



Meditation on Perception
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Meditation on Perception is a series of talks given at White Hall Meditation. This series was inspired by Bhante Gunaratana's *Meditation on Perception: Ten Healing Practices to Cultivate Mindfulness Wisdom* Publications 2014. It is recommended that the reader also purchase the book for reference. Each talk indicates the page numbers covered. Quotes not otherwise indicated by an endnote are taken as excerpts from the book.

Talk I Introduction/Overview (pp. vii-7)

The Foreword by Bhikkhu Bodhi

Bhikkhu Bodhi is an American Theravada Buddhist monk, ordained in Sri Lanka. He has edited and authored many publications grounded in the Theravada Buddhist tradition.

The second Noble Truth tells us that craving is the root of all suffering. We want life to be other than it is, and the wanting is craving. We crave because we do not know and understand how life really works. This non-knowing and non-understanding is called ignorance.

In our ignorant state, we want to live life as a being (self) that lives a satisfying, comfortable life that is predictable (certain). Our goals are permanence, enjoyment, selfhood, and sensual beauty (from all of the senses).

In order to cease our suffering, we must not only resist craving but also transform our cognition. This cognitive breakthrough involves changing our perception so that we see things as they really are rather than bask in our ignorant goals of enjoyment, etc.

This means that we are changing from a distorted perception to a purified perception.

The most famous teaching on changing our perception is the Girimananda Sutta. By way of this sutta, the Buddha teaches ten perceptions and practices that lead to purified perception.

The Venerable Girimananda was a monk in the Buddha's time who became "sick, afflicted, and gravely ill." The Buddha's manservant, Ananda, informed the Buddha about this and asked if the Buddha would "visit him out of compassion." Instead of visiting, the Buddha asked if Ananda would speak to him about ten perceptions. The Buddha then gave Ananda the discourse on the ten perceptions and afterwards said, "If Ananda, you visit the bhikkhu Girimananda and speak to him about these ten perceptions, it is possible that on hearing about them he will immediately recover from his affliction."

“Then, when the Venerable Ananda had learned these ten perceptions from the Blessed One, he went to the Venerable Girimananda and spoke to him about them. When the Venerable Girimananda heard about these ten perceptions, his affliction immediately subsided. The Venerable Girimananda recovered from that affliction, and that is how we was cured of his affliction.”

As stated in the foreword, Bhante G. is well qualified to explain the Buddhist perspectives on perception “both in its negative role as an instrument of delusion and suffering and in its positive role as an aid on the path to emancipation....Whether or not these perceptions can heal bodily illness is of secondary importance. What is of prime importance is their ability to heal the most debilitating illness of all, the ignorance inherent in mental distortions and in toxic views about ourselves and the world in which we live.”

Introduction by Bhante Gunaratana (Bhante G)

Where in the Eightfold Path is perception addressed? It is in the seventh step, Skillful Mindfulness in the Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness, Mental Objects. The five aggregates of clinging are how the mind experiences the world. The aggregates are labeled clinging because of our potential attachment to them. We can experience each one of these aggregates by observing the mind.

Perception is one of the five aggregates (form, feeling, perception, thought, and consciousness). Perception includes information from many sources: all six senses (touch, seeing, hearing, taste, smell and mind (including thought and imagination). Purifying perceptions helps us to overcome unskillful thinking and acting as well as to further develop our spiritual growth.

Using the Girimananda teaching, we will gain a greater understanding of perception and be able to distinguish between distorted and purified perception. We will explore the ten perceptions, meditating on each one. “As we work through meditation on the ten perceptions, we train the mind to move beyond ordinary superficial perception into the enlightened perspective that leads to permanent liberation from confusion and unhappiness.”

What can we expect from this training?

On the mundane level, everyday level, we can overcome negative mental attitudes such as anger and greed and increase positive attitudes such as patience, loving-kindness, and peace of mind.

On the spiritual level, we can make progress on the path toward liberation from suffering and perhaps experience genuine mental as well as physician healing.

Talk II What is Perception? (pp 11-20)

Pure Perception

The Buddha defined pure perception as what the senses sense without embellishment. The type of perception depends on which sense base is involved. The senses bases are eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind. What the senses sense are sense objects:

Eye/Visible objects

Ear/Sounds
Nose/Smells
Tongue/Tastes
Body/Tangible Objects
Mind/Mental Objects

The process works as follows. The five factors of mentality (also called the five aggregates) are form, feeling, perception, mental objects (ideas, fantasies, memories, fears, emotional responses), and consciousness. These factors become involved as follows: The sense base makes contact with the sense object, the first factor (form). We become aware of the sense object when we pay attention through the fifth factor, consciousness. Then the second factor, feeling, about the object arises (pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral). Then the third factor, perception, arises which is followed by the fourth factor, mental objects (ideas, fantasies, memories, fears, emotional responses). These thoughts can lead to more thoughts (mental proliferation) depending on the amount of attachment or clinging we have about that object.

As an example, you are walking down a street and the eye sense base makes contact with a person coming toward you, the sense object (form). You become aware of this person through consciousness. Then a feeling arises about this person (pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral). Perception then arises followed by the arising of thoughts. Thinking can lead to mental proliferation (many thoughts). If the perception was originally negative, proliferation can lead to unskillful speech and action which causes suffering.

Why is it important to understand this process? Because this understanding will lead to less unskillful thinking and behavior. The function of perception is to recognize an object. What happens when we initially recognize an object is that perception continuously changes as our mind embellishes the initial contact. When we are mindful of how the embellishments of what we initially experience can affect our behavior, we will not act out of ignorance.

Meditate on perception and the aggregates by using the breath

Start with a concentration meditation focusing on the breath.

During meditation, be mindful of each aggregate

Form – notice the sensation of the breath and any other sensations that might arise

Feeling – notice the discomfort that arises just after exhalation and the pleasure that arises when starting to inhale.

Perception - notice if the sensation of the breath is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.

Mental objects – notice the thoughts that arise (emotions, memories fears, etc.)

Consciousness – notice how consciousness is always changing such as going from one aggregate to another

The purpose of this meditation is to try to perceive whatever arises and passes away with an impartial attitude. If embellishments arise, we cannot truly see what we are perceiving.

Be mindful of the impermanence of perception with each moment.

Be mindful that the aggregates that arise are not you. For example, you are not your feelings. Feelings just arise.

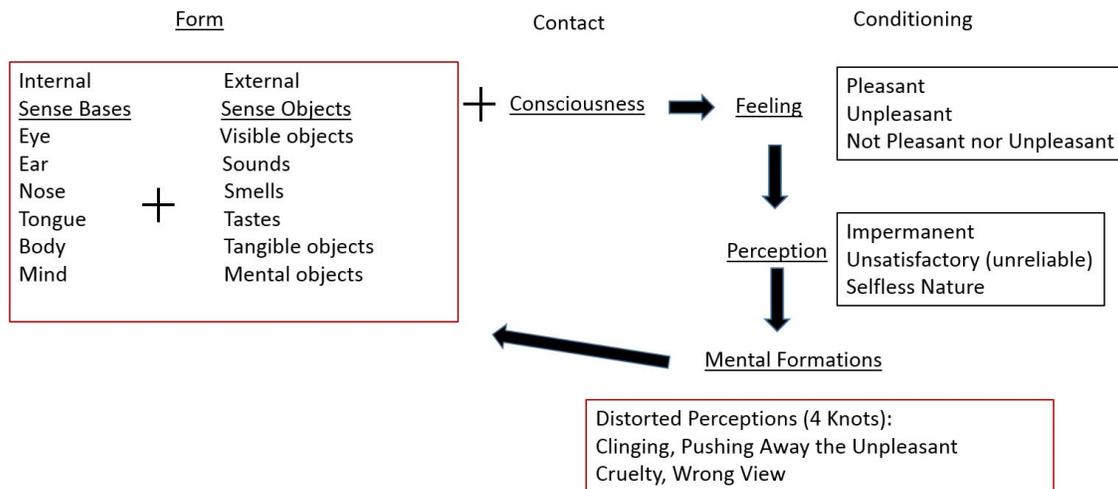
Talk III Distorted Perception Part I (pp 21-26)

As noted in the previous talk, the Buddha defined pure perception as what the senses sense without embellishment.

Perception is pure and clean in its original state. It can become distorted by what Bhante G. calls “the virus of concepts.” This is the mental proliferation of the fourth aggregate, thought (mental formations) which colors subsequent perceptions.

As an example, when we look at features of someone’s face such as their nose, eyes, ears and mouth, a feelings arise as pleasant (beautiful), unpleasant (ugly) or neutral (neither pleasant or unpleasant). Our thoughts in the form of concepts from the past (memories) influences our feelings and subsequently our perceptions. Then more thoughts can take place (mental proliferation). As the result of the visual contact with this person’s face, we can have a reaction based on a perception that has become distorted by our concepts. We do not see what is really there (a face) but rather a concept of pleasant (e.g. beautiful), unpleasant (e.g. ugly) or neither pleasant not unpleasant.

How Distorted Perception Develops and Changes



The process that causes distorted perception leads to unhappiness (suffering) because we became attached to the concept rather than seeing what is.

Another way to understand the process of distorted perception is to know that it reflects the opposite of the true characteristics of all experience (impermanence, dissatisfaction, selfless nature). Perception is always changing (impermanence), unreliable (dissatisfaction) and not our self (selfless nature). Distorted perception causes us to perceive objects as permanent, reliable (satisfactory) and under our control (self).

