Nimitta and *Anuvyañjana*

Signs and Details

[Sense-restraint & wise attention: how to master the senses]
(Vism 1.53-59/20-22)
An introduction by Piya Tan ©2005; 2007

1 Sense-restraint in the early texts

1.1 GRASPING NEITHER THE SIGN NOR THE DETAIL. In a number of Pali suttas, such as **the Kumm-ôpama Sutta** (S 35.240)[1] and **the (Cattāro) Padhānā Sutta** (A 4.14),[2] we find this important and helpful instruction—which I shall provisionally call *the nimitta,vyañjana passage*—on how to practise sense-restraint, that is, how to master the senses:[3]

> *Idha bhikkhave bhikkhuno cakkhunā rūpaṁ disvā* ***na nimitta-g,gāhī hoti nânuyañjana-g,-gāhī hoti*** *yatv-ādhikaraṇam enaṁ cakkhu'ndriyaṁ asaṁvutaṁ viharantaṁ abhijjhā,domanassā pāpakā akusalā dhammā anvāssaveyyuṁ: tassa saṁvarāya paṭipajjati rakkhati cakkhu'ndriyaṁ cakkhu'ndriye saṁvaraṁ āpajjati.*
>
> *...sotena saddaṁ sutvā... sot'indriye saṁvaraṁ āpajjati.*
> *...ghānena gandhaṁ ghāyitvā... ghān'indriye saṁvaraṁ āpajjati.*
> *...jivhāya rasaṁ sāyitvā... jivh'indriye saṁvaraṁ āpajjati.*
> *...kāyena phoṭṭhabbaṁ phusitvā... kāy'indriye saṁvaraṁ āpajjati.*
>
> *...manasā dhammaṁ viññāya* ***na nimitta-g,gāhī hoti nânuyañjana-g,gāhī hoti*** *yatv-ādhikaraṇam enaṁ man'indriyaṁ asaṁvutaṁ viharantaṁ abhijjhā,domanassā pāpakā akusalā dhammā anvāssaveyyuṁ, tassa saṁvarāya paṭipajjati, rakkhati man'indriyaṁ man'indriye saṁvaraṁ āpajjati.*

Here, bhikshus, when a monk sees a form with the eye, **he grasps neither its sign nor its detail**, insofar as he dwells unrestrained in that eye-faculty, so that the evil, unwholesome states of covetousness and displeasure[4] might not overwhelm him, to that extent, he therefore keeps himself restrained. He practises the restraint of it. He guards the restraint of the eye-faculty, he commits himself to the restraint of the eye-faculty.

When he hears a sound with the ear,… He…has restraint of the ear-faculty.
When he smells a smell with the nose,… He…has restraint of the nose-faculty.
When he tastes a taste with the tongue,… He…has restraint of the tongue-faculty.
When he feels a touch with the body,… He…has restraint of the body-faculty.

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[1] S 35.240/4:177-179 = SD 19.17.

[2] A 4.14/2:16 f = SD 10.2. For other occurrences, see below here.

[3] For a commentary on the key terms of this passage, see "The Restraint of the Senses" (Vism 1.53-59) below.

[4] "Covetousness and displeasure," *abhijjhā,domanassaṃ,* which Walshe (1995:335 & n632) renders as "hankering and fretting for the world"; alt tr "covetousness and displeasure" or "longing and loathing." MA says that longing and displeasure signify the first two hindrances—sensual desire and ill will—principal hindrances to be overcome for the practice to succeed. They thus represent the contemplation of mind-objects, which begins with the five hindrances. Cf M 1:274/39.13; see also **Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna S** (D 22.13) and **Satipaṭṭhāna S** (M 10.36) on how to deal with the hindrances in one's meditation. The monk effects the abandoning of the hindrances by the contemplations of impermanence, fading away (of lust), cessation (of suffering) and letting go (of defilements), and thus comes to look upon the object with equanimity. On ***abhijjhā,domanassa,*** there is an interesting related passage from **Pubba or Pubb'eva Sambodha S** (A 3.101): "Bhikshus, before my enlightenment, when I was still a bodhisattva, this thought occurred to me… 'Whatever physical and mental joy (*sukha,somanassa*) there is in the world, that is the gratification (*assāda*) in the world; that the world is impermanent, suffering and of the nature to change, that is the disadvantages (*ādīnava*) in the world—the removal and abandoning of desire and lust for the world, that is the escape from the world'." (A 3.101/1:258, pointed out to me by Robert Eddison).

