



EVAM ME SUTTAṀ

This is how I heard it

by Patrick Kearney

Mūlapariyāya Sutta & the process of understanding

Lists, lists of lists, and lists within lists

When we read the *suttas* we are struck by the number of lists and the prevalence of repetition. Why do they have this quality? The *suttas* are the product of an oral tradition. They are *performances*, not *texts*. The *dhamma* is not a written teaching contained on a library shelf, but something which has no material structure. It is contained within the mind, structured of mind, but experienced sensually, in chanting and hearing. The lists which are recited and memorised are the scaffolding which frame this invisible structure of *dhamma*.

Lists refer to other lists. Each time we come to a list in the texts we have come to an individual table in the relational database which constitutes the complete *dhamma*. No list exists in isolation, but each connects with some other list. For example, the four noble truths is a foundational list. Within this, *dukkha* is listed as the five clung-to aggregates, another foundational list; and each aggregate is further listed. The fourth truth, the path, is listed into eight factors; each factor is expanded into another list, and each of these lists sends the reciter on a trajectory elsewhere into the *dhamma*. For example, the factor of *sati* (“attention” or “mindfulness”) is listed as the four domains of attention (*satipaṭṭhāna*), of which the first is the body. The domain of attention which is the body (*kāya satipaṭṭhāna*) is further listed as a number of meditations - as in *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (M10).

Further, items within lists refer to other items in other lists. We often find specific terms denoting particular mental or material phenomena defined in terms of a list of synonyms. For example, craving (*taṇhā*), the cause of *dukkha*, is referred to in *Mahāhatthipadopama Sutta* (M28) with the synonyms desire (*chanda*), indulgence (*ālaya*), inclination (*anunaya*), and holding (*ajjhosāna*). The use of synonyms indicates that the assumed audience of this performance are listeners (*sāvakas*) who have already memorised a body of *suttas*, and for them each term in the list would resonate with other occasions and contexts within which these same terms were used. So the *suttas* function as a kind of oral hypertext, where any given term leads the reciter and audience to other terms, which in turn evoke other teachings, other occasions, other contexts. Each term has a *trajectory*, and each list evokes an ever widening context which exists in the mind of the performers and audience, and this context is the *dhamma*.

When we become familiar with the lists we can begin to trace pathways through them. Of course, in an oral tradition, to “become familiar” with a body of material means to memorise it. Each list functions as a matrix for a series of further lists, so each list provides one of many possible pathways through the *dhamma*, and these pathways may turn and intersect with each other in ever larger possible combinations. These combinations form a pattern which reveals the structure of the *dhamma*. Learning the lists is not simply a matter of rote learning - “parrot fashion” - a body of material, but learning how the different lists fit, how they interconnect to form the structure and pattern of the *dhamma*. In other words, it is not just a matter of learning lists, but learning what to *do* with these lists.

Given this structure, the performer can improvise within the limits provided by the underlying patterns of interconnected lists. A performer chanting to an audience may come to the four domains of attention (*satipaṭṭhāna*) as a bare item in a list; then detour into another list that gives a brief definition of each domain; then detour into another list that gives a full exposition of each; and then return to the original list. Which route the performer will take would depend on his individual interests and the that of the audience, the context within which the performance takes place.

So we are not dealing simply with lists, but with an underlying structure suggested and formed by an interconnected network of memorised lists. The contents of this network, being unfixed because unwritten, are inherently fluid, and can legitimately take on different forms in different circumstances. Once written, however, the structure becomes fixed for all time as a “text,” and improvisation gives way to commentary. (Commentary, of course, still retains a creative aspect. A text which is the subject of commentary is never finished, but always open to addition and interpretation.) Historical readers of the *suttas* will look for the “original” teaching, but if freedom to create within the network was part of the oral tradition then seeking an original teaching becomes problematic, since this original invariably takes the form of a fixed set of contents - but the point is not the *content*, but the underlying *structure*. So when we read the *suttas* we need to be alert to this underlying structure, pattern or network. And, of course, this underlying structure is always some or other aspect of dependent arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*).

