire mass of suffering originates. If the first of those bundles of reeds were to be pulled away, the other would collapse. And if the other were to be pulled away, the first would collapse. In the same way, when name and form cease, consciousness ceases. When consciousness ceases, name-and-form ceases. When name-and-form cease, the six sense fields cease. When the six sense fields cease, contact ceases. ... That is how this entire mass of suffering ceases. (SN 12.67)

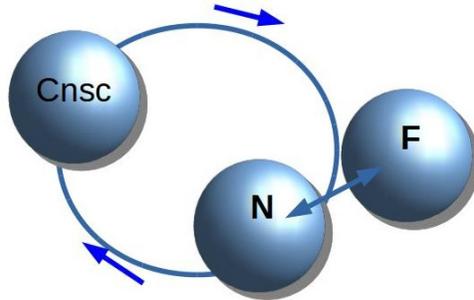
Similarly, the Buddha describes the aggregates as painting a picture.

Suppose, *bhikkhus*, an artist or a painter, using dye or lac or turmeric or indigo or crimson, would create the figure of a man or a woman complete in all its features on a well-polished plank or wall or canvas. So too, when the uninstructed worldling produces anything, it is only form that he produces, only feeling that he produces, only perception that he produces, only formations that he produces, only consciousness that he produces. (SN 22.100)

It is tempting to identify consciousness with the paint brush, but more properly the center of consciousness is the fresh wet paint appearing on surface already marked by old dry paint, for the paint brush would imply an external agent while consciousness

appears spontaneously given the right conditions, more like ice crystals or rain drops than like paint.

A third simile for the interaction of consciousness and name-and-form is a *cycle (vaṭṭa)*, sometimes translated as vortex or whirlpool. This is already implicit in the artist simile as repeatedly the painted surface provides focal points, paint descends onto a particular focus, thereby augmenting the painted surface, providing more places to which consciousness can descend. It is in the nature of consciousness to find a footing in name-and-form and, reciprocally, name-and-form cannot grow nor long be sustained without consciousness.¹⁷ Graphically, the cycle might look like this, with name and form spinning around each other like earth and moon – form sensitive to sense impingement – and the two spinning around with consciousness.



A fourth way of describing the interaction is as consciousness getting ensnarled, mired or entrenched in name-and-form.¹⁸

Just see the world, with all its gods,
Fancying a self where none exists,
Entrenched in name-and-form it holds,

17 Nāṇānanda (2008, sermon 3, 61-63).

18 See Nāṇānanda (2008, sermon 9)

The conceit that this is real. (Sn 756)

And,

“A tangle within, a tangle without, people are entangled in a tangle. Gotama, I ask you this: who can untangle this tangle?”

“Where name-&-form, along with perception of impingement & form, totally stop without trace: that's where the tangle is cut.” (SN 7.6)

The range of growth. Often the elaboration performed by consciousness goes deep: A tail, sound or shadow becomes an entire cat, an obscure bird becomes a plan to fetch binoculars and bird book, a person's chance remark becomes a complex of underlying intentions and character flaws on the part of that person, or colors playing out on a television screen becomes an entire realm displaced in time and space. Growth of phenomenal experience is the function of consciousness. Its growth is nourished both through seeking additional conceptual information and by making volitional choices.

Craving not only attracts consciousness, consciousness itself is a target of craving. Consider someone, Chester, who loves watching football. This entails that if Chester walks into a room in which a football game is playing on the television, consciousness will descend right there. But it entails more than that: Chester actively seeks out situations in which there is a television playing a football game or gets tickets to football games. Moreover, Chester reads voraciously about football players, buys football fan paraphernalia and fantasizes about how he would have played the ball if he has been on the field himself. He even dreams about

football. He is seeking, encouraging and participating in the growth of that part of the phenomenal world having to do with football.

This is consciousness seeking its own growth, and it does this in two ways: (i) it seeks further information concerning a present obsession and (ii) it seeks action, that is, active engagement with that obsession. As a result, it cognitively proliferates, including planning, fantasizing, ruminating and initiating physical action.¹⁹ This is all growth of consciousness. Another commonplace example would be an adolescent boy who discovers, then becomes obsessed with, girls, spending a significant portion of his time in visual, and eventually through dating in tactile data acquisition, and in daydream. The tycoon is similarly obsessed with wealth acquisition, and ... the devout Buddhist with practice and study and play out their obsessions in analogous ways.

