

# Online 10-day Retreat Nov 3, 2020, with Delson Armstrong

*This video is part of the 10-day online (Nov-3) retreat series). It is a daily 30-minute QA on the suttas, dhamma talk and reflections.*

*Topics - Effective Choice and Effective Application*

<https://www.suttavada.foundation/10-days-reference-material/>

(Slightly edited to improve readability)

## **Question:**

In the Satipatthana Sutta, you said it starts with physical sensation. So, when the Buddha talks about observing Vedana (Feeling), is it a physical sensation? When the Buddha describes the Five Aggregates, then is the Vedana a mental part?

## **Answer:**

When I talked about sensory experiences, yes, it's the five physical senses and the mind. But there are also sensations in relation to Contact, internal and external contact of the body. That can also relate to the mind, particularly in the Five Aggregates. In either case, the sensory experiences are still part of the mental faculties, because all of this ultimately is experienced through the process of mind.

## **Question:**

Why didn't the Buddha add Perception to the links of Dependent Origination (DO)?

## **Answer:**

The process of Feeling is such that perception and cognition follow it right after. In the case of the links of Dependent Origination, when you have Feeling, the feeling itself when the Buddha describes it – and this is how I view it – before the bare sensation or the bare feeling that arises, it is just that; Feeling. But as soon as you apply onto it the concept of pleasant, unpleasant or neutral – or neither painful nor pleasant – that naming, that understanding of it, is the Perception that's tied to the Feeling. In the case of the links of Dependent Origination, as you have Contact and Feeling, you recognize the Perception that is in the Feeling. Meaning, you recognize through the perception, whether that feeling is painful or pleasant. If you take that to

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be personal, and if you start to attach to it, that's when the Craving arises. Perception can lead to two; it can either lead to more mental proliferation, in the way of Craving, Clinging and so on, by taking it personal - and taking it personal is another kind of perception that arises. Or you can have Wise Perception, or the attention rooted in reality – in Pali that's *yoniso manasikara* – which is to say; you see through that Feeling, you see the emptiness of that feeling. You see the not-self aspect, the impermanent aspect and you see it's not worth holding on to. Therefore, that whole process is Perception in and of itself. It's inherent within the Feeling when you name it.

In the chat is mentioned a very good point; Feeling can condition Craving *or* from Feeling can arise insight, or Wisdom. That's a very good observation, two roads from Feeling.

### Question:

In the talk, about choices, you explain that there is a pause when you respond, versus reacting. Will we acquire that pause through the practice?

### Answer:

The practice is twofold; it's the sitting and walking meditation, and applying that process of meditation and the 6R's in daily living. It's basically a feedback loop. The more you're able to use the 6R process effectively within the meditation, the more you're able to create choices for yourself out of reflection, out of mindfulness and out of that pause. That pause is all about the mindfulness of understanding where your mind is going towards, in term of the choices that you have. Once you start to see that the mind is perhaps tending towards something unwholesome, you use mindfulness to be able to 6R that, and then swerve your mind towards the more Effective Choice through Right Intention and Right Mindfulness. The more you do that, the more it allows you to act and speak more in alignment with the Eightfold Path. As this happens, it allows the mind to have a stronger foundation in the meditation itself.

There is an inverse connection between following the Precepts and the Hindrances. The more you maintain the precepts, the more you act from the alignment of the Eightfold Path, and the less the hindrances will arise in your mind, both in the practice and in daily living.

### Question:

Could you explain the Factor of Awakening of Investigation and how it differs from just observation? And how can it be applied to the hindrance of Sloth & Torpor?

### Answer:

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Observation is just another synonym that I used for Mindfulness. This is knowing that your attention was swerving from one place to another, and then bringing it back to your object of meditation.

Investigation is more in relation to bringing up and understanding how this phenomenon was caused. It can be used in conjunction with attention rooted in reality, *yoniso manasikara*. Investigating into the phenomenon of Sloth & Torpor is essentially utilizing observation. First and foremost, you have seen and recognized that your mind is tending towards Sloth & Torpor. You then investigate into what Factor needs to be brought up. In other words, whether you need to bring up Joy or a little more Effort and put more attention towards the object.

The synonym for Investigation, that I use, is understanding. The end result of investigation is understanding. Once you have investigated what is required in that process of the meditation, where you're leaning towards Sloth & Torpor, you then understand that this is the Factor you need to bring up a little more, in order to balance it. With that understanding, you apply the effort to bring in Joy, Energy or Effort.

### Question:

In one of the suttas it's mentioned that, in Dependent Origination, Consciousness conditions Mentality-Materiality and vice versa. Do both come together, how to understand this?

### Answer:

Consciousness can only be reckoned, measured, through the experience of the Six Sense bases. There is the consciousness that arises from the Contact. You have the sensory consciousness of the eye, you have the consciousness of the visual object – that is in the external reality, so to speak – and then you have the consciousness of the seeing itself. So, in each of the six sense bases there is a triad of consciousness, you could say that there are altogether 18 different types of consciousnesses, depending upon where you put your attention to.