There is a story about distorted perception concerning a devotee of the Buddha, Nakulapita, who came to the Buddha because he was afflicted and suffering. The Buddha teaching was: “So it is, householder, so it is! This body of yours is afflicted, weighed down, encumbered. If anyone carrying around this body were to claim to be healthy even for a moment, what is that due to other than foolishness? Therefore, householder, you should train yourself thus: “Even though I am afflicted in body, my mind will be unafflicted.’ Thus should you train yourself.”

One of the Buddha’s close disciples, explained this to Nakulapita further: “A person who is unfamiliar with the teaching of the Buddha regards the five aggregates as his self. With the change and decay of these aggregates, there arises in him sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, despair. This he is afflicted both in body and in mind.”

Regarding perception, there is a tendency to regard our perception as self or that we possess perception. For example, if we perceive something as beautiful, we believe that this is the truth that is a part of our “self.” In truth, self is only a concept and always stands in relationship to an object. It cannot exist outside of an object.

Perception is impermanent. If it were permanent, our perception would not change over time. Something that we regarded as beautiful would always be that way.

As Bhante G. notes in *Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness*: “Thus the more you focus on mind itself, the less solid it seems. Like everything else that exists, it is always changing. Moreover, you discover, there is no permanent entity; no one is running the movie projector. All is flux, all is flow, all is process. In reality, who you are is simply this constant flow of changing moments of mind. Since you cannot control this process, you have no choice but to let go. In letting go, you experience joy and you taste for an instant the freedom and happiness that is the goal of the Buddha’s path. Then you know that this mind can be used to gain wisdom.”¹

This is true for all of aggregates:

The body is not the self.
Feeling is not the self.
Perception is not the self.
Thoughts (mental formations) are not the self.
Consciousness is not the self.

Talk IV Distorted Perception Part II (pp 21-29)

Distorted perceptions can be divided into four types. The Buddha called these groups, knots because these perceptions keep us tied (attached) to suffering.

The four knots are:
Distorted Perception of Clinging
Distorted Perception of pushing away the unpleasant
Distorted Perception of cruelty

Distorted Perception of wrong view

Distorted Perception of Clinging

We cling to what we perceive as pleasant believing that it is permanent.

Distorted Perception of pushing away the unpleasant

We push away what we perceive as unpleasant because we believe that it is permanently so.

Distorted Perception of cruelty

When we continue to push away what is unpleasant, anger or hatred can develop causing us to engage in unskillful activity.

Distorted Perception of wrong view

When we believe in people or objects as being permanent, pleasant and having self-nature, we are ignorant of the truth. The truth is that all experiences are impermanent, unsatisfactory and selfless.

Distorted perceptions are harmful to our well-being. “The Buddha’s solution to this problem is straightforward: We train ourselves to use mindfulness to focus on the simple cognitive aspects of perception without going beyond them into judgments and interpretations. We remind ourselves that conceptual proliferation gets in the way of clear perception and always strive to perceive things impartially. We remain mindful that our perceptions, like every other part of the mind and body, are always changing and will never bring us permanent satisfaction or dissatisfaction. When we understand deeply that the intrinsic nature of all perceptions is impermanent, unsatisfactory, and selfless there is no room for conflict!”

Talk V Purified Perception (pp 31-42)

The Buddha defined pure perception as what the senses sense without embellishment.

In order to purify our perception, the mind must be trained. We use mindfulness and meditation as tool for the training.

The main teachings for the purification of perception come from the Eightfold Path (Skillful Understanding, Skillful Thinking, Skillful Speech, Skillful Action, Skillful Livelihood, Skillful Effort, Skillful Mindfulness and Skillful Concentration.) Talks on the [Eightfold Path](#) are on the White Hall Meditation [website](#),

Perceptions arise and fall away from two conditions:

- Causes and Conditions
- Effort

Causes and Conditions are noted in the first Step in the Eightfold Path: Skillful Understanding. Sometimes referred to as karma, conditions arise from many causes to affect our perception.

“Because only purified perceptions arise, coarser perceptions no longer arise. Equanimity is purified and bright. For this reason, we do not form positive or negative thoughts or feelings, nor do we generate any good or ill intentions toward people or things. For this reason, we do not cling to anything in this world comprised of our mind and body. When we do not cling, we are not agitated. When we are not agitated, we attain cessation – personal nibbana, the end of suffering. As the Buddha expressed the knowledge and vision that arises in this state: “Unshakable is the liberation of my mind. This is my last birth. Now there is no more renewed existence.”

Meditation on Perception

Talk VI Introduction to the Ten Healing Perceptions (pp 45-47)

The Girimananda Sutta, upon which Meditation on Perception is based, is a teaching of Ten Healing Perceptions.

“If, Ananda, you visit the bhikkhu Girimananda and speak to him about ten perceptions, it is possible that on hearing about them his affliction will immediately subside. What are the ten?”

Notice that these are ten perceptions, not “the” ten. The Buddha apparently selected them because they are not distorted and for their healing value. Recall what Bhikkhu Bodhi said in his introduction to Meditation on Perception: “Whether or not these perceptions can heal bodily illness is of secondary importance. What is of prime importance is their ability to heal the most debilitating illness of all, the ignorance inherent in mental distortions and in toxic views about ourselves and the world in which we live.”

In our training of the mind, we use these perceptions to see the undistorted truth in each of the ten. When we see the truths, we become experience joy. This is the joy of non- attachment.

By not clinging to our worldly experiences through the Five Aggregates (form, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness, we will not suffer as the Buddha says:

“Fully Knowing

The arising and passing of the aggregates,

One attains joy and delight,

For those who know, this is the deathless.”

Training our mind with meditation on these perceptions may a harsh medicine as we face painful truths.

The ten perceptions are:

1. Perception of Impermanence
2. Perception of Selflessness
3. Perception of Impurities
4. Perception of Danger
5. Perception of Abandoning
6. Perception of Dispassion
7. Perception of Cessation

8. Perception of Nondelight in the Whole World
9. Perception of Impermanence in Regard to All Mental Formations
10. Mindfulness of Breathing – Pure Perception of the Pure Breath.

There is an order to these perception as they build on each other. For example, we need to see the undistorted truth in impermanence before we can contemplate the perception of selflessness.

Talk VII Perception of Impermanence Part I (pp. 47-54)

The Buddha said in the Girimananda Sutta:

“And what, Ananda, is the perception of impermanence? Here, having gone to the forest, to the foot of a tree or to an empty hut, a bhikkhu reflects thus: ‘Form is impermanent, feeling is impermanent, perception is impermanent, volitional activities are impermanent, consciousness is impermanent.’ Thus he dwells contemplating impermanence in these five aggregates subject to clinging. This is called the perception of impermanence.”

Note that the Buddha is referring to the five aggregates of clinging. All of our experience comes through one or more of these aggregates. They are called the five aggregates of clinging because we attach (cling) to them.

Impermanence is constant change. Everything is constantly changing. It is necessary to know this by experience, not just have a theoretical knowledge.

What is everything that is changing? Our mind forms the world through concepts. For example, what is our body? It is made up of many parts such as the heart which is made up of many parts such as the muscles and the valves which are made up of many parts such as molecules and atoms. Each of these parts change or leave the body. So, our concept of the body does not exist in the same form from moment to moment.

What do we do with this knowledge? How can we make this useful? It is useful because it is the key to understanding why we suffer.

The Buddha said from the Mahasunnata Sutta:

“I do not see even a single kind of form, Ananda, from the change and alteration of which there would not arise sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair in one who lusts for it and takes delight in it.”²

It is not impermanence or change that causes suffering. It is our attachment to the impermanent object that we want to be permanent that is the problem. Our suffering will end when we give up this attachment.

We also need to realize that our body and mind are impermanent as well. This understanding is called “signlessness.”

As the Buddha said in the Phena Sutta:

*Form is like a lump of foam,
Feeling is like a water bubble;
Perception is like a mirage,
Volitions like a plantain trunk,
And consciousness like an illusion³*

We need to be aware of “signlessness” at all times because it reminds us that nothing is permanent. This means that we have abandoned our “bucket list” and have entered the state of wishlessness. We then can see the arising of “selflessness” or “emptiness.”

Wishlessness, signlessness and emptiness are often called the three gateways to liberation.

As the Buddha noted:

Seeing thus, the impermanence, suffering, and selflessness of all conditioned things, one becomes disillusioned with everything.”⁴

from the Dhammapada⁵

Like the path of birds in the sky
It is hard to trace the path
Of those who do not hoard
Who are judicious with their food,
And whose field
Is the freedom of emptiness and signlessness

Those who do not hoard (cling) to the aggregates and who lead skillful lives and who dwell in nonattachment, leave suffering behind.

Disenchantment (disillusion) is not negative. Out of disenchantment arises spiritual maturity and the joy of nonattachment.

In the next talk, we will discuss the healing process

Talk VIII Perception of Impermanence Part II (pp. 47-54)

The Buddha: *“And what, Ananda, is the perception of impermanence? Here, having gone to the forest, to the foot of a tree or to an empty hut, a bhikkhu reflects thus: ‘Form is impermanent, feeling is impermanent, perception is impermanent, volitional activities are impermanent, consciousness is impermanent.’ Thus he dwells contemplating impermanence in these five aggregates subject to clinging. This is called the perception of impermanence.”*

The healing process with Meditation on Impermanence

First of all, you must practice to know that the five aggregates are impermanent and always changing.