The network is revealed by the *mātikās*.¹ The term *mātikā* occurs in the Nikāyas as part of a description of an accomplished monk in the sequence “learned in the *dhamma*, learned in the *vinaya*, learned in the *mātikās*” (*dhamma-dhara vinaya-dhara mātikā-dhara*). (A1.117) Cognate with the English “matrix,” *mātikā* is derived from *mātar* (“mother”). A *mātikā*, in other words, is not just a list, but something creative - something out of which other things emerge. The *mātikās* are the building blocks for constructing an exposition, they are nodes that create a network, and when combined in various ways they form a network that is larger than the sum of its nodes. Further, a *mātikā-dhara*, one who “holds” or is learned in the lists, knows both the *mātikās* and what to do with them. There is a *skill* involved in one’s understanding of the lists. One learned in the lists can use them to improvise and create. The *mātikās* are not simply texts but a *practice*, of applying a method of working *with* texts which is based on memorisation and the creative use of chanting. This method creates the structure of the *dhamma*, which is not contained in any text because any given text is an expression of an already existing *dhamma* structured by the *mātikā*. And this method includes an element of creativity or play: a *mātikā-dhara* is not restricted to any specific list or list of lists, but can move between the various lists so long as they are used in a way that is consonant with the already-given underlying structure of *dhamma*.

Creativity, meditation and the list

There is room for individual creativity within the lists. We find *peyyāla* (“repetition”) sections in the Saṃyutta and Aṅguttara Nikāyas especially. *Peyyāla* is shortened as *pe*, which could be translated as “etc.” These “et cetera” sections are made up of abbreviated lists which could be expanded and linked in various ways. These sections are guidelines for oral recitation and composition rather than a fixed literary text. In other words, a purely oral tradition may contain more scope for creativity than one in which words are fixed and frozen on paper.

The lists are more than mnemonic devices; they are also a technique for creative oral composition. They are born from *vibhaṅga*, “analysis” or “breaking up.” This is the essence of *vipassanā*, which could be literally translated as “seeing (*passanā*) separately (*vi*).” *Vipassanā* meditation takes that which we perceive as solid and fixed, and generates a perception of it as fluid, changing, and part of a broader network of conditioned and conditioning process. The focus of interest within this broader pattern is not any one given experienced event, but the network

itself, of which any one experienced event is simply an instantiation. And often in a text the important thing is not the specific items being listed, but the fact that things when examined break up into their parts and emerge as interrelated phenomena. Ultimately “things” are phenomena, and phenomena are relationships. The lists reveal patterns of causal relationships; what route the chanter takes through the lists will vary according to his specific starting point and desired end point. The starting point varies depending on the circumstances of the individual; the end point is always liberation. In this way, the structure of the *dhamma* which is the doctrine revealed in the texts parallels the structure of the *dhamma* which is the experience of reality by the practitioner. Both are trajectories leaning towards liberation. In the world of the Nikāyas scholarship and practice are interdependent.

Full understanding (*pariññā*)

The ordinary untrained person is lost in conceivings (*maññanā*) because of delusion (*moha*), an absence of full understanding (*pariññā*). What characterises full understanding? According to the commentary, full understanding has three aspects: full understanding of the known (*ñāta-pariññā*); full understanding by examination (*tīraṇa-pariññā*); full understanding by abandonment (*pahāna-pariññā*).

- Full understanding of the known (*ñāta-pariññā*): Understanding the object of experience in terms of its characteristic (*lakkhaṇa*), function (*rasa*), manifestation (*paccupaṭṭhāna*) and proximate cause (*padaṭṭhāna*). These four aspects of the phenomenon constitute the classical *abhidhamma* approach to the analysis of phenomena.

This aspect of full understanding refers to understanding our experienced world in terms of *dhammas* (Skt. *dharmas*) rather than “things” or “entities.” The Buddha teaches a first person discourse. This means his concern is with the nature of experience from the perspective of the one undergoing the experience. For example, when the Buddha says “world,” he does not mean our sense of a planet orbiting the sun; he means our-experience-of-the-world. We know, in a third person sense, that the earth orbits the sun; we *experience*, in a first person sense, the sun rising in the east and setting in the west. It is the nature of our *experience* the Buddha is interested in, and experience is always experience of something. What is that something? And what does it do?

When we examine our experience closely it breaks down into units of experience called *dhammas*. A *dhamma* is our-experience-of-a-thing, or an experienced thing. For example, we might examine “breath” in meditation practice. What is “breath?” How do you know you are breathing? We can *infer* we are breathing, because we are alive, but in terms of our actual experience, how do we *directly know* (*abhijānāti*) that we are breathing? What does it feel like? Do you, for example, experience movement? Do you experience hardness or softness? The experience of “movement,” in all its forms, is *vayo-dhātu*, “air element.” The experience of resistance, or hardness/softness, is *pathavī dhātu*, “earth element.” These elements are *dhammas*. They are discrete units of experience that apparently real entities disappear into. The concept “breath” does not survive presence. What survive presence are actual experienced phenomena - *dhammas*.