When the suttas talk about that – and in particular Sariputta talks about that – he says that it's sort of an interlinking between Consciousness and Mentality-Materiality. You cannot really experience the eye without consciousness, for example, but at the same time you are conscious of something *through* the eye.

On a broader scale, on a macrolevel, through the process of Rebirth, it's consciousness that then gets linked with a certain Mentality-Materiality. It gets linked at conception with the fetus or whatever it might be; Mentality or Mentality-Materiality. As the experience of that Mentality-Materiality starts to arise, there is a consciousness which links through it and experiences that Feeling. There is a consciousness *before* Mentality-Materiality and there is a consciousness that arises after it links with that Mentality-Materiality. However, it's the same consciousness in the

## Suttavada Foundation

flow of that consciousness. And when I say that, in the Mentality-Materiality, when you have the experience of the eye, that same consciousness arises, or is conditioned by Formations. Formations in this regard, unless you become an arahant, are conditioned by Ignorance. But how does the Formation arise? It arises through Contact, through Feeling and Perception. Primarily through Contact and Feeling, in that when you have contact with the outside world, let's say you have the visual sensation, you have the visual object; upon having that contact, the Formations related to seeing that arise, then activate the consciousness and that consciousness links with the six sense base. Particularly with the eye, and that same consciousness experiences the triad of the eye consciousness, the visual object consciousness, and the Feeling or the sensation of seeing consciousness.

It always begins with Formations and you have to see that it happens so fast. At the level of the Base of Infinite Consciousness, you experience something like up to two million per second of consciousnesses arising and passing away. The actual links of Dependent Origination are several, several times faster. As soon as you make contact with light, as soon as the photons hit the receptors, you have already activated Formations, which activate Consciousness and through attention you experience, whether it's the eye, whether it's the photons or whether it's the seeing of whatever is being shown. So, it's one and the same thing; they are interdependent.

You will read in a later sutta, which is part of this program, where Sariputta talks about Ignorance and the Defilements, or the Taints. He says those two are interdependent; Ignorance is conditioned and caused by the taints, but at the same time the taints arise because of Ignorance. There is always an interdependency.

As I said earlier, the Formations will arise, based on Contact. This means that the flow of Dependent Origination, while on a broader scale might seem linear, is actually cyclical. But within that cycle of DO, are smaller cycles, from Contact to Formations and so on. And within that is embedded the cycle of the Five Aggregates, which are then embedded within the Mentality-Materiality, so it's circles within circles within circles; it's a spiral thing.

### **Question:**

Does this mean that Formations basically decide which sense contact we want to experience?

### **Answer:**

I look at Formations as carriers of Kamma, meaning they are the ones that provide the kammic impulse. You will see this later on as we progress with the retreat, that in relation to the level of Contact, is where you have all the old Kamma. There is the Feeling that arises. What you do with that Feeling will then determine whether new Kamma is created or not. Whatever we are experiencing up to the level of Contact and Feeling, is old Kamma. It's the effects of choices we made in past lives, whether it's just a split second ago or eons ago. Whatever we are

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experiencing in the way of our six senses, and in the way of our experience with the mind and body, is all the inherited effects of Kamma. So, I would shift the perspective in looking at Formations from that angle. And then see that whatever we experience, is a result of our choices. That is why I began with Effective Choice.

Going back to the question; it's a matter of the Formations deciding in that moment, because they were conditioned by a previous choice we made. They are not deterministic, they are rather affected or conditioned by our choices we made in the past. Because of that, we can *change* the Formations. We can strengthen certain Formations, based on choices we make in this present moment, or we can weaken them.

That is why the Noble Eightfold Path is called the cessation of Kamma. Because when the Formation arises, as the carrier of Kamma, it then is activated through the process of Dependent Origination, to the level of Contact and Feeling. At that point you have the old kamma, which is the effects of choices you made previously. Once you have this Feeling, it's how you perceive it, how you take it. Is it through Wise Perception and letting go of any attachment and craving to that Feeling right there and then; that will determine the next set of Formations, which will allow you to continuously let go in the next set of choices.

But the more you attach a sense of self, the more you crave that Feeling by attaching a sense of self, the more you are determining, from your present choices, the future Formations which will be strengthened. Those will then determine the choices you make, which are tending more towards creating more Craving for yourself.

Formations are always conditioned by choices. And choices, in that regard, are conditioned by old Formations.

### **Question:**

There are basically three kinds of Formations: mental, physical and verbal. When practicing meditation, I see there is a slight body movement. Can this be treated as a physical Formation? Immediately with the small movement, there will also arise some thoughts. Are they interrelated? Do they arise because other Formations arose?

### **Answer:**

Movement is a bodily Formation.

I would not say the three Formations are necessarily interwoven. They are categorizations of different experiences that are caused by them.

In the case of mental Formations, they cause the Feeling and Perception. The sensations, the experience within and without the body and mind, and the perceptions that are tied to it.

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The physical Formations, generally and traditionally speaking from the suttas, are related to the breath, first and foremost. But there is also the decision-making process arising from that Formation to move a limb, for example. I would also categorize that under the physical Formations, but that is the way I would view it.