Healing can take place because of our purified perception of impermanence. Impermanence, like gravity does not exist in a vacuum. There must be something (an external object) that is impermanent

just as there must be an object to be affected by gravity. We come into contact with this object through the Five Aggregates. Consciousness draws our attention to the contact with one of our six internal sense objects to the external sense object (form) and the other aggregate of feeling, perception, mental formations come into play as factors of the mind. All of this mental function is impermanent (constantly changing) just as the object is impermanent (constantly changing).

Instead of complaining or encouraging mental proliferation about an unpleasant experience that can lead to more fear and depression, reflect on the following:

Know that all is changing by meditation on the perception of impermanence.

Know that the fear and depression that arise are impermanent.

Use the seven factors of enlightenment (mindfulness, investigation, energy, joy, tranquility, concentration, equanimity) to deal with this unpleasant experience:

Mindfulness/Investigation/energy: Be mindful and investigate the experience knowing that this requires energy (effort). By investigating the experience and the fear, you can see that the perception is impermanent and constantly changing. The negative (unpleasant) feelings from the initial fear then can change to neutral feelings and then to positive feelings as you realize that all is changing and you are not permanently attached to the unpleasant feeling of fear from this experience.

Joy and tranquility arise as your perception of impermanence is purified.

Maintain your concentration to keep mindfulness focused on what you are experiencing.

Repeat this sequence several times. Be open to what happens next – equanimity can arise.

So rather than suffer from the certainty of the outcome that we fear may happen, we use mindfulness to pay attention to what is. We employ mindfulness from moment to moment because everything is changing. We cannot make one observation and know that that is the truth. The truth is the changing nature of all objects.

Talk IX Perception of Selflessness Part I (pp. 55-57)

“And what, Ananda, is the perception of non-self? Here, having gone to the forest, to the foot of a tree or to an empty hut, a bhikkhu reflects thus: ‘The eye is non-self, forms are non-self; the ear is non-self, sounds are non-self; the nose is non-self, odors are non-self; the tongue is non-self, tastes are non-self; the body is non-self, tactile objects are non-self; the mind is non-self, mental phenomena are non-self.’ Thus he dwells contemplating non-self in these six internal and external sense bases. ‘This is called the perception of non-self.’”

The Buddha noted that all of the six internal and the six external sense bases are devoid of self (non-self). He mentions each one in matching pairs:

Eyes/forms

Ears/sounds

Nose/odors

Tongue/tastes

Body/tactile objects

Mind/mental phenomena

Since all of these internal sense bases are part of the makeup that we call our body, there is nothing that is not changing, that we can call permanent. Therefore there is no "self" in the sense of a permanent being, no matter how small.

The Buddha's teachings on selflessness is called the Doctrine of Selflessness. The Buddha also addressed self in four of the Ten Fetters or unwholesome states: belief in the existence of a permanent self or soul, subtle desire to exist in fine material form, subtle desire to exist in immaterial form, conceit or the underlying perception of self-identity.

In "No-self or Not-self", Thanissaro Bhikkhu notes:

"So, instead of answering "no" to the question of whether or not there is a self — interconnected or separate, eternal or not — the Buddha felt that the question was misguided to begin with. Why? No matter how you define the line between "self" and "other," the notion of self involves an element of self-identification and clinging, and thus suffering and stress. This holds as much for an interconnected self, which recognizes no "other," as it does for a separate self. If one identifies with all of nature, one is pained by every felled tree. It also holds for an entirely "other" universe, in which the sense of alienation and futility would become so debilitating as to make the quest for happiness — one's own or that of others — impossible. For these reasons, the Buddha advised paying no attention to such questions as "Do I exist?" or "Don't I exist?" for however you answer them, they lead to suffering and stress."

The questions that occur to the mind are not "Is there a self? What is my self?" but rather "Am I suffering stress because I'm holding onto this particular phenomenon? Is it really me, myself, or mine? If it's stressful but not really me or mine, why hold on?" These last questions merit straightforward answers, as they then help you to comprehend stress and to chip away at the attachment and clinging — the residual sense of self-identification — that cause it, until ultimately all traces of self-identification are gone and all that's left is limitless freedom.

In this sense, the Doctrine of Selflessness is not a doctrine of no-self, but a not-self strategy for shedding suffering by letting go of its cause, leading to the highest, undying happiness. At that point, questions of self, no-self, and not-self fall aside. Once there's the experience of such total freedom, where would there be any concern about what's experiencing it, or whether or not it's a self?"⁶

In other words, self is a concept that only arises when there is clinging to an object. And since the object is always changing, so too is the "self." The self does not have to be invoked to deal with experiences. "Anger is arising" is more accurate than "I am angry." Anger is merely being observed as experiences (sensations in the body, thoughts) which are impermanent.

Often when we communicate an emotion that is arising by saying "I am _____", we attach more closely to that emotion than when we say, "I am having the experience or feeling of _____". What need is there of the "I" or self? The emotion is simply arising.

Liberation: the three paths.

Signlessness, wishlessness, and emptiness are often called the three gateways to liberation.

Signlessness is what we discovered in the Perception of Impermanence (anicca in the Pali language). Everything is changing. And once we know impermanence, we don't desire anything and thus can enter the state of wishlessness or desirelessness instead of suffering (dukkha). When we are desireless, there is no self desiring which leads to emptiness (anatta) and liberation.

To repeat Thanissaro Bhikkhu: "Once there's the experience of such total freedom, where would there be any concern about what's experiencing it, or whether or not it's a self?"

In the next talk we will discuss the healing nature of the purified perception of selflessness.

Talk X Perception of Selflessness Part II (pp. 55-57)

The Healing Process with Perception of Selflessness

Purifying the perception of self to the perception of selflessness can reduce stress and anxiety. This stress comes from our believing that we are a slave to our self.

Rupert Spira in the *Transparency of Things* asks us to imagine that we have spent our whole life living in a large house serving a demanding old man who lives in a room on the top floor. Although you have never seen this old man, you spend day after day doing his chores which include trying to be successful, seeking pleasure, maintaining a good reputation, and seeking praise while avoiding loss, pain, disrepute and criticism. One day, you complain to a friend about the burden of these chores and she urges you to speak to the old man.

When you finally get up the courage to seek him out, you go upstairs to find him. At first you can only peep around the door and you don't see him. When you tell your friend this, she urges you to look more thoroughly. You make several visits to the room each time searching more diligently but you never can find him.

At last you understand that the old man does not exist and you gradually cease doing the chores that you thought were for him. This takes some time but eventually the obligation to do these chores dwindles away

In this story, the old man is the perceived self and the friend is the teacher who urges you to investigate. The chores are part of the eight winds when we strive for gain, pleasure, reputation, praise and avoid loss, pain, disrepute, and criticism.

As you discover and truly know that here is no old man, stress and anxiety are reduced.

"When we relax the mind and let go of this tension and pressure, we give tremendous relief to the mind and body."⁷

This is the healing of nature of the perception of selflessness.

Don't be concerned with the self. This concern can only lead to attachment and suffering. Without out the self, there is freedom. "Once there's the experience of such total freedom, where would there be any concern about what's experiencing it, or whether or not it's a self?"⁸ Thanissaro Bhikkhu

Talk XI Perception of Selflessness Part III

Know and Let Go

Most people do not want enlightenment

Ajahn Chah noted in *Food for the Heart* Chapter 29, No Abiding "So most people don't want to go to nibbana, because there's nothing there at all; nothing at all." No abiding is like that space between two abidings, the floor and the roof. "Where there is no abiding, that's where there's emptiness, and nibbana is in this emptiness."

"People hear this and they back up a bit; they don't want to go. They're afraid they won't see their children or their relatives.....But when you start talking about emptiness, they don't want to hear about it; they're attached to abiding."⁹

Do you truly want to go for enlightenment? It does mean losing your conditioned self.

"What is the Self?" is not the important question

It is who or what we are not that needs to be addressed first because who we are cannot be described. Our mind wants certainty and clarity. The mind wants a description of who we are particularly searching for the fundamental answer to Can the self die?

Don't be concerned with the existence or not of the self. This concern can only lead to attachment and suffering. Without the self, there is freedom. "Once there's the experience of such total freedom, where would there be any concern about what's experiencing it, or whether or not it's a self?"¹⁰

Use the awareness of the self as a reminder (trigger) for attachment being present. The concept of the self is always accompanied by an object. Use mindfulness to see what that object is. For example, if you are thinking, "I am hurt by those comments," through mindfulness you can see that the concept of self,"I", has arisen and the object of attachment is an emotion of feeling hurt.

It's all about letting go.

Ajahn Chah based the majority of his teaching on the three characteristics: impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and selfless nature. In the previously noted chapter, No Abiding, he discusses the importance of letting go. Wishing for things is a common experience; letting go is the difficult part. Ajahn Chah described the correct process as "Know and let go."

Know and let go is a summary phrase for the process of the Seven Factors of Enlightenment. We apply the first three factors, mindfulness, investigation, and effort allowing us to let go and experience joy, tranquility, concentration and equanimity. "Make the mind know in this way, let wisdom arise. When the mind has wisdom, what else is there to look for?"¹¹

Practicing Know and let go (Non-Abiding)

Reflect on the dhamma daily. A good reading for non abiding is The Place of Non-Abiding (Chapter Two) in Small Boat, Great Mountain by Amaro Bhikkhu.¹²

Meditate daily if only for a little while. After quieting the mind with concentration practice, shift to Vipassana (Insight) practice and see the three characteristics manifested in each phenomena (a thought, memory, sensation, perception) that arises.