When we experience clearly, we see the behaviour or activity of phenomena. The full understanding of the known indicates the activity of focusing on the movements of experience rather than being caught up in the assumption that there exists some substantial or essential thing *behind* these movements. It indicates understanding experience entirely in terms of not-self (*anattā*). Instead of “conceiving x as ...,” we ask: how does x *behave?*; what does x *do?* What is *real* for the Buddha is activity, not the (assumed) thing which (supposedly) acts. The fourfold analysis of characteristic, function, manifestation and proximate cause is the classical way of expressing this kind of phenomenological investigation.

- Full understanding by examination (*tīraṇa-pariññā*): Contemplation of the universal characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self through the object.

This aspect of full understanding refers to the investigative activity of *satipaṭṭhāna vipassanā*. In insight meditation the practitioner “scrutinises,” “examines” or “investigates” the nature of the phenomenon, beginning with the cultivation of the perception of impermanence (*anicca-saññā*), and proceeding to the perceptions of suffering or unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*) and of not-self (*anattā*). The three universal characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self are listed in order of gross to subtle, so it is likely that the practitioner will become intimate with them in that order. However, every experienced phenomenon shows all three characteristics, so strictly speaking we are not speaking of a linear path here. Yet the cultivation of the perception of impermanence is listed first, because this is the open door to the contemplation of the other characteristics.

As the Buddha says to his son Rāhula: “Develop meditation on the perception of impermanence, Rāhula; for when you develop meditation on the perception of impermanence, the conceit ‘I am’ (*asmi-māna*) will be abandoned” (M62 Mahārāhulovāda Sutta). We have seen that abandoning conceit implies abandoning craving and views as well, since they all operate together. The perception of impermanence cuts through our sense of anything lasting, and therefore reliable. This opens us to an understanding of suffering (*dukkha*), the inherent unreliability and insecurity of existence, the fact that we are not in control as we think we are or wish to be. This in turn opens us to an understanding of not-self (*anattā*), the realisation that there is no experience worth holding on to as “this is mine,” (*etaṃ mama*) “I am this,” (*eso’ham asmi*) “this is my-self” (*eso me attā*).

This is why all insight (*vipassanā*) meditation techniques are designed to expose the practitioner to the reality of impermanence, directing her attention to the changes within her experience. For example, the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* begins by describing the practitioner in this way: “surrendering desire and grief for the world, s/he lives contemplating body as body, ardent, clearly understanding and attentive.” Later the language changes, and the Buddha describes her in this way: “S/he lives contemplating the nature of arising as body; or s/he lives contemplating the nature of ceasing as body; or s/he lives contemplating both the nature of arising and the nature of ceasing as body.” Instead of watching the body and noticing that it changes, the practice matures to the point where the practitioner is watching *the fact of change itself*, and noticing that it takes place in and through the experience of body. As Sāriputta explains:

The ordinary untrained person ... regards form as self, or self as possessing form, or self as in form. S/he lives obsessed by the notions: “I am form, form is mine.” As s/he lives obsessed by these notions her form changes and alters. With this change and alteration of form, there arise in her sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair. (S3.3)

The practitioner’s understanding of the universal characteristic of *dukkha* matures into an understanding of the universal characteristic of *anattā* as she gives up the quest for some solid, reliable foundation of experience, and opens to the emptiness of contingency, the freedom found within free-fall. This movement is associated with the third aspect of full understanding.

- Full understanding by abandonment (*pahāna-pariññā*): Abandoning desire and “passion” (*rāga*) for the object of experience.

At this point the practitioner has given up seeking satisfaction from the objects of experience. At a deep level, she has had enough. Previously, she had projected on to experience “conceivings” that caused her experienced world to appear as beautiful (*subha*), satisfying (*sukha*), repulsive (*paṭigha*), permanent (*nicca*) and substantial or self (*attā*). But in finally abandoning the work involved in creating and maintaining these projections she discovers that they have been hiding what was always there, but hidden. She experiences realistically (*yathabhūtam*).

