

## The Scientific Basis of Buddhist Meditation

In dealing with the scientific basis of Buddhist meditation, it is necessary to use modern scientific terminology, which is mainly psychological. We believe Buddhism is not a religion of faith and worship but an advanced form of psychotherapy. Its aim is not to make abnormal people normal, but to make normal people supernormal, because, from the Buddha's point of view, all normal people are mentally sick, suffering from a delusion, and are, therefore, insane (*sabbe puthujjanā ummattakā*).

Buddhism can be called an introspective science that uses the scientific method consisting of observation, inference, and experimental verification. When Buddhists meditate on the teaching of the Buddha (*dhamma*), they recite:

**“Clearly stated is the teaching of the Buddha (*suakkhāto bhagavatā dhammo*). It is experiential (*sanditthiko*), timeless (*akāliko*), verifiable (*ehipassiko*), and introspective (*openaiko*). It has been personally experienced by the intelligent (*paccattan veditabbo vinnuhi*).”**

The difference between Buddhism and modern physical sciences is that Buddhism is experiential rather than empirical. That means it is also introspective, unlike the physical sciences. Being introspective, it is also independent of time and space. Buddhism understands time, space, matter, and energy as a product of our thinking. The entire world, including ourselves, is a creation of the process of perception and thinking. This idea is strange to the normal mind, but it is verifiable, and rational people have verified it. It is somewhat like the ideas expressed in modern quantum physics.

We read in the Suttas (*Rohitassa Sutta*, AN 4.45) that once a celestial being came to meet the Buddha and asked the question: “If one travels in space at an extremely high speed, for about a hundred years, will that person be able to reach the end of the universe?” The Buddha replied: “No – one cannot reach the end of the universe that way. But without reaching the end of the universe, one cannot bring the **insecurity of life** to an end.” Then the Buddha continued: “The universe, the beginning of the universe, the end of the universe, and the way leading to the end of the universe, is in this fathom long body itself, with its perceptions and conceptions.” When this was said, the celestial being said: “How true this statement is. I know this through my own experience. In my previous life, I was a yogi. As a result of my practice of meditation, I gained the power to travel in space at an extremely high speed. I traveled in space for hundred years and died on the way, and was reborn in the celestial world. This was why I asked you this question. Now I know the answer. Thank you, Your Holiness.”

Thinkers in the West have been generally extroverted. Even the Buddha has drawn attention to this fact. The Western mind has always tried to conquer the world or nature and change the circumstances to suit human wishes. Western religions, politics, philosophies, and even science have been attempting to change the world and society. Modern scientific technology is a good example of this effort to change nature. Modern politics and political theories are an effort to change society.

However, these efforts have not solved the problem of existence, which is the conflict between our self-centered emotions and reality. Our blind emotions seek permanence in an impermanent world. Our self-centered emotions come in conflict with those of others. Our emotions dominate our minds. Our intelligence has become the slave of our emotions, not the master. We cannot gain control over these blind unrealistic emotions. We find ourselves faced with the entire gamut of horrible situations --- crime, war, terrorism, drug addiction, epidemics, suicide, and insanity. It also includes the unavoidable calamities of life---aging, disease, and death.

The Eastern mind has been more introverted and introspective than the Western mind, and therefore it has been more concerned with changing the human mind rather than the external world. These pursuits include activities like yoga, meditation, and spirituality. If we bring this Eastern path of life into careful scrutiny, we begin to realize that it seems to be taking the path taken by the process of evolution. We know that biological evolution took place not by attempting to change the environment to suit the organism but by changing the organism to suit the environment. It is called adaptation to the environment, which results in the evolution of the species. It is akin to the Eastern path, which is proceeding towards further evolution of the human species by transforming the human mind and character.

Suppose one studies the teachings of the Buddha. In that case, one finds that the Buddha, the Awakened One, adopted this method of evolution and thereby not only evolved beyond the normal level of the human being himself, but he also helped others to solve the problem by transforming their lives. He was not a savior of the world who used supernatural powers to solve the problems of mankind. He was a savior who used human wisdom and the power of the human mind to solve human problems. He taught how each individual could solve his own problem through his own effort. Many have benefited immensely from his leadership and tutorship.

The practice of Buddhism is a personal growth technique or a conscious psychological evolution of the human consciousness. This psychological, evolutionary process is mainly a matter of emotional control or management. Some modern thinkers hold that emotions make one a human being. This is an obvious error because emotions are present in other animals too. The fact, however, is that emotion is what makes a human being an animal. His ability to think and reason logically raises the human being above all other animals.

A verse well-known to Indian Sanskrit scholars says:

Eating, sleeping, fear, and sex,  
Are seen in animals and even men  
The human being is above the beast  
Only in his power to think and know what's good  
The human being who is weak in thought  
Is almost like an ordinary beast.