The vocal or verbal Formations are really the Formations that arise from your Perception. What I mean by that is; right now, you perceive that I am speaking to you. And you are listening to what I say. In your mind you might start to be making thoughts, as a response to what I'm telling you. So, the perception that you experience in the way of listening and understanding what is spoken, then conditions or activates the Formations, that create or condition the speech that you may have in the way of responding to what I might be telling you.

They are not interconnected, but they arise so quickly, in the way of how Contact arises, that they seem like they may be interwoven. For example, taking your example. When you're in meditation, or when you are just sitting down and you make a body movement, you move a limb. You notice that it also creates thoughts in the mind, or it creates other kinds of mental Formations, but that is caused and conditioned by the Contact. It will actually spurt out, if you will, two different types of Formations. First of all, the physical Formation had already taken place when you moved the limb and as a reaction to that, you had the thought of moving the limb. That created further thought patterns.

These two things are like forks in the road; you started first with moving the limb, but that process was conditioned by a physical Formation. That process of movement didn't cause or condition or activate a physical Formation; it was the other way around. The other fork in the road is a result of having moved. They are thoughts that arise, based on the mental Formations, that come from the Contact of having moved the limb.

### **Question:**

How important is it to not move during the meditation?

### **Answer:**

Extremely important, because as you start to still the body, you are already working on the lower jhanas, with the stilling and tranquilizing of the bodily Formations. Not only is your breathing, if you notice it, becoming less apparent and starts to become – not necessarily shallow, but just feeble, and it doesn't really affect the body. Secondly, it starts to lower the heart rate, blood pressure, starts to bring things into equilibrium for the body. That is why you start to lose certain sensations of the body. You're tranquilizing and stilling the physical Formations when you do that.

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As soon as you move, or as soon as there is contact made with the physical body, you have Perception of that physical body. This then creates further Formations, in experiencing the physical body again. Whether it's through your own movement, or through Contact with the body.

It's very important to keep the body still in the sitting practice. In the practice of walking, you are obviously moving the body and you're still working with physical Formations, because you are intending the walking while you are doing it. But I would say, it's more important to sit. I see the walking as an exercise for the mind, to be able to bring and generate the Loving-kindness out into the world. And as a way to cultivate it, in whatever the way is that you might be doing it.

But in the sitting practice, it's very, very important to sit still. Number one because as you progress through the jhanas and as your body becomes still, you are tranquilizing the bodily Formations. And up to the level of the fourth jhana, Contact with the body becomes almost imperceptible. And then come the Formless Realms, as they call it, the dimensions of Infinite Space, Infinite Consciousness, Nothingness and Neither Perception nor non-Perception.

In the first and second jhana, you are dealing with the verbalizations. If you see in the first jhana you verbalize, or you have an intention of sending out Loving-kindness to yourself or your spiritual friend; that's the verbal Formation, that is being at play. Then, as you get into the second jhana, or when you start from the second jhana onwards, you don't use the verbalizations and the intention is quickly let go of. There is only the awareness of the Feeling. At this point you have already, for the most part, stilled the verbal Formations.

That's not to say that you will not have verbalizations that arise in the way of thoughts, certain stray thoughts that might come and go, that sound like verbalizations. That also can be dealt with from the fourth jhana onwards, that's no problem. But these verbalizations are coming from the intention that is conditioned by the verbal Formations. By silencing the mind, stopping the verbalizations, you are stopping the intention and thereby you're also stopping the verbal Formations that condition that intention.

As you get higher into the fourth level, you're stilling the bodily Formations. As you get deeper and deeper, especially into Nothingness and Neither Perception nor non-Perception, you'll start to have stray thoughts, images and things like that, that might be disconnected. Especially in Neither Perception nor non-Perception. When you have them, those are really now working with the mental Formations, which are the Feeling and Perception. As you start to let go of those and 6R that, then you have basically stilled all the Formations, and activated and balanced the Factors (of Awakening) and you enter into Cessation of Perception and Feeling.

That's basically a long way of saying that it's extremely important to still the body when you're meditating.

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## Question:

I wanted to clarify if Effective Application and the 6R's are the same thing?

## Answer:

Yes, the 6R's are really identical to the Four Right Applications, or the Four Right Efforts. You have four different Right Efforts:

1. **Preventing** any hindrances from arising. As soon as you notice and recognize there is a hindrance, or a distraction, in the mind, you stop it from further creating more distractions or more thoughts. That's the first Right Effort.
2. **Abandoning**. When you Release and Relax the mind and body, relax the tension or craving. These steps are part of the abandoning any already arisen unwholesome states. If there is any craving or the tension associated with the hindrance, you are Releasing and Relaxing it.
3. **Bringing up** wholesome states, which happens when you return to the Smile and you come back to feeling Loving-kindness or any of the Brahma Viharas, or whatever your object is. That is the third Right Effort in which you are bringing it up.
4. **Maintaining**. As you return to your object, you are maintaining the good feeling, the wholesome quality of mind. And then you Repeat as necessary.

This is how the 6R process is intertwined with the Four Right Efforts. But whether you practice the 6R's or the Four Right Efforts, it is identical. It's one and the same, just a different way of understanding it.