

Mindful Wisdom: The Sati-paṭṭhāna-sutta on Mindfulness, Memory, and Liberation

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The *Sati-paṭṭhāna-sutta* (The discourse on the establishing of mindfulness)¹ is among the most important and well-known early Buddhist texts, a paradigmatic teaching of Buddhist meditative practice.² In this discourse, the

¹ The *Sati-paṭṭhāna-sutta* (hereafter *SPS*) appears in the *Majjhima Nikāya* (hereafter *MN*) 10; i, 55 (the source of citations to and quoted passages from the Pali canon, here and throughout, is the Vipassana Research Institute's virtual edition, <http://tipitaka.org>; I use the citation system of the Pali Text Society's critical editions, with sutta number [if cited] followed by volume number [in roman numerals] and page number; all translations from the Pali are my own, unless noted otherwise). The *SPS* is also reproduced in the *Mahā-sati-paṭṭhāna-sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya* (hereafter *DN*) 22; ii, 290–315. In this second text, the *Sacca-vibhanga-sutta* (The exposition of the [four] truths) (*MN* 141; ii, 248) is inserted in the penultimate section of the *SPS*, in which the Buddha relates the Four Noble Truths. In the discussion below, I will be referring to the *SPS* as it appears in the *MN*, although my basic arguments apply to the *Mahā-sati-paṭṭhāna-sutta* just as well.

² I share with many other scholars the uncomfortable feeling that arises from the use of the term “early” in regard to Buddhist scriptures. Nonetheless, my basic position is that the suttas of the four major Nikāyas are relatively early—I would say, “early enough”—in the sense that they reflect Buddhist practices and ideas that were common in the second half of the first millennium BC. When I say “early” with regard to the *SPS*, I intend to convey that the major thrust of the text—and I will be dealing here with what should probably be considered as the foundational positions and structure of the sutta—represents the Buddhist tradition in the making during the last few centuries before the Christian era. My ideas in this regard are inspired by such studies as Johannes Bronkhorst, “Did the Buddha Believe in Karma and Rebirth?” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 21, no. 1 (1998): 1–7; and Alexander Wynne, “The Historical Authenticity of Early Buddhist Literature:

Buddha instructs his audience of monks on what he defines as the “one path” (*ekāyana*)³ that will lead to the full annihilation of all negative forces present in the mind and to the realization of *nibbāna*. This “one path” consists of four parallel techniques that differ with regard to the object—or, rather, the domain—toward which the meditator is instructed to direct his attention. These are the four *sati-paṭṭhānas* (*cattāro sati-paṭṭhānā*), commonly translated as the “foundations,” the “applications” or the “establishing” (*paṭṭhāna*) of “mindfulness” (*sati*).⁴ Although the way these practices are defined in the text poses some difficulty for the translator,⁵ they

A Critical Evaluation,” *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens* 49 (2005): 35–70. For a fuller elaboration on my position regarding this issue, see my “Early Meanings of Dependent-Origination,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 36 (2008): 300–302.

More specifically with regard to the *SPS*, following the suggestion of Anālayo, *Satipaṭṭhāna: The Direct Path to Realization* (Birmingham: Windhorse Publications, 2003), it seems reasonable to view “the four applications of mindfulness” as a primitive Buddhist category (16). (It is possible even that the “application of mindfulness” itself should be viewed as the primitive term, as there are instances when the Buddha speaks of mindfulness of the body alone, as in *MN* iii, 89 or in *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (*AN*) i, 43 [but, in this regard, see Collett Cox, “Mindfulness and Memory: The Scope of *Smṛti* from Early Buddhism to the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma,” in *In the Mirror of Memory: Reflections on Mindfulness and Remembrance in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism*, ed. Janet Gyatso (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 69], or passages on five *sati-paṭṭhāna*, as in *MN* iii, 221). The main reason I would support such a view is the common reference in the *Nikāyas* to the category of “the four applications of mindfulness” (e.g., *Saṃyutta Nikāya* [*SN*] v, 149; *AN* v, 55), which could be understood to relate to a general direction to be mindful of the fields of inquiry addressed by the *SPS*. Later on, the basic direction to be mindful may have been fleshed out in what became the *SPS*. If this idea is correct, it would mean that the specific meditations outlined in the *SPS* are expression of a more fundamental practice of *sati-paṭṭhāna*.

On the *SPS* as a paradigmatic teaching, Rupert Gethin states: “With the four *satipaṭṭhānas* we have the nearest thing in the four *Nikāyas* to basic general instruction in Buddhist [meditation] practice’ or ‘yoga’” (Rupert M. L. Gethin, *The Buddhist Path to Awakening* [1992; Oxford: Oneworld, 2001], 66). *Sati-paṭṭhāna* is more often than not classified as a form of *vipassanā* (insight) meditation.

³ Bhikkhu Bodhi and Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoḷi (*The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the “Majjhima Nikaya,”* trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi and Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoḷi [Boston: Wisdom Publications, in association with the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, 1995], 1188–89 n. 135) and Anālayo (*Satipaṭṭhāna*, 27–29) translate *ekāyana maggo* as the “direct path.” For a fuller discussion of this term, see Gethin, *Buddhist Path to Awakening*, 59–66. What is of major concern in these discussions is the fact that the “one path” need not necessarily be the “only path.”

⁴ *Sati-paṭṭhānas* is translated as “foundations of mindfulness” in, e.g., Bodhi and Ñāṇamoḷi, *The Middle Length Discourses*, and in John J. Holder, trans., *Early Buddhist Discourses* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006); as “applications of mindfulness” in, e.g., Cox, “Mindfulness and Memory”; and as “establishing of mindfulness” in, e.g., Gethin, *Buddhist Path to Awakening*, chap. 1.

As this paper intends to explore the meaning of *sati* in *SPS*, I translate it as “mindfulness” according to common usage. I will have more to say below about the term *paṭṭhāna*, generally accepted as being the equivalent of the Sanskrit *upasthāna*. For further discussion of the meaning of *sati-paṭṭhāna*, see Gethin, *Buddhist Path of Awakening*, 30–33; and Anālayo, *Satipaṭṭhāna*, 29–30.

⁵ The difficulty arises from the fact that the object of meditation appears twice in the sentence “. . . bhikkhu kāye kāyānupassī viharati” (followed by the same structure regarding

basically refer to specific ways of meditating on (1) the body, (2) feelings, (3) the mind, and (4) *dhammas*, in this context usually referred to as “mental objects.”⁶

Sati is the equivalent of Sanskrit *smṛti*, terms that ambiguously carry a dual, and in some ways contradictory, meaning. On the one hand, *sati/smṛti* means “memory.” On the other hand, in a very broad sense, it means “consciousness,” “awareness,” or “knowledge”—or in the more specific context of Buddhist meditation, “mindfulness.” This second meaning is generally taken to be the one at play in the *SPS* and is understood to concern a specified function: *sati* pertains to a unique ability, perhaps a potential, of the mind to be in continuous and intense contact with its object.⁷ Thus, *sati* is commonly conceived of as a highly focused examination of the present contents of experience.⁸ *Sati* as “mindfulness” may even be construed as a process of exceptionally clear and concentrated attention to “the bare object of perception.”⁹ This indeed is the sense in which the distinct meanings of *sati*—“memory” and “mindfulness”—appear to be

the three other domains). Different translators have approached this passage with their own solutions (e.g., Bodhi and Nāṇamoli, in *The Middle Length Discourses*, render it as “abides contemplating the body as a body”; Soma Thera, in “*Satipatthana Sutta*”: *The Discourse on the Arousing of Mindfulness* [<http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.010.soma.html>], translates it as “he lives contemplating the body in the body”; and Cox, in “Mindfulness and Memory,” gives it as “abides observing the feelings in the feelings” [70]). My take on this sentence reads *kayānupassī* as a *bahubbrihi* compound in the nominative singular, and thus I translate: “The monk who is an observer of the body, abides in the body” (see also my translation of the refrain in the beginning of Section I below).

⁶ The specific term chosen for *dhammā* in this context may vary (e.g., “mind-objects” in Bodhi and Nāṇamoli, *The Middle Length Discourses*, or “mental phenomena” in Holder, *Early Buddhist Discourses*), but translators are almost unanimous in believing that *dhammā* is a general term for objects of the mind. Anālayo critiques this translation and states that in this context *dhammā* are better understood as Buddhist schemes according to which one analyzes one’s experience in meditation (*Satipatthāna*, 182–83). Donald Swearer speaks of *dhammas* as being not only mental objects but also “truths” (Donald K. Swearer, *A Guide to the Perplexed: The “Satipatthāna Sutta”* [Kandy: Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1973], 18). I will have more to say about this issue below that will have much in common with Swearer’s and Anālayo’s reading of *dhammā*. Also, Cox speaks of the “ever more inclusive explanations offered” for this term in Abhidharma texts (“Mindfulness and Memory,” 74).

⁷ It should be noted that Cox distinguishes between two meanings of *sati*—as a psychological function and as a meditative technique. In this context, I will be referring mainly to the first of these two meanings, as I understand the mental capacity of *sati* to be what the meditative technique of *sati* both utilizes and attempts to enhance (“Mindfulness and Memory,” 67–68).

⁸ Such a notion of *sati* is implied by the Buddha’s treatment of *sati-paṭṭhāna* in the *Sati-paṭṭhāna-samyutta* of the *SN*; see *SN* v, 142 and v, 144.

⁹ For example, Nyanaponika Thera believes *sati-paṭṭhāna* to be a process of “bare attention,” which “consists in a bare and exact registering of the object” (*Satipatthāna: The Heart of Buddhist Meditation; A Handbook of Mental Training Based on the Buddha’s Way of Mindfulness* [York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, 1962], 30–32). See also Donald K. Swearer, “Control and Freedom: The Structure of Buddhist Meditation in the Pali Suttas,” *Philosophy East and West* 23, no. 4 (1973): 435–36; and Anālayo, *Satipatthāna*, 267.

in deepest conflict. When one is carefully aware of the present contents of experience, supposedly in a nonconceptual and noncategorical manner, he or she must be markedly suspicious of any trace of “memory.”¹⁰ *Sati* can also be interpreted in other ways, and later Buddhist meditative traditions gave *sati* technical meanings concerned with processes of attention at work in meditative concentration.¹¹

The terms “mindfulness” and “memory” relate, in this context, to psychological functions that operate in meditative practice. Interestingly, these terms have immediate correlates in scholarly discussions of religious or mystical experience.¹² Memory is akin to “construction,” or to constructivism, the approach that understands religious experience as a product of a unique cultural and linguistic setting. This approach views religious experiences as being mediated by the particular cognitive structures by which they were generated. Thus, to take an example, what the Buddhist, the Jew, and the Christian feel and understand as true and as meaningful are inherently different, and these believers’ profound religious encounters with their particular religious truths are thus distinct as well.¹³ The contrary approach says that the many different religious or mystical forms of experience are based, in fact, on one and the same truth, which is merely cloaked in the language and symbols of each particular religion. As opposed to constructivism, this approach is often called “perennialism,” intended to express the fact that all religious systems aim at the same infinite truth.¹⁴ This position also involves a strong degree of “deconstruction,” since the meanings important to any specific culture are

¹⁰ See Anālayo, *Satipaṭṭhāna*, chap. 3, esp. 46–49; Anālayo states that the characterization of *sati* in the *SPS* is distinct from the meaning of *sati* as “memory.”