This verse indicates that the ability to think and reason logically makes humans unique among animals. We know of no other animal able to think so logically as a human being.

Most animals suffer even when seeking food. They may not always that they find their food. Sometimes while searching for food, they can become a meal for a larger animal. Other times while searching for food, they might meet their opposite sex. Yet, while being attracted by this sexual object, they might encounter a challenger and fight to death. Animals are not conscious enough to predict the possibility of their death. On the other hand, human beings are fortunate in being conscious of their own suffering and even having the intelligence to avoid most dangers, though not entirely.

Some writers and speakers on Buddhism have mistakenly stated that according to the Buddha, **life is suffering**. We must vehemently deny this, as it is not only an insult to the Buddha, but it is also an absolute error and a misrepresentation of the teachings of the Buddha. The Buddha said that **a self-centered life is an unhappy life**.

If our aim in life is self-centered and having goals like becoming rich, achieving power, obtaining a prominent place in society, or enjoying sensual pleasures, we would certainly be disappointed, worried, and unhappy. If on the other hand, our aim in life is to be unselfish, to care for and share with others, to

give, to do things for the sake of others, to make others happy, to make contributions to society at large, and even make gifts of ourselves to the world, then only will we be happy.

Self-centeredness is biological and is built into our system. All our emotional impulses are self-centered. Only by learning to gain control over these self-centered emotional impulses can we become happy and selfless. The aim of Buddhism and Buddhist meditation is to give up self-centered emotions and the notion of “self.” We suffer in life because of emotions.

**We are organisms in an environment that have become conscious of a “self” due to self-centered emotions.**

Figure 1. below shows how **we are organisms in an environment**. It is the first step in understanding the problem of unhappiness.

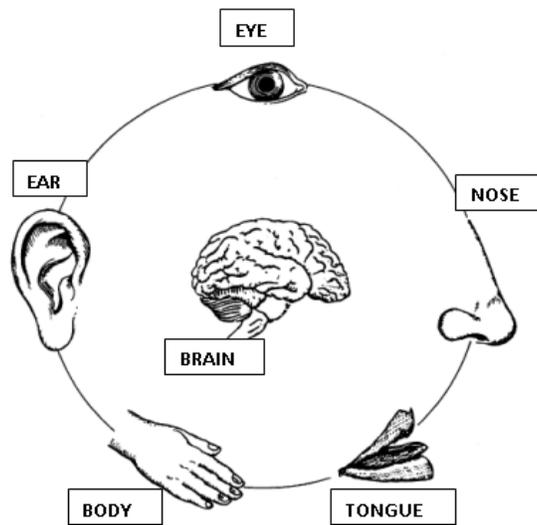


Figure 1. The organism and its senses

The organism is aware of the environment through the five senses—the eyes, the ears, the nose, the tongue, and the body.

Figure 2. depicts how the organism reacts to sensory stimulation. The five senses are stimulated by things happening in the environment. Sensory stimulation can arise from within and outside the organism. For example, when light falls on the eye, we see. The first thing that happens is seeing. Then, having seen, we form a concept (giving meaning to what we see) of what we have seen. We then begin to like or dislike what we see. That is the emotional part of our reaction. The emotions lead to muscle tension and discomfort, which seek release in action.

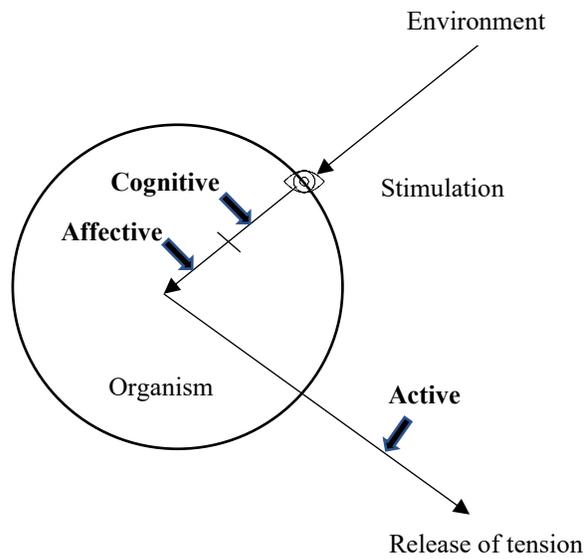
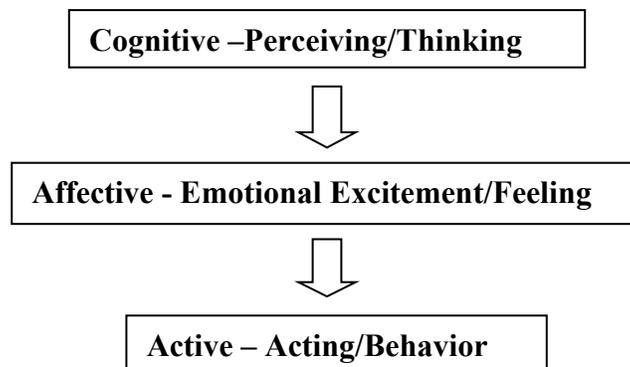