When conscious of the self, apply mindfulness to see the object attachment. “When we see our mind getting caught up with something, we can apply the classic vipassana technique—just hit it with impermanence, not-self, and suffering, the old one, two, three. If we have a good sense of anatta (selflessness), we chop it with a “not me, not mine” and down it goes. But it is important to remember that clinging is extraordinarily wily. There we are gloating over our success, but we don’t realize that this is a tag match that’s going on. Another character is bearing down on us from behind while we look at our knockout on the floor. The partner is about to clobber us. We just barely let go of the attachment to time when attachment to opinions starts moving full speed ahead. We drop that, then here-ness takes over. Then it’s the body. . . . Clinging takes shape in many, many different ways and we need to notice them all.”¹³

Talk XII Perception of Impurities Part I (pp. 59-64)

“And what, Ananda, is the perception of unattractiveness? Here, a bhikkhu reviews this very body upward from the soles of the feet and downward from the tips of the hairs, enclosed in skin, as full of many kinds of impurities: ‘There are in this body hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, bone marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, pleura, spleen, lungs, intestines, mesentery, stomach, excrement, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, grease, saliva, snot, fluid of the joints, urine.’ Thus he dwells contemplating unattractiveness in this body. This is called the perception of unattractiveness.”

Perception of Impurities

The Buddha called this perception “unattractiveness.” Bhante G. calls it impurities. Either way, the point is that we fall into the trap of perceiving our bodies and those of others as either attractive or unattractive, pure or impure. Using mindfulness, we are able to see that body as it really is: impermanent, unreliable, and of selfless nature.

As we have learned earlier, the body is a concept. We use the term body as a form of identification for ourselves and to communicate it to others. The body that we refer to is always changing as we noted in the perception of impermanence. It is not the same body from moment to moment. The body is not our “self” as we noted in the perception of selflessness.

Going further, this perception of impurities, allows us to understand and know that the body consists of many parts, none of which are attractive or unattractive. These parts are just are. With this perception, we perceive the body and its parts exactly as they are. We are perceiving with equanimity, the seventh factor of enlightenment. As the Buddha explained, our attitude toward the parts of the body will be similar to our observations about examining many kinds of grain. We recognize the types but we don’t have a positive or negative emotion about each kind.

To reach this understanding, we can use the seven factors of enlightenment as described in the first healing perception of impermanence. We use mindfulness, investigation, effort to come to joy, tranquility, increased concentration, and equanimity about the body and its parts.

Meditation of Impurities

Begin by settling in.

Cultivate living kindness toward all beings

Remind yourself that your intention in meditation on the parts of the body is to overcome pride and self-hatred for your own body and lust and loathing for the bodies of others.

Meditate first on each of the five most visible body parts as these are the ones by which we most often judge in ourselves and others: head hair, body hair, nails, teeth and skin.

Starting with head hair, notice how this part is often perceived as an object of beauty.

Next, note its impermanence. Hair falls out, changes in texture, gathers dirt, grease, and odors.

Next, note its unsatisfactoriness as it doesn't meet our expectations of always being beautiful and clean.

Next, note its selfless nature. We cannot ultimately control its fate.

As a result of these meditations, observe your attitude toward hair. Is it still beautiful or ugly? Or is it just hair?

Continue to examine the other four body parts in the same way: body hair, nails, teeth, and skin.

Examine the other body parts listed in the Buddha's instructions to Ananda above.

Talk XIII Perception of Impurities Part II (pp. 59-64)

The Healing Process with Perception of Impurities

When we meditate on the parts of the body, we see the body as it is, neither attractive nor unattractive. This is called "seeing the body with the wisdom of equanimity." We still care for our body as before but now with a realistic perception that what we are taking care of is constantly changing.

By seeing the body as it is changing, we also realize that we are and will continue to experience the changes of aging – gradual loss of function be it strength, balance, vision, or hearing. We can view this with equanimity because our body is not our "self." "When we relinquish attachment to our body, our suffering decreases and we become calm."

Having taken care of our stress and anxiety about the deterioration of the body, we can use mindfulness and concentration to pay attention to these changes to effect healing. It is known scientifically, that when the mind is in a state of happiness, certain chemicals such as oxytocin are released in the brain which can cause healing.¹⁴

Joseph Goldstein cites a classic Buddhist reflection that addresses the truth: "That which is subject to illness grows ill. That which is subject to aging ages and then dies. And I am not exempt."¹⁵

"Sometimes it is possible to focus our mind on a defective part with a strong power of visualization and accelerate its healing. However, when we diligently understand the body and its parts, we are not overly emotional and upset if healing does not occur and remain calm even at the thought of death."¹⁶

Talk XIV Perception of Danger (pp. 65-68)

"And what, Ananda, is the perception of danger? Here, having gone to the forest, to the foot of a tree, or to an empty hut, a bhikkhu reflects thus: 'This body is the source of much pain and danger; for all sorts of afflictions arise in this body, that is, eye-disease, disease of the inner ear, nose-disease, tongue-disease, body-disease, head-disease, disease of the external ear, mouth-disease, tooth-disease, cough, asthma, catarrh, pyrexia, fever, stomachache, fainting, dysentery, gripes, cholera, leprosy, boils, eczema, tuberculosis, epilepsy, ringworm, itch, scab, chickenpox, scabies, hemorrhage, diabetes, hemorrhoids, cancer, fistula; illnesses originating from bile, phlegm, wind, or their combination; illnesses produced by change of climate; illnesses produced by careless behavior; illnesses produced by assault; or illnesses produced as the result of kamma; and cold, heat, hunger, thirst, defecation, and urination.' Thus he dwells contemplating danger in this body. This is called the perception of danger." (tr. Bhikkhu Bodhi)

Perception of Danger

In this perception, the Buddha lists a number of illnesses that can befall the body. The term, danger, means the possibility of afflictions (e.g. injury, disease) affecting the body. Although the types and descriptions of bodily disease have changed over time (there are over 13,000 illnesses listed in the ninth edition of the World Health Organization's international classification of diseases), the point the Buddha makes is still relevant: the possibility of harm or injury to the body is great and inevitable.

Five explanations for why the Buddha listed these diseases

1. The body is not a single entity. It is made up of parts, each of which is susceptible to disease.
2. Disease is inevitable and by contemplating on this list, we become aware of the truth.
3. The condition of each part of the body is impermanent, always changing. The body and its parts will not stay disease-free permanently.
4. When we are enjoying good health, we can become attached and take pride in our well-being. We then forget the suffering of others or take pity on them.
5. We can take precautions and take care of our body as best we can to avoid these diseases.

Taking precautions against danger

Anxiety, fear, anger and other mental formation can affect our emotional and physical health. The Dhamma (teachings) can help to prevent these mental formations from arising. In the Eightfold Path, the sixth step, Right Effort, is the main prescription to overcome unskillful thoughts and cultivate skillful ones.

As Bhante G. notes, "Not only could the Dhamma alleviate Girimananda's emotional and physical suffering, but it could lead him to nibbana, which is ageless and beyond death."

Talk XV Perception of Abandoning (pp. 69-72)

"And what, Ananda, is the perception of abandoning? Here, a bhikkhu does not tolerate an arisen sensual thought; he abandons it, dispels it, terminates it, and obliterates it. He does not tolerate an

arisen thought of ill will ... an arisen thought of harming ... bad unwholesome states whenever they arise; he abandons them, dispels them, terminates them, and obliterates them. This is called the perception of abandoning." (tr. Bhikkhu Bodhi)

Perception of Abandoning

To abandon means to give up or get rid of something. The something that the Buddha is referring to in this perception is unwholesome thoughts. Unwholesome thoughts include those of sensuous pleasure, hatred, and hurting others.

These thoughts are deeply rooted in the mind and require vigilant mindfulness to identify them and intervene. Unwholesome thoughts can lead to unskillful action, so it is best to deal with them as soon as they are perceived.

Know that this is the process of abandoning thoughts that arise; not dwelling on "I shouldn't have these thoughts." Resisting thoughts rather than abandoning will cause them to remain.

The Buddha described the process of abandoning in the second step of the Eightfold Path, Right Thinking:

"And what, is Right Thought? Thought associated with renunciation, thought associated with absence of ill will, thought associated with absence of cruelty. This is called Right Thought."

Renunciation (Abandoning)

Thoughts for sensual pleasure arise through desire. Desire for material objects and relationships. Clinging takes place. The mind becomes excited, restless and agitated rather than at peace.

Abandoning or letting go can put the mind back in a peaceful state. Replacing thoughts of sensual desire with those of renunciation is beneficial. Resisting rather than replacing leads only to perpetuating the perception.

Bhante G. notes: "Renunciation is the conscious decision to let go of perceptions of desire, lust, greed, clinging and craving. It is the conscious decision to restrain the senses to avoid disturbing impulses and refocus our attention on the goal of making the mind peaceful, relaxed and serene."

Absence of ill-will

When ill-will or hatred is present, our mind perpetuates our suffering and can aggravate any illness that we have. Letting go of ill will and replacing it with loving-kindness is the antidote.

Bhante G. notes: "When we no longer push things away, we feel friendly acceptance toward everything that exists, even toward our own body and illness." P. 71

Absence of Cruelty

Thoughts of cruelty hurt ourselves and not others. We can reflect on times when we were treated badly and the consequences of that. Letting go of harming thoughts and replacing them with restraint, compassion and care for others are the antidotes.

Bhante G. notes: "Abandoning harmful thoughts helps to make us feel peaceful and happy, which helps us overcome our own suffering.

