

CHAPTER NINE

THE FOUR MIDDLE NIDANAS

Avijja, sankhara, vinnana – delusion, karmic formations and consciousness – make a crucial linking at the fourth nidana. At this nexus, the first three nidanas come to earth through nama rupa. The Pali scriptures say: Vinnana-paccaya nama-rupa, “Consciousness conditions mind and body.”

Nama-rupa

Nama-rupa is a key phrase in the Indian sacred systems. It is important in Advaita Vedanta and the earlier Samkyha system as well as in Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism. Nama-rupa means “mind-body,” or “mentality-physicality.” In the twelve nidanas, when the first three nidanas link up with nama-rupa, potentiality becomes reality; a living, sentient being begins to form within the mother. The tiny creature has a physical shape and a nervous system, however rudimentary or complex, that will eventually allow it to feel. Two separate processes unite at the fourth nidana: samsaric DNA, an otherworldly inheritance received from the first three nidanas, and the physical DNA inherited from the entity’s biological parents.

The tiny creature that begins to develop at conception inherits avijja (delusion), as well as specific karma formations which are the result of past karmic deeds. Some formations have strong energy fields; others exist beneath the surface as weak energy fields that may never be activated in this lifetime. An example of a weak energy field could be one created by skillful deeds practiced in former lives, waiting to be activated by spiritual practice in the present life. The entity can be born into hell realms, animal realms, hungry ghost realms or deva realms. In the human realm it can be born into extreme poverty in a country with absolutely no freedom, or it can be born into very good circumstances. The karma formations are unconscious contents that play out throughout this lifetime. This is our samsaric inheritance. Much like Jung’s archetypes, it relentlessly seeks manifestation, both for good and for bad.

Also streaming from the first three nidanas is samsaric consciousness, an obsessive brooding, or constant self-reference. When we consider these inheritances as impersonal processes operating unconsciously, and see that there is no “me” in these habit formations, we have gained a foothold into working with them. It can be oddly freeing.

No less important is a second group of inheritances that occur with the fourth nidana. These are the specific biological and psychic traits received through our parents, grandparents, etc.: our physical “earthly” DNA. We are Caucasian or Asian, we are born of tall, average or short stock. We are blue- or brown- eyed. We are born into generations of high intelligence and accomplishment; we are born into generations of average intelligence and average accomplishments. The vertical samsaric line that stretches back to beginningless time bisects the horizontal biological line at the fourth nidana. Thus we inherit a “double personality,” the mind-body of the fourth nidana and samsaric consciousness which is the third nidana.

In Vipassana meditation, the vital role of nama-rupa in the process of awakening is clearly described. Vipassana meditation posits sixteen stages of Insight Knowledge on the journey from the unreal to the Real. Some of the stages can last for years, while a meditator may pass through other stages in a matter of a few mind moments, less than a second. The gradual progression of Insight occurs more or less in order, although one may go back and forth between two stages for some time, or one may get stuck at a certain level for this lifetime. The end of the journey, which Mahasi Sayadaw describes so clearly in *The Progress of Insight*, is the complete and total annihilation of avijja. It is safe to say that all meditators, from all disciplines, must go through this first stage, although not necessarily so clearly delineated as it is in Vipassana.

The first Insight in Vipassana meditation is described as nama-rupa pariccheda nana: knowledge (nana) that can distinguish what is mental from what is physical. The meditator notices the rise and fall of the abdomen and is aware that the movement of the abdomen is rupa (the physical body); the *knowing* of this movement is nama (mind). The meditator experiences the sensations of a moving foot during walking meditation as rupa. That which knows the foot is moving is nama. The meditator experiences strong sensations as rupa, and that which labels it pain as nama.

Mahasi Sayadaw says:

Such knowledge as this, which analyses in each act of noticing both the bodily process noticed and the mental process engaged in noticing, according to their true essential nature, is called 'Analytical Knowledge of Body and Mind.'

One cannot exaggerate the importance of this first insight. Compared to the transformative experiences of later insights, recognizing nama-rupa can seem trivial; in fact, the knowledge of nama-rupa strikes a profound blow to the darkness of avijja. It signals the pivotal separation. Awareness extricates itself from the fusion of mind and body and clearly distinguishes between the two. That which is able to see that nama and rupa are two separate processes has begun the journey of awakening.