¹¹ See, e.g., in Paul J. Griffiths, “Memory in Classical Indian Yogācāra,” in Gyatso, *In the Mirror of Memory*, 110–16.

¹² The problematics of the terms “religious experience” and “mystical experience” have been dealt with incisively by Matthew Kapstein, “Rethinking Religious Experience: Seeing the Light in the History of Religions,” in *The Presence of Light: Divine Radiance and Religious Experience*, ed. Matthew T. Kapstein (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). Basically, I use the term “religious experience” as an expression for the events that the Buddhist meditative practices I will be discussing bring about. In a sense, the term “mystical experience,” as it is used in the science of the study of religion, may be more applicable, but I find it farther removed from the traditions under discussion.

¹³ The constructivist position regarding “mystical experience” was most strongly articulated by Steven Katz in a number of publications, the most important of which is Steven T. Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). See also Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

¹⁴ The perennialist view of mystical experience has been summarized and defined anew by Robert K. C. Forman in his introduction, “Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting,” to *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy*, ed. Robert K. C. Forman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). See also Robert K. C. Forman, “What Does Mysticism Have to Teach Us?” in *Models of the Self*, ed. Shaun Gallagher and Jonathan Shear (Exeter, UK: Imprint Academic, 1999).

discovered to lack true foundation and to be valueless images beside the ultimate perennial reality.¹⁵

At first glance, the Buddhist notion of “mindfulness”—as it is commonly understood—although distinct from perennial forms of understanding that are better suited to theistic traditions, has much in common with these systems. Mindfulness supposedly allows one to subvert the common structuring of cognition and hence affords a vision of “things as they are.” True mindfulness is understood to generate a unique and intense appreciation of all that appears in the mind prior to its appropriation by conditioned forms of understanding. Mindfulness takes in what is naturally there, before it is incorporated into the false or limited notions of truth appreciated by daily life. It is thought of as a form of perceptual therapy that deconditions the all-too-obvious and inherently painful normal human perception.

Thus, the question of the nature of mindfulness and of its relation to memory—again, meanings that are suggested by both the Pali *sati* and the Sanskrit *smṛti*—proves to be a question about the nature of early Buddhist meditative experience as well. An understanding of mindfulness will help us better appreciate the goals and dynamics of early Buddhist notions of practice, experience, and liberation.

A number of scholars have commented on the interrelated meaning of memory and mindfulness with regard to *sati* in the *SPS*.¹⁶ Nonetheless, none of these studies proceeded to elaborate on what this deep convergence between memory and mindfulness teaches us about early Buddhist notions of consciousness. This, then, is the first aim of this study: to examine carefully what the *SPS* tells us about the nature of *sati* and the

¹⁵ Paul J. Griffiths, in his essay “Pure Consciousness in Indian Buddhism” (in Forman, *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*), has outlined a perennialist approach to Buddhist religious experience. Although Griffiths is uncertain whether pure-consciousness events were sought after in the Indian Buddhist tradition, he does believe that this tradition cherished and sought a state of unmediated consciousness or unstructured awareness. Roger J. Corless, in “Parables of Deconstruction in the *Lotus Sūtra*” (in *The Innate Capacity: Mysticism, Psychology, and Philosophy*, ed. Robert K. C. Forman [New York: Oxford University Press, 1998]), has offered what can be considered a paradigmatic case for a Buddhist deconstructivist and perennialist position. Although Corless discusses a tradition that is far removed from the one under discussion in my essay, the structure of his reading is applicable to other Buddhist traditions as well. Once one deconstructs reality, truth (in this case, Buddha-nature) emerges (in Corless’s discussion of the *Lotus Sūtra*, the truth is then deconstructed as well). For a reading in tune with the perennialist approach to liberation ingrained in the early Buddhist tradition, see Peter Harvey, *The Selfless Mind: Personality, Consciousness and Nirvāṇa in Early Buddhism* (Richmond, UK: Curzon, 1995), chaps. 11, 12.

¹⁶ See Gyatso, *In the Mirror of Memory*, 6, 13–15; Cox, “Mindfulness and Memory,” 67–68; Gethin, *Buddhist Path to Awakening*, 36–44. See also Paul Griffiths, “Concentration or Insight: The Problematic of Theravāda Buddhist Meditation Theory,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 49, no. 4 (1981): 614; and Edward Fitzpatrick Crangle, *The Origin and Development of Early Indian Contemplative Practices* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1994).

role memory plays in the functioning of consciousness. Such a definition will further allow us to examine the role *sati* plays in the Buddhist path to awakening, as conceived of in the Pali Nikāyas. Specifically, I will suggest that the understanding of *sati* that will be developed in the following pages provides an opportunity to grasp how early Buddhists—here, I mean primarily the “authors” of the *SPS* and possibly, to some extent, even the Buddha himself—viewed the relation between the deep, meditative concentration (primarily, *jhāna* or *samādhi*) and wisdom (*pañña*), the insights embodied by the central Buddhist teachings, most important, those of the Four Noble Truths.¹⁷ Once this synthesis between concentration and wisdom is achieved, we will be able to reach new conclusions about the nature of the religious experience revered by the authors of the *SPS*.

Early Buddhist literature is notorious for having been reworked through the centuries, so we are normally presented with “archaeological” strata in need of philological excavation.¹⁸ Although I agree that this probably is the textual reality of the *SPS*, my methodology will proceed along a different course. Rather than attempting to trace the historical development of the text and contextualize its different strata in their true historical context, I will assume that at least at the time of the “composition” of the text—at the date it achieved the form we are familiar with today—it was coherent to the people who put it together and to those who continued to study it. Thus, I will be relating to the *SPS* as a unified, integrated, and coherent document. With the aim of developing a clear interpretation of the way the authors or compilers of the *SPS* viewed *sati*, I will refrain from citing different materials from the Pali canon in order to clarify the statements made in the *SPS* itself. Since these passages are likely to generate more or less equal measures of confusion and clarity, I will leave allusions to such relevant passages to discussions conducted in the footnotes.¹⁹ I will thus proceed by analyzing the meditations described in the *SPS*, specifi-

¹⁷ In this sense, I hope I will be answering the call made by Johannes Bronkhorst, in *Two Traditions of Meditation in Ancient India* ([1993; Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2000], 128), to continue beyond philology and utilize a different approach in understanding the character of early Buddhist meditation.

¹⁸ For a definition of the problem and the different positions that have been adopted with regard to it in scholarly literature, see Lambert Schmithausen, preface to *Panels of the Seventh World Sanskrit Conference*, vol. 2, *Earliest Buddhism and Madhyamaka*, ed. David S. Ruegg and Lambert Schmithausen (Kinderhook, NY: E. J. Brill, 1990).

¹⁹ Anālayo, in *Satipaṭṭhāna*, relates to the Chinese *Āgama* versions of the *SPS*, listing the meditations that appear in the Chinese version and that are absent from the Pali one (see 120–21). There are clearly significant variations between the texts, which may offer valuable information regarding the historical evolution of the text. These variations do not, however, affect the line of analysis I pursue here. Rather, the meditations listed in the Chinese versions appear to be further examples of the same principles I will be defining with regard to the *SPS*.

cally emphasizing the question of whether they are better classified as “mindfulness” or as “memory.”

I. THE *SATI-PAṬṬHĀNA-SUTTA*'S INSTRUCTIONS FOR MEDITATION

The first six meditations recorded in the *SPS*²⁰ involve the observation of the body (*kāyānupassana*), beginning with the *ānāpāna* meditation, which focuses on the breath:

Here a bhikkhu, gone to the forest or to the root of a tree or to an empty hut, sits down; having folded his legs crosswise, set his body erect, and established mindfulness in front of him, ever mindful he breathes in, mindful he breathes out. Breathing in long, he understands “I breathe in long”; or breathing out long, he understands “I breathe out long”; breathing in short, he understands “I breathe in short”; or breathing out short, he understands “I breathe out short.” He trains thus: “I shall breathe in experiencing the whole body”; he trains thus: “I shall breathe out experiencing the whole body.” He trains thus: “I shall breathe in tranquilizing the body formations”; he trains thus: “I shall breathe out tranquilizing the body formations.”²¹

Aside from the fact that this meditation is clearly concerned with a conscious monitoring of breathing, it is difficult to determine the precise nature of the meditation. Evidently, *ānāpāna* demands an intense awareness of what happens in the body and, most significantly, of the process of breathing itself. This is an important point to note: *ānāpāna* meditation obviously involves a substantial degree of “mindfulness.” At the same time, it is not completely obvious whether this meditation contains conceptual elements. For instance, when one “understands [*pajānāti*; possibly better, “knows”] ‘I breathe in long,’” it is difficult to discern whether he knows this fact conceptually or, rather, whether he is simply aware of the long in-breath he is taking.²² In any case, a principle of grace is in order

²⁰ Traditionally, the last set of meditations (the “nine charnel ground” meditations [*navasīvathikā*]) is counted as nine meditations, and hence fourteen meditations of the body are listed (see, e.g., Bodhi and Nāṇamoḷi, *The Middle Length Discourses*, 1190 n. 139). In our context, I prefer to consider them as one.

²¹ Bodhi and Nāṇamoḷi, *The Middle Length Discourses*, 145–46. “idha, bhikkhave, bhikkhu araṇṇa-gato vā rukkha-mūla-gato vā suñṇāgāra-gato vā nisīdati, pallaṅkaṃ ābhujitvā, uḷḷaṃ kayam paṇidhāya, parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā. so satova assasati, satova passasati. diḡham vā assasanto ‘diḡham assasāmi’ ti pajānāti, diḡham vā passasanto ‘diḡham passasāmi’ ti pajānāti, rassaṃ vā assasanto ‘rassaṃ assasāmi’ ti pajānāti, rassaṃ vā passasanto ‘rassaṃ passasāmi’ ti pajānāti, ‘sabba-kāya-paṭisaṃvedī assasissāmi’ ti sikkhati, ‘sabba-kāya-paṭisaṃvedī passasissāmi’ ti sikkhati, ‘passambhayaṃ kāya-saṅkhāraṃ assasissāmi’ ti sikkhati, ‘passambhayaṃ kāya-saṅkhāraṃ passasissāmi’ ti sikkhati.”