> When he cognizes a mind-object with the mind, **he grasps neither its sign nor its detail**, insofar as he dwells unrestrained in that mind-faculty so that covetousness and displeasure, evil unwholesome states, might overwhelm him, to that extent, he therefore keeps himself restrained. He practises the restraint of it. He guards the restraint of the mind-faculty, he commits himself to the restraint of the mind-faculty.[5]

Here are the main occurrences of this passage in the Pali Suttas. It should be noted that the phrase may occur more than once in some of these citations:

D 2	Sāmaññ,phala Sutta	(D 2.64/1:70)	SD 8.10
D 10	Subha Sutta	(D 10.2.2/1:207)	
D 33	Saṅgīti Sutta	(D 33.1.11(10)/3:225) = A 4.14	SD 10.2
M 27	Cūḷa Hatthi,padopama Sutta	(M 27.15/1:180)	
M 33	Mahā Gopālaka Sutta	(M 33.20/1:223)	
M 38	Mahā Taṇhā,saṅkhaya Sutta	(M 38.35/1:269)	SD 7.10
M 51	Kandaraka Sutta	(M 51.16/1:346)	SD 32.9
M 53	Sekha Sutta	(M 53.8/1:355)	SD 21.14
M 94	Ghoṭa,mukha Sutta	(M 94.18/2:162)	(SD 3.1)
M 101	Deva,daha Sutta	(M 101.33/2:226)	SD 18.4
S 35.120	Sāriputta Sutta	(S 35.120/4:104)	
S 35.239	Ratha Sutta	(S 35.239/4:176)	
S 35.240	Kummôpama Sutta	(S 35.240.7/4:178)	SD 19.17
A 3.16	Apaṇṇaka Paṭipada Sutta	(A 3.16/1:113)	
A 4.14	(Cattāro) Padhānā Sutta	(A 4.14/2:16) = D 33.1.11(10)	SD 10.2
A 4.37	Aparihānā Sutta	(A 4.37/2:39)	
A 4.164	Khama Sutta	(A 4.164/2:152 x4)	
A 4.198	Attantapa Sutta	(A 4.198.11/2:210)	
A 5.76	Yodh'ājīva Sutta	(A 5.76.12/3:99 f)	
A 5.140	Sota Sutta	(A 5.140.11/3:163)	
A 10.99	(Durabhisambhava) Upāli Sutta	(A 10.99.6/5:206)	SD 30.9
A 11.18	Gopālaka Sutta	(A 11.18.23/5:351).	

The signs (*nimitta*) are *the most distinctive qualities of the object* which, when unmindfully grasped, can give rise to defiled thoughts: simply put, this is one perception of the object *as a whole*. **The features (*anuvyañjana*)** are the *details* that subsequently gain attention when the initial perception is not followed by restraint.

1.2 CONCEPTUAL IMPRESSION & SENSE-IMPRESSION. **The Mahā,nidāna Sutta** (D 15) speaks of two kinds of sense-impression (or sensing)—**conceptual impression** or "labelling contact" (*adhivacana,-samphassa*) and **sense-impression** or "impact contact" (*paṭigha,samphassa*)[6]—without going into any detail.[7] A deeper understanding of these two important processes can be found in the Abhidhamma doctrines of cognitive process (*vīthi*). In simple terms, conceptual impression refers to the mental cognitive process (*mano,dvāra,vīthi*) [3], while sense-impression is the five-door cognitive process (*pañca,dvāra,-vīthi*) [2].

Below we shall examine the five-door cognitive process first, as it is a more common experience [2]. This refers to the activities of the five physical sense-faculties: the eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body. We shall examine only the first cognitive process, that of the eye or of seeing, since the same process applies to the all other four physical senses. These physical processes do not occur in isolation, but is followed by their respective mind-door cognitive processes [3].

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[5] For citations, see next para.
[6] Also rendered as "resistance contact" or "resistance impression."
[7] D 15.20/2:62 = SD 5.17, see also Intro (5).

← The 14 instants of process consciousness →

B	1 P	2 V	3 A	4 F	5 E	6 Rc	7 I	8 D	9 J	10 J	11 J	12 J	13 J	14 J	15 J	16 Rg	17 Rg	B
***	***	***	***	***	***	***	***	***	***	***	***	***	***	***	***	***	***	***
Stream of bhavaṅga	Past bhavaṅga	Vibrating bhavaṅga	Arrest bhavaṅga	Five-door adverting	Eye-consciousness	Receiving	Investigating	Determining	← Javana Impulsion →							Registration	Registration	Stream of bhavaṅga

Table 2.2 A Complete Eye-door Cognitive Process or Cycle (after Abhs:BRS 1999:155)

2 The five-door cognitive process

2.1 THE 17-MOMENT SERIES. After the Buddha's time, erudite monks (we can call them scholastics) began to systematize various early teachings regarding the mind into what is called Abhidhamma (Skt Abhidharma).[8] **Buddhaghosa,** for example, gives an interesting Abhidhamma-style explanation of the above stock passage in detail in **the Visuddhi,magga**,[9] which is given below in translation. In the Visuddhi,magga §57 below, Buddhaghosa summarizes the cognitive process (*citta,vīthi*) of a visual experience (in a simple term, seeing), thus: *the life-continuum series, adverting (directing the attention), the eye-consciousness, receiving, investigating, determining, impulsion, followed by the life-continuum series again*. This simple sequence later formulated into a well known 17-moment sequence of the cognitive process of seeing. This process is explained in many of the Abhidhamma books, including popular writings that are often circulated free of charge nowadays.[10]

2.2 THE EYE-DOOR COGNITIVE PROCESS.[11] This table represents a complete moment of cognitive process (*citta,vīthi*) at the eye-door, that is, the act of seeing. This is how the process occurs:

P 1 Past life-continuum (*atīta bhavaṅga*)
First, a stream of life-continua (*bhavaṅga citta*) arises. Each of the sets of three black dots represents the three mind-moments (*citta-k,khaṇa*) of arising, change, and ceasing. At the arising instant of this *citta* (conscious moment), the visible form and the eye-sense (*cakkhu pasāda*) simultaneously arise. This is the arising instant of the visible object (*rūp'ārammaṇa*).