Figure 2. Reaction of the organism to environmental stimulation

**The reaction has three parts:**

**Cognitive,  
Affective, and  
Active**

For example, the **cognitive** part of the reaction is seeing, identifying, and forming a concept about what is seen. Then having cognized, we begin to react emotionally in the form of likes or dislikes; this is the **affective** part of the reaction. Now, the emotional reaction is not only mental, it is also physical. Hormones are secreted into the blood, various parts of the body begin to change function, and tensions arise in the muscles. Muscle tensions make us feel uncomfortable until they are released in action to obtain what is desired, to get rid of what is hated, or to run away from what is feared. The action step is the release of tension, and the **active** part completes the reaction. When the tension is released in action, we feel comfortable and happy.



Although the biological mechanism of releasing tension in action was useful to animals and our primitive ancestors, today, we cannot release our tensions similarly. This inability is partly due to

civilization and the standards of acceptable behavior expected of us by society. For example, when we become angry with a person, we can't kill, fight or abuse him. If it's your boss, you can't do anything! So the tension remains and is not released. When you go home, you may release the tension by quarreling with your husband, wife, or children. Sometimes the tension cannot be released properly, and even if you release it with someone else, you still haven't released it with your boss. The tension therefore remains. These tensions get built up one upon the other. New tensions arise and are never released properly. The word **stress** is used to describe this problem today and is what the Buddha called *dukkha*, which is usually translated as suffering. But I like to translate *dukkha* as **discomfort**, which is a state where the mind is disturbed, and the body becomes tense. It is a mental and physical state which is very unpleasant, and this is the meaning of *dukkha*. Some people think *dukkha* happens only in third-world countries where there is poverty, starvation, and other problems. That is not the *dukkha* we are considering here. *Dukkha* is what we experience every day, all the time because our tensions are not released.

Even if we temporarily release our tensions, new tensions arise because we are constantly reacting to new things in life. So the problem is our reaction. Our ideal state is not to react to anything. When I say this, some people think that we become vegetables—some call it the philosophy of the turnip—simply not reacting to anything or being like a statue.

The emotional reactions have been useful to animals and primitive humans, during evolution, until the faculty of reasoning and thinking and the forebrain or the cerebrum fully developed. We don't really need emotions when the thinking process is functioning properly. The emotions are primitive. Man can do things through reason. When I say this, some object. They say, for example, "Oh, emotions are very important because we need love." But real love is not an emotion. Real love becomes possible only when the mind becomes calm, tranquil, and free of self-centered emotions. In his book, *The Art of Loving*, Erich Fromm distinguishes between the three kinds of love—*eros*, *philia*, and *agape*. *Eros* is sexual love between a man and a woman. *Philia* is family love between parents and children or brothers and sisters. *Agape* is selfless love. The Buddha's *mettā* or *maitri* and Christ's "Love thy neighbor as thy self" are examples of selfless love, which is not an emotion, because all emotions are self-centered. True love is an interest in the welfare of others without making any distinction between oneself and others. That is *mettā*, a divine mental state (*brahma-vihāra*). *Brahma* is a term for God. *Vihara* means dwelling. Therefore, *mettā* is the Dwelling of God. In other words, this is love, which is called God. "God is love." It is selfless love. When humans can cultivate this kind of love, they become God, according to Buddhist thinking. Buddhism is a humanistic religion and not theistic. In theistic religions, God is the creator of the world. In Buddhism, God is the human being who has evolved to that state of selfless love. Therefore it is the human being that becomes God. In other words, God is a human concept, which is the ideal of perfection, which human beings conceive and try to realize through the practice of religion. The practice of religion is, therefore, an effort to become God. In other words, "**man creates God and not vice versa.**" This is the humanistic way of looking at religion and is the Buddhist way of thinking. The important thing to realize is that we are trying to get rid of self-centered emotions. We cannot practice true love as long as we harbor these self-centered emotions.

Instead of reacting, we must learn to respond, which means acting calmly and rationally. "Not reacting" does not mean being inactive; it means responding. At this point, we need to distinguish between a "reaction" and a "response." As shown before, the reaction consists of cognitive, affective, and active phases. **When we learn to respond, we transform the reaction into a response.** In order to achieve this, it is necessary to transform the cognitive process and eliminate emotional arousal. Today cognitive psychologists are gradually becoming aware of this. Over 2,500 years ago, the Buddha discovered this. Modern psychologists are only rediscovering what the Buddha taught. Rational Emotive Therapy is based on this principle.