Talk XVI Perception of Dispassion (pp. 73-75)

"And what, Ananda, is the perception of dispassion? Here, having gone to the forest, to the root of a tree, or to an empty hut, a bhikkhu reflects thus: 'This is peaceful, this is sublime, that is, the stilling of all activities, the relinquishment of all acquisitions, the destruction of craving, dispassion, nibbana.' This is called the perception of dispassion." (tr. Bhikkhu Bodhi)

Perception of Dispassion

Dispassion is the opposite of craving. Craving leads to clinging. The Second Noble Truth tells us that clinging is the cause of suffering. The Third Noble Truth notes that the elimination of clinging is the cure for suffering. When we crave things such as material objects and relationships, we are not seeing that what we are craving is impermanent. With mindfulness (paying attention moment to moment to what is), we see that the perception of craving comes from greed, hatred, and delusion. The perception of dispassion is the purified perception replaces our distorted perception of craving.

Burning

The Buddha in one of his teachings, The Fire Sermon, explained the dangers of craving impermanent phenomena such as material objects and relationships. Just as one doesn't touch a hot stove with a hand because of the potential for burning, one avoids craving impermanent objects for the same reason. The Buddha notes that all six senses (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and thinking) have the potential for burning. He uses the eye and its contact as an example:

Bhikkhus, all is burning. And what, bhikkhus, is the all that is burning? The eye is burning, forms are burning, eye-consciousness is burning, eye-contact is burning, and whatever feeling arises with eye-contact as condition- whether pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant-that too is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of lust, with the fire of hatred, with the fire of delusion; burning with birth, aging, and death; with sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair, I say. (tr. Bhikkhu Bodhi)

In other words, all is burning with greed, hatred and delusion.

Absence of Burning

The way not to get burned is to let go of the source of burning as soon as possible. For example, as soon as you are conscious of making eye contact with an object you crave, look away. When an unskillful thought arises, replace it with a skillful one. This takes practice because of our habitual nature.

Developing strong mindfulness of dispassion allows us not to cling to anything. We truly realize that everything is impermanent, dissatisfactory, and of selfless nature.

The Buddha said that the way to resolve the paradox of the opposites (e.g. pleasure vs. pain) is by releasing the clinging.

T. S. Eliot captured the essence of the Buddha's instruction in these lines from the poem "Ash Wednesday": "Teach us to care and not to care. Teach us to sit still..."

"The Buddha's instruction to abandon clinging translates into caring without demanding, loving without imposing conditions, and moving toward your goals without attachment to outcome."¹⁷

Talk XVII Perception of Cessation (pp. 77-79)

"And what, Ananda, is the perception of cessation? Here, having gone to the forest, to the root of a tree, or to an empty hut, a bhikkhu reflects thus: 'This is peaceful, this is sublime, that is, the stilling of all activities, the relinquishment of all acquisitions, the destruction of craving, cessation, nibbana.' This is called the perception of cessation." (tr. Bhikkhu Bodhi)

Perception of Cessation

Note that this Perception is worded similarly to the Perception of Dispassion. The Perception of Cessation is going deeper to ending of suffering rather than just changing our relationship to it. In Dispassion we lack interest in the object that arises. In Cessation, we cease to experience the object. Cessation means that there is no more greed, hatred or delusion to deal with. There is no more fascination or attachment with the impermanent phenomena such as thoughts, memories, perceptions and sensations that arise in the mind. Instead there is appreciation for the joys of non-attachment.

The joys of non-attachment can be experienced through deep concentration. Practicing the jhanas strengthens deep concentration. The jhanas are "states of deep mental unification which result from the centering of the mind upon a single object with such power of attention that a total immersion in the object takes place."¹⁸

The Buddha described this state beyond suffering as noted above: *'This is peaceful, this is sublime, that is, the stilling of all activities, the relinquishment of all acquisitions, the destruction of craving, cessation, nibbana.' This is called the perception of cessation.*"

The Role of Meditation in the Perception of Cessation

Practicing the jhanas is a great benefit to quiet the mind and facilitate the non-arising of thoughts memories and perceptions. Two excellent reference are *Beyond Mindfulness in Plain English: An introductory guide to Deeper States of Meditation* by Bhante Gunaratana and *Right Concentration: A Practice Guide to the Jhanas* by Leigh Brasington

Talk XVIII Perception of Nondelight in the Whole World (pp. 81-82)

"And what, Ananda, is the perception of nondelight in the entire world? Here, a bhikkhu refrains from any engagement and clinging, mental stand- points, adherences, and underlying tendencies in regard to the world, abandoning them without clinging to them. This is called the perception of nondelight in the entire world." (tr. Bhikkhu Bodhi)

Perception of Nondelight in the Whole World

This perception goes deeper and may be hard to understand. In the conditioned world, our tendency is to increase our delight (pleasure). However, we have learned so far in our exploration of perception that all phenomena share characteristics of impermanence, dissatisfaction and selfless nature. We know that pleasure shares these characteristics and even if we could completely fill our lives with it, we still would suffer. The Buddha's father tried to fill his son's life with pleasure and the Buddha came to the same realization.

We also know that we can experience the joy of peace and nonattachment which is preferable to pursuing delight.

However, the mind is always looking for ways to survive and we may hold out hope that in another life we may be able have pleasure without suffering. Two of the ten fetters or subtle hindrances to our practice are craving for fine material existence and, if that fails, craving immaterial existence. We realize that our cravings are just thoughts for these exalted states.

Permanent Freedom

The path leads to permanent freedom and our purified perception allows us to put aside doubt and fear. We become free of attachment to the eight worldly conditions (gain and loss, honor and dishonor, praise and blame, pain and joy).

As the Buddha said in the Mahamangala Sutta:

A mind unshaken
When touched by the worldly states,
Sorrowless, stainless, and secure;
This is the blessing Supreme.

Another translation:

Though touched by worldly circumstances,
Never his mind is wavering,
Sorrowless, stainless and secure:
This, the Highest Blessing¹⁹

Does nondelight mean that we can't have pleasure or joy in our experiences?

The short answer is yes, you can. When you experience any emotion be it joy, pleasure, anger or hatred, know it with mindfulness. All experiences share the three characteristics of impermanence, unreliability (dissatisfaction) and are of selfless nature. So when you experience pleasure, enjoy it in the present moment and know that it is not permanent. The disappointment comes in when greed, hatred, or delusion follows and we want more or less (if the experience is painful.) Every day we experience many or all of the eight worldly conditions - pleasure, pain, gain, loss, praise, criticism, fame and disrepute. When, for example, life throws us praise, we may feel pleasure and being mindful, we do not attach to and base our happiness on getting more.

Talk XIX Perception of Impermanence in Regard to All Mental Formations (pp. 83-85)

"And what, Ananda, is the perception of impermanence in all conditioned phenomena? Here, a bhikkhu is repelled, humiliated, and disgusted by all conditioned phenomena. This is called the perception of impermanence in all conditioned phenomena." (tr. Bhikkhu Bodhi)

The Perception of Impermanence in Regard to All Mental Formations

The perception of impermanence in regard to all mental formations is the total giving up or relinquishment of clinging to anything.

Meditating on the previous perceptions using the processes of the mind has helped us get to this point. First, we explored perception; understanding what perception is and the difference between distorted and purified perception.

With Perception of Impermanence, Perception of Selflessness, Perception of Impurities, and Perception of Danger, we have come to know that our body is impermanent, subject to decay and disease, and is not a "self." With Perception of Abandoning and Perception of Dispassion we know the cause of suffering and through Perception of Cessation we can experience the state beyond suffering. With Perception of Nondelight in the Whole World we overcome the wish for rebirth of any kind.

The perception of impermanence in regard to all mental formations goes farther to give up clinging to everything including all conceptions, all mental formations, all conditioned and compounded things including the processes of our own mind whether they be unwholesome, wholesome or imperturbable. All are impermanent.

We do not even cling to perception.

In other words, using the processes of the mind to get to this point has been helpful and now we do not need them anymore. It is like abandoning the raft once we cross the river because it has served its purpose.

The Final Stage

As the Buddha noted in the Vatthupama Sutta:²⁰

When he knows and sees thus, his mind is liberated from the taint of sensual desire, for the taint of being, and from the taint of ignorance. When it is liberated, there comes the knowledge: "It is liberated." He understands: "Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more coming to any state of being." (tr. Bhikkhu Bodhi)

Instructions from Huang Po

Huang Po was a Chinese Zen Master who died in 850 AD.

"Were you now to practice keeping your minds motionless at all times, whether walking, standing, sitting or lying, concentrating entirely upon the goal of no thought-creation, no duality, no reliance on others and no attachments; just allowing all things to take their course the whole day long, as though you were too ill to bother; unknown to the world; innocent of any urge to be known or unknown to others; with your minds like blocks of stone that mend no holes – then all the Dharmas would penetrate your understanding through and through. In a little while you would find yourselves firmly unattached. Thus,

for the first time in your lives, you would discover your reactions to phenomena decreasing and, ultimately, you would pass beyond the Triple World; and people would say that a Buddha had appeared in the world.”²¹

The Venerable Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rimpoche

The Progressive Stages of Meditation on Emptiness²² as taught by Ven. Rimpoche is another way to explore the final stage. This teaching has similar aspects to our study on Perception. The Obscurations are distorted perceptions and the Realizations are similar to the pure perceptions. Note that both Meditation on Perception and the Five Stages to Emptiness lead to Being.