V 2 Vibrating life-continuum (*bhavaṅga calana*)
At the arising instant of this *citta,* the visible object appears distinctly at the eye-sense (or eye-door). Note that in the case of a sustained visible object (*atimahant'ārammaṇa*), it takes one mind moment for its full development after arising.

A 3 Arresting life-continuum (*bhavaṅg'upacceda*)
The life-continuum-stream is cut, as the cognitive process takes over.
It should be noted that **instants 1-3**—namely, the three *bhavaṅga* cittas—are called the "process-free (*vīthi,mutta*) consciousness, that is, they are a subconscious process.

F 4 The five-door adverting consciousness (*pañca,dvārâvajjana*)
This is always the first *citta* in the cognitive series of the five-sense-door processes (that is, the stimulation of any of the five physical senses). It is a functional (non-karmic) consciousness that adverts the consciousness stream towards the sense-door, asking as it were, "what is this?"

E 5 Eye-consciousness (*cakkhu viññāṇa*)
It sees the visible object. The sense-impression occurs: only the colour or shade is seen, not the form or shape yet. [Canonically, this is the process of perception (*saññā*).][12] The sense-impression is transmitted to the next *citta* before it ceases.

Rc 6 Receiving consciousness (*sampaṭicchanna viññāṇa*)
This resultant consciousness receives the visible object together with the sense-impression and relays them to the next *citta.*

I 7 Investigating consciousness (*santīraṇa*)
The resultant consciousness investigates the visible object and the impression.

D 8 Determining consciousness (*voṭṭhapana* or *mano,dvārâvajjana*)
This functional consciousness determines whether the object is wholesome or unwholesome. [Canonically, this is process of formation (*saṅkhāra*).][13]

Instants 4-8—namely, the resultant consciousness of seeing, receiving, investigating, and determining—arise in spite of ourselves. According to Abhidhamma, they cannot be controlled and operate as the effects of past karma. [Canonically, these refer to the latent tendencies (*anusaya*).][14]

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[8] For a intro, see **Dhamma and Abhidhamma** = SD 26.1.
[9] Vism 1.53-59/20-22.
[10] See eg Bodhi 1999:44 f, 122-134, 153-167 & Mehm Tin Mon 2004:131-148.
[11] See eg Abhs:BRS 4.6/149-166, Mehm 2004:132-140 & Susila 2005:7-22.
[12] See ***Saññā*** = SD 17.4.
[13] See ***Saṅkhāra*** = SD 17.6.
[14] See ***Anusaya*** = SD 3.1.3.

J 9-15 Impulsion (*javana*)

Javana means "running swiftly," as they progress rapidly. The series of impulsions or impulsive consciousness enjoys or experiences the sense-object. It runs mostly for seven mind-moments, apprehending the visual object. They are either the same kind of wholesome consciousness rooted in non-greed, non-hate, or non-delusion, or the same kind of unwholesome consciousness rooted in greed, hate, or delusion.

It is at this stage that the visual object is fully experienced; as such, it is the most morally significant stage, since good or bad karma arises here accordingly. While preceding consciousnesses are "rootless" (*ahetuka*), javana consciousness series has either the wholesome or the unwholesome roots.

Rg 16-17 registering consciousness (*tad-ālambaṇa* or *tad-ārammaṇa*)

These two consciousnesses immediately follow impulsion, enjoying the visual object. Just as a person running fast has to slow down a few steps before stopping, registration arises twice after the javanas to slow down their force before the mind lapses again into the *bhavaṅga* stream. At the ceasing instant of the second registering consciousness, the visible object and the eye-sense both cease at the same instant due to the completion of the 17 mind-moments; thus, completing the life-span of a single moment of matter (*rūpa*).

B life-continuum (*bhavaṅga*)

Since the visible object no longer exists, the cognitive process ends and the consciousness stream sinks back into the life-continuum.

According to Abhidhamma, in the eye-door cognitive process, except for the eye-consciousness, which arises dependent on eye-sensitivity (the eye-faculty), the rest of the consciousness process arises depending on the heart-base (*hadaya,vatthu*)[15] (that is, the mind). Instants 1-3 operate as a process-free sequence. Instants 4-17 form the actual cognitive process. [This is the process where consciousness (*viññāṇa*), in the canonical sense, is present throughout.][16] When the object is not very strong or "great" (that is, it impinges only weakly on the sense), the two instants of registering consciousness will not arise. The cognitive process then stops at the javana stage, and the mind lapses into *bhavaṅga* again.