Notice that surrendering conceptions of beauty also entail surrendering conceptions of ugliness or repulsiveness. If a person lives in a world of beauty, she lives in a world of ugliness; and vice versa. Usually translations of the texts contrast the (wrong) perception of *subha* as “beautiful” with the (right) perception of *asubha* as “repulsive” or “loathsome” with the negative prefix *a* added to *subha*, “beautiful.” But this is clearly mistaken, for beauty and ugliness are necessarily linked. To grasp at one entails grasping at the other; to abandon one entails abandoning the other. So *a-subha* is “un-attractive,” or “not-attractive,” not in the usual sense of positively repulsive, but in its literal sense of no longer attracting or enchanting. The experience is just as it is, and the heart feels no compulsion to either grasp at it or push it away. The heart feels no compulsion - that’s the point. In brief, the fundamental movements of attraction, aversion and delusion construct the world in which we live, while we remain convinced that we are perceiving the world as it really is. But when the world is perceived as it really is, it becomes a different world.

The sekha and the possibility of full understanding

A bhikkhu/nī who is in higher training (*sekha*) ... directly knows (*abhijānāti*) earth as earth, ... should not conceive earth, ... should not conceive from earth, ... should not conceive “earth is mine,” ... should not delight in earth. Why? So that s/he may fully understand it, I say.

While the “untaught ordinary person” can’t help himself - he inevitably *does* project beauty, ugliness, satisfaction and substantiality into experience - and the *arahant* (inevitably?) does not, the *sekha* has choice. She may or may not do this. The *sekha* stands at a cross-roads, at a point of choice. How can we understand this situation?

A *sekha* (“trainee”) is one who has had at least one glimpse of reality, and so is now *ariya* - “noble,” “refined,” “cultivated.” Instead of “perceiving” earth, she has learned how to “directly know” earth. Her attention is refined to the point where she can now see what is really going on. Here is a description of the experience that moves a person from *puthujjana* (“ordinary person”) to *ariya* (“noble,” “refined,” “cultivated”) as it occurred to the layman Upāli while he listened to a talk from the Buddha:

Just as a clean cloth with all marks removed would take dye evenly, so too, while the householder Upāli sat there, the spotless immaculate vision of the Dhamma arose in him: “All that is subject to arising is subject to cessation.” Then the householder Upāli saw the Dhamma, attained the Dhamma, understood the Dhamma, fathomed the Dhamma; he crossed beyond doubt, did away with perplexity, gained intrepidity, and became independent of others in the Teacher’s Dispensation. (M56: Upāli Sutta)

Notice how this realisation is bound up with the perception of impermanence - “All that is subject to arising is subject to cessation,” or “Whatever is of the nature to arise, *all* that is of the nature to cease.” We are speaking here of the mature *vipassanā* practitioner, one who, having seen through identity and the projections that construct identity, has now abandoned *sakkāya diṭṭhi*, the view of the reality of the person. She has clearly seen, at least once, that she is *not* real; there’s really no-one here, no-one underneath the experience-of-this.

And so the *sekha* “directly knows” (*abhijānāti*) earth as earth. According to the commentary, “direct knowledge” (*abhiññā*) implies at least some part of the two lower types of full understanding, full understanding of the known (*ñāta-pariññā*) and full understanding by examination (*tīraṇa-pariññā*).² This is the kind of penetrative understanding associated with *vipassanā* meditation which is necessary for the “vision of the Dhamma” or “vision of reality” (*dhamma-cakkhu*) referred to above.

The *sekha* is like a child who has realised that there is no Santa Claus. She knows, now, and the world has changed. She can never go back to that magical world in which Santa appears to fulfil

her wishes. But she can always choose to act as if Santa is real. We can never go back to the world of our childhood; but we can always choose to act childishly. Similarly, while the mature practitioner has seen something, something that changes everything, she can always retreat to her old habits, born of oblivion, and pretend that she really doesn't see anything. Nevertheless, although the *sekha* may get caught up in thoughts of "I" and "mine," they can never reach the point where they set into "views" (*ditṭhi*), because at a deep level, the *sekha*, or mature practitioner, can never quite believe them, just as an adult can never quite believe in Santa Claus, no matter how much she may want to or try to.

Venerable Khemaka explains how this works. Khemaka was an old monk close to death who got caught up in a misunderstanding. Wanting to check out his realisation before he died, his fellow monks asked him, "Does Venerable Khemaka regard anything as self or as belonging to self among these five aggregates subject to clinging?" Khemaka replied, "Among these five aggregates subject to clinging, I do not regard anything as self or as belonging to self." His friends were surprised, if not shocked - was he claiming to be an *arahant*, fully awakened? Khemaka explained:³

"Friends, I do not speak of form [feeling; perception; formations; consciousness] as 'I am,' nor do I speak of 'I am' apart from form [feeling; perception; formations; consciousness]. ... Although 'I am' has not yet vanished in me in relation to these five aggregates subject to clinging, still I do not regard [anything among them] as 'I am *this*.'