The Five Stages of Emptiness	Obscuration	Realization
Emptiness		
Stage 1	Belief in a permanent self	There is no one to suffer
Stage 2	Perceptions of objects are inherently real	Nothing to suffer
Stage 3	Objects are real	Concepts are empty
Stage 4	Non-duality can be understood by mind	Transcendence of all concepts
Stage 5	There is awareness of awareness	Being, abiding, wholeness

Talk XX Mindfulness of Breathing Part I (pp. 87-99)

"And what, Ananda, is mindfulness of breathing? Here, a bhikkhu, having gone to the forest, to the foot of a tree, or to an empty hut, sits down. Having folded his legs crosswise, straightened his body, and established mindfulness in front of him, just mindful he breathes in, mindful he breathes out.

"Breathing in long, he knows: 'I breathe in long'; or breathing out long, he knows: 'I breathe out long.' Breathing in short, he knows: 'I breathe in short'; or breathing out short, he knows: 'I breathe out short.' He trains thus: 'Experiencing the whole body, I will breathe in'; he trains thus: 'Experiencing the whole body, I will breathe out.' He trains thus: 'Tranquilizing the bodily activity, I will breathe in'; he trains thus: 'Tranquilizing the bodily activity, I will breathe out.'

"He trains thus: 'Experiencing rapture, I will breathe in'; he trains thus: 'Experiencing rapture, I will breathe out.' He trains thus: 'Experiencing happiness, I will breathe in'; he trains thus: 'Experiencing happiness, I will breathe out.' He trains thus: 'Experiencing the mental activity, I will breathe in'; he trains thus: 'Experiencing the mental activity, I will breathe out.' He trains thus: 'Tranquilizing the mental activity, I will breathe in'; he trains thus: 'Tranquilizing the mental activity, I will breathe out.'

"He trains thus: 'Experiencing the mind, I will breathe in'; he trains thus: 'Experiencing the mind, I will breathe out.' He trains thus: 'Gladdening the mind, I will breathe in'; he trains thus: 'Gladdening the mind, I will breathe out. He trains thus: 'Concentrating the mind, I will breathe in'; he trains thus: 'Concentrating the mind, I will breathe out.' He trains thus: 'Liberating the mind, I will breathe in'; he trains thus: 'Liberating the mind, I will breathe out.'

"He trains thus: 'Contemplating impermanence, I will breathe in'; he trains thus: 'Contemplating impermanence, I will breathe out.' He trains thus: 'Contemplating fading away, I will breathe in'; he trains thus: 'Contemplating fading away, I will breathe out.' He trains thus: 'Contemplating cessation, I will breathe in'; he trains thus: 'Contemplating cessation, I will breathe out.' He trains thus:

'Contemplating relinquishment, I will breathe in'; he trains thus: 'Contemplating relinquishment, I will breathe out.'

"This is called mindfulness of breathing.

"If, Ananda, you visit the bhikkhu Girimananda and speak to him about these ten perceptions, it is possible that on hearing about them he will immediately recover from his affliction."

Then, when the Venerable Ananda had learned these ten perceptions from the Blessed One, he went to the Venerable Girimananda and spoke to him about them. When the Venerable Girimananda heard about these ten perceptions, his affliction immediately subsided. The Venerable Girimananda recovered from that affliction, and that is how he was cured of his affliction. (tr. Bhikkhu Bodhi) Perception of

Pure Perception of the Pure Breath

To purify our perception, we use the breath because nothing can distort it. Other benefits of focusing on the breath include calming of the mind, relaxing of the body, and increasing our ability to heal the body. We also increase our proficiency in concentration and mindfulness.

The Breath and the Four Foundations of Mindfulness

This section of the Girimananda Sutta is similar to Section 2 of the Anapanasati Sutta (Mindfulness of Breathing). With the sixteen exercises with the breath, the Buddha describes the Four Foundations of Mindfulness (The Sattipatthana Sutta).

The four tetrads are summarized as follows:

- Mindfulness of the Body: long breath, short breath, aware of whole body, calming of the whole body
- Mindfulness of Feelings: rapture, happiness, aware of mental activity, tranquilizing of mental activity
- Mindfulness of the Mind: aware of the mind, making the mind happy, concentrating the mind, liberating the mind
- Mindfulness of Mental Objects: contemplating impermanence, dispassion, cessation, relinquishment

By meditating on the breath with these exercises, we can reap the benefits noted above.

Talk XXI Mindfulness of Breathing Part II (pp. 87-99)

What is Enlightenment or Awakening Anyway?

In *Halfway Up the Mountain*²³ Mariana Caplan quotes many well-known spiritual teachers. Many of them would not directly talk about enlightenment because it is so easily misunderstood. It is much easier to say what it is not.

Caplan states: "The main difficulty with trying to define enlightenment is that we do so from the bleachers, and not from the playing field. The same person who watches a football game on television and says "If I were the quarterback, I would have made the touchdown," is the one who cannot discipline himself to exercise three times a week and can't throw a football five yards. We try to define enlightenment from a subjective and conceptual perspective, but it lacks any objective or experiential references. What we think of as "enlightenment is an idea created by our imagination. Enlightenment is a fantasy."

She goes on to note: “The most common, widely-held fantasy about enlightenment is that it is freedom from suffering, the transcendence of pain and struggle, the land of milk and honey, a state of perpetual love, bliss, and peace. Enlightenment represents the collectively shared dream of an idealized and perfect world of pure beauty and joy. It is not only New Age fantasy, it is the secret wish of all people. It is our shared dream of salvation. But it is only a fantasy.”

While enlightenment may very well include some of these aforementioned elements, it is fantasy because we are wishing for a state of being in which our self can be present as well to know these elements. The mind cannot conceive of what enlightenment really is because it is beyond the mind.”

So, if enlightenment is a fantasy, why do we practice?

You may often hear people talk about meditation as the path to enlightenment—that they hope to attain something. Yet, according to Ajahn Chah in his book *Food for the Heart*²⁴, the answer to “What are we practicing for?” is NOT to gain something (e.g. enlightenment). He says we practice in order to relinquish, not to gain. A woman told him that she was suffering. When he asked her what she wanted, she said that she wanted to be enlightened. “As long as you want to be enlightened,” he replied, ‘you will never become enlightened. Don’t want anything.’” That why the term, awakening, may be a better description of the process. We awaken to the truth, to what is.

The Way of Mindfulness to Awakening

*“The Island”*²⁵ is an anthology of the Buddha’s teachings on Nibbana (Enlightenment) by Ajahn Pasanno and Ajahn Amaro. In the introduction by Ajahn Sumedo, he states “In meditation classes, people often start with a basic delusion that they never challenge, the idea that “I’m someone who grasps and has a lot of desires, and I have to practice in order to get rid of these desires and to stop grasping and clinging to things. I shouldn’t cling to anything.”....So we start our practice from this basis and, many times, the result is disillusionment and disappointment, because our practice is based on the grasping of an idea”. The idea that we are now grasping is “I shouldn’t cling to anything.” Any time the word “should” is used, we are grasping onto an idea. Non-attachment means letting go of these ideas as well. So in meditation, we practice the way of mindfulness.

The way of mindfulness is the way of recognizing conditions just as they are. We simply recognize and acknowledge their presence, without blaming them or judging them or criticizing them or praising them. We allow them to be, the positive and the negative both. And, as we trust in this way of mindfulness more and more, we begin to realize the reality of “The Island that you cannot go beyond”.

What is this island? In one of the Buddha’s teachings, he is asked a question by the Brahmin student Kappa:

“Sir,” he said, “there are people stuck midstream in the terror and the fear of the rush of the river of being, and death and decay overwhelm them. For their sakes, Sir, tell me where to find an island, tell me where there is solid ground beyond the reach of all this pain.”

“Kappa,” said the Master, “for the sake of those people stuck in the middle of the river of being, overwhelmed by death and decay, I will tell you where to find solid ground.

“There is an island, an island which you cannot go beyond. It is a place of nothingness, a place of non-possession and of non-attachment. It is the total end of death and decay, and this is why I call it Nibbana [the extinguished, the cool].

“There are people who, in mindfulness, have realized this and are completely cooled here and now. They do not become slaves working for Mara, for Death; they cannot fall into his power.”

Talk XXII Mindfulness of Breathing Part III (pp. 87-99)

The Seven Factors for Awakening from the Anapanasati Sutta

"And how are the four frames of reference developed & pursued so as to bring the seven factors for awakening to their culmination?"

"[1] On whatever occasion the monk remains focused on the body in & of itself — ardent, alert, & mindful — putting aside greed & distress with reference to the world, on that occasion his mindfulness is steady & without lapse. When his mindfulness is steady & without lapse, then mindfulness as a factor for awakening becomes aroused. He develops it, and for him it goes to the culmination of its development.

"[2] Remaining mindful in this way, he examines, analyzes, & comes to a comprehension of that quality with discernment. When he remains mindful in this way, examining, analyzing, & coming to a comprehension of that quality with discernment, then analysis of qualities as a factor for awakening becomes aroused. He develops it, and for him it goes to the culmination of its development.

"[3] In one who examines, analyzes, & comes to a comprehension of that quality with discernment, persistence is aroused unflaggingly. When persistence is aroused unflaggingly in one who examines, analyzes, & comes to a comprehension of that quality with discernment, then persistence as a factor for awakening becomes aroused. He develops it, and for him it goes to the culmination of its development.

"[4] In one whose persistence is aroused, a rapture not-of-the-flesh arises. When a rapture not-of-the-flesh arises in one whose persistence is aroused, then rapture as a factor for awakening becomes aroused. He develops it, and for him it goes to the culmination of its development.

"[5] For one enraptured at heart, the body grows calm and the mind grows calm. When the body & mind of a monk enraptured at heart grow calm, then serenity as a factor for awakening becomes aroused. He develops it, and for him it goes to the culmination of its development.