It is through such obsessions that the growth of the phenomenal world kicks into high gear. Four nutriment (*āhāra*) are said to feed our hunger for growth:

1. the nutriment of edible food,
2. the nutriment of consciousness,
3. the nutriment of contact,
4. the nutriment of intentional thinking.²⁰ (SN 12.11)

The first is necessary for the growth of the physical body. Contact and intentional thinking are themselves concomitant aspects of consciousness itself that feed our hunger for information and for action respectively.

19 See Ñāṇānanda (2012) for more on proliferation.

20 *manosañcetaṇa*.

The deceit of consciousness

Consciousness does not keep pace with the world as it plays out. Its slights of hand lead us astray and fail to maintain consistency with the perverse phenomenal world it has fabricated, nor with the ongoing impingement of the senses.

The illusion of reflection. We often think of consciousness as something like a mirror, simply as awareness that passively reflects whatever would be going on anyway as it is “out there,” in what we call the objective world. The objective world stands in contrast to the phenomenal world as something given whether we are there to know about it or not. We look out the window, through our eyes, and there is George the mailman; he waves and continues his route. Consciousness need only register, as its content, what it is conscious *of*, what is right there, immediate in the objective world, for all to see. There certainly *seems* to be an objective world or “really real world” that would be there whether we experience it or not, and is ever immediately available to our experience, should we care simply to show up. It seems so real. Consciousness as awareness or reflection stands in stark contrast to the active and creative role of consciousness in fabricating our phenomenal world described above. In fact, reflective consciousness is an illusion, a kind of controlled hallucination.

Let me illustrate briefly why consciousness cannot itself cognitively simply reflect the objective world, through a kind of thought experiment. Consider that the brain, presumably behind our experience of the objective world, sits totally in darkness and in silence. The brain's only access to anything beyond our skulls is through nerves that collect neural impulses from eyes and ears and so on. The brain has no capacity to directly experience the

objective world, which at best can only be reconstructed on the basis of a very primitive level of neurally transmitted raw sense data. Since we only experience the phenomenal world through the filter of the senses, we have no way to know directly what the objective world might be like.²¹ It must be fabricated anew. The objective world might even be entirely illusory, for consciousness might be a dream or a simulation generated as in the movie *The Matrix*. How would we know?

The influence of the senses and of the objective world enters into the cycle **(3) consciousness** ↔ **(4) name-and-form** through form. It is revealing that form within name-and-form is quite abstract and conceptualized only through negotiation with form.²²

Nonetheless, the illusion of reflection is very real in human experience and plays a critical role in the *samsāric* condition. In fact it arises within the chain of dependent co-arising as a by-product of the **(3) consciousness** ↔ **(4) name-and-form** cycle as consciousness continually conjures new content beyond itself. The result is the **(5) sixfold-sphere** that arrays the phenomenal world neatly into interior and exterior spheres, such that **(6) contact** between an object in the exterior world and a sense faculty in the interior produces consciousness as a reflection of that exterior sphere.²³ This illusion of reflection is the primary product of the magician's tricks that we seek to discover by being

21 Modern physics presents radically unfamiliar proposals about the nature of this objective world, in some of which even time and space are absent, or in which consciousness itself cannot be distinguished from the objective world. This suggests a huge level of abstraction between the objective world and our experience of the objective world.

22 See Cintita (2016, 4-5), Bodhi (1995, 15-17). Ñāṇānanda (2008, sermon 1) points out that form is the same as perception of form (*rūpasāññā*) and also calls form nominal form and calls name formal name.

23 Cintita (2018a).

the man with good eyesight hiding in the wings.

Frustrated expectations. The interaction between consciousness and name-and-form is the source of the phenomenal world. The magic of consciousness creates an exterior realm, fills that world with stuff, gives us reason to crave it, gives us a personal identities as creatures that need and fear, are intent on self-preservation and suffer, and it makes it all seem so real. This interaction provides the conditions under which the entirety of the phenomenal world arises.

