

## **Meditation as a Tool For Deconstructing the Phenomenal World**

---

**Karen Lang**

Historians of Indian religion agree that in the time between the seventh and fifth centuries BC a fundamental change in the orientation of religious life occurred. Among various groups of religious thinkers, both orthodox and unorthodox, new theories developed about human action and its role in relation to repeated births and deaths. These thinkers' theories on how the world is constructed and kept in motion and the practical strategies they devised for deconstructing and immobilizing worldly activity have influenced all subsequent Indian religious thought. Some of these strategies rely upon a theoretical analysis of the psychological forces at work in the mind's development and expansion of its ideas about the world. One technique devised for calming the mind's frantic activity involves a type of meditative practice designed to curb the impact of sensory stimulation. In theory, control over the activity of the senses should lead to a meditative experience divested of all disruptive emotional content. This experience becomes central to religious practice, since such negative emotions as desire and hatred motivate the type of mental and physical actions that keep the cycle of birth, death and rebirth in motion.

Several Indian religious works, both of the orthodox brahmanical tradition and of the unorthodox traditions of Buddhists and Jains, use the expression *prapañca* (Pāli *papañca*) to refer to the world perceived and constructed as the result of disturbed mental states. In order to calm this unquiet world, these works advocate meditative practices that staunch the flow of normal sensory experience. In this paper I will examine what several of these religious texts say about the meditative practice of restraining the sense faculties and its function in halting *prapañca* and use this information to suggest a new interpretation of several verses in an early Buddhist text, the *Suttanipāta*. My discussion of these works, views on the origin and cessation of *prapañca* relies on two basic assumptions. One of them is that the language these works use to describe meditative practices reflects a serious attempt to describe actual experience. The second is that despite the similarity of these works' descriptions of meditative experience, the experience itself is not necessarily similar; and it is, of course, interpreted in terms of quite different religious beliefs.

The earliest *R̥gveda* texts speak of altered states of consciousness which are clearly ecstatic in nature, and often attained through the use of the mind-altering substance, *soma*. Some of the philosophical texts collected in the tenth book of the *Artharvaveda*, however, seem to advocate an altered state of consciousness whose focal point is turned inwards. The composers of these texts speak of exemplary religious persons knowing a stable force at the center of an unstable world, which they call *brahman*. The term *brahman*, as Jan Gonda has pointed out, is a word whose multiple meanings are aspects of a core meaning of “inherent firmness, imperishable solidity”, a meaning which remains constant throughout the term’s occurrence in divergent Vedic texts whose composition ranges over several centuries. The hymns of the *R̥gveda* describe *brahman* as an animating and strengthening force; those of the tenth chapter of the *Artharvaveda* describe it as a pillar (*skambha*) which supports the world.<sup>1</sup> In a more recent study of the concept, Brian Smith faults Gonda for his failure to emphasize sufficiently the dynamic quality of *brahman*, the potency that is immanent in all names and forms. Smith following Louis Renou’s lead in identifying the “connective potency” of *brahman* as a basis for linking together its diverse applications, defines it as the connective energy that lies between disparate elements and makes efficacious the ritual action that forges those elements into a unity. *Brahman* is seen as the nexus that links all the multiple names and forms, “the resembling parts” with itself, the cosmic whole.<sup>2</sup> The *brahmin* priests—in whom *brahman* assumes bodily form—achieve power through their ability to recite ritual texts and manipulate divine power. They become, according to the *Artharvaveda* and other Vedic texts, gods on earth, with the special privileges of teaching ritual texts, officiating at sacrifices and accepting gifts as their religious duty.<sup>3</sup>

The opening verses in the eighth chapter of the tenth book of the *Artharvaveda* (X, 8, 1–2) begin with an invocation to *brahman*, described as a pillar (*skambha*) which holds in place heaven and earth. It is whole (*sarva*) and contains within itself a dynamic animating force, an *ātman*; it is a hidden force immanent in the world upon which everything that manifests life, that is to say, everything that breathes, moves, and blinks its eyes, depends.<sup>4</sup> This chapter’s verses equate

---

<sup>1</sup> J. Gonda, *Notes on Brahman*, Utrecht, J.L. Beyers, 1950, 40–58; see also J. Gonda, *Change and Continuity in Indian Religion*, New Delhi, 1985, 198–202.

<sup>2</sup> B. K. Smith, *Reflections on Resemblance, Ritual and Religion*, Oxford, 1989, 70–72.

<sup>3</sup> J. Gonda, *Change and Continuity in Indian Religion*, 202–4.

<sup>4</sup> *Atharvaveda*, 8, 2b: *skambha idam sarvam ātmanvad yat prāṇan nimmiṣac ca yat* and *Atharvaveda*, 8, 6: *āvīḥ sannihitaḥ guhā jaran nāma mahat padam | tatredaṃ sarvam ārpitam ejat prāṇat pratiṣṭatam*. The *ātman* is regarded in these texts as an animating, life-giving force: “everything that has an *ātman* breathes” (*Atharvaveda*, 11, 2, 10: *sarvam ātmavad prāṇat*). See Steven Collins, *Selfless Persons: Imagery and Thought in Theravāda Buddhism*, Cambridge, 1982, 50, 80–81.