2.3 THE SIMILE OF THE MANGO. The Attha,sālinī, Buddhaghosa's Commentary on the Dhamma,saṅgaṇī, introduces the famous simile of the mango, but without going beyond the eating of the mango.[17] Later tradition, such as **the Abhidhammattha Vibhāvinī Ṭīkā,**[18] added the swallowing of the fruit and going back to sleep as counterparts of registering and then lapses back into the *bhavaṅga.*[19] The full simile goes as follows:

A man with his head covered goes to sleep at the foot of a mango tree heavy with fruits. Then a ripe mango breaks from its stalk and falls to the ground, grazing his ear. Awakened by the sound, he opens his eyes and looks around. Then he stretches his hand, takes the fruit, squeezes it, and smells it. Having done so, he eats the mango, swallows it enjoying the taste, and then goes back to sleep.

These points of the parable apply to the above conscious process as follows:

Bhavaṅga	The time when the man is sleeping at the foot of the mango tree.
Arresting	The instant of the ripe fruit falling and grazing the man's ear.
Adverting	The moment of waking due to the sound.
Eye-consciousness	Opening his eyes and looking around.
Receiving	Stretching out his hand and taking the mango.
Investigating	Squeezing the fruit to see if it is ripe.
Determining	Smelling the fruit to ensure it is ripe and sweet.
Impulsion	The time of eating the mango.
Registration	The swallowing of the fruit while enjoying its taste.
Bhavaṅga	The man goes back to sleep.

[15] This term is not found in the Canon, but only occurs as *vatthu* in **Paṭṭhāna** (Paṭ 1,4). See Vism 8.111-113/256; Abhs:BRS 6.3/239 (5). See also **Meditation & Consciousness** = SD 17.8c(7.2).

[16] See ***Viññāṇa*** = SD 17.8a.

[17] DhsA 271 f = DhsA:PR 359 f.

[18] The sub-comy on Abhs, or Vibhāvinī for short, by the Sinhala monk, Sumaṅgala (12th cent).

[19] See eg Abhs:BRS 4.6/158 & Mehm 2004:140 f.

2.4 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE COGNITIVE PROCESS. The *Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma* makes this important note on the nature of the various cognitive processes:

> It should be noted that the entire cognitive process occurs without any self or subject behind it as an enduring experience or inner controller, a "knower" outside the scope of the process itself. The momentary cittas themselves exercise all the function necessary to cognition and the unity of the cognitive act derives from their coordination through laws of conditional connectedness. Within the cognitive process each citta comes into being in accordance with the lawful order of consciousness (*citta,niyāma*). It arises in dependence on a variety of conditions, including the preceding citta, the object, a door, and a physical base. Having arisen, it performs its own unique function within the process, and then it dissolves, becoming a condition for the next citta. (Abhs:BRS 158 f)

In our study of consciousness, we discussed Ajahn Brahmavamso's fruit salad simile, which is a simplified model of the cognitive process.[20] The apple represents *eye-consciousness*; the banana, *ear-consciousness*; the mango, *nose-consciousness*; the lemon, *tongue-consciousness*; the papaya, *body-consciousness*; the pineapple, a mind-object (such as a thought): these represent the five-door cognitive process. The ever present pineapples in the intervals respresent the the mind-consciousness, that is, the mind-door cognitive process.

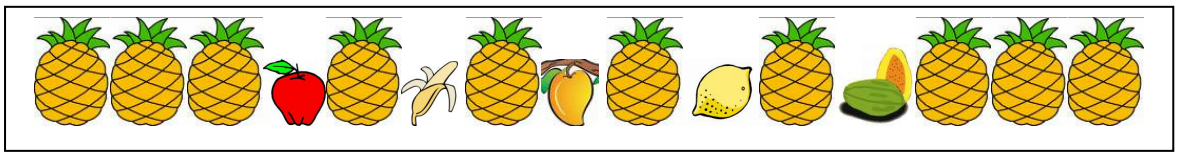

Fig 4. The Brahm fruit salad simile

3 The mind-door cognitive process

The mind-door cognitive process is slightly different from the five-door cognitive process [2].[21] After a physical sense-door process (for example, an experience of seeing), many *bhavaṅga* consciousnesses arise, followed by a mind-door cognitive process that takes the same sense-object (eg the visible object), *but that has already ceased,* that is, is a past object. In other words, we are attending to a sense-object that does not really exist!

Represented below in **Table 3** is the mind-door cognitive process, beginning with the vibrating of one moment of *bhavaṅga* (V). Then another *bhavaṅga* moment is arrested, followed by the mind-door adverting consciousness, when the mind directs itself to the past sense-object. After seven javanas, two moments of registering consciousness occur, then the mind-door cognitive process ends. The mind lapses into the *bhavaṅga* again.