²² The *Ānāpāna-sati-sutta* of the *MN* elaborates on the practice of “mindfulness of breathing.” To the instructions presented by the *SPS* are added a number of observations to be carried

regarding our appraisal of this meditation, which may be considered an application of forceful meditative concentration on breathing and its functioning in the body. The same is true regarding the next two meditations listed by the sutta. In the next meditation, the practitioner “understands accordingly however his body is disposed”—specifically, when he is walking, standing, sitting, or lying down. In the following meditation, he “acts in full awareness” (*sampajāna-kārī hoti*) with regard to a long list of bodily actions, such as where he is going and directing his gaze, when he is eating or drinking, and when he is disposing of urine or feces.²³

Following the description of each of the sutta’s meditations, there appears a passage that describes the quality of the meditative vision involved (a “refrain”). This standardized passage seems naturally connected to the three meditations just outlined, which surely involve a true quality of “mindfulness”:

Thus he abides in the body, deeply observing [*anupassī*] the body inwardly. He abides in the body, deeply observing the body outwardly. He abides in the body, deeply observing the body inwardly and outwardly. He abides in the body deeply observing the events [*dhamma*] that arise. He abides in the body deeply observing the events that cease. He abides in the body deeply observing the events that arise and cease. Or the mindfulness “there is a body” is established for him, in the right extent of knowledge, in the right extent of awareness [*patissati*]. And he abides unsupported, without depending on anything in the world. That, monks, is how a monk abides in the body deeply observing the body.²⁴

This passage, too, poses many questions regarding the precise meaning of its descriptions. Particularly vague is the statement that the meditator is

out while one is breathing in or breathing out. For example, the meditator should breathe in and out “while experiencing rapture” (*pīti-paṭisaṃvedī*) or “pleasure” (*sukha-paṭisaṃvedī*). Next, the meditator will breathe in and out “experiencing the mind” (*citta-paṭisaṃvedī*), “gladdening the mind” (*abhippamodayaṃ cittaṃ*), “concentrating the mind” (*samādaha cittaṃ*), and “liberating the mind” (*vimocayaṃ cittaṃ*). Interestingly, the final set of instructions involve components that seem to demand conceptual understanding; the meditator is guided to breathe in and out while “observing impermanence” (*aniccānupassī*) and, further, observing “dispassion” (*viragā*; in Bodhi and Nāṇamoḷi, *The Middle Length Discourses*, “fading away” [944]), “cessation” (*nirodha*), and “relinquishment” (*paṭinissagga*) (*MN* 118; iii, 180).

²³ “puna caparaṃ, bhikkhave, bhikkhu gacchanto vā ‘gacchāmi’ ti pajānāti, ṭhito vā ‘ṭhitomhī’ ti pajānāti, nisinno vā ‘nisinnomhī’ ti pajānāti, sayāno vā ‘sayānomhī’ ti pajānāti. yathā yathā vā panassa kāyo pañihito hoti tathā tatha naṃ pajānāti.”

²⁴ “iti ajjhataṃ vā kāye kāyānupassī viharati, bahiddhā vā kāye kāyānupassī viharati, ajjhata-bahiddhā vā kāye kāyānupassī viharati; samudaya-dhammānupassī vā kāyasmim viharati, vaya-dhammānupassī vā kāyasmim viharati, samudaya-vaya-dhammānupassī vā kāyasmim viharati. ‘atthi kāyo’ ti vā panassa sati paccupaṭṭhitā hoti, yāvad eva nāṇa-mattāya paṭissati-mattāya anissito ca viharati, na ca kiñci loke upādiyati. evam pi kho bhikkhave, bhikkhu kāye kāyānupassī viharati.”

“deeply observing the body inwardly” and/or “outwardly.”²⁵ It is also not apparent what exactly is meant by the observation of all *dhammas* that pass in the body as they arise and cease. *Dhammas* in this sense could be minute details of bodily processes, such as minuscule movements of the diaphragm, or they could be more general objects, such as the course of breathing as a whole. In any case, it is evident that this stock passage follows the description of the sutta’s meditations in order to enhance the notion of “mindfulness.” The passage strengthens the idea that the meditative space developed by these practices involves a careful and vigilant alertness to corporeal reality at any specific moment, creating an intense state of awareness and presence.²⁶

The role of the stock passage on “mindfulness” is less obvious with regard to the next meditation narrated in the text:

And also, monks, the monk considers this very body, from the soles of his feet upward, from the crown of his head and downward, and to the edge of his skin, as full of many sorts of uncleanness: in this body—the hairs of the head, bodily hairs, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, marrow, kidney, heart, liver, diaphragm, spleen, lungs, intestines, mesentery, stomach, feces, bile, phlegm, blood, sweat, fat, tears, saliva, snot, cartilage.²⁷

Some fundamental questions about this passage demand our attention: Must the body necessarily be seen “as full of many sorts of uncleanness”? Is this the only truthful way to look at the body? Could not the body be seen as a form of beauty, its workings awe-inspiring and amazing? Does not our spleen, for instance, produce a sense of true aesthetic wonder and inspiration? The answer supplied by the authors of the *SPS* to this set of questions is absolute: the body is ugly. There is a very

²⁵ Bodhi and Ñāṇamoḷi and Anālayo all translate this as “internally and externally” (*The Middle Length Discourses*, 146); Gethin renders it as “within and without” (*Buddhist Path to Awakening*, 53–54). My translation follows Cox, “Mindfulness and Memory,” 71.

²⁶ Note that in the *Kāya-gatā-satī-sutta* (Mindfulness intent on the body), the same meditations regarding the body are listed, but they are not followed by the refrain that appears in the *SPS*. Instead, the meditations are followed by a shorter passage, which states: “Thus he abides vigilant, ardent, and resolute, and his memories and intentions that depend on the household life diminish. Once they diminish, his mind stabilizes inwardly, becomes calm, unifies, and concentrates. Thus, monks, a monk develops mindfulness intent on the body” (“tassa evaṃ appamattassa ātapino pahitattassa viharato ye geḥa-sitā sara-saṅkappā te pahīyanti tesam pahānā ajjhattam eva cittaṃ santiṭṭhati sannisīdati ekodi hoti samādhīyati. evaṃ, bhikkhave, bhikkhu kāya-gatā-satīṃ bhaveti”) (*MN* 119; iii, 88).

²⁷ “puna ca paraṃ bhikkave bhikku imam eva kāyaṃ uddham pāda-talā adho kesa-matthakā taca-pariyantaṃ pūra-nāna-ppakārassa asicuno paccavekkhati: atthi imasmim kāye kesā lomā nakhā dantā taca mamsaṃ nahāru atthi atthimiñjā vakkam hadayaṃ yakanam kilomakam pihakam papphāsam antam antagunaṃ udariyaṃ karisaṃ pittaṃ semham pubbo lohitaṃ sedo medo assu vasā kheḷo siṅghānikā lasikā muttan’ti.”

specific way in which the body is best viewed, particularly on the path to *nibbāna*. The seeing of the body as unclean may not be an end in itself, as such a view probably is intended to produce a realization of impermanence and suffering. Nonetheless, this vision of the body is strikingly negative, and the realizations this stance will generate rely on a particular and subjective notion of truth.

Even if we grant that the body *is* unclean, we must ask if the consideration of the body as unclean or impure is rightfully described as an instance of “mindfulness.” In essence, “seeing as” is far removed from “mindfulness.” Rather, “seeing as” is more connected with an implementation of memory: one sees according to an understanding developed in the past. This practice suggests that we are involved in more than a careful monitoring experience—indeed, in a shaping of vision so that it will correspond to the contents of a specific Buddhist “memory.”

The conceptual manipulation in operation during the observation of the body intensifies with the next meditation:

Again, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu reviews this same body, however it is placed, however disposed, as consisting of elements thus: “In this body there are the earth element, the water element, the fire element, and the air element.”²⁸

No less significant is the image the Buddha supplies in order to illustrate his intention:

Just as though a skilled butcher or his apprentice had killed a cow and was seated at the crossroads with it cut up into pieces; so too, a bhikkhu reviews this same body . . . as consisting of elements thus: “In this body there are the earth element, the water element, the fire element, and the air element.”²⁹

The example sets the emotional tone of the meditation. Just as the butcher must suppress his care for the animal, so too must the meditator deny any affection he has for his body. “Analyzing himself as consisting of the four great elements, images of meat and blood will now appear. Possibly, the meditator may even envision the butcher applying the knife to his personal body and will scorn himself for shrinking from such a thought. Presum-

²⁸ Bodhi and Ñāṇamoḷi, *The Middle Length Discourses*, 148. “puna capāraṃ, bhikkhave, bhikkhu imam eva kāyaṃ yathā-ṭhitam yathā-pañhitam dhātuso paccavekkhati—‘atthi imasmim kāye pathavī-dhātu āpo-dhātu tejo-dhātu vāyo-dhātu’ti.’”

²⁹ Ibid. “seyyathāpi, bhikkhave, dakkho go-ghātako vā go-ghātakantevāsi vā gāvim vadhitvā catu-mahā-pathe bilaso vibhajitvā nisinno assa. evam-eva kho, bhikkhave, bhikkhu imam eva kāyaṃ yathā-ṭhitam yathā-pañhitam dhātuso paccavekkhati—‘atthi imasmim kāye pathavī-dhātu āpo-dhātu tejo-dhātu vāyo-dhātu’ti.’”

ably, he will eventually grow indifferent to the body and become disenchanted. But then, we must note, he is not just neutrally scrutinizing his body according to the scheme of the four elements. Rather, he is adopting a position with a very specific idea of what corporeal existence is about.

The final meditation directed at the body by far exceeds anything we have seen thus far:

And also, monks, just as if a monk would see a body left in a charnel ground, dead for one, two, or three days, bloated, discolored, and rotting, the monk compares his own body with it: “This body, too, is of precisely the same nature, of precisely the same existence, of precisely the same future.”³⁰

The text next continues to enumerate eight more such “charnel ground” (*sivathikā*) meditations, the disgust intensifying as we proceed. No details are spared as the meditator imagines corpses being eaten by jackals and worms and bones decomposing into many different states—with or without sinews, covered with blood or not, amassed in a pile, and so forth. Again, we are patently not dealing here with anything that has to do with our normal intuition about “mindfulness.” Rather, this meditation is a creative act of the imagination, a direction of the mind toward a conceptual contemplation of one’s body and of existence in general, accompanied by powerful feelings of horror and disgust. It should be unambiguously clear that this meditation is not a simple perceptual monitoring of the “here and now” but an adoption of an ideological and emotional choice with regard to being.