*brahman* with a powerful being (*mahat yakṣam*) in the centre of the world to whom rulers offer oblations.<sup>5</sup> Like the term *brahman*, the term *yakṣa* also, according to Louis Renou, retains throughout its occurrence in Vedic texts an enigmatic, mysterious quality.<sup>6</sup> Those who know *brahman*, this *Artharvaveda* text (X, 8, 43) says, know also this mysterious *yakṣa*. They know that it is located in the body (metaphorically represented as a lotus) and that it also possesses the animating force of the *ātman*.<sup>7</sup> Renou believes that these *Artharvaveda* verses prove that the identity of *brahman* and the *ātman* is already an established fact well before the composition of the *Upaniṣads*<sup>8</sup> and he considers the term *yakṣa* to be nothing other than a “nom contourné de *l’ātmanhrahman*”.<sup>9</sup> The connections that appear to be obtained between these terms may not be precisely the kind of identity the *Upaniṣads* speak of when they refer to the identity of the individual self (*ātman*) and the ultimate ground of the cosmos (*brahman*)—the *Artharvaveda* passages reveal that both *brahman* and *yakṣa* possess *ātman* and possession is not the same kind of relationship as identity but nonetheless *Artharvaveda* (X, 73–38) indicates that there is a vital animating force embedded in the thread from which creatures are spun and through which they are all connected. Although the forms manifest in the world are multiple, the connective energy that supports the world is one.<sup>10</sup>

Knowledge of this one powerful being that is immanent in the flux of the multiple forms can be acquired through the performance of austerities (*tapas*). The *Artharvaveda* says: “The great being (*yakṣa*) in the midst of the world, behind the flux, is approached through austerities (*tapas*).”<sup>11</sup> Many scholars have pointed out that from the time of the *Ṛgveda* onward, the “heated effort” of asceticism yields insight into what had previously been hidden.<sup>12</sup> Certain Vedic rituals require the performers to engage in silent meditation, vigils by the sacrificial fire, and fasting, which generates the “heat” of *tapas*. This “heat” is produced by controlling or arresting the breath, which Mircea Eliade regards as an

<sup>5</sup> *Atharvaveda*, 8, 15b: *mahat yakṣam bhuvanasya madhye tasmai baliṃ rāṣṭabhṛto bharati*.

<sup>6</sup> L. Renou, *Études védiques et pāṇinienes*, II, Paris, 1956, 28; “Sur la notion de brahman”, *JA*, 237, 1949, 12–13.

<sup>7</sup> *Atharvaveda*, X, 8, 43: *puṇḍarīkaṃ navadvāraṃ tribhir gunebhir āvṛtam | tasmin yad yakṣam ātmanvat tad vai brahmavido viduḥ ||*

<sup>8</sup> L. Renou, *Études védiques et pāṇinienes*, 72.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, 28.

<sup>10</sup> *Atharvaveda*, X, 8, 11b: *tad dādihāra pṛthivīm viśvarūpaṃ tat sambhūya bhavaty ekam eva*.

<sup>11</sup> *Artharvaveda*, X, 7, 38a: *mahat yakṣam bhuvanasya madhye tapasi krāntaṃ salilasya pṛṣṭhe*.

<sup>12</sup> See W.O. Kalber, *Tapta Mārga: Asceticism and Initiation in Vedic India*, Delhi, 1990, 83–96.

assimilation of unorthodox yogic techniques to orthodox *brahmanic* methods. The sacrifice itself becomes assimilated to *tapas*; in the practice of asceticism, he says, the gods are offered an “inner sacrifice” in which “physiological functions take the place of libations and ritual objects”. This “interiorization” of Vedic sacrifice and ritual thus makes it possible for “even the most autonomous ascetics and mystics” to remain within the orthodox Vedic tradition.<sup>13</sup> Sacrifice and austerities are both indicated as effective ways of gaining knowledge about the great unborn *ātman* in the following passage from the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*:

“Brahmins desire to know it by recitation of the *Vedas*, by sacrifices, by charity, by austerities, and by fasting; after knowing it, one becomes a sage. Itinerant ascetics, desiring it alone as their world, wander forth.”<sup>14</sup>

This passage first mentions brahmin priests gaining knowledge in the orthodox manner by reciting the *Vedas* and offering sacrifices but it goes on to mention a different kind of religious practitioner, the itinerant wander who has renounced the complex ritual world of the Vedic specialist to concentrate upon the *ātman* alone, an indication perhaps of the process of assimilating unorthodox traditions into the orthodox brahmanical fold.

According to the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (4, 4, 12–13), the individual who recognizes his own identity with the *ātman*, becomes, by virtue of this, the maker of all things; “he is, in fact, the world (*sa u loka eva*)”. This liberating knowledge replaces the complex ritual practices through which the sacrificer constructed out of the sacrifice a divine self (*daiva ātman*) and a heavenly world for it to inhabit. Ritual action, according to the early Brahmanical texts, constructs both this self and its world.<sup>15</sup> Both the “divine self” and the “heavenly world” are particularized concepts in Vedic thought, Smith writes, “intimately linked with the particular sacrificer who fabricates them in his ritual activity”. They are not, he emphasizes, “unitary concepts” but “rather, tailored to individuals and hierarchically gauged”.<sup>16</sup> Though J.C. Heesterman has argued that in the *Upaniṣads*’ interiorization of ritual, which makes services of ritual specialists superfluous, and the institution of renunciation are the “logical conclusion” that is already implied in the classical ritual texts,<sup>17</sup> Smith’s suggestion that in the

<sup>13</sup> M. Eliade, tr. by W.R. Trask, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, Princeton, 1969, 108–112.

<sup>14</sup> 4, 4, 22: *etaṃ vedānuvacanena brāhmaṇā vividiṣanti yajñena dānena tapasā ’nāsakenaitam eva viditvā munir bhavati | etaṃ eva prāvrajino lokam icchantāḥ pravrajanti.*

<sup>15</sup> B.K. Smith, *op. cit.*, 102–3; S. Collins, *op. cit.*, 53–55.

<sup>16</sup> B.K. Smith, *op. cit.*, 112–13.