When the sense-object is weak, the two moments of registration do not occur. Many mind-door cognitive processes then follow to cognize the colour, the name, the form and shape of the visible object, and the reaction towards it. This sequence of mind-door cognitive processes occurs as follows:

(1) It recognizes *the past visible object*.
(2) It recognizes the *name* of the object (that is, it is labelled).
(3) It recognizes the *shape or form* of the object.
(4) One reacts with *liking* (a pleasant object), or *disliking* (an unpleasant object), or *ignoring* (a neutral object): this is where karma is created "recorded" as latent tendencies of lust, of ill will, or of ignorance.

[20] ***Viññāṇa*** = SD 13.8a(4.3).

[21] Here, we will examine the *mechanics* of the mind-door cognitive process. For the *dynamics* of same, see **I (the spiritual problems of identity)** = SD 19.1(5.2).

According to Abhidhamma teachers, *beginning with the fourth mind-door cognitive process*, the karma created is heavier than that in the first three mind-door cycles or in the five-door cognitive process. The reason is simple: as the object becomes clearer, the reaction is also stronger.

← The 10 instants of process consciousness →

1 P	2 V	3 A	4 M	5 J	6 J	7 J	8 J	9 J	10 J	11 J	12 Rg	13 Rg	B
***	***	***	***	***	***	***	***	***	***	***	***	***	***
Past bhavaṅga	Vibrating bhavaṅga	Arrest bhavaṅga	Mind-door adverting	← Javana → Impulsion							Registration	Registration	Stream of bhavaṅga

Table 3 A Complete Mind-door Cognitive Process (after Susila 2005:23, 30)

4 The mind-door process can occur by itself

The wholesome or unwholesome **javanas** of the five-door cognitive process bear fruit only while one is living (*pavatti*). They do not produce any name-and-form (*nāma,rūpa*) or the five aggregates at **rebirth consciousness** (*paṭisandhi citta*) because the object is still rudimentary. The javanas beginning from the fourth mind-door cognitive process onwards, however, are strong enough to produce name-and-form at the rebirth moment, in future lives, as well in the present life.

Sometimes the mind-door cognitive process occurs by itself, without any of the five-door cognitive processes. When any of the six sense-objects enters the range of cognition entirely on its own (not as a continuing from one of the five sense-door processes), it is called a "bare mind-door cognitive process" (*suddha,manodvāra,vīthi*). This is when, for example, one is meditating, thinking, reminiscing, imagining, or day-dreaming.

Understanding that the mind is behind every conscious action we do, and that the mind also works by itself independent of the physical senses, allows us to work on the mind so that it will wholesomely influence all such physical processes and also strengthen itself. Working on our own mind also helps us to notice that *there is only thinking going on without any thinker*, that is, we are merely but a series of wonderfully conscious processes. There is no abiding entity in such a process, nor outside of them.

What really troubles us is not the question of whether there is an abiding soul or not, but the fact that we tend to live as if there *were* such a permanent entity. This blinds us to the fact that people change, things change, everything in this world changes. If we and the world are constantly changing, there is nothing that we can really hold for long. It is really going to hurt if we try to hold on to something where happiness arises only in letting them go.

When we understand that we really own nothing in this world—naked we arrive, naked we leave—then we begin to treasure the goodness in ourselves and in others. We are then ready *to disown the pain* that is never really ours in the first place. We begin to understand what it really means to say: the scolding is painful, but the scolded feels no pain. That is to say: *only suffering exists, but no sufferer*.

5 Wise attention

5.1 HOW WISE ATTENTION WORKS. Suppose one sees someone and gets *angry* with him, the consciousness rooted in anger will run for seven conscious cycles. Since many mind-door cognitive cycles follow one another, consciousness rooted in anger will arise in succession countless times, as the mind arises and ceases faster than lightning speed! If you were to be angry for just a minute, numerous billions of unwholesome karmic moments are produced, leaving behind unwholesome karmic potency in your stream of consciousness.

Similarly, if you harbour any *negative mental state*, it will arise continuously until you change your mental state. The rules are simple enough: (1) every mental state replicates itself; (2) to weaken the old negative states, create new positives ones; (3) in due course, let go of both states. This is, in essence, how meditation works.

Now, if you are attached to a visible form or object, consciousness rooted in greed will arise successively in the javana stage countless times. Each javana has the potential to produce its result either in the present life or in lives to come. This means uncountable billions of latent tendencies lie in wait to strike when the conditions are right. As **the Dhammapada** reminds us:

Mā'vaññetha pāpassa	Do not look down on evil, thinking,	
na maṁ taṁ āgamissati	"It will not come to me!"	
uda,bindu,nipātena	Even as water fills a pot drop by drop,	
pūrati bālo pāpassa	the fool is filled with evil,	
thoka,thokam pi ācinaṁ	piling it up little by little.	(Dh 121)

However, these unwholesome javanas are not fixed like resultant and functional consciousness. We can be our own master by exercising control over our own mental states, and change unwholesome javanas into wholesome ones through wise attention (*yoniso manasikāra*).[22]