Lest I be misunderstood, let me emphasize my point: I am not saying that the *SPS* is not about meditation. I am also not saying that the engaged meditator, who will diligently implement the instructions outlined in the *SPS*, will not undergo a deep transformative experience. On the contrary, I believe he will. What I am saying is that the transformation the monk will experience is not best described as affording him a more privileged access to his present contents of consciousness. It is also not a naked perception of “things as they really are.” Rather, the transformation is better understood as a conditioning of vision, as a structuring of awareness, intended to produce a particular way of generating experience. This new vision is profoundly in tune with the basic Buddhist understanding of reality as impermanent, suffering, and not-the-self.

³⁰ “puna caparaṃ, bhikkhave, bhikkhu seyyathāpi passeyya sariraṃ sivathikāya chaḍḍitaṃ ekāha-mataṃ vā dviha-mataṃ vā tiha-mataṃ vā uddhumātaṃ vinilakaṃ vipubbaka-jātaṃ. so imam eva kāyaṃ upasaṃharati—‘ayampi kho kāyo evaṃ-dhammo evaṃ-bhāvī evaṃ-anatīto’ti.’”

We may now conceptualize the *SPS*'s statement regarding the body as a whole.³¹ The “establishing of mindfulness with regard to the body” appears, first of all, to involve a deep meditative concentration. One develops the ability to take note of all events that pass in the body. In this sense, he or she could be said to be practicing “mindfulness.” At the same time, the meditator establishing *sati* is attempting, with great effort, to condition this same “mindfulness” according to the way the Buddha conceptualized, that is, “remembered” or “constructed” the path to and experience of awakening. When we integrate these two vectors, we realize that the establishing of *sati* is best described as a unique structuring of awareness—or, better, as an imbuing of consciousness with memory.³² Rather than relieving our vision of its predetermined tendencies, we are advised to replace one conditioning with another, with a conditioning that the Buddha believed would be more conducive to *nibbāna*.

The nature of the relation between “mindfulness” and “memory” becomes clearer when we examine the remaining meditations taught by the Buddha in the *SPS*. The next two meditations are dedicated to the observations of feelings (*vedanā*) and of the mind (*citta*). Here, as with the first three meditations on the body, the practice appears to be concerned with what we would normally understand as “mindfulness.” One is aware of all bodily (*sāmisa*) and mental (*nirāmisa*) sensations, be they of joy (*sukha*), of pain (*dukkha*), or neutral (*adukkham-asukhaṃ*). Next, one understands one's states of mind. For example, the meditator is aware of his mind being with or without the three afflictive emotions (*kilesa*, *kleśa*): passion (*rāga*), aggression (*dosa*), and confusion (*moha*).³³ We could again

³¹ In *MN* iii, 94 and *AN* i, 43–46, “mindfulness intent on the body” (*kāya-gatā-sati*) is said to be the “one thing” (*eka-dhammo*) that will bring about all states necessary for attaining liberation. But see Gethin (*Buddhist Path to Awakening*, 57), who believes this statement to be true only in the sense that it will naturally activate the other *sati-paṭṭhānas*. See also Cox, “Mindfulness and Memory,” 69.

³² A number of similar statements regarding the nature of *sati* have been made in scholarly publications. Griffiths, in “Concentration or Insight,” understands *sati-paṭṭhāna* to be “an extremely effective way to train awareness to perceive the universe in accordance with Abhidhamma categories” and as a process by which “sensation, cognition and intellection . . . are developed, and, as it were, become ‘paññised’—imbued with wisdom” (14). Crangle, in *Origin and Development of Early Indian Contemplative Practices*, follows Griffiths and believes that “*Satipaṭṭhāna* represents the initial systematic attempt to fully realize the internalized Buddhist metaphysic.” He speaks of an intellectual understanding that develops into an intuitive one (199) and of *sati* as participating in the process of “installing the Buddhist metaphysic firmly in the *jhāyin*'s mind” (260). Both these sources speak of *sati* in the context of Buddhist soteriology. I will discuss the relevance of *sati* for Buddhist liberation in the following section, where the difference between my approach and the approaches of these two scholars will become fully evident.

³³ The text does not explicitly define the contents of the mind as connected to any specific Buddhist category but defines the states of mind according to the three *kilesas* of *rāga*, *dosa*, and *moha*.

wonder about the relation between these two meditations and Buddhist conceptual schemas of feelings and the mind. It is not fully evident whether these two meditations imply a type of awareness that exceeds the pre-conceptual mental registration of one's sensations and mental processes. Nonetheless, we need not exaggerate the role conceptualization plays in the observation of feelings and the mind.³⁴ It should be clear that even if while practicing these meditations one is conceptually defining the contents of his vision, he is doing so while being deeply in tune with what passes in his experience.

The situation again becomes more complex when we analyze the final set of meditations directed at *dhammas*, the first of which concerns the five hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*):

Here, a bhikkhu abides contemplating mind-objects as mind objects in terms of the five hindrances . . . here, there being sensual desire in him, a bhikkhu understands: "There is sensual desire in me"; or there being no sensual desire in him, he understands: "There is no sensual desire in me"; and he also understands how there comes to be the abandoning of arisen sensual desire, and how there comes to be the future non-arising of abandoned sensual desire.³⁵

The same formula is then applied to the remaining four hindrances of ill will (*byāpada*), sloth and torpor (*thūna-middham*), restlessness and remorse (*uddhaca-kukkucca*), and doubt (*vicikicchā*). Again, it cannot be determined whether conceptual processes are necessarily at play in this meditation. At the same time, it must be conceded that one would need to practice the contemplation of the five hindrances in order to learn to see them more immediately. This is probably true of the previous two meditations on feelings and the mind as well. Once this principle is appreciated—that one must learn to analyze one's experience in terms of Buddhist categories in order to see them spontaneously occurring—we are well on the way to bridging the gap between mindfulness and memory in the *SPS*.

³⁴ The Thai method of practicing *sati-paṭṭhāna* clearly involves active and deliberate use of conceptuality. The meditator is instructed to actively "note" the occurrence of many different types of bodily and mental processes and to identify them verbally. Thus, one is to note, for example, "pain, pain," "comfort, comfort," or "neutral, neutral." See, e.g., *Dhamma from Ajahn Tong* 7, where "noting" is defined as "the heart of the practice of vipassanā," <http://buddhapiya.org/content/image/PDF/Dhamma%20from%20Ajahn%20Tong%207.pdf>.

³⁵ Bodhi and Nāṇamoḷī, *The Middle Length Discourses*, 151. "idha, bhikkhave, bhikkhu dhammesu dhammānupasī viharati pañcasu nīvaraṇesu. kathaṃ ca pana, bhikkhave, bhikkhu dhammesu dhammānupasī viharati pañcasu nīvaraṇesu? idha, bhikkhave, bhikkhu santam vā ajjhataṃ kāma-cchandaṃ 'atthi me ajjhataṃ kāma-cchando' ti pajānāti, asantaṃ vā ajjhataṃ kāma-cchandaṃ 'natthi me ajjhataṃ kāma-cchando' ti pajānāti; yathā ca anuppannassa kāma-cchandassa uppādo hoti taṃ ca pajānāti, yathā ca pahinassa kāma-cchandassa āyatim anuppādo hoti taṃ ca pajānāti."

In the following meditation, the meditator is instructed to review the five aggregates, regarding each one as “this is form (or one of the remaining aggregates); this, its appearance; this, its disappearance.”³⁶ Clearly, such a practice is tailored to the Buddhist view of the reality, centering on the impermanent, insubstantial, and decaying nature of the aggregates. When a person with no familiarity with Buddhist teachings sits down to meditate, he surely does not see—or, at least, is not aware of seeing—“the arising and passing away of the aggregates.” Once he has become acquainted with Buddhist doctrine, he may indeed view his experience in terms of the concepts he has grown familiar with and see “the arising and passing away of the aggregates.” At that time, he may also agree that even prior to his acquaintance with Buddhist doctrine he was seeing the five aggregates but that he did not yet possess the ability to identify them.

We can utilize the next meditation, which deals with “the six external and internal bases” (*chasu ajjhātika-bāhiresu āyatanesu*), in order to define our reading of *sati-paṭṭhāna* meditation on *dhammas*. This is how the meditator is instructed to view the first base of the eye and its forms, the same formula being repeated for each of the five succeeding “bases” (the senses and their objects):

Here, a bhikkhu understands the eye, he understands forms, he understands the fetter that arises dependent on both; and he also understands how there comes to be the arising of the unarisen fetter, and how there comes to be the abandoning of the arisen fetter, and how there comes to be the future non-arising of the abandoned fetter.³⁷

Plainly, this meditation appears to involve a considerable degree of both “mindfulness” and “memory”: the meditator is not passively observing what appears to the mind; rather, he actively structures what he sees so that it will accord with Buddhist categories and teachings. Note the particular significance of knowing “the future non-arising of the abandoned fetter.” As with the other parts of the formula of the six bases, we can envision the meditator seeing or sensing—that is, being “mindful” of—this significant event. At the same time, we must admit that the practitioner is not a disinterested observer but, rather, one who creates and structures his

³⁶ “iti rūpaṃ, iti rūpassa samudayo, iti rūpassa atthaṅgamo.” Bodhi and Ñāṇamoḷī translate this as: “Such is material form, such its origin, such its disappearance” (*The Middle Length Discourses*, 152).