"Suppose there is the scent of a blue, red, or white lotus. Would one be speaking rightly if one would say, 'The scent belongs to the petals,' or 'The scent belongs to the stalk,' or 'The scent belongs to the pistils?'"

"No, friend."

"And how should one answer is one is to answer rightly?"

"Answering rightly, one should answer: 'The scent belongs to the flower.'"

"So too, friends, I do not speak of form [feeling; perception; formations; consciousness] as 'I am,' nor do I speak of 'I am' apart from form [feeling; perception; formations; consciousness]. ... Although 'I am' has not yet vanished in me in relation to these five aggregates subject to clinging, still I do not regard [anything among them] as 'I am *this*.'

"... Even though a cultivated student has abandoned the five lower fetters, still, in relation to the five aggregates subject to clinging, there lingers in him a conceit 'I am' (*asmi-māna*), a desire 'I am' (*asmi-chanda*), an underlying tendency 'I am' (*asmi-anusaya*) that has not yet been uprooted."

A flower has a distinct scent which belongs to the whole flower and cannot be pinned down to any specific location, and in the same way the background sense of "I am" has no specific location and no specific content. It's just sensed faintly in the background as there - somewhere. It presents as this vague but compelling sense that there is someone here experiencing this. But "I am" is always *looking* for location, for some kind of content with which it can identify and emerge into the foreground. The conceit (*māna*) "I am" has a predisposition or underlying tendency (*anusaya*) to be moved by desire (*chanda*) for specific existence to surface as "I am *this*" (*attā*). But in the mature practitioner, this move is not necessary. It can be blocked by an examination or investigation (*tīraṇa*) of any specific experienced phenomenon which reveals that clearly, in this instance, I am *not* this.

But as long as the underlying tendency or predisposition to "I am" (*asmi-anusaya*) continues, the practitioner is liable, in a moment of forgetting, to identify with experience and, for a time, to relate to experience as "I am *this*."

“Sometime later he dwells contemplating rise and fall in the five aggregates subject to clinging ... As he dwells contemplating rise and fall in the five aggregates subject to clinging, the conceit ‘I am,’ the desire ‘I am,’ the underlying tendency ‘I am’ that has not yet been uprooted – this comes to be uprooted.

“Suppose a cloth has become soiled and stained, and its owners give it to a laundryman. The laundryman would scour it evenly with cleaning salt, lye, or cowdung, and rinse it in clean water. Even though that cloth would become pure and clean, it would still retain a residual smell of cleaning salt, lye, or cowdung that had not yet vanished. The laundryman would then give it back to the owners. The owners would put it in a sweet-scented casket, and the residual smell of cleaning salt, lye, or cowdung that had not yet vanished would vanish.”
(Khandha Saṃyutta 89)

The “sweet-scented casket” is the practice that leads to the completion of full understanding by abandonment (*pahāna-pariññā*). This practice is to continue to contemplate the aggregates as “This is not mine” (*n’etaṃ mama*), “I am not this” (*n’eso’ham asmi*), “This is not my-self” (*na m’eso attā*). The first contemplation reduces craving, the second reduces conceit, and the third confirms and reminds the practitioner of her freedom from a view of self.⁴ But until the attainment of full liberation, the mature practitioner is always liable to be deluded by experience - for a while.

The arahant

A bhikkhu/nī who is an *arahant* ... directly knows earth as earth, ... *does not* conceive earth, ... *does not* conceive from earth, ... *does not* conceive “earth is mine,” ... *does not* delight in earth. Why? (1) Because s/he has fully understood it, I say. ... (2) Because s/he is free from lust through the destruction of lust. ... (3) Because s/he is free from hate through the destruction of hate. ... Because s/he is free from delusion through the destruction of delusion.

With the completion of full understanding the practitioner does not project anything at all on to the experience, but lives only in the experienced reality. Along with full understanding comes the destruction (*khaya*) of lust (*rāga*), hate (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*). This concept of the *destruction* of lust, hate and delusion are central here, as, being destroyed, they cannot arise again. Liberation is complete, and permanent. How can we understand this?