<sup>17</sup> J.C. Heesterman, “Brahmin, Ritual, and Renouncer”, in *The Inner Conflict of Tradition: Essays in Indian Ritual, Kingship, and Society*, Chicago, 1985, 39–42

*Upaniṣads* one may be witnessing “the conclusion of Vedism, not in the sense of culmination but in the sense of its destruction”, is more persuasive. He argues that the complex system of connections between phenomena that linked the human and the cosmic planes and the hierarchial distinctions maintained in Vedic ritualism are collapsed in the monistic thought of the *Upaniṣads* into “the ultimate connection: the equation of self and cosmos (without the ritual intermediary) formulated as the full equality of *ātman* and the *brahman*”.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to the “interiorization of ritual”, the early *Upaniṣads* describe other new techniques by which *ātman* and *brahman* can be known. Some of these passages seem to speak of a state of consciousness derived from the use of meditative techniques which shut down the mind’s sensory processing of external data and bring about a state of inner tranquillity. The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* appears to mention the practice of sensory withdrawal in its brief reference to the practice of “concentrating all the senses on the self”<sup>19</sup> as a means of preventing rebirth in this world. The cultivation of a tranquil, concentrated mental state, according to the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, is essential to the ascetic’s experience of seeing “self in the self”.<sup>20</sup> The *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* describes knowledge of the self as a fourth state beyond the usual states of waking, dreaming and dreamless sleep, a state which it characterizes as neither involving cognition of anything inside or outside or both, neither a (complex) mass of consciousness nor a (simple) consciousness, neither conscious nor unconscious.<sup>21</sup> This state is described twice in this text as the calming of *prapañca* (7 & 12). The term *prapañca* in this context appears to refer to a disruptive world of multiform appearance in contrast to the unified experience of self achieved in this fourth state of mind. Although the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* and the *Chāndogya Upaniṣads* suggest the use of meditative techniques for calming the mind and the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* characterizes the liberated state as the one in which calm and peace prevail over the sensory disturbances common to waking and dreaming states of mind, it is in the religious literature of the nonorthodox traditions, the Jains and the Buddhists, that we find more detailed descriptions of these techniques of sensory withdrawal. Both Jain and Buddhist literature redefine the nature of sacrifice and the qualities of a brahmin and explain differently the kind of liberating action required to cut one’s ties to the world.

---

<sup>18</sup> B.K. Smith, *op. cit.*, 193–94.

<sup>19</sup> *Chāndogya*, 8, 15: *ātmani sarvendriyāṇi sampratiṣṭhapy[a]*. Cited and discussed by J. Bronkhorst, *Two Traditions of Meditation in Ancient India*, Stuttgart, 1986, 108, 118.

<sup>20</sup> *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*, 4, 4, 23: *dānta uparatas titikṣuḥ samāhito bhūtvātmanyevātmānaṃ paśyati*.

<sup>21</sup> *Māṇḍūkya*, 7: *nāntaḥ prajñam na bahiḥprajñam nobhayamayataṃ prajñam na prajñanaghanam na prajñam nāprajñam*.

The Jain *Uttarādhyāyanasūtra* contains two stories<sup>22</sup> in which a Jain monk criticizes brahmins performing sacrificial actions. In chapter twelve of this text Harikeśa, a Jain monk born into a family of outcastes,<sup>23</sup> approaches brahmins performing a Vedic sacrifice. The text criticizes these brahmins as arrogant because of their high birth, as unchaste killers of animals, and as people who fail to restrain their senses. When asked about the right way of sacrificing, Harikeśa informs them that it involves not harming living beings, abstaining from lying and from taking what is not freely given, renouncing property, women, pride, deceit, and practising self-control. When they ask him about the oblation he offers into the fire, he responds that the practice of austerities (*tapas*) is his fire, and self-control, right exertion, and tranquillity are the oblations he offers. Chapter twenty-five tells the story of another Jain monk, Jayaghosa, who after a month's fast asks for alms from a brahmin who at first refuses his request. The Jain monk informs this brahmin that he does not know what is most important about performing a sacrifice nor does he realize the acts of a Vedic sacrifice—in which animals are tied to a pole and killed—will bring about the sacrificer's downfall. This monk defines a true brahmin as someone who does not injure living beings, take anything not given, or engage in sensual pleasures. A true brahmin, he says, renounces property and family and lives a chaste life. When the repentant brahmin offers Jayaghosa alms, he refuses to take them and instead requests that the brahmin immediately become a monk. The chapter concludes with the information that both men extinguished their *karma* through the practice of self-control and austerities. Jain texts include control over the senses' activity among the austerities which are intended to restrain all mental and physical activity. Both physical activity and mental activity create the conditions for karma, considered as a subtle form of matter, to flow into the soul and literally stain it. Ascetic practices purify the soul of this defiling stain of *karma* and, by liberating the soul from the passions of desire and hatred, prevent any further karmic influx (*āśava*). The *Sūyagadaṃgasutta* (1.7.27–30) states that a monk should control his desire for the pleasures of sense objects, remain detached even if beaten, and await death.<sup>24</sup> Another Jain text, the *Uttarādhyāyanasūtra* (32, 21–34), also traces the conditions for the influx of *karma* back to the visual organ's perception of objects; attractive objects engender desire and unattractive objects, hatred. These emotional reactions, in turn, lead to the soul's accumulation of

<sup>22</sup> H. Jacobi, *Jaina Sutras*, 2, New York, 1968, 50–56, 136–41.

<sup>23</sup> The Sanskrit term is *śvapaca* “dog-cookers” or *śvapāka* “dog-mikers” about which David White, *Myths of the Dog-Man*, Chicago, 1991, 73, says: “[T]he two poles of Indian society, the wholly pure brahmins and the wholly impure *śvapacas* or *śvapākas*, are contrasted in terms of their diet: brahmins lived by the cooked milk of their pure cows, while outcastes lived by the flesh of their impure dogs.”

<sup>24</sup> H. Jacobi, *op. cit.*, 296–97.