³⁷ Bodhi and Ñāṇamoḷī, *The Middle Length Discourses*, 152. “idha, bhikkhave, bhikkhu cakkhuñ ca pajānāti, rūpe ca pajānāti, yañ ca tad-ubhayaṃ paṭicca uppajjati saṃyojanaṃ tañ ca pajānāti, yathā ca anuppannassa saṃyojanassa uppādo hoti tañ ca pajānāti, yathā ca uppannassa saṃyojanassa pahānaṃ hoti tañ ca pajānāti, yathā ca pahinassa saṃyojanassa āyatim anuppādo hoti tañ ca pajānāti.”

vision as he meditates. The practitioner is carefully observing the “objects of mind” while meticulously keeping in mind what it is that he is supposed to observe. In fact, he is “remembering” the content of his present experience, or seeing it in terms of internalized Buddhist knowledge. In this context, it seems that the meditator is observing *dhammā* not in the sense of “mental objects” but in the sense of “truths” or even of “doctrines.”³⁸

It must be emphasized that I am speaking of memory in a very specific sense, in many ways divorced from our immediate intuitions regarding memory. Prereflectively, memory involves a present recollection of the past event. One brings to mind a mental image that was acquired in the past and, possibly, further developed in the mind, again in the past. In the context of the *SPS*, I am speaking of a precisely opposite direction in which memory functions. Rather than memory proceeding from the present to the past, it proceeds from the past to the present. It is “memory” in the sense that past experiences and insights inform the present contents of consciousness. Memory here involves the conditioning of present experience by internalized structures of knowledge, the origin of which is temporally previous to the conscious events it is structuring. Rather than “re-collection,” we may speak of “pre-collection.”³⁹

In my mind, the important thing to take note of is that with good practice, the “ardent, fully aware and mindful” (*ātāpī sampajāno satimā*) meditator probably improves his ability to unite mindfulness and memory. With regard to the novice, we may be correct to designate two parallel processes at work: at times, he is aware, to the extent of his capacity, of the spontaneous occurrences in his mind. At other times, he analyzes these same occurrences according to the teachings he has received.⁴⁰ With practice,

³⁸ See also Swearer, *Guide to the Perplexed*, 18; and Anālayo, *Satipaṭṭhāna*, 182–83.

³⁹ See Charles Malamoud, *Cuire le monde: Rite et pensée dans l'Inde Ancienne* (Paris: Éditions la Découverte, 1989), 15; and David Shulman, “The Prospects of Memory,” in *The Wisdom of Poets: Studies in Tamil, Telugu, and Sanskrit* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), chap. 8. Both Malamoud and Shulman discuss Indian notions of memory in a manner that has deep connection to the analysis of the *SPS* conducted here. Malamoud’s discussion centers on an analysis of the term *smara*, which refers not only to memory but to notions of *kāma* (love, desire, passion) as well. Malamoud thus speaks of the structural relation between love and memory in the context of Indian thought: one remembers what one loves; we contain our love in our memory, and thus memory is determined by love. Malamoud defines “se rappeler” (to remember) as “fixer avec intensité son esprit sur un objet (qui n’est pas matériellement présent)” (to fix one’s spirit with intensity on an object [that is not materially present]) (297). Memory proves to be a preexistent model of perception, structured by desire, which further supports the functioning of desire itself (298).

Deep questions arise regarding Malamoud’s analysis of memory—a little too deep, in fact. It seems possible that the Buddha may have been looking not to uproot desire but to structure it. Shulman, too, in the context of a discussion of Kālidāsa’s *Abhijñāna-Śakuntalā*, speaks of memory as “a prospective form of knowledge;” possessive of forward rather than backward movement (192) and as an “epistemic movement in the present” (208).

⁴⁰ See Gethin, *Buddhist Path to Awakening*, 53.

these two distinct mental processes probably become one: in order to be “mindful,” the adept no longer needs to “remember,” that is, to actively reflect on his present experience with the aid of truths and concepts he has learned in the past.⁴¹ Rather, he naturally gains the ability to see according to these concepts; he “understands” or “knows” (*pajānāti*) his experience according to the way he has internalized the meaning of these same truths.

The understanding of *sati* as a form of “memory” that shapes the structure of consciousness, awareness, or vision becomes especially important when we look at the final two meditations presented in the *SPS*. In the penultimate meditation, the Buddha’s student will notice the arising of the seven enlightenment factors (*bojjhangā*).⁴² In the last meditation he will realize (*yathā-bhūtaṃ pajānāti*: literally, he “knows as it actually is”) the Four Noble Truths. This realization is of particular significance, since one who is capable of such insight is generally understood to be liberated, an *arahant*. Following the analysis of the *SPS* conducted above, it appears that in many ways this realization of the Four Noble Truths occurs once one has managed to fully structure one’s perception according to the Buddhist view of reality. When the gap between mindfulness and memory has been eliminated, one may in fact be able to “truthfully” see the workings of the Four Noble Truths. He or she will directly, and possibly nonconceptually, “know as it is”: “This is suffering, this is the origin of suffering, this is the end of suffering, this is the path leading to the end of suffering.”⁴³ With the seeing of the Four Noble Truths in mindful meditation, it becomes fully and convincingly clear that the meditator is not just looking at “mental objects” (*dhammā*) but at the same time is also looking at Buddhist truths (*dhammā*). He is, in fact, aware or “mindful” of the Buddhist vision of truth.⁴⁴

⁴¹ See Swearer, *Guide to the Perplexed*, 18; as well as the sources referred to in n. 31 above.

⁴² In the *Ānāpāna-sati-sutta* (The discourse on mindfulness of breathing), it is suggested that the seven “enlightenment factors” arise once the four *sati-paṭṭhānā* have been fully developed (*MN* 118; iii, 85). Aside from the fact that there are notable differences between this sutta’s conception of the four *sati-paṭṭhānā* and the one advocated by the *SPS*, this text also seems to understand the relation between the seven *bojjaṅgas* and the four *sati-paṭṭhānā* differently. In the *SPS*, the seven *bojjaṅgas* are part of the fourth *sati-paṭṭhānā*, while in the *Ānāpāna-sati-sutta*, they result from the development of the four *sati-paṭṭhānā*.

⁴³ “idha, bhikkhave, bhikkhu ‘idaṃ dukkhaṃ’ ti yathā-bhūtaṃ pajānāti, ‘ayaṃ dukkha-samudayo’ ti yathā-bhūtaṃ pajānāti, ‘ayaṃ dukkha-irodho’ ti yathā-bhūtaṃ pajānāti, ‘ayaṃ dukkha-irodha-gāminī paṭipadā’ ti yathā-bhūtaṃ pajānāti.”

⁴⁴ It must be noted that the discussion here concerns a very specific type of Buddhist meditation but also that the insights into the transformation this meditation involves are relevant to understanding many types of religious experience. In this sense, religion may be defined as a form of active memory, which structures the mind so that it will experience reality in a way that is congruent with the truths valued by the tradition. Indeed, religious “com-memoration” may be a much wider phenomenon than the specific moments when one actively thinks about or meditates on God or God’s chosen ones. See also related remarks in Section III of this essay.

The analysis of the *SPS* we have conducted affords insight into Buddhist notions of perception and consciousness. But there is still more in store. These last remarks on the realization of the Four Noble Truths hint toward an interesting possibility regarding Buddhist notions of liberation. The view that consciousness is not just a passive factor aware of “things as they are” but, rather, an active agent, subjectively forming and coloring its contents has profound consequences for the understanding of Buddhist realization. It is this insight I wish to pursue in the next section of this essay.

II. ON THE RELATION BETWEEN WISDOM AND *JHĀNA*-MEDITATION

Scholarly understanding regarding early Buddhist notions of liberation has been troubled by the seeming incompatibility of the two most basic factors that constitute, or facilitate, liberation: on the one hand, meditative absorption (*jhāna/dhyāna*) or concentration (*samādhi*); on the other, wisdom of liberating insight (*paññā*). As early as 1936–37, Louis de La Vallée Poussin had identified a profound dichotomy between two basic Buddhist approaches to liberation. In his oft-quoted “Musīla et Nārada,” La Vallée Poussin termed the first approach “rationalism” and its practitioners *spéculatifs*. These *spéculatifs* attain liberation by means of understanding. La Vallée Poussin termed the second approach “mystique,” and its practitioners *extatiques* (*jhāyins*). These *extatiques* are said to attain liberation by means of a mystical experience that occurs in deep meditation, as they “touch nirvāṇa with their body.”⁴⁵ In the context of our discussion, these *extatiques* can be understood as an example of adepts who realize the profound, or a profound, perennial reality. The *extatiques* are more naturally understood along the lines of constructivist theories of religious experience.

La Vallée Poussin’s definition of the fundamental dissonance between the two Buddhist approaches to liberation has been criticized by a number of scholars.⁴⁶ Most significant among these critiques may have been the one presented by Richard Gombrich, who demonstrated that La Vallée Poussin’s reading of the major canonical text on which he was relying was mistaken.⁴⁷ Specifically, Gombrich argued that with regard to earliest Buddhism, the notion that one can achieve enlightenment by means of wisdom alone, without meditation, is inadequate. Nevertheless, La Vallée

⁴⁵ Louis de La Vallée Poussin, “Musīla et Nārada,” *Mélanges Chinois et Bouddhiques* 5 (1936–37): 191, and see 189–92.

⁴⁶ See, e.g., Lance Cousins, “Buddhist *Jhāna*: Its Nature and Attainment according to the Pali Sources,” *Religion* 3 (1973): 116.

⁴⁷ See Richard Gombrich, *How Buddhism Began* (London and Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Athlone Griffiths, 1996), chap. 4. Gombrich’s argument analyzes La Vallée Poussin’s reading of the *Kosambi-sutta* of the *Nidāna-saṃyutta* (*SN* ii, 115).

Poussin's articulation of the fundamental gap between the two approaches to Buddhist liberation remains greatly relevant, as it is still unclear how meditative concentration and knowledge can coalesce. La Vallée Poussin's formulation points to essential questions, which remain unanswered: How is it that truth can be known in a deep meditative trance that has surpassed conceptuality? How can knowledge function in a calmed and stilled mind in which the majority of cognitive functions with which we are familiar have ceased to operate?

The structural disagreement between meditative concentration and wisdom has been pointed out in more recent studies as well.⁴⁸ For these studies, the irreconcilability of the two fundamental aspects of liberation stems from one pivotal observation: the standardized descriptions of meditative concentration in early Buddhism report the attainment of states of consciousness that allow for minimal—if any—cognitive content. There are different schemas that outline the meditative stages of mental concentration, and there are also questions regarding the role of specific medita-

⁴⁸ This disagreement has been restated most forcefully by Paul Griffiths, in "Concentration or Insight," 616, "Buddhist Jhāna: A Form-Critical Study," *Religion* 13 (1983): 65, and *On Being Mindless: Buddhist Meditation and the Mind-Body Problem* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1986), 23. In addition, a number of studies rely on the structural separation between concentration and wisdom: Tilmann Vetter, in *The Ideas and Meditative Practices of Early Buddhism* (Leiden and New York: E. J. Brill, 1988) exemplifies this tendency, as he suggests that for the Buddha, liberation involved only meditative concentration, specifically the meditations of the first four *jhānas*. According to Vetter, for the Buddha, wisdom was epiphenomenal, serving as a technique for attracting students and providing them with the ability to hold their position in philosophical debates (xxi–xxxvii, 3–32). Pursuing the same line of argument, Vetter distinguishes between two distinct early Buddhist intuitions about liberation. The first pursues immortality (*amata*), the second "the cessation of suffering" (see, e.g., 15). There is also a common approach that relegates concentration to the status of a helpful but dispensable technique that purifies the mind and enforces its capacity to achieve true states of wisdom. Thus, liberation is about wisdom rather than about meditative attainments, and the *jhānas* become stepping-stones for the attainment of insight. See, e.g., William Hart, *The Art of Living: Vipassana Meditation as Taught by S. N. Goenka* (1987; Singapore: Vipassana Publications, 1990), chaps. 7, 8; Mahasi Sayadaw, *Satipathāna Vipassanā: Insight through Mindfulness* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1990), 50; and the modern Burmese traditions described by Winston L. King, in *Theravāda Meditation: The Buddhist Transformation of Yoga* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1992), chap. 7.