"[6] For one who is at ease — his body calmed — the mind becomes concentrated. When the mind of one who is at ease — his body calmed — becomes concentrated, then concentration as a factor for awakening becomes aroused. He develops it, and for him it goes to the culmination of its development.

"[7] He carefully watches the mind thus concentrated with equanimity. When he carefully watches the mind thus concentrated with equanimity, equanimity as a factor for awakening becomes aroused. He develops it, and for him it goes to the culmination of its development.

(Similarly with the other three frames of reference: feelings, mind, & mental qualities.)

"This is how the four frames of reference are developed & pursued so as to bring the seven factors for awakening to their culmination.

Clear Knowing & Release

"And how are the seven factors for awakening developed & pursued so as to bring clear knowing & release to their culmination? There is the case where a monk develops mindfulness as a factor for awakening dependent on seclusion, dependent on dispassion, dependent on cessation, resulting in relinquishment. He develops analysis of qualities as a factor for awakening... persistence as a factor for awakening... rapture as a factor for awakening... serenity as a factor for awakening... concentration as a factor for awakening... equanimity as a factor for awakening dependent on seclusion, dependent on dispassion, dependent on cessation, resulting in relinquishment.

"This is how the seven factors for awakening are developed & pursued so as to bring clear knowing & release to their culmination."

*That is what the Blessed One said. Gratified, the monks delighted in the Blessed One's words.
(Tr. By Thanissaro Bhikkhu)*

The Seven Factors of Awakening

"The profitable effect of the awakening factors stands in direct opposition to the detrimental repercussions of the hindrances, a contrast frequently mentioned in the discourses. Both these sets form aspects of Sattipatthana contemplation and are of central importance in cultivating the mental conditions conducive to realization. According to the Buddha, these two aspects from among the contemplations of dhammas (removal of the hindrances and the establishment of the awakening factors) are the necessary conditions not only for realization, but also for develop mundane type of knowledge."²⁶

The Five Hindrances and the Seven Factors of Awakening are considered to be the most important dhammas for contemplation. "Thus, what remains as the unanimously accepted core of contemplation of dhammas in all different versions are the five hindrances and the seven factors of awakening factors, a finding which underlines their importance."²⁷

Developing the awakening factors can be combined with a broad range of meditation exercises as well as directly contemplating on the factors. With the meditation exercises, one can be aware of the factors and "one consciously develops and balances them so that contemplation of one's primary object can give rise to awakening."²⁸

The Practical Application of the Seven Factors of Awakening

The Seven Factors of Awakening can be applied as meditation exercises to each of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness: body, feelings, mind, and mental qualities. The Factors can also be applied when any of the Five Hindrances arise in everyday life and we want to see the truth and end suffering/dissatisfaction.

Here is step by step process to try while meditating or reflecting:

- When suffering or dissatisfaction arises, look to see which one of the Five Hindrances is present.
Is it
 1. Sense Desire
 2. Ill-Will
 3. Drowsiness and Dullness
 4. Anxiety and Worry
 5. Doubt?
- Apply the first factor of Awakening: Mindfulness.
 - Pay attention moment to moment to what is.
- Next investigate
 1. Note any sensations arising in the body.
 2. Note any thoughts, perceptions or memories arising and see if they are accompanied by:
 - Judgment about the issue

- Commentary on the issue
 - Decision-making to resolve the issue.
3. With these sensations and thoughts, just be mindful of their presence.
- Be persistent and don't give up investigating.
 - Notice if joy arises after persistence.
 - Notice if calmness arises after joy.
 - Notice if your concentration is increased after you have become calm.
 - Notice if equanimity arises.
 - What are you experiencing now?

Talk XXIII Mindfulness of Impermanence of the Body and Mind (pp. 103-111)

Meditation: Impermanence and the Six Sensory Objects

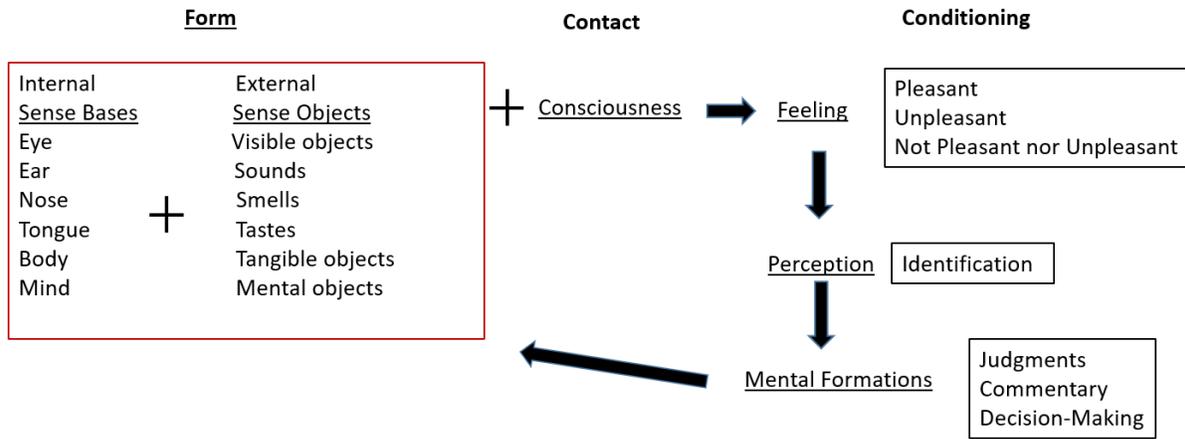
In Part 3: Meditation on Perception, Bhante G. mentions several meditation practices to fully experience some of the perceptions. Three of the practices are focused on Impermanence, the first perception. The meditation practice, Seeing Impermanence with Insight Awareness (Chapter 18) , was mentioned in conjunction with Perception of Impermanence (Chapter 4).

Bhante G. notes, "We need to see impermanence deeply in our own experiences. In our meditation, we pay total mindful attention to the processes of our own body and mind without assumptions or preconceived notions. The impartial attention allow the mind to see impermanence from its roots. Direct, preconceptual knowledge of impermanence opens the door to seeing the truth about all conditioned things."

What is preconceptual knowledge? This is knowledge that we experience before the mind puts an interpretation or assumption on it. This is pure perception which the Buddha defined as what the senses sense without embellishment.

Below is diagram showing the Flow of Impermanence. Preconceptual knowledge occurs with form and contact before conditioning. What we can experience is that everything is constantly changing: the sense bases, the sense objects and consciousness. The Flow of Impermanence is a cycle constantly changing over and over again.

The Flow of Impermanence



Here is a meditation practice to experience the impermanence of all things:

Meditation Instructions on Impermanence

We begin every day with meditation, using the breath as the primary point of focus. As the breath becomes calm, subtle, and relaxed, the mind becomes calm and relaxed.

Once the body is relaxed and the mind is peaceful, we turn our attention to the perceptions of the six kinds of sensory objects: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches, and mental objects.

For instance, we listen to the sounds of birds-pigeons, sparrows, nightingales, blue jays, parrots, or other birds. We notice that some make loud and annoying sounds, and others make sweet and attractive sounds. We listen as well to sounds made by humans. Just like the birds, some make loud and annoying sounds. Others make soft and agreeable sounds. As we listen, we notice that whatever sound we hear is always changing. When we listen to sounds mindfully-without anger, greed, or delusion- all we hear is change and impermanence.

Next, we may turn our attention to the sense of smell. We breathe in the scent of fresh flowers or the smell of soap, cow dung, or bread baking and pay total mindful attention. Whatever smell we notice is changing all the time.

Next, we pay attention to the touch of our clothes against the skin-loose or tight, soft or rough, soothing or scratchy, changing all the time. We experience the touch of the cushion we are sitting on, and how this perception changes from soft and comfortable to hard and unyielding. We experience these changing sensations with awareness.

If we open our eyes, we see leaves, trees, and clouds that are moving. Everything the eyes can see is moving and changing in obvious and subtle ways.

Now we notice that everything we perceive is changing. There is no particular order for things to arise. While being aware of a sound, we suddenly become aware of the impermanence of a feeling, or a thought, or of consciousness itself. We allow the mind to experience these changes in whatever order they arise. No matter what object the mind becomes aware of, we notice impermanence in that object. We don't have to force ourselves to see it. Impermanence is right there, very clearly marked. Everything we perceive is clearly marked with impermanence.

Similarly, all kinds of feelings-pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral- that arise from the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body are changing all the time.

When thoughts arise-wholesome, unwholesome, or neutral we pay total mindful attention to them. All we notice in them is change.

Any perception that arises depending on sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, or thought always changes. Any state of consciousness that arises depending on sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and thought also changes. While we are paying attention to any of them, it changes.

Underneath all changes is the breath, and it is also changing. 'The feeling of the breath, the perception of breath, the attention to breath, the intention to pay attention to breath, and the awareness of breath-they are all changing, without any power that can stop the change. Nothing can prevent the change of anything.

When we breathe in, even the breath does not remain static. It changes by itself It goes to our lungs, exchanges oxygen with carbon dioxide, and then leaves the lungs. We don't do anything to cause this changing process. It happens by itself

Our heartbeat, the blood circulating through the capillaries and arteries-these movements take place naturally through the very same process of impermanence. Radiating body heat and absorbing environmental heat to balance the body's temperature take place due to impermanence. Heat in the body must move, air in the body must move, liquid in the body must move, other elements in the body must move naturally in order to keep the body going. All bodily functions take place naturally due to impermanence. We use mindfulness to become aware of this process while breathing. If we cannot be fully aware of all of these simultaneous changes, we strive to be aware of whatever we can notice while breathing in and out.