A cognitive transformation results in a change of the affective, which stops the reaction so that a rational response can be made. The reaction is an involuntary action, whereas the response is voluntary. This deliberate, voluntary action is called CONATION. We must distinguish between “active” in a reaction and “conative” in a response (Figure 3).

When we consider the five precepts—to refrain from killing/harming other living beings; stealing; adultery; harsh speech; and taking intoxicants, we are talking about a change in our behavior that is not based on our emotions. Crime, for example, is due to emotional behavior. Crime can only be stopped when the emotional behavior stops. So instead of behaving emotionally, we have to act calmly and rationally, which is called responding instead of reacting. When we control the reaction and begin to respond, we have undergone a transformation of the cognitive (*paññā*) and a transformation of the affective (*samādhi*), and a transformation of the active into conative (*sīla*). *Sīla* is the transformation in behavior. This changed behavior is the active part of the response we call “conative.”

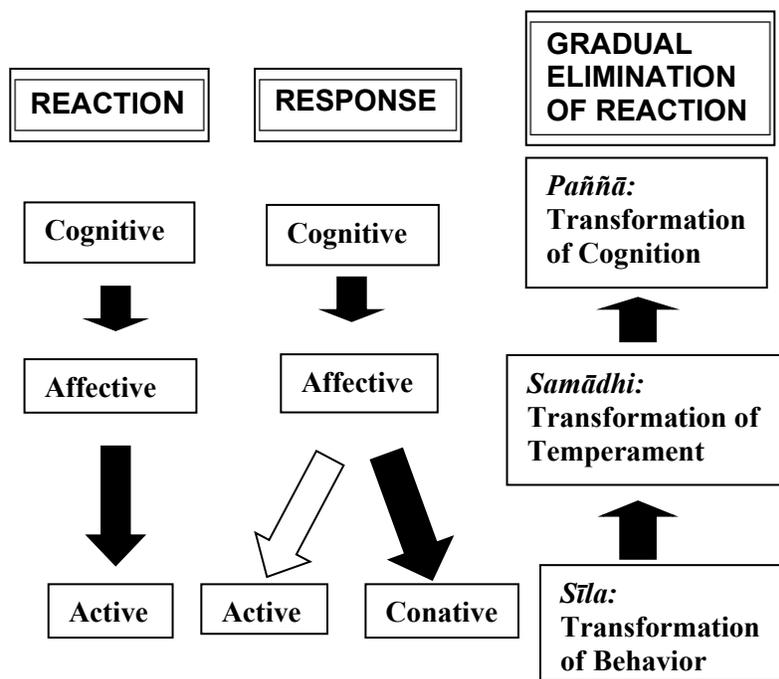


Figure 3. The reaction and response

This change or transformation has to begin at the cognitive level, but the outward behavior is seen at the active or *sīla* level. For example, we might be angry but don’t speak or act angrily. That is *sīla*. Our cognitive transformation is a change in our perspective. This change is an expansion of perspective. What do I mean by an expansion of perspective? For example, take two people who argue because they have opposite views. And they don’t see each other’s point of view. If one listens to his opponent and understands the issue, one begins to discover that there are two ways of looking at it, not just one way. So his perspective expands, and the conflict ceases. That is a transformation of the cognitive. This is what is done in cognitive therapy or conflict resolution. It is seeing it from another angle, transforming cognitive, and emotional behavior. Modern psychologists call this a paradigm shift. In the expanded perspective, you see that it is not your circumstances that make you happy or unhappy, but it is how you interpret them. By changing your interpretation, you change your reaction and behavior. So instead of reacting, you learn to respond to

circumstances. The transformed or expanded perspective is called the **Harmonious Perspective** because it resolves a conflict.

In his book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen R. Covey gives a good example of a paradigm shift. He describes an encounter between a passenger and a father traveling with his children on a train. The children were restless, running about and creating a disturbance. The father was quiet and unconcerned. All this made the passenger uneasy. The father, who was sitting quietly next to him, started explaining that his wife had passed away a few minutes ago in the hospital. Upon hearing this, the passenger's paradigm shifted, and his mood changed from anger to sympathy and understanding.

In the *sutta*, there are many instances where a person is transformed after listening to the Buddha. That means hearing the *Dhamma* can result in a paradigm shift, which can lead to calming emotions. While supporting cognitive psychology, this Buddhist way of thinking points out the short-sightedness of behaviorist psychology, which focuses only on behavior.