*karma*. Only an ascetic indifferent to visible objects remains impervious to the pain that this influx of *karma* produces. To halt this painful developmental process, this text advises restraint of the senses:

“By restraining the visual sense faculty, one brings about the restraint of attraction and aversion for pleasant and unpleasant visible forms; the action that results from this does not bind and action previously bound is destroyed.”<sup>25</sup>

What is described as “pure meditation” (*śukladhyāna*) in Jain texts not only shuts down the mind’s processing of sense data, but also shuts down all physical, verbal, and respiratory activities. Pure meditation, according to the *Sūyagaḍaṃgasutta*, is of four kinds. In the first kind of meditation, the investigating mind focuses on multiple objects, in the second, the investigating mind is one-pointed, in the third, its activity becomes subtle and in the fourth it ceases. The *Uttarādhyāyanasūtra* (29, 72) describes the third as occurring at the point when the meditator has less than a moment remaining of his life-span, when he stops all his activities and enters pure meditation in which only subtle activity remains, and from which, in the fourth kind, he does not fall back; he first stops the activity of his mind, then of his speech and body, and finally he puts a stop to breathing in and out. Bronkhorst observes that the four kinds of pure meditation can be looked upon as stages on the road to complete motionlessness and physical death. At the first stage, the mind still moves from one object to another. At the second stage, it stops doing so and comes to a standstill. The third and fourth stages are characterized by little or no physical activity. When the body and mind have been completely stilled, physical death takes place.<sup>26</sup> Along with this cessation of all activity, in the fourth stage of meditation comes the destruction of the meditator’s *karma*. “After his *karma* is destroyed”, the *Sūyagaḍaṃgasutta* (I, 7, 30) says, “he no longer engages in expanding his world”.<sup>27</sup> In these early Jain canonical texts, one finds meditative techniques, including the technique of sensory withdrawal, subordinated to the main goal: a permanent halting of all activity through a planned and carefully monitored voluntary death.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> *Uttarādhyāyanasūtra*, 29, 63: *cakkiṇḍiyaniggahem maṇunamanunnesu rūvesu rāgadosaniggahaṃ jaṇayati, tappaccaiyaṃ kammaṃ na baṃdhai, puvvabaddhaṃ ca nijjarei.*

<sup>26</sup> J. Bronkhorst, *op. cit.*, 32–34.

<sup>27</sup> *Sūyagaḍaṃgasutta*, I, 7, 30: *ñidhūya kammamṇa pavamc ’uvei.* This passage is cited and discussed in K.R. Norman, *Elders’ Verses I*, London, 1969, 204.

<sup>28</sup> On the practice of dying in meditation see P.S. Jaini, *The Jaina Path of Purification*, Berkeley, 1979, 227–40, and J. Bronkhorst, *op. cit.*, 29–31, for a translation on a relevant passage from the *Āyāraṃga*.

The Buddhists share with the Jains a similar tradition of redefining the true nature of the sacrifice but accord meditation a more prominent role in a monk's religious practice. The *Kūṭadantasutta* (D, I, 140–49) has the Buddha describe in response to the brahmin Kutadanta's questions about the most profitable of sacrifices, a series of sacrifices beginning with sacrifices in which no animals are killed and no trees cut down for the sacrificial post, and culminating in the most profitable of all sacrifices: the life of a monk of exemplary moral conduct, who is accomplished in meditation and has acquired insight into the truth of the Buddha's teachings.

In the prose prologue to the *Pūraḷāsasutta* (Sn, III, 4), the brahmin Sundarika-bharadvaja, after performing a fire sacrifice, seeks a suitable recipient for the remains of his sacrificial offerings. The Buddha rejects the notion that birth and knowledge of the *Sāvitrī mantra* makes one a brahmin and informs Sundarikabharadvaja that the sacrificial cake (*pūraḷāsa*) should be offered to those who have abandoned sensual pleasures, whose sense-faculties are well-restrained, and who wander in the world unattached:

“The Tathagata in whom there is no occasion for delusion, who perceives with insight all phenomena, who bears his last body and has reached complete awakening, unsurpassed peace-to such an extent is the purity of his being (*yakkha*)-deserves the sacrificial cake.”<sup>29</sup>

The brahmin then offers him the sacrificial cake, which he refuses saying that he does not accept food consecrated by Vedic chants. The story concludes with the brahmin seeking admission to the order. As in the Jain story, the proper sacrificial offering is not food but the act of committing oneself to the life of a monk. In this *sutta*, full of references to Vedic religion, it is possible that the term *yakkha* may be used in the sense that *yakṣa* was used in the *Artharvaveda* X, 8. One verse in the *Suttanipāta* (v.927) prohibits a monk from resorting to the type of magical practices contained in *Artharvaveda*; the composers of these verses may also have been familiar with the philosophical passages in the tenth book. The expression *yakkhassa suddhim* occurs again in the *Suttanipāta* in a somewhat different context.

The *Kahalavivādasutta* (Sn, 862–877) depicts a causal sequence which is more complex than those of the early Jain texts but which shares the same main elements: desire has its sources in pleasant sensations which, in turn, result from the visual organ's contact with a visible object. This early *sutta*, however, is less explicit about the meditative techniques that halt this development. One verse indicates that this developmental process ceases with the attainment of a medita-

---

<sup>29</sup> *Suttanipāta*, 478: *mohantarā yassa na santi keci, sabbesu dhammesu ñāṇadassī, sarīraṇ ca antimam dhāreti, patto (ca) sambodhi anuttaram sivaṃ—ettāvatā yakkhassa suddhi—tathāgato arahati pūraḷāsam.*



tive state in which visible form (*rupa*) is no longer an object of cognition. The negative and seemingly paradoxical language, which the author of this verse uses to describe this meditative state, makes any definitive interpretation of this verse difficult. Still, some tentative conclusions can be reached on the basis of what the author excludes from consideration:

“Visible form ceases for someone who has attained [a state in which there is] neither a consciousness characteristic of [normal] cognition nor of non[normal]-cognition; neither [is this state] unconscious nor has consciousness ceased to exist. Concepts characterized by development have cognition as their source.”<sup>30</sup>