Firstly we need to understand what these movements are. *Rāga* is usually translated as “passion.” Literally meaning “colour,” *rāga* is what “colours” the mind when caught in the grip of excitement stimulated by desire. When the mind is “coloured” in a certain way, it cannot see beyond the object of desire; it is obsessed by the object. So *rāga* refers to the obsession contained in desire and therefore the absence of freedom, for there is no freedom in obsession. *Rāga* is an aspect of *taṇhā*, “thirst” or craving, and indicates attraction (*lobha*), one of the three fundamental movements of the mind. Attraction is the movement of the mind toward an object to seize it. It is always accompanied by two other movements. *Dosa*, here translated as “hate,” is aversion, the movement of the mind away from an object to avoid or resist it. *Moha* is delusion, which has two aspects. It can appear as the mind’s misunderstanding of the object, a conviction that it is what in fact it is not; and as a confused response to the situation, oscillating between the two possibilities of attraction and aversion without settling on either. So delusion entails both dullness and confusion. These fundamental movements are destroyed in full understanding.

Can liberation be permanent? In Cūlasaccaka Sutta (M35) the Buddha explains the difference between a *sekha* (“disciple in higher training,” “trainee”) and an *arahat*. He begins with the trainee:

Any kind of material form [feeling, perception, formations, consciousness] whatever, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near - a student of mine sees all material form [feeling, perception, formations, consciousness] realistically with complete wisdom in this way: “This is not mine, I am not this, this is not my-self.” *To this extent* my student is one who carries out my instruction, who responds to my

advice, who has crossed beyond doubt, become free from perplexity, gained intrepidity, and become independent of others in the Teacher's Dispensation.

Here we have the implication that the student is one who has "crossed beyond doubt" and so on, *only* "to this extent" - to the extent that s/he "sees realistically" the five aggregates that make up the experienced self and her world. In other words, the Buddha does not appear to be talking about a permanent state entered into at the point of realisation and from then on permanently existing. He could be talking about a *practice*, an on-going relationship to reality that must be *done*, moment by moment. The implication here is that when this practice is *not* done, the person is no longer a "trainee." To be a "trainee" is to possess a potentiality, which is always available - just as the aggregates are always available for examination - but which must be performed, practised, in this present moment to become, now, a reality. In other words, it is not that there exists a trainee; what exists is the activity of training.

Then the Buddha describes the *arahat*:

Any kind of material form [feeling, perception, formations, consciousness] whatever, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near - a bhikkhu has seen all material form [feeling, perception, formations, consciousness] realistically with complete wisdom in this way: "This is not mine, I am not this, this is not myself," and through not clinging he is liberated. *To this extent* a bhikkhu is an arahat with taints destroyed, one who has lived the holy life, done what had to be done, laid down the burden, reached his own goal, destroyed the fetters of becoming and is completely liberated through final knowledge.

Here we are talking about the *result* of an action *already completed* ("has seen"). Having seen something, there can now be a new relationship to the situation, a new response, one of "not clinging," and it is this relationship which is the essence of the *arahat's* liberation. But again the Buddha leaves a touch of ambiguity - "to this extent" is one an *arahat*, to the extent to which she does not cling to what has now been clearly seen and understood. In the moment of not clinging the person is *arahat*, fully awakened, living in a relationship of full liberation. But does that leave the possibility that the *arahat's* realisation too is not a permanent state, something within which she is necessarily frozen, but a relationship, something *chosen* (or possibly *not* chosen) from moment to moment? This ambiguity may explain the early tradition's doubts on the question of whether the *arahat's* understanding and liberation was permanent, or not.⁵ It's an old question, and arises today in the form of contemporary doubts of the possibility of *full* liberation in the classical sense of the term.⁶

However, we also find in the Nikāyas texts which seem quite definite that the liberation of the *arahat* is in fact permanent. Hence the reference to the "destruction" (*khaya*) of passion, hate and delusion; and to the "uprooting" of the conceit "I am," the desire "I am," and the underlying tendency "I am." We may examine this issue in later classes.

Life without conceiving

The *arahat* does not conceive. What does this mean? Bhikkhu Bodhi explains:

The arahat, therefore, no longer conceives anything in any way. ... This does not mean that the arahat has ceased to cognize. ... But now [the arahat's mind] simply registers the impinging phenomena as they appear, without distortion or falsification. The arahat no longer sees pleasant objects as attractive, for he is free from lust; he no longer sees unpleasant objects as repulsive, for he is free from hatred; he longer sees neutral objects as confusing, for he is free from delusion. He does not add and does not take away. ... For him there is in the seen only the seen, in the heard only the heard, in the sensed only the sensed, in the cognized only the cognized. There is no notion that "I see, I hear, I sense, I cognize," no notion that the seen, heard, sensed, and cognized are "mine."⁷

But does this make sense in a human world? If the *arahat* does not add anything to bare experience, how can he function normally in a meaningful world? Or does the absence of “conceiving” have a more restricted sense, the cessation of the projection of “I” and “mine” into experience?