In meditation, we try to achieve emotional calm. There are different degrees of calm. Let us find out what calm is. What are the obstacles or interferences to calm? When we meditate, we have to be aware of five types of obscurants (*nīvarana*) or interferences (usually translated as the five hindrances):

- Carnal desire (*kāmacchanda*)
- Anger (*vyāpāda*)
- Lethargy and drowsiness (*thīna middha*)
- Anxiety and worry (*uddhacca kukkucca*), and
- Vacillation (*vicikiccā*)

*Kāmacchanda* is the reaction to pleasant feelings (*vedanā*) and the desire for sensual pleasures. People ask, "What's wrong with enjoying sensual pleasures?" Now, there's nothing wrong with enjoyment itself. What's wrong is if you enjoy it once, there arises in you want for more. Then you want the pleasure to last. There's no end to this; you become unhappy when you don't have the pleasure. So, the enjoyment in itself is not wrong. But enjoyment leads to desire, and desire creates unhappiness. When the desire arises, tension arises, and the tension has to be released in action to obtain what is desired. When you don't have what is desired, the tension remains and must be released somehow. This can lead to the pursuit, which leads to acquisition, which leads to jealousy, which leads to guarding, which leads to crime, violence, war, and the whole host of evils in the world. It can also manifest in neurosis, psychosis, and psycho-somatic diseases. That is why the desire for sensual pleasures is not such a good thing. Although sensual pleasure itself is nice, the desire for sensual pleasure is not so good. That is the problem.

*Vyāpāda* is anger. It arises partly from the desire for sensual pleasure. When you don't get what's desired, you become angry. In other words, when your desire for sensual pleasure is not satisfied, you get angry, or if someone takes it away again, you can become angry. So, anger is also an emotional reaction and not a good thing. These are things that prevent us from true love. True love cannot appear in the presence of the desire for sensual pleasure and anger.

*Thīna middha* is lethargy and drowsiness. When one is unable to obtain what is desired, one feels like not doing anything and simply gives up. Sometimes it's called discouragement, depression, apathy, and so on. *Thīna middha* is also an accumulation of tension, which is not properly released. An alternative to releasing the accumulated tension is to go to sleep or become lazy and not want to do anything. Here, the emotions and tensions are kept inside.

*Uddhacca kukkucca* is anxiety and worry. Although you may not be actively involved in anything, you begin to worry about the past and the future.

*Vicikiccā* is vacillation or a confused state of mind where you can't decide on what is right and wrong. You become so discouraged that you can't decide on anything.

These are psychological problems that psychologists and psychotherapists come across frequently.

These obscurants or interferences disappear when you learn to control your emotions and relax your tensions. One advantage of meditation is learning to relax the tensions and control the thoughts.

In controlling thoughts, we must look at the reaction again in terms of cognitive, affective, and active. The cognitive is a mental picture. The affective is emotional arousal. The active is the release of tension. Emotional arousal occurs when we hold a mental picture associated with an emotion, resulting in tension. For example, when you are angry, you may have a mental picture of a quarrel or disagreement. So you feel insulted. As long as you hold that mental picture in your mind, anger will be aroused, and you will become tenser and tenser. The Buddha compared this to a person being shot with two arrows. The first arrow is someone abusing or harming a person. The second arrow is the anger that arises in the person. So when a person does something bad to you, and if you become angry, you are harming yourself in addition to the other person harming you. Why should you be harming yourself because someone hurt you?

As we learn to change mental pictures through meditation, we learn to take our minds away from such pictures, which arouse emotional states, and focus on something that produces mental calm. We think of the Buddha (the Awakened One), *Dhamma* (the teachings or reality of the Awakened One), or the *Sangha* (the community of followers), or we think of *mettā*—"May all beings be well and happy." So it's the mental picture that determines what kind of emotional state you have. We can learn to change the mental picture, similar to changing channels on TV. We must learn to switch off bad mental pictures and switch on mental pictures that calm our minds. This way, we can reach deeper and deeper levels of tranquility.

When obscurants (*nīvarana*) disappear from the mind, tranquility appears. We experience five things – *vitakka vicāra*, *pīti*, *sukha*, *ekaggatā*. *Vicāra* means inquiring, and *vitakka* is inference. These are the basic constituents of conceptual thinking. Whenever we form a concept, we ask, "What is this?" Then we answer – "Oh, this is a microphone." Thus forming a concept. We can also form a concept while doing meditation on breathing. You inquire, "What is this?" "Oh, this is breathing in; this is breathing out. These are also concepts. We can also have concepts that produce excitement --- "Oh, who is this?" "This is my enemy," and then you become angry. So anxiety is dependent on the mental pictures and the concepts you hold.

In meditation, we are cultivating concepts that produce calm. This conceptual thinking is *vicāra* and *vitakka*. When you have good concepts in your mind, you experience happiness. We call it rapture (*pīti*). It is a state of tranquil happiness. *Sukha* is physical comfort because the tensions relax. Now, this is different from releasing tension in action. Instead of releasing tension in action to obtain what is desired or to get rid of what is hated, we learn to consciously relax the tension. **It is, therefore, not a "release" but a "relaxation" of tension.** When tensions relax, a comfortable feeling arises, and that is *sukha*. In other words, you feel happy or rapturous when the mind is free of emotional excitement, and physically you feel comfortable because the tensions are relaxed.