For example, when a meditator sees a beautiful girl, instead of being aroused with lust, he reflects on the impurities of the body, that is, the body as really being made up of *head hair, body hair, nails, teeth, skin*, and so on. He reverses the perception of beauty into the perception of foulness (*asubha,-saññā*).[23]

In the Visuddhi,magga story of **Mahā Tissa Thera of Mt Cetiya**, we see how the elder keeps his focus on his meditation even while on almsround. When an unhinged woman laughs at him rudely, his mindfulness allows him to see the reality of the moment, that is, the woman's teeth. Meditating on the impermanence of these "bones," Tissa becomes an arhat right there and then! [§55]

In a less dramatic way, we should be mentally centred in the face of *loss, obscurity, blame, and pain*, for they are but the flip side of *gain, fame, praise, and joy*. They are the eight winds that blow where it likes.[24] The strategy to a successful working life is as follows:

- be clear of your tasks,
- use your strength, strengthen your weaknesses,
- work hard, rest well,
- occasionally review your life and work in the light of your spiritual goal.

If you have put in your best in work or in life, but still there is no progress, then some past karma or present condition must be cleared away. As **the Alabbhanīya Ṭhāna Sutta** (A 5.48) advises us,

Sace pajāneyya alabbhaneyyo	If he should know, "Not to be attained
mayā ca aññena vā esa attho	is this goal by me, or by any other,"
Asocamāno adhivāsayeyya	then, ungrieving, bearing it, consider thus:
kammaṁ daḷhaṁ kinti karomi dānî ti.	"How shall I now apply my strength to the task?"
	(A 5.48/3:56)

[22] Wise attention is said to be the "internal condition" for the noble eightfold path: see **Meghiya S** (A 9.3) = SD 34.2 & **Virtue Ethics** = SD 18.11(6.4).

[23] This term, common in the Suttas, refers to the 31 (or Comy, 32) parts of the body. The term *asubha,nimitta* (the sign of foulness) in Comys, refers to one or other of the 10 foul objects, ie bodily remains in one of the 10 stages of decomposition (Vism 6.1-11/178 f). On details of the practice, see **Satipaṭṭhāna Ss** (D 22.5/2:293 = M 10.10/) = SD 13.2-3; **Kāya,gatā,sati S** (M 119.7) = SD 12.21 Intro (5). See also **Vibhaṅga S** (S 51.29/5:277 f), on the analysis of will or desire (*chanda*).

[24] See **Loka,dhamma S** (A 8.5/4:157) = SD 42.2.

Meantime, the best spiritual practice would be the perception of impermanence. For it reminds you that everything in the world is impermanent: *failure is impermanent, be happy with it; success is impermanent, be happy with it*. Either way you are happy, which is much more than what most people can be! But you also have a head start with impermanence as a mental companion: streamwinning awaits you in this life itself.

5.2 MEDITATION CAN IMPROVE ATTENTION. In 2007, the science journal, *PLoS Biology* (Slagter et al, June 2007), carried a report by a group of US mind scientists on how "Mental training affects distribution of limited brain resources."[25] According to the study, a three-month training in Vipassana (Insight) meditation[26] leads to a profound shift in how the brain directs its attention.

The study was led by **Richard Davidson**, a professor of psychology and psychiatry at the University of Wisconsin at Madison.[27] According to Davidson, it appears that the ability to let go of distracting thoughts, frees the brain to attend to more rapidly changing things and events in the world at large. Expert meditators, he says, are better than other people at detecting fast-changing stimuli, such as emotional facial expressions.

Recent research has shown that *meditation is good for the brain*.[28] It appears to increase the brain's gray matter, improve the immune system, reduce stress and promote a sense of well-being. But according to Davidson, this was the first study to examine how meditation affects attention.

The study exploited a brain phenomenon called *the attentional blink*. Suppose that pictures of an apple and of an orange, separated by a series of 20 pictures of pineapples, are flashed before your eyes half a second apart. In that sequence, most people would fail to see the second fruit. Their brain, as it were, "blinked." The mind lapsed in attention.

Scientists explain this blindness as "a misallocation of attention." Things are happening too fast for the brain to detect the second stimulus. Consciousness is somehow diverted. But the blink is not an inevitable bottleneck, Davidson says. Most people can identify the second target some of the time. It is possible to exert some control, which need not be voluntary, over the allocation of attention.

In the study, 17 volunteers with no meditation experience spent three months at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachussetts, meditating for 10 to 12 hours a day. A novice control group meditated for 20 minutes a day over the same period. Both groups were then given attentional blink tests with two numbers embedded in a series of letters. As both groups looked for the numbers, their brain activity was recorded with electrodes fixed on the scalp.