The gap between meditative concentration and wisdom is also apparent in studies that emphasize the alternate use of *samatā* and *vipassanā*. Taking the example of such texts as the *Anupada-sutta* (The discourse following [realization]) (*MN* 11; iii, 26), studies such as Crangle's *Origin and Development of Early Indian Contemplative Practices* state that one applies wisdom after meditative states have been achieved so as to realize their impermanence, suffering, and nonselfhood (216, 262–65). In Crangle's study, wisdom and concentration are intimately related but are, nonetheless, practiced one after another rather than simultaneously. Crangle's approach is similar to one advocated by King in *Theravāda Meditation*, esp. in chap. 6. For King, who relies heavily on Buddhaghosa, *vipassanā* ensures that *jhāna* will not be a mere yogic trance. *Vipassanā* is used in *jhāna* to purify it and maintain its Buddhist quality. Nevertheless, King's approach is similar to the one developed here in emphasizing that the *jhāna* and *vipassanā* must ultimately coalesce.

tive states in the process that facilitates realization. Nevertheless, all these discrete meditative states share one basic structural feature: they aim at a very deep quieting of the mind. The quiet that these states involve cannot allow for any identification of truth, let alone for a conceptual understanding of truth.

The central account of the development of meditative concentration is a list of nine meditative stages: the four *rūpa jhānas* (form meditations), the four *arūpa jhānas* (formless meditations), and finally “the cessation of perception and feeling” (*saññā-vedayita-nirodha*) or simply “the attainment of cessation” (*nirodha-samāpatti*). This schema of nine stages is often seen as a dogmatic attempt to integrate the central meditations practiced in early Buddhism into one meaningful sequence. Specifically, a number of authors question the place of the four *arūpa jhānas* in the “original” meditation practiced by the Buddha.⁴⁹

Since the aim of the present study is not to discuss the many early descriptions of realization in order to offer new insight about their origin and development, I will not enter into an elaborate discussion of these meditations here.⁵⁰ For the purposes of our discussion, only one key point must be highlighted: in all the different states of consciousness just mentioned, the functioning of knowledge demands an explanation. As the practitioner moves from the first to the second *jhāna*, “thinking and reasoning” (*vittaka* and *vicāra*) are suppressed.⁵¹ The following *jhānas* are characterized by “oneness of mind,” or “one-pointedness,” a quality

⁴⁹ See Vetter, *Ideas and Meditative Practices*, chap. 12; and Bronkhorst, *Two Traditions of Meditation*, chap. 7. King, in *Theravāda Meditation*, sees the whole *jhāna* sequence as an Indian yoga technique that achieves its Buddhist character when it is paired with insight (*vipassanā*) meditation (41–43). While the understanding of the *arūpa-jhānas* as “non-Buddhist,” at least in origin, may have achieved a fairly wide acceptance, this notion has now been seriously challenged by Alexander Wynne, in *The Origin of Buddhist Meditation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007). According to Wynne, the Buddha learned the meditations of the last two *arūpa jhānas* from Brahmanical ascetics, and his realization was a transformation of the structure of these two meditations. Thus, for Wynne, the *arūpa jhānas*, as they were developed by the Buddha, become the acme of Buddhist meditation.

⁵⁰ These meditations have been given focal attention in a number of studies, to which the reader new to this material is referred for further information: see, e.g., Cousins, “Buddhist *Jhāna*”; Griffiths, “Concentration or Insight,” “Buddhist *Jhāna*,” and *On Being Mindless*; Robert S. Bucknell, “Reinterpreting the *Jhānas*,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 16, no. 2 (1993): 375–403; Crangle, *Origin and Development of Early Indian Contemplative Practices*; Bronkhorst, *Two Traditions of Meditation*; and Wynne, *Origin of Buddhist Meditation*.

⁵¹ The descriptions of the first *jhāna* has been given thorough consideration in Martin Stuart-Fox, “*Jhāna* and Buddhist Scholasticism,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 12, no. 2 (1989): 79–109; and in Bucknell, “Reinterpreting the *Jhānas*.” According to Bucknell, the stopping of the conceptual modes of thought, which allows the meditator to enter the second *jhāna*, is a “major breakthrough,” described as a “most satisfying and encouraging attainment” (397–98).

that appears to be in conflict with any form of understanding.⁵² To emphasize just how different the states of mind under discussion are from anything we are familiar with, it is said that in the fourth *jhāna*, breathing comes to a halt.⁵³ The deep focus of the mind becomes particularly intense in the *arūpa jhānas*, the last of which appears to allow for no mentation at all.⁵⁴ The ninth, and final, stage is described in some texts as resembling death and at times is understood to be wholly unconscious.⁵⁵ Griffiths has aptly described the nine stages of *jhāna* meditation as “states of conscious-

⁵² See, regarding “one-pointedness,” Crangle, *Origin and Development of Early Indian Contemplative Practices*, 203–7. Stuart-Fox has discussed in *Jhāna and Buddhist Scholasticism* the fact that some accounts of the first *jhāna* (primarily in *abhidhamma*) describe it as being characterized by *ekaggatā* as well. According to his account, this appears to have been a scholastic development. On the conflict between one-pointedness and understanding, he states: “Logic alone suggests that *vitakka*, understood as discursive thought, cannot exist in any state of consciousness entailing one-pointed mental concentration: if the mind is casting around for an object upon which to focus, or is following one train of thought after another ‘like a wild monkey,’ it cannot be said to be one-pointed” (93).

⁵³ This description is common, although it does not appear in the standard presentation of the progressive attainment of the *jhānas*; see *SN* iv, 217; as well as Cousins, “Buddhist *Jhāna*,” 125; and Bronkhorst, *Two Traditions of Meditation*, 89. To Griffiths, it is clear that there is no thinking in the fourth *jhāna* (“Buddhist *Jhāna*,” 61–62).

⁵⁴ The eighth *jhāna* (or, the fourth *arūpa jhāna*) is a state of mind called *naivāsāññā-naivāsāññā* (devoid of perception and nonperception). Crangle believes this state to be semi-conscious (*Origin and Development of Early Indian Contemplative Practices*, 205), while Lambert Schmithausen is convinced that it is wholly beyond any form of ideation (“On Some Aspects or Theories of ‘Liberating Insight’ and ‘Enlightenment’ in Early Buddhism,” in *Studien zum Jainismus und Buddhismus Gedenkschrift für Ludwig Alsdorf*, ed. Klaus Bruhn and Albrecht Wezler [Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1981], 224). See also in Bronkhorst, *Two Traditions of Meditation*, 81–82. Clearly the preceding *jhāna*, called “the stage of nothing whatsoever” (*akiñcaññāyatana*), is not all that colorful either.

⁵⁵ On its likeness to death, see *MN* i, 297; *SN* iv, 294; and the discussion in Griffiths, *On Being Mindless*, 5–13. On its relation to unconsciousness, see Griffiths, *On Being Mindless*, 10; King, *Theravāda Meditation*, 105–6; and Crangle, *Origin and Development of Early Indian Contemplative Practices*, 242. See also Schmithausen, *On Some Aspects*, 216, 247. Although the question of the nature of “cessation” exceeds the scope of the present study, we might consider the possibility that “cessation” is not always and necessarily unconscious. The fact that some early Buddhist meditators clearly understood it to be almost beyond life itself does not imply that all understandings of cessation inevitably demand that it have no experiential content whatsoever. Primarily, this state is termed *saññā-vedayita-nirodha*—hence, that in it there are no *saññā* (perceptions, ideations) or *vedayita* (feelings, experienced objects). This state is not termed, for instance, *viññāna-nirodha* (the cessation of consciousness). Also, we are accustomed to translating *nirodha* as “cessation,” but it can also receive meanings such as “quieting” or “calming.” In the *Sappurisa-sutta* (The discourse on the good man) (*MN* 113; iii, 45), we find an interesting statement to this effect, in which the text says that in cessation, the good man stops “conceiving” (*maññati*). This statement suggests that there are other forms of experience that have not yet stopped, for which the stopping of “conceiving” is significant. Harvey, in chaps. 11 and 12 of *The Selfless Mind*, suggests a possibility for understanding “cessation” in a sense beyond a nonconscious nothingness. For him, Buddhist liberation involves an enhanced and transformed state of awareness involving the experience of the “brightly shining mind.” See also the discussion of K. Arbel, “The Attainment of ‘Cessation of Perception and Feeling’: A Study of *SAÑÑĀVEDAYITANIRODHA* in the Pāli Nikāyas” (MA diss., University of Bristol, 2004), chap. 2.2; Arbel suggests that cessation does not necessarily imply a stopping of consciousness.

ness which become progressively more empty of intellectual and emotional contents.”⁵⁶ Although these states may have originally functioned in contexts that are not appreciated by the list of nine stages and although some of these descriptions of meditative states may be theoretical accounts of meditation that were not accepted by all Buddhist practitioners, the fact that all these states of consciousness involve remarkable calm and tranquility is evident. Indeed, there appears to be good reason for the scholarly preference to divorce concentration from any form of wisdom. Whether one believes that the first four *jhānas* are the true Buddhist meditation or whether one prefers to emphasize the importance of the next four *jhānas* or the attainment of cessation, the same question persists: how does wisdom function in such intensely concentrated and possibly noncognitive states of mind?