*Ekaggatā* is the stillness of mind, calmness, tranquility, mental stability, mental repose, or a state of equilibrium. *Ekaggatā* is commonly translated as one-pointedness of mind, but I think it means stillness. The Bible says, "Be still and know that I am God." All religions talk about this stillness. When you come to stillness, you become God (*brahma bhuto*).

There are four levels of tranquility (*jhāna*). At the first level, there are five constituents or factors. These are the *vitakka vicāra*, *pīti*, *sukha*, and *ekaggatā*, translated as inference, inquiry, rapture, comfort, and mental stillness. At the second level of tranquility, even the conceptual thinking, denoted by *vicāra* and

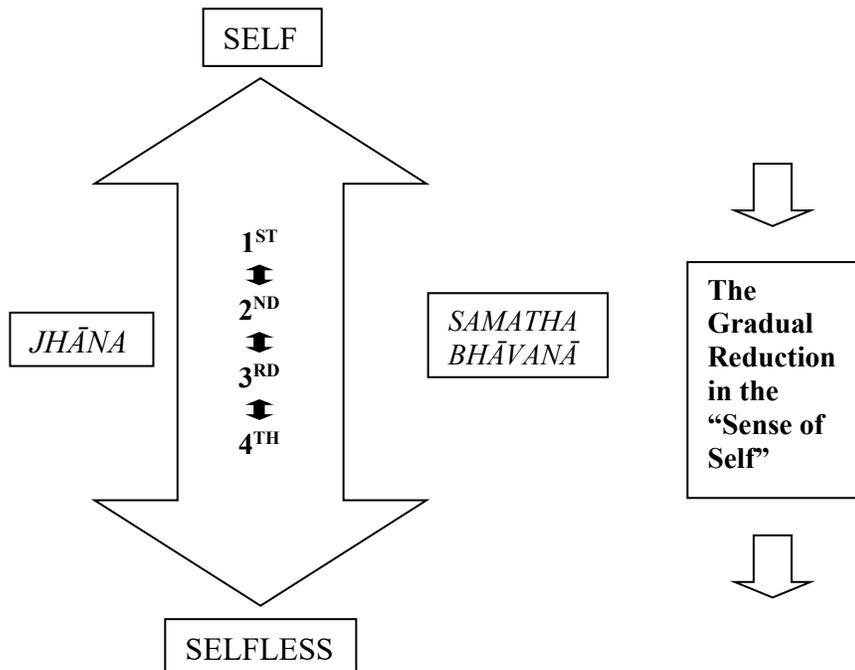
*vitakka*, stops, so you're left with rapture (*pīti*), comfort (*sukha*), and stillness (*ekaggatā*). At this level, percepts or mental pictures form in your mind, but you don't form concepts. But you experience rapture, comfort, and stillness. At the third level, the rapture, which also is a subtle excitement, disappears, and you become further tranquil and experience comfort (*sukha*) and stillness (*ekaggatā*). At the fourth level, comfort also disappears, and you calm down further to reach *ekaggatā* or the perfect stillness of mind. This kind of meditation, which calms the mind, is called *samatha bhāvanā* or tranquility meditation. Those levels of tranquility are called *jhāna*. The word *jhāna* (*Pāli*) or *dhyana* (Sanskrit) became *chan* in Chinese and *zen* in Japanese.

**Progress of Tranquility (*jhāna*):  
A Gradual Reduction of Experience**

FIRST <i>JHĀNA</i>	SECOND <i>JHĀNA</i>	THIRD <i>JHĀNA</i>	FOURTH <i>JHĀNA</i>
<i>Vicāra</i> (inquiry)	↓		
<i>Vitakka</i> (inference)	↓	→	
<i>Pīti</i> (rapture)	<i>Pīti</i> (rapture)	↓	→
<i>Sukha</i> (comfort)	<i>Sukha</i> (comfort)	<i>Sukha</i> (comfort)	↓
<i>Ekaggatā</i> (mental - stillness)	<i>Ekaggatā</i> (mental - stillness)	<i>Ekaggatā</i> (mental - stillness)	<i>Ekaggatā</i> (mental - stillness)

Another interesting thing happens during *samatha* meditation. When we become calm and tranquil, our experience of “self” is gradually reduced and begins to disappear. The feeling of “self” is a result of emotions and tensions. As you become calmer and calmer, the feeling of “self” is gradually reduced, and when you reach mental stillness, the feeling of “self” completely disappears.

## Gradual Reduction of the Experience of “Self”



Of course, when people who are not aware of the Buddhist way of thinking attain these levels of tranquility, and if they have been brought up in a theistic culture, they would say, “This is the presence of God, or I am uniting with God.” And because the “self” begins to disappear, they think my “self” is merging with “God.” Buddhists see this experience in a different way.