This verse’s four negations deny the applicability of each of two sets of ascriptions: (1a) normal cognitive activity and (1b) abnormal cognitive activity and what I propose to interpret as (2a) a temporary cessation of cognitive activity and (2b) a permanent cessation of cognitive activity. These latter two negations exclude the possibility of this state’s resemblance to the meditative trance state of cessation (*nirodhasamāpatti*), in which all conceptual and sensory activities temporarily cease,<sup>31</sup> or to any state that occurs after death. The commentarial literature also had difficulty in interpreting this verse. The canonical *Niddesa* commentary rejects any possibility of an allusion to the four formless meditative attainments (*arūpasamāpatti*) or to the meditative attainment of cessation (*nirodhasamāpatti*) and suggests, not altogether convincingly, that the verse alludes to a meditator on the path to the formless realms (*arūpamaggasamaṅgi*, Nd, I, 280), as does Buddhaghosa’s commentary, the *Paramatthajotikā* (II, 553). The commentarial literature’s difficulties with this *sutta* extend also to interpretation of the expression *yakkhassa suddhim* in the two verses that follow.<sup>32</sup>

“What we have asked, you have answered. We would like to ask you something else. Tell us: Do some learned people say that, here, such purity of being is the best or do they say that something else [is better] than this? Some learned people say that, here, such purity of being is the best. But some of them, who claim expertise in the ‘remainderless’, speak about extinction<sup>33</sup> as [the highest].”

<sup>30</sup> *Suttanipāta*, 874: *na saññasaññi na visaññasaññi no pi asaññi na vibhūtasaññi, evaṃsametassa vibhoti rūpaṃ, saññānidānā hi papañcasaṃkhā.*

<sup>31</sup> P.J. Griffiths, *On Being Mindless*, La Salle, 1986, 1–41, discusses at length the attainment of this state in the Theravada Buddhist tradition.

<sup>32</sup> *Suttanipāta*, 875: *yan tam apucchimha, akittayī no, aññaṃ taṃ pucchāma, tad iṃgha brūhi: ettāvat’ aggam no vadanti h’eke yakkhassa suddhim idha paṇḍitāse, udāhu aññaṃ pi vadanti ettho. Suttanipāta, 876: ettāvat’ aggam pi vadanti h’eke yakkhassa suddhim idha paṇḍitāse, tesam pun’eke samayaṃ vadanti anupādisese kusalā vadānā.*

<sup>33</sup> The *Niddesa* (I, 282) glosses the term *samaya* as calming (*sama*, *upasama*, *vūpasama*) and cessation (*nirodha*) and indicates that this takes place after death. The verse may refer to the Jain practice of meditation to death and suggests an alternative derivation from the root *śam* “to calm, to be extinguished” for the Jaina Prakrit tenn *samaya*, usually derived from the root *i* plus the preverb *sam* and translated by equanimity. Jaini, 221, notes that the derivation of the term from the root *i* “to go” is not clear.

Although the term *yakkha* in the masculine gender ordinarily refers to a non-human being (*amanussa*), the *Niddesa* (1, 280) interprets the phrase *yakkhassa suddhim* as referring to the purity of a human being. In an obvious attempt to explain away the problematical occurrence of the word *yakkha* in this verse, the *Niddesa* commentator glosses this word with a list of stock synonyms for human being.<sup>34</sup> Ñāṇananda’s translation of this expression as “purity of the soul” may be based upon the *Niddesa*’s inclusion of the word *jīva* in this list. He proceeds to argue that in these verses “the wise men” (used ironically, he adds), who “identify the aforementioned paradoxical state as the highest purity of the soul”, represent the Upaniṣadic tradition.<sup>35</sup> While the Buddha and immediate disciples may have been aware of the teachings of the early *Upaniṣads*,<sup>36</sup> Ñāṇananda in translating *jīva* as “soul” disregards the fact that the *Niddesa* passage clearly uses the term *jīva* in the sense of living being. What then might *yakkhassa suddhim* mean in this context? Previous translations of the verse in which this problematic expression occurs have relied upon the *Niddesa*.<sup>37</sup> But in the case of this verse, the commentary may not be helpful. The context of these verses indicates the topic under discussion is the meditative technique of sensory withdrawal. This suggests that the expression might be better interpreted as referring to the purity of the senses. If the *y* of *yakkhassa* is taken as a *sandhi* consonant placed between the final vowel of the preceding word *eke* and the initial vowel of *akkhassa* for euphonic reasons, the phrase then becomes *akkhassa suddhim*, “the purity of the visual sense”. This seems to be the way

<sup>34</sup> *Niddesa*, I 280: *yakkhassa ti | sattassa narassa māṇavassa possassa puggalassa jīvassa jagussa jantussa indagussa manujassa | suddhim ti visuddhim*.

<sup>35</sup> Ñāṇananda, *Concept and Reality*, Kandy, 1971, 123–25.

<sup>36</sup> L.M. Joshi, *Discerning the Buddha*, New Delhi, 1983, 49–52, argues for dating the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* and the *Chāndogya* circa 500 BC and the remaining nine early Upaniṣads circa 400–200 BC.; cf. Bronkhorst, *op. cit.*, 108–116. But K.R. Norman in “A note on Ātta in the Alagaddūpama Sutta”, *Studies in Indian Philosophy: A Memorial Volume in Honour of Pandit Sukhlaji Sanghvi*, Ahmedabad, 1981, 19–29, and in “Aspects of early Buddhism”, *Earliest Buddhism and Madhyamaka*, ed. by D. Seyfort Ruegg & L. Schmithausen, Leiden, 1990, 24, and R. Gombrich, “Recovering the Buddha’s Message”, *Earliest Buddhism and Madhyamaka*, 13–20, have uncovered references in Buddhist *suttas* to teachings now preserved in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* and *Chāndogya* Upaniṣads.

<sup>37</sup> cf. Nyanaponika, *Sutta-Nipāta*, Konstanz, 1955, 55: “des Menschen Reinheit”; L. Gomez, “Proto-Madhyamika in the Pali Canon”, *EW*, 26, 1976, 146: “cleansing of the spirit” and H. Saddhatissa, *The Sutta-Nipāta*, London, 1985, 103: “purification of the individual being”. K.R. Norman, *The Group of Discourses (Sutta-Nipāta)*, London, 1984, 145: “the supreme purity of the individual”.

some Chinese translators dealt with the problematic term *yakkha* or *yakṣa*.<sup>38</sup> One might then translate the two verses in this way:

“What we have asked, you have answered. We would like to ask you something else. Tell us: Do some learned people say that, here, such purity of visual sense is the best or do they say that something else [is better] than this? Some learned people say that, here, such purity of the visual sense is the best. But some of them, who claim expertise in the ‘remainderless’, speak about extinction as (the highest).”