The fact is that a distinctive feature of most descriptions of early Buddhist *samādhi* is that they speak of some form of knowledge that operates in them. A good example is the *Bhaya-bherava-sutta* (The discourse on fear and terror) (*MN* 4; *MN* i, 16), in which the Buddha describes his enlightenment as an awakening to three forms of knowledge that take place in the fourth *jhāna*. The three knowledges appear in many descriptions of awakening,⁵⁷ and consist of (1) the knowledge of former births, (2) the knowledge of beings’ karmic passing between lives, and finally (3) the realization of the Four Noble Truths and of the destruction of the taints.⁵⁸ This description of realization has been termed by Schmithausen and, later, by Bronkhorst as the “standardized detailed description of the path of liberation,”⁵⁹ and although both scholars agree that this description of enlightenment is probably not the most ancient one, they both believe it to be very old. No less significant is the common description of the achievement of “the cessation of perception and feeling” in the *MN*.⁶⁰ The discourses in this corpus that discuss cessation normally make the claim that once one achieves this mental state, “his taints are destroyed by his seeing with wisdom” (my emphasis).⁶¹ Many more examples

⁵⁶ Griffiths, “Concentration or Insight,” 609.

⁵⁷ See, e.g., in the *Mahāsaccaka-sutta* (The great discourse to Saccaka) (*MN* 36; i, 247–49) and in the *Kandaraka-sutta* (The discourse to Kandaraka) (*MN* 51; i, 347–80).

⁵⁸ These three distinct “knowledges” can be viewed as elaborations of the basic insight of dependent origination or conditionality (*paṭiccasamuppāda* or *idapaccayatā*). I hope to discuss this matter in another paper.

⁵⁹ Schmithausen, *On Some Aspects*, 204; Bronkhorst, *Two Traditions of Meditation*, 102.

⁶⁰ The same applies for some of the descriptions in the *AN*. In *On Some Aspects*, Schmithausen notes the difference among the Nikāyas with regard to their preferred formulations of realization. Schmithausen states that “this seems to indicate that the monks specializing in a certain Nikāya may also have formed a (more or less coherent) group with certain doctrinal (or spiritual) predilections” 204 n. 15; see also nn. 55, 169).

⁶¹ “paññāya cassa disvā āsavā parikkhīṇā honti.” The importance of this statement has been emphasized by Arbel, in chap. 2.3 of *Attainment*, as well.

could be supplied that would attest that at least some “early Buddhist meditators” believed that wisdom does function in intense *samādhi*.⁶²

There is a growing consensus in the modern understanding of the early Buddhist path to liberation that deep meditative concentration, especially *jhāna*, was an essential component of the process that brings about liberation, possibly even of liberation itself.⁶³ Thus, if we are to respect the formulations of the process of liberation supplied by the early Buddhist

⁶² See, e.g., *MN* i, 478, and *DN* ii, 69–70.

⁶³ Again, I quote the authority of Gethin’s *Buddhist Path to Awakening*: “The present study suggests that we must see the *jhāna* meditations as the heart of early Buddhist meditation theory. . . . There can be no doubt that for the Nikāyas, the Abhidhamma and the commentaries the *jhānas* represent central, mainstream (i.e., ‘Buddhist’) meditation; more or less everything is continually being related back to the *jhānas*” (347).

Interestingly, for Gethin, *jhāna* and wisdom are essential to each other: “According to Abhidharma theory, in practice, when the mind is stilled in *jhāna* there is always some element of *paññā* involved” (345). *Jhāna* appears as a state quite rich in content, in which “some very powerful skilful forces or tendencies become available to the mind” (ibid.).

The most straightforward account of the centrality of the *jhānas* has been developed by Bronkhorst, in *Two Traditions of Meditation*. Bronkhorst distinguishes between an Indian tradition that practiced severe ascetic meditation, which he terms the “main stream” tradition of Indian meditation, and Buddhist meditation, which mainly includes the *jhānas* (*dhyānas*). Two considerations are central to his argument: first, that many passages in Buddhist texts argue against the efficacy of severe asceticism; second, that Buddhist *jhānic* meditation involves and cherishes pleasurable feelings, which are completely alien to the logic of severe ascetic meditation. In addition, Bronkhorst finds no significant mention of *jhānic* meditation in early non-Buddhist scriptures. Thus, he argues that *jhāna* meditation is the original Buddhist meditation and that it should be viewed as the Buddha’s contribution to Indian meditative techniques.

For a more complex argument in favor of regarding the *jhānas* as the Buddhist meditation par excellence, see Vetter, *Ideas and Meditative Practices*, 3–32. The heart of Vetter’s analysis is a deconstruction of the *Dhamma-cakka-ppavattana-sutta* (The discourse on the setting in motion of the wheel of truth) (*SN* v, 421), the alleged first and foremost discourse preached by the Buddha. Vetter unravels the different strata he identifies in the text so as to suggest that the original Buddhist notion of the Middle Path corresponded to *jhāna* meditation. Furthermore, he develops the claim that the last of the Four Noble Truths, which consists of the Eightfold Path, should be seen as a serial process that culminates in the eighth element, “Right Samādhi.” The Right Samādhi is itself *jhāna* meditation, as defined in such texts as the *Sacca-vibhanga-sutta* (*MN* 141; iii, 252). For Vetter, the entirety of Buddhist thought—most importantly, the Four Noble Truths—is a development subsequent to realization.

It must be said that many parts of Vetter’s account of early Buddhism are problematic, for reasons I cannot discuss here. Both Steven Collins (review of *The Ideas and Meditative Practices of Early Buddhism*, by Tilmann Vetter, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 111, no. 1 [1991]) and Johannes Bronkhorst (review of *The Ideas and Meditative Practices of Early Buddhism*, by Tilmann Vetter, *Indo Iranian Journal* 36 [1993]: 63–68) has emphasized the lack of historical substantiation for a number of Vetter’s arguments. Nonetheless, Vetter’s reading of early Buddhist materials is, at least to my mind, both of great interest and in many ways convincing. At the outset of his work, Vetter acknowledges that one cannot reach an accurate and well-substantiated theory about original Buddhism; therefore, he says, he wishes to portray a basic way to approach the texts. This is not only legitimate but even important. Neither Collins nor Bronkhorst relate to Vetter’s basic argument regarding the identity of the Middle Path and *jhāna* meditation. For further accounts of the centrality of *jhāna* in early Buddhism, see also Cousins, “Buddhist *Jhāna*,” 115; and Griffiths, “Concentration on Insight,” 64–65.

tradition, we must supply a more convincing interpretation for the functioning of wisdom in these states than the common ones that prefer to brush wisdom aside.⁶⁴ If we are ever to understand the intention behind these descriptions or theories of liberative experience, we had best accept the fact that wisdom and concentration can and do go hand in hand. When Buddhist meditators seem to have believed the concentration and wisdom are reconcilable, we, as scholars studying the tradition, had better suggest an alternative to the view that the two must necessarily be alien to each other.

Here we reach our main point. I suggest that when we appreciate the notion of consciousness discussed in Section I of this essay—the idea that consciousness is imbued with memory, that it is a carefully patterned structure that conditions and shapes experience—we are in a better position to understand early Buddhist intuitions about the relation between *samādhi* and wisdom. With such an understanding, we may realize that deep, meditative *samādhi* is not a contentless state of mind. At the same time, wisdom need not be conceptual; it may not even be a fully conscious perception. Rather, when the mind that has internalized the Buddhist vision of truth—or, better, a Buddhist vision of truth—enters *samādhi*, it becomes fully engrossed in “wisdom.” A concentrated mind, structured according to Buddhist notions of reality, will experience this same reality more intensely in one-pointed concentration. While this mind is absorbed in itself, it will at the same time be realizing directly the Buddhist form of knowledge it has come to know so well.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ On such formulations, see related remarks in Schmithausen, *On Some Aspects*, 200. The classic example of these common interpretations is Griffiths’s, in his “Concentration or Insight”; Griffiths believes that the fact that wisdom is said to take part in cessation is a “last minute injection of wisdom” caused by “the Buddhist scholastic mania for neat classifications” (616); see also Griffiths, *On Being Mindless*, 23. Vetter, in *Ideas and Meditative Practices* (see nn. 48 and 63 above), also seems to believe wisdom to be a late addition, caused by considerations irrelevant to realization itself. For Wynne, in *Origin of Buddhist Meditation* (esp. 120–22), realization occurs in the last two *arūpa jhānas*, while the Buddha adapted them to states of consciousness that allow for mindfulness to be present. Thus, for Wynne, the emphasis on wisdom is a misunderstanding or an exaggeration of the Buddha’s meditative innovations.

⁶⁵ David Burton, in “Knowledge and Liberation: Philosophical Ruminations on a Buddhist Conundrum” (*Philosophy East and West* 52 no. 3 (2002): 326–45, defines a Buddhist “conundrum” about liberation: knowledge cannot alleviate suffering, since the knowledge that things are impermanent cannot cure attachment. This problem may be relevant with regard to the overtly intellectual and propositional forms of knowledge Burton discusses. It must be emphasized though, that Buddhism appears to allow for notions about the nature of knowledge radically different from the ones Burton has in mind. Knowledge need not necessarily be expressed in words—and may, in fact, rely on acts of vision that directly experience truths previously (as well as subsequently) expressed in language. In a sense, developing these nonpropositional forms of knowledge is precisely what Buddhism is about, and only after “directly realizing” these truths “for one’s self” would any serious Buddhist speak of reducing

Schmithausen's approach to early Buddhist liberation proves to be most helpful at this point.⁶⁶ For Schmithausen, it is natural that there are different and even conflicting descriptions of liberation. He believes all descriptions of liberation to be more like theories, attempts at a conceptual explanation of a meditative reality that is experienced in ways that are not fully conceptual. For Schmithausen, description is postexperiential and possesses a true capacity to characterize the experience itself. Different people will naturally tend toward different types of experiences, as well as toward different types of descriptions of the truth or the reality they have discovered. When we accept Schmithausen's approach, we are relieved of the need to explain all the early Buddhist transformative experiences in one shot. We may thus concern ourselves only with the descriptions or theories that are relevant for us—in this case, realizations that involve a simultaneous occurrence of wisdom and meditative concentration.⁶⁷ At the same time, these descriptions were clearly important to the early Buddhist meditative community. There are obviously other types of liberation outlined in the Nikāyas to which the explanation developed here does not apply.⁶⁸

It is interesting to note that a number of sources suggest a close relation between *sati* and *jhāna* meditation. The *Kāya-gatā-sati-sutta*, for example, discusses two main practices.⁶⁹ The first is “mindfulness of the body,” which will naturally lead to the second, which consists of the first four *jhānas*. In the Chinese version of the *SPS*, these four *jhānas* are even included among the contemplations of the body.⁷⁰ More important, Gethin

or annihilating suffering (see, e.g., the Buddha's statement in the *Dhamma-cakka-ppavattana-sutta*, at *SN* v, 422–23). In this sense, knowledge implies a change in the structure of experience and a remodeling of consciousness. This may be connected with the “wisdom” Burton wonders about in the conclusion to his article.