But at this point we are concerned with understanding unconscious processes, how each unnoticed nidana projects forward, linking up with its inevitable successor. After nama-rupa comes nidana number five, salayatana.

Salayatana

Nama-rupa paccaya salayatana: "Name and form condition the six senses."

At long last, the first three nidanas have come to earth, the vertical samsaric line has bisected the horizontal line of sentient existence and a tiny being is formed in the mother's womb. Now, vinnana – samsaric consciousness – has a vehicle to experience itself through matter, and to brood on its own existence. How does it receive sensory data? How does it *feel*? This is where the fifth nidana comes in. The fetus begins a process described by Kalu Rinpoche as "Twisting Wind." Legs and arms push out of its primitive walnut shape giving it a distinct form. Eyes develop, ears develop. The entity develops six separate ways of receiving and processing sensory data.

Over the years, NASA has sent landing crafts to Mars, such as the rovers Spirit and Opportunity. Each rover has "arms" to collect rocks, and wheels so it can move around. They are equipped with different data collecting instruments that send information back to a main computer for processing. Among those instruments are a panoramic camera that can "see," and a thermal emission spectrometer that can "feel" and identify Martian rocks and soils. Then the main computer can decide whether the

rover should examine the rocks and soil more closely or move on its merry way. How did we invent such a clever device? We cloned ourselves.

If nama-rupa is the landing craft which allows us to explore planet earth, salayatana, the fifth nidana, is the means by which the craft collects sensory information. It has six separate means of gathering data: smelling, seeing, hearing, tasting, touching and the sense mind, the main computer. Each sense is a separate consciousness: seeing consciousness, hearing consciousness, etc. Mind, which is the sixth consciousness, is able to process each of the other five consciousnesses, like a central phone switch which sorts out the information coming in from the other five lines. With all six senses in place, the landing craft is almost ready to go exploring; it only needs one more nidana to complete its wiring.

Phassa

Salayatana-paccaya phassa: “The six sense consciousnesses condition contact.”

Phassa means contact – it is the last piece of internal wiring needed in order for the landing craft (nama-rupa) to function. It has eyes to receive visual data and ears to take in sound waves, and it has the central computer to combine all this information into a cohesive whole: we see, hear, feel, and it all seems to be happening simultaneously. The landing craft stands ready to receive the data, but one final process is necessary for actual contact to occur. There has to be a connection between the sense consciousness and the object. Phassa is that contact. It “opens” the eye door and ear door; it opens the touch door, allowing the hands to feel an object.

Phassa is the actual connection between an object such as a rose and the eye. That contact causes a slight impinging as light waves strike the eyes. The contact between the external object and the sense organ causes the data to be sent to the internal seeing center in the brain, and the image of a rose appears. Contact may also occur between the nose and the object. Slight impinging occurs at the nostrils from the contact, and the data is sent to the olfactory center. A sweet odor arises with the image of the rose. The sound of wind or birds chirping adds to the experience. It’s a multi-media event! The sense mind distinguishes between seeing, hearing and smelling, and with phassa the wiring of the landing craft is complete.

Joseph Goldstein tells the story of an especially difficult time he had

with craving during a meditation retreat. He worked with it by pouring mindfulness into the experience, but sad to say the desire was too strong and it kept returning. Eventually, he realized that his strategy was not working so he decided to change the focus of mindfulness. He began to notice the very moment of initial contact with the object rather than craving. In other words, he brought attention to *phassa*. Much to his astonishment, craving vanished completely.

When Joseph focused on the moment of initial contact with the object of his desire, he introduced mindfulness into the chain of *nidanas*. This broke the unconscious current at the sixth link, *contact*. His mindfulness was like a low branch over an eddy pulling him down the stream. He grabbed hold of the branch and pulled himself out of the eddy that is the twelve *nidanas*.

But our concern here continues to be with the unconscious current – the eddy pulling us downstream toward suffering. From contact with a sense object comes the seventh *nidana* and the beginning of the tremendous power the external world exerts in our lives. This is where our analogy of the landing craft breaks down. It merely reports information to its central computer. Sentient beings not only report information, they *feel* it throughout the system. The seventh *nidana* causes the little rover to go off the reservation.

Vedana

Phassa-paccaya vedana: “Contact conditions feeling.”