These two verses, interpreted in this way, suggest that the Buddha rejects as the goal of religious practice both a temporary restraint of the senses and a permanent “purified” state that occurs after an ascetic’s death. His remarks about people who claim to be experts about a ‘remainderless’ state that occurs after death, about which they could not possibly have any direct experience, are clearly intended to be ironic. This *sutta* concludes that the sage who examines and understands these people’s reliance on speculative views is released from such views, does not enter factional disputes, and seeks neither rebirth nor death (Sn, 877). Both verses may refer to Jain practitioners.

The Buddha further criticizes this practice of restraining the senses in the *Indriyabhāvanāsutta* (M, III, 298ff). Here, the student Uttara explains, at the Buddha’s request, that his meditation instructor, Pārāsariya, teaches that when the senses are restrained, the visual sense organ does not perceive visible objects. The Buddha replies sarcastically that the blind have mastered that practice since

---

<sup>38</sup> A.F. Rudolf Hoernle, *Manuscript Remains of Buddhist Literature Found in Eastern Turkestan*, 1, Oxford, 1916, 34, comments: “The presence of the epithet *yakkhassa* in verse 10b of the Pāli version is puzzling. Buddha could not with any propriety be called a Yaksha, particularly in a hymn in his praise. The Chinese translation which says “who has the highest eyes” supplies the solution. The Sanskrit original must have had the word *akṣaya*, eye”. He concludes that “The Pāli *yakkhassa*, therefore, is clearly *akkhassa* with an initial euphonic *y*, just as we have it in *na yimassa*, *yāci eva*, *kiñci yittham*, etc.” cf. Bhikṣu Thich Minh Chau, *The Chinese Madhyama Āgama and the Pāli Majjhima Nikāya*, Saigon, 1964, 190–91. But E. Waldschmidt, *The Varṇasatam: A Eulogy of One Hundred Epithets of Lord Buddha spoken by the Gr̥hapati Ūpāli(n)*, Göttingen, 1979, 15, disagrees: “Today, a translator would not be shocked by epithets based on popular religious conceptions and assigned to the Buddha as a superhuman being.” He concludes that the Chinese translator replaced such an epithet. He adds in a note page 14: “Hoernle’s scruples do not pain Buddhaghosa who assigns qualities of a Yakṣa to the Buddha: *yakkhā ti ānubhāvadassanaṭṭhena adissamānakaṭṭhena vā bhagavā yakkho nāma ten’āha yakkhassa*. Oskar von Hinüber, “Upāli’s Verses in the Majjhimanikāya”, in L.A. Hercus, ed., *Indological and Buddhist Studies*, Delhi, 1984, 249, suggests another possibility: the explanation of (*anuttara*) *cakṣus*: *yakṣaya* may originate from a confusion of the Kharoṣṭhi *akṣaras ya-* and *a-* and leading to *akṣasa* interpreted as ‘eye’. It is also possible that *yakkha*, coupled here with the expression *āhuneyyassa* “worthy of the oblation”, may refer to the term as used in *Atharvaveda*, X, 8.

their visual organs see no visible forms! The best cultivation of the senses (*anuttarā indriyabhāvanā*), he says, involves being mindful of the arising of pleasant sensations, etc., and understanding their constructed, dependently originated nature; this practice culminates in equanimity (*upekkha*). The practitioner remains unaffected by the pleasurable sensations that arise, just as a lotus leaf remains unaffected by drops of water. This meditative practice differs from that discussed in the Jain *Uttarādhyayanāsūtra* (32:34, 106), primarily in that an intellectual analysis of the origination of pleasant sensations is incorporated into the meditative practice. Several verses in the Theragāthā, however, suggest that earlier Buddhist meditative practices did not include this intellectual analysis. In these verses (vv.726–34), Pārāsariya advocates restraining the senses as a means of preventing the pain that results from the desire that arises when one sees attractive objects.<sup>39</sup>

The purification of the senses according to another *Majjhima Nikāya sutta* (I, 296) occurs in the meditative trance state of cessation. In this state, they are inactive and thus “pure”. Buddhaghosa explains, in his commentary on this *sutta* (II, 352), that the sense organs’ contact with their objects “pollutes” them and diminishes their natural clarity.<sup>40</sup> In this instance also, the practice of restraining the senses involves a temporary cessation of cognitive activity. In the meditative state described in verse 874 of the *Kalahavivādasutta* no cognitive activity associated with visual objects exists, yet some conscious activity still persists. But what kind of conscious activity might this be? A passage from the *Udāna* (71), which links the non-cognition of visual objects (*arūpa-saññī*) with the elimination of discursive thoughts (*vitakka*), suggests the possibility that this meditative state may be one from which discursive thinking has been eliminated. This possibility receives some support from the explanation of cognitive activity in the *Madhupiṇḍikasutta* (M, I, 108–114), in which Kaccāna comments on the Buddha’s brief remarks about avoiding disputes by not clinging to the source (*nidāna*) from which concepts and cognitions characterized by development (*papañcasaññasāṅkhā*) proceed. These brief remarks of the Buddha recall, in general, the subject matter of the *Kalahavivāda-sutta* and, in particular, its message that “concepts characterized by development have perception as their source” (*saññānidāna hi papañcasāṅkhā*). The *Majjhima Nikāya* passage (I, 111–112) reads:

“Visual consciousness arises in dependence upon the eye and visible form; the conjunction of the three is contact. With contact as its condi-

<sup>39</sup> The *Theragāthā* gives his name as Pārāpariya but Norman, *Elders’ Verses I*, 134, notes that the confusion *p/s* arose from the similarity of the two letters in the Brahmī script, and says, page 228, that the commentary identifies this monk with the meditation teacher mentioned in the *Indriyabhāvanāsutta*.