The Buddha has taught that if the “self” disappears when you become calm, and the “self” comes into being when you become emotionally excited, then it means there’s no reality to this “self.” “Self” is only an experience that results from emotional excitement and tension. So when you come out of *jhāna* or tranquil states, which are temporary resting states of the mind, and look at the body, you begin to see the body as body and not as “self.” Then you begin to see, “I have been identifying this body as ‘myself’ all these years.” Then when a feeling arises in the body, you begin to see, “Here’s a feeling arising in the body; it comes and goes, and it is not “myself.” In this way, you realize that the body is born, grows old, eventually dies, and is impermanent. Then, when an emotional excitement appears, you begin to see “An emotional excitement arose and passed away like a wave in the ocean.” They come and go, and they are not “myself.” They’re just emotions that arise in the body due to reactions to feelings. Then, when you experience a concept or thought, “Oh! Here’s a thought that arose in the body.” It results from a cognitive process and a reaction to stimulation. In this way, you begin to depersonalize everything you have personalized and identify as “myself.” That is called *vipassanā bhāvanā*.

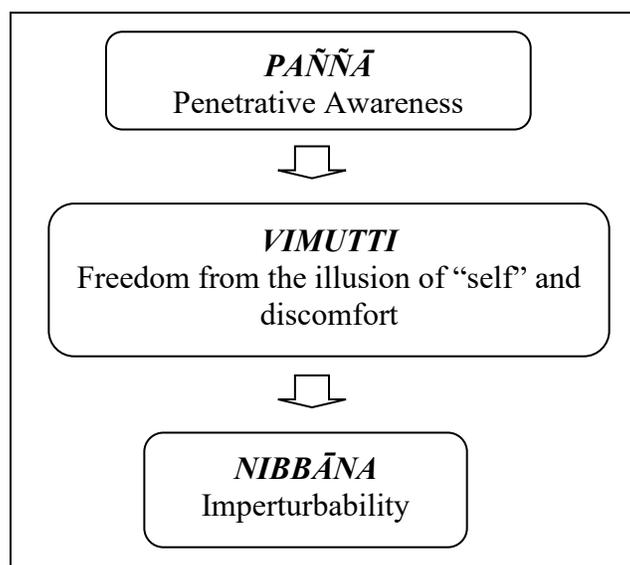
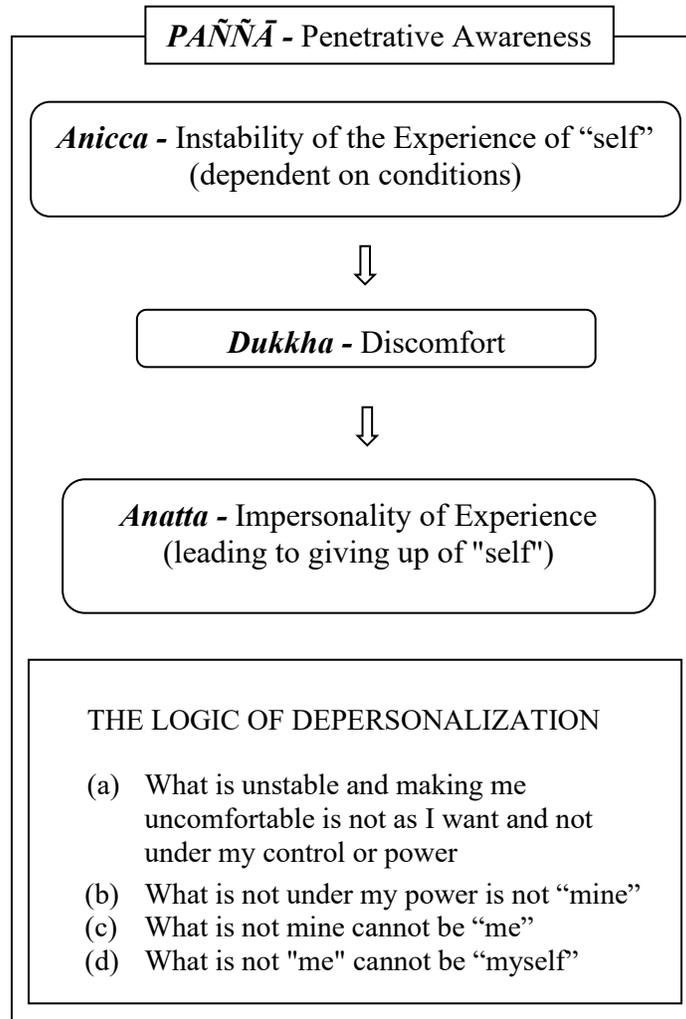
In *vipassanā*, we look at the body as body, feelings as feelings, emotions as emotions, thoughts as thoughts, and not as “myself.” When you keep doing that for some time, you begin to see that there’s no “self” after all to talk about, think about, defend, satisfy, or worry about. I worry because I have identified many things with “myself.” If my car gets dented, I become upset because I have identified myself with the car. This car is not only “mine” but also “myself.” In every culture, parents identify children as “mine” or “myself.” And therefore, the death of a child causes great unhappiness because part of “oneself” has died or been destroyed. This is the beginning of *dukkha*, or suffering. What the Buddha called *dukkha* is the attachment to things, identifying them as “yours” and “yourself.” That is to say, “This is mine,” and

what is “mine” becomes “myself.” It is this which is called *upādānakkhandha* or the aggregate of personalization, the beginning of all *dukkha* or unhappiness.