If, for example, attraction and repulsion are projected into experience by craving (*taṇhā*), then how could an *arahat* appreciate beauty in the absence of craving? Or is there desire which is not craving? The Nikāyas do speak of forms of desire that have a positive value for the practitioner. Terms like *chanda* (“desire”), *rāga* (“passion” or “lust”) and *nandi* (“delight”) are generally used in a negative sense, but the Buddha also speaks of *dhamma-chanda* (“desire for the real”), *dhamma-rāga* (“passion for the real”), and *dhamma-nandi* (“delight in the real” as positive values.

But this can be a sensitive question. In the first edition of his translation of Majjhima Nikāya, Bhikkhu Bodhi translated M131 Bhaddekaratta Sutta, which has as its subject the practice of *vipassanā* meditation by night and day, as “One Fortunate Attachment.” In a note he explains, following Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, that *ratta* or *ratti* can be taken from the root *raj*, “to take pleasure in.” So *baddeharatta* refers to one who is fortunate (*bhadda*) in having one (*eka*) attachment (*ratta*) - the attachment to “insighting (*vipassati*) each presently arisen phenomenon.”⁸ But in his second edition, Bhaddekaratta Sutta becomes “A Single Excellent Night.” Bhikkhu Bodhi has changed his mind about *ratta*, and now, after a suggestion by Bhikkhu Thanissaro, interprets it as coming from the Sanskrit *rātra* or *rātri*, “night.” He explains that “if the word were used to mean attachment, an unwholesome state in typical Buddhist discourse, some commentarial clarification would surely have been offered.”⁹ Or was his first interpretation just too radical for the tradition?

In any event, the *arahat* uses language and concepts such as “I” and “mine,” but does not use these expressions to project substantial realities into experience where none exist. Consequently he no longer “seeks delight in the objects he encounters,” and does not pursue them. And in the absence of delight, there is no more renewal of *saṃsāra*.¹⁰ So we have two aspects of the *arahat*’s insight: (anti-)ontological (referring to what really exists) and affective (referring to our emotional responses to what actually exists).

The ontological aspect of insight, which entails the abandonment of conceit and views, is the cessation of projections of substantial realities where none exist, while still accepting conventional “realities” such as “I” and “mine” that make communication possible. The affective aspect of insight, which entails the abandonment of craving, is the cessation of the pursuit of satisfaction in a restless, unquenchable manner. This latter has to do with our relationship to pleasure, which is a crucial issue in practice.

What gives us pleasure? And how do we relate to what gives us pleasure? Craving (*taṇhā* - literally “thirst”) implies a relationship of *dependence*. I *must* have this thing or this experience, otherwise my life is inadequate, useless, a failure, or whatever. The absence of craving implies a relationship to pleasure characterised by independence, or freedom. I might thoroughly *enjoy* this thing or this experience, but I know I can do without it. Or, I enjoy it unreservedly, and equally let it go unreservedly when it naturally comes to an end. In the absence of craving the scope of the pleasurable is much wider, for I am no longer confined to my addictions, all of which are the expression of old habits that prevent me from opening to what is new, previously unforeseen and unforeseeable. Further, in the absence of conceit (*māna*) I no longer suffer the sense of the black hole within me that I need to fill, the absence that must be filled with something. Consequently my addictions naturally die, since their function is to seek (always unsuccessfully) to fill up this hole. So the whole relationship to pleasure and pain has changed. But do pleasure and pain themselves remain?

The *tathāgata* and fully understanding to the end

The *tathāgata*, here referring to the Buddha himself, has the same awakening as the *arahat*, but the scope of his understanding is wider. He has not just fully understood, but fully understood *to the end* (*pariññāntantaṃ* = *pariññā* “full understanding” + *anta* = “end,” “limit,”). This refers to the Buddha’s “knowledge of omniscience” (*sabbaññuta-ñāṇa*). The *tathāgata* knows the full range of whatever can be known, and this knowledge makes him a *sammā sambuddha* and enables him to found a Buddhism and awaken others.

Delight is the *mūla* of suffering

Finally, we come to the climax of our sutra. The Buddha explains how it is that the *tathāgata* does not conceive:

Because he has understood that delight is the root of suffering (*nandī dukkhassa mūlan ti*), and that with being [as condition] there is birth, and that for whatever has come to be there is ageing and death. Therefore, bhikkhus, through the complete destruction, fading away, cessation, giving up, and relinquishing of cravings, the *Tathāgata* has awakened to supreme full enlightenment, I say.