<sup>40</sup> Griffiths, *op. cit.*, 7–12, translates and discusses Buddhaghosa’s comments.

tion, sensation [arises]. What one senses, one perceives; what one perceives, one reflects upon; what one reflects upon, one expands conceptually. What one expands conceptually is the basis from which ideas and perceptions [associated with] conceptual proliferation assail a human being, with regard to past, future, and present forms cognizable by the eye.”<sup>41</sup>

A second explanation (M, I, 112), employing much the same terminology but a different format, directly follows the first. When the eye, visible form, and visual consciousness exist, it is said, one will recognize the manifestation of contact; when the manifestation of contact exists, one will recognize the manifestation of sensation; when the manifestation of sensation exists, one will recognize the manifestation of perception; when the manifestation of perception exists, one will recognize the manifestation of reflection; and finally, when the manifestation of reflection occurs, one will recognize the manifestation of ideas and perceptions [associated with] conceptual proliferation.

Kaccāna explains the source of these disruptive concepts and cognitions as a sequence, which begins with visual consciousness arising in dependence upon the visual sense and visible objects, followed by sensations arising from that contact, cognitions, discursive thinking, and ending finally with conceptual development. The distinction of subject and object takes place when the sense object contacts the mind (*manas*). After the mind becomes involved and proceeds to organize the sense data, various sensations and cognitions arise based upon the mental apprehension of that object’s features. These explanations of cognition seem to suggest a sequence of causal conditions, each one, in some way, a necessary condition for the occurrence of the one that follows. Given the manner in which the second explanation is phrased, one might assume a temporal sequence: the manifestation of one condition arising prior to that of another. But this is not how Buddhaghosa interprets the passage in the *Majjhima Nikāya-Aṭṭhakathā* (I, 77). Visual consciousness arises, he says, in dependence upon the eye’s sensitivity as the support (*nissaya*) and on visible form as the object (*arammana*). Contact, sensation and perception arise at the same time as visual consciousness. Reflection arises immediately after visual consciousness. Conceptual proliferation (*papañca*) associated with the door of visual perception arises in dependence upon all the preceding causal conditions: the eye, visible form, contact, sensation, perception, and reflection. It arises simultaneously with the cognitive stage of full cognition or impulsion (*javana*). Discursive thinking is

---

<sup>41</sup> M, I, 111–112: cakkum cāvuso, ca paṭicca rūpe ca uppajjati cakkhuvīññāṇaṃ, tiṇṇaṃ saṅgati phasso, phassapaccayā vedanā, yaṃ vedeti taṃ sañjānāti, yaṃ sañjānāti taṃ vitakketi, yaṃ vitakketi taṃ papañceti, yaṃ papañceti tato nidānaṃ purisaṃ papañcasaññāsankhā samudācaranti atītanāgatapaccuppannesu cakkhuvīññeyyesu rūpesu.

the connecting link between this cognitive activity and the subsequent activity of conceptual development; and it is conceptual development that leads to the creation of new *karma*, new bonds to the cycle of birth and death.

Ñāṇananda identifies three stages in this first explanation of cognition. Analyzing its grammatical structure, he points out that the process is described impersonally until the arising of sensation. The third person endings of the verbs, beginning with “one senses” and ending with “one conceptually expands”, he suggests, imply deliberate activity. The last stage, he says, seems “no longer a mere contingent process, nor is it an activity deliberately directed, but an inexorable subjection to an objective order of things”.<sup>42</sup> David Kalupahana, commenting on Ñāṇananda’s thesis, notes that this impersonal pattern follows the general formula of causation: “when this exists, that exists or comes into existence (*imasmim sati idaṃ hoti*)”.<sup>43</sup> From the shift in tone from impersonal to personal, he concludes that immediately after sensation the process of perception becomes one between subject and object. This marks the intrusion of the ego consciousness (*ahaṃkāra*), which thereafter shapes the entire process of perception, culminating in the generation of conceptual proliferation (*papañca*).

Ñāṇananda’s analysis reveals significant differences in the pattern of the *sutta*’s formulation of stages in the cognitive process, though the fact that the grammatical structure of the passage abruptly changes from impersonal to personal may reflect the compiler’s juxtaposing two similar passages on cognition rather than an original unified statement. But nevertheless, given the present passage, I would analyze it somewhat differently. The impersonal pattern prevalent in the first part of the initial description of cognitive activity, and in the second description, does resemble the familiar model associated with dependent origination (*paṭiccasamutpāda*). The content of the dependent origination formula and this passage on cognition overlaps: the activity of the senses leads to contact, which in turn, brings about sensation, upon which craving depends. Regardless of the grammatical structure of the passage, it is at the point of contact, the critical link between stage one and two, that there is the bifurcating distinction of object and subject. Contact is not the physical impact between object and consciousness but an indication of the sense datum’s impact on the mind (*manas*). Once the mind becomes involved and proceeds to organize the data of the senses, the various sensations and perceptions arise. Though the activity is directed, and in that sense “deliberate”, it does not yet produce new *kamma*. The link between stages two and three is reflection, which leads to conceptual proliferation, the basis for the ideas and perceptions that assail human beings.

---

<sup>42</sup> Ñāṇananda, *Concept and Reality*, 5.

<sup>43</sup> D. Kalupahana, *Causality*, Honolulu, 1975, 122.

It is possible to identify three temporal stages in this *sutta*'s model of cognition. First, there is the contact of the eye, visible form and consciousness and the simultaneous arising of sensation and perception; second, the immediately following stage of reflection; and third, the final stage, the development of discursive ideas and concepts.