Depersonalization of experience (*vipassanā*)

<b>SEEING: not as a “self,” but,</b>	
Body as Body	<i>Kāyānupassanā</i>
Feelings as Feelings	<i>Vedanānupassanā</i>
Emotions as Emotions	<i>Cittānupassanā</i>
Concepts as Concepts	<i>Dhammānupassanā</i>

The “self” is not just the body but everything outside it as well. My house, my car, my spouse, my children, my family, my bank account, my degree, my country, my nationality — all these become “myself.” That’s why nations go to war. The cure is to see these three things – *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anatta*. We must be able to see that everything in the world depends on conditions. The presence of anything, for example, a cube of ice, remains as a cube as long as the temperature is right. If not, it becomes water. In the same way, a tree exists because of soil, air, and water. So it is with everything. Whatever is dependent on conditions is unstable (*anicca*), and if we personalize these unstable things, discomfort or *dukkha* arises. *Dukkha* is the discomfort associated with the instability of things. The first thing to see is that everything, including relationships, is unstable, which causes discomfort, because we have personalized these things. When we see that, we see the third step, impersonality (*anatta*) — “What is unstable and productive of discomfort is not under my control. If it is not under my control or power, it is not ‘mine,’ and therefore, it is not ‘me’ or ‘myself.’” The moment we see that everything is impersonal, not “mine,” not “myself,” we become detached from everything. When we become detached (*virāga*) and lose the “self,” all suffering, unhappiness, and discomforts cease (*nirodha*). That leads to imperturbability (*Nibbāna* or *Nirvana*), which is the final goal of Buddhism and meditation.



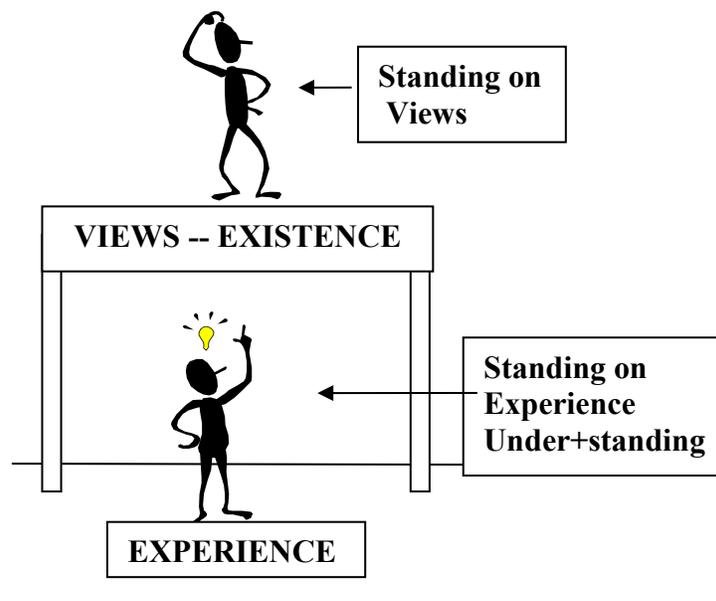
## The Paradigm Shift

The paradigm shift is called **understanding**.

**Normal** standpoint: Normally, people **stand on views** (of the existence of a “self” in the “world”). But these views are based on experience.

**Supernormal** standpoint: The Supernormal Awakened Ones **stand on the experience on which views stand**, which is **standing under** the views. This is **understanding** (under+standing).

**GET OFF YOUR VIEWS – Stand on Experience!**  
(*ditthinca anupagamma dassanena sampanno*)



The Transcender (*Tathāgata*) is free from views, for he **understands** (*Diṭṭhigatan iti apanītaṃ etaṃ Tathagatassa. Diṭṭhaṃ etaṃ Tathāgatena*).

*Paññā* is the penetrative awareness resulting in the **freedom from the experience of “self.”** Understanding *anatta*, or the impersonality of experience, leads to *vimutti*, the freedom from the experience of “self” and all anxieties, worries, and fears. This freedom (*vimutti*) leads to *Nibbāna*, the perfect tranquility of mind that can never be disturbed. *Nibbāna* is the imperturbable serenity of mind, called *akuppā ceto vimutti*.

Adapted from a sermon by Venerable Madawela Punnaḥi at a meditation retreat in Edmonton, Alberta (1995).