“Delight is the *mūla* of suffering.” Remember how our audience of 500 bhikkhus were vedic scholars, used to thinking in terms of something, some esoteric, universal entity, as the *mūla* of this phenomenal universe. This is a very common way of thinking about reality. There is some essence, and if only we search hard enough we will find it. It may be within ourselves (like *ātman*), or external to ourselves (like *brahman*); it may be some originary event that took place at the very beginning of the universe; it may be that from which this universe arises and that into which, at the end of time, it dissolves. But the Buddha has been explaining that however we may conceive this *mūla* we are wrong - precisely because our conception is a conception, an idea *about* reality rather than reality itself, and so something imposed by us upon reality in a desperate attempt to ground ourselves and our world.

Instead the Buddha directs our attention to the pain that causes us to look for this grounding, this *mūla*, in the first place. And what feeds that pain? It is our “delight” (*nandi* or *nandī*), our compulsive grasping after a satisfaction that is never enough, and so always contains within it the need to reach for something else. This delight is associated with “being” or “becoming” (*bhava*), which is the blind reaching out for something, anything, to fill the void. Becoming conditions “birth” (*jati*), the emergence of this blind reaching out into someone, some specific person located within some specific situation - or *this* person in *this* situation. This is another way to express the movement from “I am” to “I am *this*.” To make this move is to be born - as *someone*.

Finally, the language of this section refers us to the Buddha’s discover of dependent arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), which is what made Siddhattha Gotama a *buddha* in the first place. The Buddha tells us about this discovery:

Whether *tathāgatas* appear or do not appear this fact of nature remains, this stability of nature, this natural order, specific conditionality.

This is what a *tathāgata* awakens to, this is what he realises. After awakening to and realising it he explains, teaches, declares, lays it out, reveals, analyses and clarifies it, saying: “Look!” (S 2.25 Paccaya Sutta)

Dependent arising teaches us that whatever events we experience arise because of conditions other than themselves and in turn cease because of conditions other than themselves. This natural process of conditioned and conditioning arising is limitless. It is not that “we” realise dependent arising, for to speak or *conceive* in this way is to assume that there is some-one or

some-thing - “I” - who realises dependent arising. But there is nowhere *beyond* dependent arising from which to realise dependent arising. Dependent arising does not rest upon any ground; rather, dependent arising asserts the fundamental groundlessness of the experienced universe. We do not realise dharma; dharma realises dharma. Or, as the Buddha says, “what arises is only suffering arising, what ceases is only suffering ceasing.” (S2.17 Kaccānagotta Sutta)

So the *mūla*, the “root” or “foundation” that the Buddha is interested in is the root of our pain. For the Buddha’s project is not philosophical. He is not interested in developing a “theory of everything.” His interest is practical and pragmatic. As human beings we suffer. Why? More importantly, how? What causes this pain? How can we bring it to an end? This is the only *mūla* worth pursuing. And this *mūla* is arising now, in our restless desire to move on to the next experience, to find something that will finally fill the void within us and justify our existence, to ourselves and others. This is the *mūla* we study in insight meditation. And as long as we find ourselves resisting the experience of this moment, or reaching for something else rather than this moment, this *mūla* is available.

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1. Rupert Gettin. “The Mātikās: memorization, mindfulness, and the list.” *The mirror of memory: Reflections on mindfulness and remembrance in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism*. Janet Gyatso (ed.). Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992: 149-72.
 2. Bhikkhu Bodhi *The discourse on the root of existence. The Mūlapariyāya Sutta and its commentaries*. 2nd edition. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1992: 15.
 3. Bhikkhu Bodhi (trans). *The connected discourses of the Buddha. A translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya*. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000: 942-46.
 4. Bodhi (1992): 17.
 5. A. K. Warder. *Indian Buddhism*. Second Edition. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1980: 212-18. Andrew Skilton. *A concise history of Buddhism*. Birmingham: Windhorse Publications, 1994: 47-49.
 6. For an interesting contemporary discussion of this issue, see Stephen Batchelor. *Living with the devil: A meditation on good and evil*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2004.
 7. Bodhi (1992): 18.
 8. Bhikkhu Bodhi & Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli (trans.). *The middle length discourses of the Buddha. A translation of the Majjhima Nikya*. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995: 1039; n.1210, p.1337.
 9. Bhikkhu Bodhi & Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli (trans.). *The middle length discourses of the Buddha. A translation of the Majjhima Nikya*. 2nd edition. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2001: n.1210, p.1342.
 10. Bodhi (1992): 18.