Unfortunately, consciousness, driven by **(2) formations** rooted in **(1) ignorance**, constantly introduces inconsistencies into name-and-form, inconsistencies that reveal themselves with the playing out of the phenomenal world, in particular with somewhat independent impingement of the senses. The Buddha expresses this as a conflict between this-ness (*itthatta*) and otherwise-ness (*aññathābhāva*).²⁴

The man who has craving as his second and keeps going around for a long time, does not transcend this *samsāra*, which is an alteration between this-ness and otherwise-ness. (Sn 144)

The primary example of this is the four perversions, whereby:

1. Perceiving permanence in what is impermanent,
 2. perceiving pleasure in what is suffering,
 3. perceiving a self in what is non-self,
 4. perceiving beauty in what is foul,
- beings resort to wrong views, their minds deranged, their perception twisted. (AN 4.49)

24 Ñāṇānanda (2015, sermon 2, v.1, 81).

Consciousness persistently fabricates a world in which things enjoy independent existence, are more fixed, are more consistently agreeable and more personal than what, in fact, consistently turns out to be the case as the phenomenal world plays out. As a result, “life is a vain struggle to withstand 'otherwiseness'.”²⁵ Our phenomenal world consists largely of the shards of broken promises.

Moreover, consciousness, together with name-and-form, provides the conditions whereby layer by layer the fully formed organic person emerges, and seems so real, living needy and fearful in an exterior world of opportunities and dangers, hopelessly ensnarled in the soap-operatic drama of *samsāra*.

The phantasm of the person. The arc of the twelve links of dependent co-arises follow the arising of the organic being, accruing individual characteristics and needs, existing in and interacting with the world, caught in *samsāra*, having a sense of “me” and “mine” and of all that entails.. Each link in this process deserves an article like this one of its own, but let me provide a brief overview of this arc.

The phenomenal world and *samsāric* existence is driven by *kammic* forces, for (2) formations → (3) consciousness, where formations are volitional and conceptual choices and provide the stuff of consciousness and of the growth of the phenomenal world. These are patterned choices relating to body, speech and mind, that are skillful, unskillful or imperturbable. In this way, there is a persistent ethical quality that colors consciousness and all of *samsāra*, which consists of old *kamma*.²⁶

25 Nāṇānanda (2015 v. 1, 81).

26 I intend to write a study of formations and their *kammic* function in the coming months.

We have seen that the repeated arising of “consciousness of”, each time conceptualizing something beyond itself, produces a semblance within name-and-form between interior and exterior realms mediated by the sense faculties, and represented as (5) **sixfold-sphere**. This bifurcation into interior and exterior is taken very seriously because the fabricated exterior world is taken as very real and provides the conceptual basis for subject and object, and for self and other. Instances of contact, which bridge the gap between these two realms, begin the active engagement of self with other. Contact results in affective stances toward the opportunities and dangers of the exterior realm, in the form of (7) **feeling** and (8) **craving**. These, alongside cogitation, result in the development of obsessions and characteristic habit patterns and views as (9) **attachment**.

Because the world grows where where self-interest or craving has pooled in the phenomenal world, the exterior world is proportionate to the person, in which those things most dear or most fearsome – food, football, poisonous snakes or irksome neighbors – are larger than life, and in which those things of little consequence to the self – species extinction or poverty of the masses – are shadows or specks. The exterior sphere is hellish or divine depending on the character of the person.

With that about which one has mentally obsessed as the source, perceptions and notions born of mental obsession beset a man with respect to past, future and present forms [... repeated also for sounds, odors, etc.] cognizable through the eye. [... repeated also for ear, nose, etc.]

(MN 18)

(10) **becoming** (*bhava*) is the consummation of the fully

functioning organic person, a entity intent on self-preservation and flourishing in relation to an exterior world made in our own image. That exterior world is accordingly an inferior, superior or middling realm, ranging from hell to heaven, depending on the person's own karmic heritage. The person is fueled by attachments and survives on the four nourishments (*āhāra*) of food, consciousness, contact and intentional thinking, “for the maintenance of beings that have already become and for the assistance of those seeking becoming.”²⁷ **(10) becoming** leads to **(11) birth** and **(12) old-age, death, this mass of suffering**.