Then we realize that change is the nature of all the forms, feelings, perceptions, thoughts, and consciousness of everyone and everything in the universe. They all change constantly. With this understanding we breathe. We feel that we are breathing with the rest of the world, which experiences the changes the same way that we do.

Although we may wish to stop change in its tracks and grip the present moment tightly, doing so is impossible. The processes of life don't stop, not for a split second. Our attempt to freeze the present

moment in place is like trying to catch air in our fist. Instead, the mindful mind lets it all happen without longing for things to be different or bemoaning our fate. This attitude is known as abandonment. While noticing impermanence, nonfixity, cessation, and abandonment, we breathe in and breathe out.

Noticing these changes without greed, hatred, and delusion is our practice of mindfulness. We realize that the breath, feeling, perception, attention, intention, all kinds of thoughts, and consciousness are there to help us to gain insight into the reality of impermanence. Anyone paying total undivided attention to the breath, feeling, perception, thought, attention, intention, and consciousness can experience the same changes that we experience.

Meditation: The Mind is Also Changing

The mind also changes becoming aware of new objects as well as the changes in the object that it was previously focusing on. So our awareness of impermanence is also impermanent. As Bhante G. notes: To experience the mind's changes experientially, practice the meditation exercise as noted above and focus not on the changes in the objects of perception, but on the changes in the mind that is perceiving these objects. Notice clearly how often the mind alters its perceptual focus, switching from external to internal objects. Notice that the mind, along with everything else that exists, is engaged in constant and unstoppable change.

Talk XXV Dependent Origination (pp. 117-119)

“When this is, that is.”

Dependent origination was the Buddha's teaching that everything arises dependent on cause and conditions and falls away dependent on causes and conditions. This is called co-arising.

If one does not recognize that everything is dependent on something, it is easy to fall into either of two opposite views: everything exists permanently or nothing exists. The true nature is of impermanence: everything that we perceive rises and falls away.

We cannot control impermanence; we can only be aware of it. Likewise we can only be aware of nonattachment and cessation. They happen by themselves.

We come to realize that “Once a moment has ceased, it is gone forever. It cannot be revived by any means. What arises is a new moment. The mindful meditator lets this process happen without trying to resist this change. This is abandonment.” When resistance to letting go occurs, we suffer. The Buddha explained this by teaching dependent origination.

Dependent Origination

Suffering occurs because we are ignorant and lack mindfulness or clear comprehension of what is really happening.

“The Buddha described suffering as a traceable path, which he called a chain of “dependent origination.” From contact with an experience, depending on whether it feels pleasant or unpleasant, you have urges about having it or avoiding it, which create desire in your mind. You start to identify with what you desire; it become “me or mine,” and you sink into attachment.”²⁹

Understanding Dependent Origination is to look deeply into the process of suffering. To quote from the Maha-nidana Sutta: The Great Causes Discourse:

“I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was living among the Kurus. Now, the Kurus have a town named Kammasadhamma. There Ven. Ananda approached the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed down to the Blessed One, sat to one side. As he was sitting there he said to the Blessed One: "It's amazing, lord, it's astounding, how deep this dependent co-arising is, and how deep its appearance, and yet to me it seems as clear as clear can be."

[The Buddha:] "Don't say that, Ananda. Don't say that. Deep is this dependent co-arising, and deep its appearance. It's because of not understanding and not penetrating this Dhamma that this generation is like a tangled skein, a knotted ball of string, like matted rushes and reeds, and does not go beyond transmigration, beyond the planes of deprivation, woe, and bad destinations.”

Dependent Origination: Stages in the chain or development of suffering

- Something arises--a form of energy that could be a desire, attraction, or some kind of experience.
- You make contact with it. We become conscious of this energy through one or more of our six internal sense bases, (seeing, hearing, touch, tasting, smelling, thinking).
- A feeling arises which can be pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. If it is neutral, it passes away. If it is pleasant or unpleasant, this may lead to craving.
- Craving arises:
- Craving can lead to clinging; a more intensified version which can lead to intentional actions (thoughts, words and deeds).
- We become. A “self” is born and we identify with it creating a receptacle for suffering to occur.
- The “self” suffers. For example, wanting a pleasant experience to continue or re-occur and it doesn't; aversion to having to do some activity which you don't like; aging and death then transpire as it falls away.

For a more detailed explanation, read *The Shape of Suffering* by Thanissaro Bhikkhu.³⁰

Talk XXVI Freedom (pp. 125-128)

The Ten Perceptions

The Ten Perceptions are summarized below comparing the deluded or distorted perception with the purified one:

	Deluded Perception	Purified Perception
1	There is permanence.	Everything is impermanent.
2	There is a “self.”	Everything is of selfless nature.
3	The body is pure (attractive).	The body is impure (unattractive).
4	Afflictions of the body are remote possibilities.	Danger: The body is always susceptible to afflictions (e.g. injury, disease).
5	Thoughts of pleasure and ill-will are harmless and the way life is.	These thoughts are unwholesome and must be abandoned to become at peace.

6	Craving is the way to pleasure.	Craving leads to clinging which causes suffering. Dispassion releases us from suffering.
7	Suffering is inevitable.	Suffering can cease by developing concentration through jhana practice meditation.
8	The world is delightful.	Nondelight: Everything in the world is impermanent, unsatisfactory and of selfless nature.
9	We are our thoughts and we cling to them.	All mental formations are impermanent and selfless. We must give them up.
10	We cannot experience our mind.	Mindfulness of breathing purifies our perceptions and shows the true relationship with our mind.

The Path to Deliverance

“When one sees with wisdom that all conditioned things are impermanent, unsatisfactory, and that all the dhammas are without self, then one would be disappointed with suffering, which is the nature of all conditions, conditionings, and conditioned things. This is the path to deliverance.” The Dhammapada The path to deliverance is also called the path to purification. This is deliverance from suffering or purification from suffering.

Bhante G. noted that anyone who enjoys sensual pleasure also experiences suffering. Pleasure and suffering come as one package. The eight worldly winds are another expression of the fixed pairs of opposites: pleasure/pain, gain/loss, fame/disrepute and praise/criticism. You can’t get enough of the “good” part of the pair and you can’t avoid the other part of the pair.

As we pursue the path, we get tired of seeking sensual pleasures because we realize the impermanence, inherent suffering, and the selfless nature of all conditioned things.

There is a state beyond perception: “Here, Ananda, a bhikkhu is percipient thus: “This is peaceful, this is sublime, that is, the stilling of all activities, the relinquishing of all acquisitions, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, nibbana,” (tr. Bhikkhu Bodhi)

This state is achieved by meditative concentration and does not last long in our mundane life.

However, “it foreshadows the final cessation of perception that accompanies the death of a fully enlightened person – nibbana, the cessation of existence, extinction, the state utterly and permanently beyond death and rebirth, the ultimate goal of the Buddha’s path.” (p. 127)

“Seeing thus, bhikkhus, the instructed noble disciple experiences revulsion toward form, revulsion toward feeling, revulsion toward perception, revulsion toward volitional formations, revulsion toward consciousness. Experiencing revulsion, he becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion [his mind] is liberated. When it is liberated there comes the knowledge: ‘It’s liberated.’ He understands: ‘Destroyed is birth, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more for this state of being.’” (tr. Bhikkhu Bodhi)

¹ Bhante Gunaratana Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness p.216

² The Greater Discourse on Emptiness [Mahā Suññata Sutta](#) (MN 122)

³ Foam [Phena Sutta](#) (SN 22:95)

⁴ MP p. 51

⁵ Dhammapada 92-93

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- ⁶ Thanissaro Bhikkhu [No-self or Not-self](#)
- ⁷ MP p. 57
- ⁸ Thanissaro Bhikkhu [No-self or Not-self](#)
- ⁹ Ajahn Chah *Food for the Heart* Chapter 29 (pp 316-7)
- ¹⁰ Thanissaro Bhikkhu [No-self or Not-self](#)
- ¹¹ Ajahn Chah *Food for the Heart* Chapter 29 (pp 315)
- ¹² Amaro Bhikkhu [Small Boat, Great Mountain](#)
- ¹³ Ibid p. 28
- ¹⁴ Rick Hanson and Richard Mendius Buddha's Brain p. 127.
- ¹⁵ The Kosalan [Kosala Sutta](#) (AN 5:49)
- ¹⁶ MP p. 64
- ¹⁷ Moffitt, Phillip *Dancing with Life* p. 102
- ¹⁸ Bhante Gunaratana *The Jhanas in Theravada Buddhist Meditation*, 1995)
- ¹⁹ Blessings [Mangala Sutta](#)
- ²⁰ The Simile of the Cloth [Vatthupama Sutta](#)
- ²¹ The Zen Teaching of Huang Po Grove Press p. 90
- ²² <http://www.wearesentience.com/uploads/7/2/9/3/7293936/progressive-stages-of-meditation-on-emptiness.pdf>
- ²³ Caplan, Mariana *Halfway Up the Mountain: The error of premature claims to enlightenment* Hohm Press 1999
- ²⁴ Ajahn Chah *Food for the Heart*
- ²⁵ Ajahn Passano and Ajahn Amaro [The Island](#)
- ²⁶ Analayo *Satipatthana: The direct path to realization* p. 239).
- ²⁷ Ibid 240
- ²⁸ Ibid 240
- ²⁹ Moffitt, Phillip *Dancing with Life* p. 82
- ³⁰ <https://www.dhammatalks.org/books/ShapeOfSuffering/Section0001.html>