⁶⁶ Schmithausen, *On Some Aspects*, esp. 200.

⁶⁷ A similar type of description of realization involves alternate functioning of concentration and wisdom. Such a model for the path to liberation is articulated in the *Anupada-sutta* (The discourse following [realization]) (*MN* 11; iii, 26) and highlighted in studies such as Crangle's *Origin and Development of Early Indian Contemplative Practices*, 216, 262–65; and Arbel's “Attainment.” This description may be seen as being similar to the ones emphasized in this essay but may also be regarded as a distinct theory of liberation.

⁶⁸ A good example of an approach to liberation that appears to be in conflict with the one developed here is the idea of *nibbāna* as an expanded state of awareness in which the mind becomes aware of its “brightly shining” nature. Such an account of *nibbāna* was suggested by Harvey, based on passages from the *Udāna* and from the *DN*. As Harvey himself suggests, this form of liberation fits well with certain Mahāyāna understandings of liberation (*The Selfless Mind*, 217–21, and see chaps. 10–12). Another example of a form of “liberation” that may be different from the one addressed in this essay would be a form of “pure” or complete cessation, which transcends consciousness altogether. It seems natural to surmise that some early Buddhist understandings of cessation were akin to the states of consciousness favored by the traditions based on severe asceticism; see n. 55 above.

⁶⁹ See n. 25 above.

⁷⁰ See *Anālayo, Satipaṭṭhāna*, 120.

has demonstrated an essential connection between the development of the seven “factors of awakening” (*bojjhaṅga*) and the practice of *jhāna* meditation.⁷¹ The first among these seven factors is *sati*. It seems that when the texts speak of the serial arising of the seven *bojjhaṅgas*, they imply that the mind is entering the process of *jhāna*. In the *SPS*, the contemplation of the seven factors of awakening is strategically positioned as the penultimate meditation, practiced and perfected before the insight into the reality of the Four Noble Truths (see the penultimate paragraph of Section I above). The same process is echoed by the *Ānāpāna-sati-sutta* of the *MN* (The discourse on mindfulness of breathing) (*MN* 118; iii, 78). In this text, mindfulness of breathing fulfills (*paripūreti*) the four *sati-paṭṭhānas*, which next fulfill the seven *bojjhaṅgas*. Once these are developed, they “fulfill knowledge and liberation” (*vijjā-vimuttiṃ paripūrenti*). These sources imply that one achieves realization after one has entered *jhāna* meditation with *sati* fully developed. Such an understanding also works well with a number of modern scholarly presentations of early Buddhist meditative practices.⁷²

Luis Gómez has also been critical of the sharp distinction between insight and concentration advocated by such scholars as de La Vallée Poussin.⁷³ He quotes a number of passages that imply that rather than there being two distinct approaches to Buddhist transformation, these are better understood as different points on the same continuum. Gómez continues to define two fundamental Buddhist tendencies that are interrelated in a way he feels we are yet unable to explain: on the one hand, there is the ordered classification of the universe, which aims to give an account of the existence of the world and the self, prominent in Abhidharma traditions; on the other hand, there are the forms of intuition experienced through meditative, possibly ecstatic practice. The analysis offered here allows us to explain a central aspect of the relation between Gómez’s “accounting” and intuition: the detailed description of existence creates particular forms of knowledge and of imagination, which are experienced intensely in meditation and which end up providing the content for liberative realization.

To reiterate: *sati*, as defined above, bridges the gap between concentration and wisdom, in the same manner in which it bridged the gap between

⁷¹ Gethin, *Buddhist Path to Awakening*, chap. 5, esp. 170–71.

⁷² According to Vetter, the Eightfold Path is a sequential process that culminates in “Right Samādhi.” “Right *sati*” is thus the last thing one perfects before entering the *jhānas* (see *Ideas and Meditative Practices*, 3–32). Crangle, in *Origin and Development of Early Indian Contemplative Practices*, speaks of a process by which the development of *sati* will lead to *samādhi*, and then to *vipassanā* that will facilitate realization (234). Wynne does not discuss the nature of *sati* in *The Origin of Buddhist Meditation*, but he believes the Buddha’s innovation in the realm of meditation to be the functioning of *sati* in the last two *arūpa jhānas*.

⁷³ Luis O. Gómez, “Seeing, Touching, Counting, Accounting: Sāṃkhya as Formal Thought and Intuition,” *Asiatische Studien* 53, no. 3 (1999): 693–711.

mindfulness and memory in Section I of this essay. When we forsake the notion of consciousness as a purified, perfected, and shining whole—indeed, as the reality to which the Buddha awakened—we are in a good position to grasp the relation between wisdom and concentration. When one enters *jhāna* meditation with developed *sati*, with a consciousness that naturally perceives according to the Buddhist vision of reality, one's awareness becomes a dense embodiment of wisdom. Such an awareness, structured according to the Buddhist understanding of truth, is an instantiation of *both* concentration *and* wisdom. When one becomes fully absorbed in such an awareness, one is experiencing wisdom. This view of realization becomes especially meaningful if we allow some degree of content and movement in the concentrated mind.⁷⁴ Such a mind would naturally understand its experience in terms of what the texts define as “realization” and would perceive essential insights such as the Four Noble Truths and “the destruction of the taints.”⁷⁵

We still have one more river to bridge; the notion of liberation defined above achieves a unique synthesis between the constructive and the deconstructive approaches to religious or mystical experience. The experience in which “mindfulness” “remembers” the truths to which it has been conditioned in a dense and intense discovery of truth employs perspectives that are important to both the constructive and the deconstructive lines of inquiry. The experience is clearly informed by cultural and linguistic inclinations and is thus mediated or constructed. At the same time, it reaches its full expression by transcending familiar forms of experience. The purport and value of the event go far beyond its conceptual components and description, and therefore it cannot be an experience wholly of the constructed type. The meditation deconditions immediate experiential structures while reconditioning new types of perception. It thus employs deconstruction and (re-)construction at one and the same time. Construction and deconstruction appear to be different aspects of one and

⁷⁴ Such an idea of the nature of *jhāna* is in full agreement with the traditions discussed by Gethin, in *Buddhist Path to Awakening*, esp. 344–50.

⁷⁵ In speaking of realizing the Four Noble Truths in the concentrated mind, I am referring to an intuition regarding these truths that is different from one later defined by the tradition in more elaborate and intellectual form. Following Kenneth R. Norman's “The Four Noble Truths: A Problem of Pāli Syntax” (in *Indological and Buddhist Studies: Volume in Honour of Professor J. W. de Jong on His Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. L. A. Hercus, F. B. J. Kuiper, T. Rajapatirana, and E. R. Skrzypczak [Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1982]), I believe the simplest formula of the Four Noble Truths (*idam dukkham . . .*; “This is suffering . . .”) to be the oldest. One would not necessarily need conceptual knowledge to directly realize this principle. This formula of the Four Noble Truths bears deep resemblance to the principle of *paṭicca-samuppāda* as it is commonly articulated in the suttas. I hope to give this crucial issue fuller attention in a separate essay; see also my discussion of *paṭicca-samuppāda* in my “Early Meanings of Dependent-Origination.”

the same process. Rather than being categories that allow a full description of such meditative processes and experiences, they are helpful only in highlighting some of their aspects.

The approach to religious experience just suggested works well with Matthew Kapstein's recent analysis of the subject.⁷⁶ Kapstein clearly tends toward the constructivist position, since he accepts the basic claim that the notion of a truly contentless experience is incoherent. At the same time, he takes an important step toward the perennialist position, as he appreciates that religious experiences have a shared and intersubjective aspect to them that may even cross cultural boundaries. Therefore, he speaks of both convergences and divergences among different types of religious experiences and proceeds to call the view he endorses "soft-perennialism," in the sense that there is a shared dimension to these experiences.⁷⁷

It is clear that the meditations of the *SPS*, as well as the forms of concentration and of wisdom they enhance, are inherently constructed. Certainly, they have nothing "perennial" about them; indeed, they are based on disgust caused by a radical vision of transience, of the fact that all that is born dies. But at the same time, the full-fledged moment of mindful wisdom relates to other experiences along the Buddhist path, experiences in which many people participate. Moreover, it is immensely different from the constructed experiences of normal and regular consciousness, as varied as these might be. In some sense, it is almost contentless, albeit this does not mean that it lacks phenomenology of any kind. The "radical constructivism" of the *Sati-paṭṭhāna-sutta* has clear deconstructive, in some sense even "perennial," aspects.

III. CONCLUSION

Buddhist meditative experience, as understood in this essay, is deeply mediated and constructed. The awareness that *sati-paṭṭhāna* attempts to develop is not neutral, certainly not "naked," but rather one that has been thoroughly habituated according to Buddhist intuitions of truth. Furthermore, the liberation attained when such an awareness is enhanced by deep meditative *samādhi* proves to be a particular form of Buddhist wisdom, a wisdom that fully experiences the truths to which awareness has become attuned.

We have possibly revealed a fundamental Buddhist intuition about knowledge. True knowledge, according to the Buddhist, is a form of experience, possibly nonverbal but, at the same time, conceptual or structured, occurring when one spontaneously sees reality in a way a Buddhist

⁷⁶ See Kapstein, "Rethinking Religious Experience."

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 338–39.

believes one should. This does not mean that Buddhism did not cherish and practice states of consciousness that may be nonmediated at all, but it does say that Buddhism should not simply be said to bring practitioners “to see things as they really are.”

I would like to conclude with one further reflection on the nature of religious experience. In discussing both the *sati-paṭṭhāna* meditations and the early Buddhist notions of liberation, I have been referring, as is common, to the meditator who truly dedicates himself to the task and “goes all the way.” Naturally, some efforts, for whatever reason it may be, were less sincere and fell short of the mark. For the vast majority of all other Buddhists, no effort was made to practice *sati-paṭṭhāna* or to achieve the meditative states of the *jhānas* whatsoever. Nonetheless, for these people, too, awareness was conditioned by their personal grasp of Buddhist truth, and their experience was influenced by what they realized of Buddhist teachings. For them as well, mindfulness was imbued with memory, although on a wholly different scale than it was for those who joined the Buddhist order and fully put themselves to practice. Nevertheless, the difference between the “adept meditator” and the “believer” is not categorical; the distinction is of intensity and grade, not of structure. It may even be true that there are no archetypal adepts and believers: all may be, in fact, treading the same path, experiencing its truth in different grades of intensity.

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