According to Davidson, everyone could detect the first number. But the brain recordings showed that *the less experienced meditators tended to grasp the first number and hang onto it, so they missed the second number*. Those with more experience invested less attention to the first number, as if letting it go. This led to an increased ability to grasp the second number.[29]

The attentional blink was thought to be a fixed property of the nervous system, says Davidson. But this study shows that it can change with practice. *Attention is a flexible, trainable skill*. The *PLoS Biology* paper reports that

> Vipassana meditation allegedly reduces ongoing mental noise in the brain, enabling the practitioner to remain in the present moment. Three months of intensive training in this style of meditation may therefore have decreased mental capture by any stimulus, ie distracters and targets alike,[30] resulting in reduced distracter interference. (Slagter et al 2007:7)

Daniel Levison, a staff researcher in the psychology department at the University of Wisconsin, who meditated for three months as part of the study, says, "I'm a much better listener. I don't get lost in my own personal reaction to what people are saying."

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[25] A newspaper summary is given by Sandra Blakeslee in the New York Times, 8 May 2007 (on which this section is based). See biblio.

[26] Using the breath meditation and cultivation of lovingkindness (Slagter et al, 2007:7.

[27] On Davidson and "**How does meditation affect brain?**" see further SD 17.8e(6.4).

[28] See SD 17.8c(6.3-6.9).

[29] For a simple test on your reaction time, see http://serendip.brynmawr.edu/bb/reaction/reaction.html.

[30] S Martens, J Munneke, H Smid, A Johnson, "Quick minds don't blink: Electrophysiological correlates of individual differences in attentional selection." *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* 18 2006:1423–1438. Link: http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/abs/10.1162/jocn.2006.18.9.1423.

CONCLUSION. The advantage of understanding the nature of perceptual "signs and details" is that it provides one with *an early cognitive warning system* as well as nipping a potential perceptual hazard in the bud. As **Analayo** wisely notes:

> The instruction to bring restraint to bear on the secondary characteristics (*anuvyañjana*) could correspond to further associations in the perceptual process, which elaborate in detail the initial biased cognition (*saññā*).[31] The tendency to biased and affective reactions is rooted in the stage of sign making, when the first barely conscious evaluations that might underlie cognition (*saññā*) can arise. In the context of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*'s injunction to contemplate the causes related to the arising of a fetter, this stage of sign making is especially relevant. (Analayo 2003:226)

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The Restraint of the Senses

(Buddhaghosa, Visuddhi,magga 1.53-59/20-22)[32]

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[This section is a commentary to §1.1]

53 Instrumental talk

Now as regards "the moral virtue of sense-restraint" (*indriya,saṁvara,sīla*) shown next in the way beginning, "when he sees a form with the eye" (*cakkhunā rūpaṁ disvā*), herein *he* is a monk established in "the moral virtue of restraint in accordance with the Pāṭimokkha."

"**When he sees a form with the eye**" means on seeing a visible form with the eye-consciousness that is capable of seeing visible form taken in a conventional sense of "the eye" by way of a means [instrument]. The Ancients (*porāṇa*),[33] however, said:

"The eye does not see a form because it has no mind. The mind does not see because it has no eyes. But when there is the impingement of the door and the object, he sees by means of the consciousness that has eye-sensitivity as its physical basis.

Now such a talk is called 'instrumental talk' (*sasambhāra,kathā*), such as saying, 'He shot him with a bow (*dhanunā vijjhatî ti*),' and so on. Thus it is said, "The meaning here is this: 'When he has seen a form with eye-conscious' (*cakkhu,viññāṇena rūpaṁ disvā ti*)." [untraced]

54 Merely grasping what is really there

"**He grasps neither its sign**" (*na nimitta-g,gāhī*): he does not grasp the sign of a woman or a man, or a sign that is the ground [basis] for defilement, such as the sign of beauty, etc. He stops at what is merely seen.[34]

"**Nor its detail**" (*nânuvyañjana-g,gāhī*): he does not grasp any aspect, taken to be hand, foot, smile, laughter, talk, looking ahead, looking around, etc, that is given the term "detail" (*anuvyañjana*) because of its detailing (*anu anu vvyañjanato*) of defilements, because of causing them to become manifest. He only grasps what is really there.

55 Only a pile of bones

This is like the case of the elder Mahā Tissa, a resident of Mt Cetiya (*Cetiya,pabbata,vāsī Mahā,-tissa-t,thera*). It is said that the elder Mahā Tissa was on his way from Mt Cetiya to Anurādhapura for his almsround. Now a certain daughter-in-law of family who had quarrelled with her husband, had set

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[31] See Analayo's n here.

[32] For another description of the same process up to the death moment, see "The cognitive process" (Vism 14.115-124/458-460): SD 17.8b(5).

[33] The Ancients are apparently the learned monks before Buddhaghosa's time, but unlikely to be the immediate disciples of the Buddha, as then the Suttas would be cited, unless they are extra-textual Dharma transmissions.

[34] See Vism:Ñ 20 n14 for a long n from VismṬ 40 f.

out early from Anurādhapura, all dressed up and decked like a heavenly nymph heading for a relatives' house. She saw him on the road, and being of perverse mind, **[21]** laughed loudly.