The following concise passage comprehends the arising of the person step by step from **(1) ignorance** to **(10) becoming**:

Thus, Ānanda, for beings hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving, kamma is the field, consciousness the seed and craving the moisture for their consciousness to be established in an inferior [... repeated also for middling and superior] realm. (AN 3.76)

The cessation of consciousness

The links of dependent co-arising represent the arising of the human pathology. To weaken and eventually bring each of those links to cessation represent awakening and the end of *saṃsāra*. Accordingly,

From the cessation of name-and-form comes the cessation of consciousness, from the cessation of consciousness comes the cessation of name-and-form. (DN 14)

... and with that all downstream links cease: the six-fold sphere,

27 SN 12.11.

contact, feeling, craving, attachment, becoming, birth and death, the organic person and the whole phenomenal world.

Consciousness is weakened, and we accordingly begin to experience relief, to the extent that growth is inhibited. One way to inhibit growth is to avoid letting the mind spin out of control by falling into proliferation (*papañca*).

This Dhamma is for one who likes and delights in non-proliferation and not for one who likes and delights in proliferation. (AN 4.30, iv 228)

Non-proliferation would be cultivated through appropriate attention and bare attention. Moreover, to the extent that we weaken craving and attachment or develop dispassion, we provide fewer footings for consciousness and therefore consciousness has fewer opportunities for growth.

It seems that full cessation of consciousness is led by the cessation or disruption of name-and-form on which it interdepends.

“A tangle within, a tangle without, people are entangled in a tangle. Gotama, I ask you this: who can untangle this tangle?”

“... Where name-&-form, along with perception of impingement & form, totally stop without trace: that's where the tangle is cut.” (SN 7.6)

A number of passages refer to a kind of consciousness that persists without footing.

Where consciousness is non-manifestive, boundless, luminous all around. That's where earth, water, fire and air find

no footing. There both long and short, small and great, fair and foul, there name and form are wholly destroyed. With the cessation of consciousness, this all is destroyed.

(DN 11, i 223)

The seems to be a kind of consciousness that is non-manifestive, boundless, luminous all around, *anidassana ananta sabbato pabbha*, prior to the complete cessation of consciousness. The most important term for us is non-manifestive (*anidassana*), for it suggests consciousness without content, and consequently without footing and without growth. For instance, the Buddha uses a simile of using paints to draw pictures in the sky, whereby the monks reply that that is impossible, for the sky is immaterial and non-manifestive (*arūpī anidassano*).²⁸

Now, if upon awakening consciousness were without content or were to cease altogether, we might expect that the *arahant*, with the cessation of perception, of conceptualization, of thought, and of consciousness, would be incapable of functioning in any conventional way, beyond perhaps sitting under a tree and drooling into his alms bowl. Certainly he would be incapable of conversation or imparting *Dhammic* wisdom. However, none of this seems to be the case. What does this tell us about non-manifestive consciousness?

In fact, an *arahant* has attained, while he still lives, what is called *nibbāna with residual fuel* (or *attachments*) (*sa-upādisesā nibbāna*), which has been likened to a fire that has been extinguished, but in which the embers are still warm, like a ghost fire. He experiences this world with joy no matter how it unfolds, yet also with kindness and compassion toward the suffering of the

28 MN i 127, Kakac. See Nyananda (2008, sermon 7, 25) for discussion.

beings that live there. In fact he appears quite active on behalf of others, appears decisive, responding immediately and fluidly to the needs of others, because the slightest hint of a self that might stand in the way is absent. He does this even though he no longer believes in the concept of a “being,” and his activities are likewise beyond *kamma*.

Here is what I speculate this is going for the *arahant*: Recall the example of the John Wayne movie with which we began this essay, and recall that it seemed so real. Yet at the same time it was not really real and it passed through my phenomenal world without attachment. For instance, during the time spend in front of Waldo's television I experienced deadly fear, loss of a loved one, anxiety and tension, remorse and rage, yet in the end I turned to Waldo and declared, “I really enjoyed that movie!” On the other hand, our attitude is quite different toward the world that we assume is really real, in which we do *not* enjoy the horrifying tear-jerker in which most of us actually live. We experience the fictional world, but without attachment, or rather with the barest shadows of attachment.

I imaging that the world we take to be really real is as unreal to the *arahant* as the movie world is to us, and in this sense his consciousness is non-manifestive. In fact, this is what we would expect the man with good eyesight, who uncovers the magician's tricks, to accomplish. He experiences it without conviction, without attachment, or rather with the barest residual attachment, as something like a ghost world. The *arahant* remembers houses, but they have become like children's sandcastles: pretend. *Arahants* use worldly language much as parents use child's

language, without entanglement or imagining.²⁹

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