

## Introduction to the Buddha's teaching regarding the mind



See MN 18 PTS: M i 108 Madhupindika Sutta: The Ball of Honey  
<http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.018.than.html> ...and listen...  
<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/audio/details?num=LOC733>

See diagram on page four...

### Opening Thought

The Buddha's teaching instructs us on how to observe phenomena in our own experience and cultivate wisdom for ourselves, it is not intended to be accepted as revelation nor is it to be regarded as philosophy, rather it is a path of personal practice, we have to try it and learn it for ourselves, changing in the process. We cannot just 'learn the Dharma'; we need to practise the Dharma.

### The Six Senses

In Buddhist teaching there are six senses, the familiar five of sight, hearing, taste, smell, touch plus the sixth which is mind. There are many ways to regard the mind, in this instance it is as a sense organ. So just as our sense of hearing comes into contact with sound objects, and our sight comes into contact with sight objects, our mind, regarded in this way comes into contact with mental objects such as memory, thoughts, daydreams, regrets, fears, hopes and so on. This concept is important for what follows, both in understanding the Buddha's teaching regarding the mind but also in that it is the first step toward seeing objects of mind as being processes, proceeding from conditions and hence subject to change, rather than as intrinsic fixed aspects of a fixed unchanging 'me' or 'I'.

### When Senses Encounter Sense Objects

#### **Sparsa-Vedana-Samjna** (contact-feeling tone-perception)

When our sense organ comes into contact (Sparsa) with a sense object, including objects of mind as indicated above, this results in a response within us called Vedana which can be either pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. Every contact results in Vedana although some, most perhaps, will be too subtle to notice particularly when our experience is busy. Our physical and mental condition, well-being or otherwise, tiredness, stress and so on can also affect the feelings that arise in any given situation.

Vedana is sometimes translated as feeling tone or hedonic (common use of the word hedonism relegates to always wanting pleasant experience) tinge, I think the Western term 'gut feel' might even help us to understand it. It is not developed emotion such as happy or sad, hopeful or despairing and for this reason the word 'feelings' can be a little misleading. Rather it is the underlying pleasant, unpleasant or neutral *tone* of our experience. It is something that we need to become familiar with through meditation.

Samjna arises from Vedana and can be considered as labelling or perception, a fundamental pre-thought 'knowing' of what we have encountered based upon our conditioning, for example cold or

hot, fear or joy, threat or safe, red or blue. This three part process cannot be divided, nor can we intervene (although it is subject to influence as we shall see later), it is our automatic, base-level response to encounters with external objects and objects of mind through the six senses.

We can regard this as our 'direct experience' or 'primary reality'.

#### Awareness Of Our Experience - Vitarka

Vitarka can be thought of as self-awareness or indeed intelligence (although Vitarka also has other applications in Buddhism). It comes from an etymological root meaning 'divided reasoning' and is that ability to step back so to speak and to be aware of our own mind, be aware of being aware and of what we are experiencing and feeling. When we are cultivating mindfulness we are developing this faculty.

Vitarka be applied in three ways, firstly to our direct experience, the Sparsa-Vedana-Samjna set. Our task in meditation is to mature our awareness of our direct experience, this is why we keep returning to the body, to the breath. Vitarka is usually immature, it is intermittent, we are often out of touch with our direct experience and 'living in our head', our aim is to mature our awareness, to make it more consistent to spend more time aware of what is really going on.

#### 'Living In Our Head' - Prapanca

Prapanca is a very important term and can be translated as mental proliferation, alienated (from our direct experience) intelligence or rumination. If Vitarka is one type of thought, one that is always positive (you cannot have too much awareness), Prapanca is a second type of thought and one and it is always negative.

This is when we are disconnected from our present experience and lost in a flurry of mental activity, worry, anxiety, plotting, rehearsing conversations, lost in regrets, running over old scenarios. It is not calm controlled thought, such as reflection, planning or focus on the task at hand.

It can be living our life as a story, a narrative, in our head, for example, "I am so rubbish at this", "I hope so and so doesn't think that I am", "what will happen when I tell them", "if I do this then that might happen and then that might happen and then..."

In short, Prapanca is being lost in the stories that we tell ourselves rather than living in relation to our direct experience. Prapanca is us trying to work out our Vedana mentally rather than by turning towards it, being with it and coming to understand it with awareness on a deeper more instinctual level. Prapanca is breadth and shallowness of experience rather than steady attention and depth. It can have an addictive quality but you cannot you cannot escape from Prapanca with more Prapanca. The more complex our experience, the more we likely we will try to make sense of it with Prapanca ("why am I having this unpleasant experience") and get caught in a spiral of mental activity which feeds back into our experience making it more complex and stressful. Hence the need to step back, be mindful, create some space.

Prapanca arises in dependence upon Vitarka (and can also draw Vitarka into its sticky web!) but we can also use Vitarka to become aware of Prapanca (this being the second application of

Vitarka) and pull ourselves back to direct experience. So this is another aspect of our meditation practice, to identify and become familiar with the difference between direct experience and Prapanca. Remembering to ask ourselves, where am I now?

Can we think of patterns of Prapanca that we habitually get caught up in? If we can catch these we are exercising Vitarka. If we can catch these we can return ourselves to direct experience (which is NOT just about 'being in the moment', wise attention includes recollection of previous experience and thoughtful attention to the future).

### A Secondary Reality

**Prapanca-Samjna-Sankha** - 'knowing together' or constructed reality

So we 'Prapancaise', and we begin to believe these habits of thought and views and to construct a reality from them, our views, prejudices, fears, hopes, form a secondary reality that can sometimes bear limited relation to our direct experience. Some of this 'reality' we imbibe from the media and society, for example, racism, consumerism, the idea that only wealth and / or fame are the only measures of a 'successful' life and so on. Some of it is more individual and we construct it for ourselves, for example, "I am better or worse than this person or than person in some way", "I'll never be able to achieve calm and absorption if meditation", "So and so thinks I am an idiot"....

What then happens is that our direct experience is contaminated by this secondary reality. So for example we encounter a situation (pause and try to think of one) that we have strong constructed (maybe partially unconscious) views about and our Vedana and perception of that experience is coloured by these views, it is distorted and so the whole cycle repeats, more Prapanca, strengthened views, reinforced constructed / secondary reality.

So this is another aspect of cultivating awareness along with becoming familiar with direct experience and of when we are stuck in Prapanca, we need to become familiar with our views and tendencies, to question them, ask ourselves how they compare to our actual experience. For example if we have a fear of certain situations, how often has that fear been realised? This is the third way in which Vitarka can be applied.

### Some Concluding Words

Coming back to primary experience may not be pleasant, in a way Prapanca can be a type of distraction (along with all the external distractions that we might turn to) but we will never get anywhere with more Prapanca, we have to identify it, cut through it and return to direct / primary experience, even when that is uncomfortable. This is one of the reasons that we also need to cultivate Metta so that we practise with kindness towards ourselves rather than judgement.

The more we come back to primary experience the more our primary experience changes, we begin to decontaminate it, to purify it. Just as if we keep returning to the breath in the MoB our experience changes, it becomes calm, even blissful. Our awareness becomes brighter, illuminated and positive, in short more like the Buddha.

Saddhabhaya March 2015

**SECONDARY /  
CONSTRUCTED REALITY**

feeds our...