The elder, thinking, "What is that?" looked up, and seeing the bones of her teeth, attained to the perception of foulness, and so gained arhathood. Thus it was said:

> Seeing the bones that were her teeth, he recollected it as his foremost perception.
> Standing right there, the elder attained arhathood. [Untraced]

Now her husband, going along the road after here, seeing the elder, asked: "Bhante, have you seen a woman?" The elder said:

> Whether it was a man or a woman that went by I know not,
> But only that on this highway there went a pile of bones!" [Untraced]

56 Practising sense-restraint

As regards the words "**insofar as…that…**" (*yatv-ādhikaraṇam enaṁ*), etc, the meaning is this: by reason of which, because of which, non-restraint of the eye-faculty, if that person were **unrestrained in that eye-faculty** (*cakkhu'ndriyaṁ asaṁvutaṁ*), that is, with the eye-door unclosed by the door-panel of mindfulness, these states of covetousness, etc, **would overwhelm him**, would pursue him, would overcome him.

"**He practises restraining it**" (*tassa saṁvarāya paṭipajjati*): he practises for the sake of closing that eye-faculty by the door-panel of mindfulness. And practising thus too it is said, "**he commits himself to the restraint of the eye-faculty**" (*rakkhati cakkhu'ndriyaṁ cakkhu'ndriye saṁvaraṁ āpajjati*).

57 The cognitive process

Therein, there is actually neither restraint nor non-restraint in the eye-faculty. For, neither mindfulness nor forgetfulness arises depending on eye-sensitivity. On the contrary, when a visible form comes into the eye's range, the life-continuum (*bhav'aṅga*) having arisen twice, then ceases.

Then the functional mind-element accomplishing the function of adverting (*āvajjana*) arises and then ceases.

After that, there is the eye-consciousness (*cakkhu,viññāṇa*) with the function of seeing.

After that, there is the resultant mind-element with the function of receiving (*sampaṭicchanna*).

After that, there is the resultant rootless mind-consciousness element with the function of investigating (*santīraṇa*).

After that, there is the functional rootless mind-consciousness-element accomplishing the function of determining (*voṭṭhapana*) arises, and then ceases.

Immediately then, impulsion (*javana*) runs.[35]

Herein, there is neither restraint nor non-restraint on the occasion of the life-continuum, or on any of the other occasions beginning with adverting.

However, there is non-restraint if immorality, or forgetfulness, or unknowing, or impatience, or idleness, arises at the moment of impulsion. When this happens, it is called "non-restraint in the eye-faculty." **[22]**

58 How the eye is restrained

Why is that so? Because when this happens, the door is unguarded, so too is the life-continuum, so too the process-consciousnesses (*vīthi,cittāni*),[36] beginning with adverting.

What is it like? It is like when **a city's four gates are not secured**. Although inside the city, the doors of houses, store-houses, rooms, etc, are secured, yet all property inside the city is unguarded and unprotected. For, robbers, coming in by the city gates, can do as they please.

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[35] See Vism:Ñ 23 n16 for a long n from VismṬ 42.

[36] The term *vīthi,citta* means "process-consciousness," ie, mental units that go through a process, while *citta,vīthi* refers to the process itself, sometimes called the "cognitive process." Nyanamoli apparently has taken *vīthi,citta* simply as the process in Vism:Ñ.

Even so, immorality, etc, arise in the impulsion (*javana*), wherein there is no restraint, so that the door is unguarded, and so too the life-continuum and the process-consciousnesses, beginning with adverting.

But when moral virtue, etc, have arisen therein, then the door is guarded, and so too the life-continuum and the process-consciousnesses, beginning with adverting.

What is it like? It is like when **a city's four gates are secured**. Although inside the city, the doors of houses, store-houses, rooms, etc, are not secured, yet all property inside the city is guarded and protected. For, when the city gates are locked, there is no way in for the robbers.

Even so, when moral virtue, etc, have arisen in the impulsion (*javana*), wherein there is restraint, then the door is guarded, and so too the life-continuum and the process-consciousnesses, beginning with adverting.

Thus, although it actually arises at the moment of impulsion, it is nevertheless called "restraint in the eye-faculty."

59 How the other senses are restrained

So, too, regarding the phrases, "**when he hears a sound with the ear**…" and so on.

So it is this moral virtue, which in brief has the characteristic of avoiding the grasping of signs connected with defilement in respect to visible forms, etc, that should be understood as "the virtue of sense-restraint."

In simple terms, the practice of sense-restraint is like careful driving. Whether you are driving in a busy city street or on the highway, you have to keep your hands on the steering-wheel, your feet on the pedals, and your eyes front on the road and its peripheries (and occasionally in the view mirrors). You mindfully watch for other cars and vehicles, pedestrians, road conditions, and of course traffic signs. But you do not stare at them too long, just enough to know you if you need to slow down, or to stop, or are safe to move on. That way you safely arrive at your destination.

In meditation, too, you carefully observe whatever arises at the sense-doors that are prominent, noting them and letting them go, always going back to your meditation object (the "steering wheel"). You watch your mental state and know what to do next, so that you progress safely and joyfully into samadhi and on into dhyana and the liberation.

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