The question that verse 873 of the *Kalahavivādasutta* raises, which the Buddha answers in verse 874, and which is further explained by Kaccāna, is directly concerned with the means of getting rid of pleasure and pain, namely a meditative technique based upon curtailing the activity of the senses. Contact between sense organ and its object produces feelings based on that object's attractive or unattractive features. These feelings in turn lead to the emotional reactions of desire or aversion, which precede a person's taking some action with regard to that object. Conceptual development is then considered impure or polluted since it involves the negative emotional states of desire and aversion and is associated with the *karma* that binds one to the world. Through the restraint or purification of the senses and in particular of the visual sense (*akkhassa suddhim*), *papañca*, the disruptive world perceived and developed as a result of the unrestrained activity of the senses ceases. It is this early technique of sensory withdrawal, common to meditators both within the orthodox Vedic tradition and the unorthodox traditions of Buddhism and Jainism, that the verses 874–76 of the *Kalahavivādasutta* discuss. In the final verse of this *sutta* (v.877), the Buddha concludes that it is the wise person who refuses to become involved in disputes about which religious practice is best, who succeeds in breaking free of the cycle of birth and death. The calming (*vyūpasama*) of discursive thought and the "one-pointed" focus of mind occurs in the second of four meditative states (*jhāna*). In the first of these states, the mind has withdrawn from sense objects. Gradually, the affective content of these mental states is toned down until pure equanimity is achieved in the fourth state. The *Khaggavisāṇasutta*, of the *Suttanipāta* (v.67), identifies the practice of these meditative states as the means for relinquishing pleasure and pain.

The closeness of this relation between a meditative technique that shuts down sensory processing and the calming of conceptual development is emphasized in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (II, 161–2). Here, Sāriputta explains that the range (*gati*) of conceptual development and that of sensory bases (*ayatana*) encompasses one another. The calming of conceptual development results from the detached cessation of the sensory bases of contact. He further explains that a person who speculates on whether something remains (does not remain, both, and neither) once the sensory bases completely cease, develops concepts about something that is beyond conceptual development. In other words, the kind of discursive thinking characterized by these four logical alternatives creates the mental unrest diametrically opposed to liberation. The *Theragāthā* (vv.989- 90) records

Sāriputta as saying that by rejecting conceptual development, one attains *nibbāna*, rest from exertion.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, the Buddha, when asked on how to realize *nibbāna*, responded that one must cut off the root of what is called conceptual proliferation, namely the thought “I am” and by remaining mindful, control whatever internal desires he has (Sn, 916). In this way, one achieves the goal of inner calm (Sn, 919).<sup>45</sup>

Similar notions about conceptual development and the goal of inner calm recur centuries later in the work of the Madhyamika philosopher, Nāgārjuna. In the twenty-second chapter of his *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, he also denies that assertions couched in terms of these four alternatives apply to the Buddha. Moreover, people disturbed by the formulation and development of these concepts cannot see the Buddha:

“Those who develop concepts about the Buddha, who is unchanging [and] beyond conceptual development, are all afflicted by conceptual development [and] do not see the Buddha.”<sup>46</sup>

Nāgārjuna equates the calming of conceptual development with the peace of *nirvāṇa*: “tranquillity [is] the calming of all that is perceived, the calming of conceptual development”.<sup>47</sup> This verse suggests that for Nāgārjuna also, meditative practices that withdraw the mind from all sensory stimuli are the means for calming the mind and controlling its tendency to develop concepts. Influenced by Nāgārjuna’s writings and those of other Buddhist authors is the early Advaita text, the *Gauḍapādiyakārikā*. The first chapter of this text comments on some statements in the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*. According to the *Gauḍapādiyakārikā* (I, 17), conceptual development operates on the premise that duality between the percipient subject and the external objects of his perception is real; when the ultimate truth of non-duality is understood, this illusion ceases. The last verse (I, 29) of this chapter states that only the person who knows the soundless ‘om’, identified with the calming of duality (*dvaitasyopaśama*) is a sage.

In the second chapter, the *Gauḍapādiyakārikā* (II, 16) notes that it is the individual self (*jīva*), functioning as the percipient subject, which constructs objects,

<sup>44</sup> On *yogakhema* as “rest from exertion”, see K.R. Norman, *Elders’ Verses I*, 128, n. 32.

<sup>45</sup> On these verses, see Gomez, *op. cit.*, 147, T. Vetter, “Some Remarks on Older Parts of the Suttanipāta”, *Earliest Buddhism and Madhyamaka*, ed. by D. Seyfort Rugg & L. Schmithausen, Leiden, 1990, 45; Ñāṇananda, *op. cit.*, 31.

<sup>46</sup> *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, XX, 15: *prapañcayanti ye buddhaṃ prapañcātitaṃ avyayam | te prapañcahatāḥ sarve na paśyanti tathāgatam.*

<sup>47</sup> *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, XXV, 24ab: *sarvopalambhopaśamaṃ prapañcopśamaṃ śivaṃ.*



both external and internal. This text also associates the elimination of disruptive emotions and discursive thought with the calming of conceptual development:

“Sages detached from desire, anger, and fear, reach the *Vedas*’ other shore and experience this calming of conceptual development, which is free of discursive thinking.”<sup>48</sup>

The verse that follows recommends that one focus the mind’s attention on non-duality and, after realizing non-duality, react to the world as if one were senseless (*jaḍa*). This advice recalls the Jain tradition of meditation in which body and mind become immobilized.

This brief survey of Indian literature on the meditative practice of restraining the senses shows that it is a technique common to different religious traditions. The term *prapañca/papañca* used in these texts often refers to the world constructed on the basis of one’s sense impressions of phenomena and continually expanded through the mind’s reactions to these impressions. By stopping the flow of sense impressions, the mind becomes tranquil and all conceptual development ceases. Despite the common language used in these texts to describe their religious experiences, it is by no means certain that the experience described is itself similar.

---

<sup>48</sup> *Gauḍapādīyākārikā*, II, 35: *vītarāgabhayakrodhair munibhir vedapāragaiṃ | nirvikalpo hy ayaṃ dṛṣṭaṃ prapañcopaśamo dvayaṃ.*