Vedana is the seventh *nidana*; it means “feeling” in the Pali scriptural language. Vedana is what makes us sentient beings. Perhaps a creature may not be able to think about an experience, as do humans, but all creatures share the ability to feel pain and to feel pleasure. In the West, we use the word “sensation” to describe physical touch: heat causes a certain physical sensation, as does the soothing touch from a massage. We reserve the word “feeling” to describe mental reactions. In other words, a pleasant sensation in the body may produce a pleasant mental feeling. But in the Pali scriptural language, *vedana* refers to both sensation and feeling. In fact, it is often translated as “sensation,” particularly in some Mahayana scriptures. My suggestion is that “feeling/sensation” is a much more accurate translation of *vedana*.

Vedana is experienced as positive, neutral or negative. It is the

immediate mental-physical reaction to any contact (phassa). A gentle touch on the back from someone you love will result in a positive feeling/sensation (vedana). It will be experienced physically (rupa) as a pleasant sensation, and, more than likely, it will be experienced mentally (nama) as a pleasant feeling. Interestingly, there may be quite a discrepancy between the positive charge of the two processes; i.e. the touch may be only a level 4 out of 10 on the pleasure scale, but the mental reaction could be hugely positive, say a level 8 out of 10. This exact touch – same amount of pressure, same amount of contact, same spot on the back – from a stranger standing behind you at a counter may elicit an opposite reaction. It is likely that the physical sensation could be more or less neutral, but the mental reaction may be extremely negative.

Where there is no separation between nama and rupa, we are at the mercy of vedana; we are convinced that our boundaries have been invaded when a stranger bumps into us, and we feel caressed when someone attractive touches us. The sight of a beautiful object will result in a positive mental vedana, translating immediately into a physical feeling/sensation. The sight of something very unpleasant will elicit a corresponding feeling/sensation. A beautiful sound will cause the body to relax; loud raucous noises may cause our bodies to tense up. Little wonder the landing craft is out of control. Nothing in its programming helps it to process vedana, and we may have forgotten the most crucial piece of information. The landing craft called Nama-Rupa has a destructive program hard-wired in its computer. It's called avijja.

Remember that vedana does not refer to the complex of emotions such as anger, lust, happiness or joy. Buddhism teaches that these are “mind states,” not vedana. Think of the seventh nidana as the basic initial feeling/sensation reaction to any type of contact, mental or physical, experienced through one of the six sense doors. It will always have a positive, neutral or negative charge to it. This is amazing to consider, and almost universally ignored. Every conscious contact produces a sensation/feeling. The vast majority of our feelings remain slightly beneath the surface of consciousness. So I may indulge in a cycle of negative thoughts without the slightest awareness of the consequences that my thoughts are registering in my body and mind. Then a few days later I wonder why I feel so miserable. It is probably the case that mind states are the inevitable result of unnoticed vedana reactions over an extended period of time. Imagine the consequences of negative vedanas constantly feeding negative mind states.

The great Ch'an master Ta Hui warns us, however, that negative feeling/sensations are not the greatest obstacle to awakening.

Unpleasant situations are easy to handle; pleasant situations are hard to handle. For that which goes against one's will, it boils down to one word: patience. Settle down and reflect a moment and in a little while it's gone. It's pleasant situations that give you no way to escape: like pairing magnet and iron, unconsciously this and that come together in one place. Even inanimate objects are thus: how much the more so for those acting in ignorance, with their whole beings making a living within it.

Because of *avijja*, the mind relentlessly clings to "pleasant situations." The idea of being vigilant, mindful, in the presence of good feelings seems absurd. Why would anyone want to destroy a good time by subjecting it to the watchful eye of mindfulness? This is fundamentally a question for grown-ups only. Ta Hui poses this question: "If you just manage to cradle the uncrying child in your arms, what is the use?" The meditator must learn how to cradle the screaming inner baby, but she must also learn how to be totally present when the baby is quiet and tranquil.

The least mentioned, and most difficult *vedanas* to work with are neutral feelings. This is a great example of the Buddha's subtle teaching. We have seen that our little landing craft is going to back away from any contact that creates "bad" feeling/sensation. The backing away process usually causes negative feelings to turn into aversion. We also have learned that any contact that makes the little craft feel good leads toward positive feeling/sensation. This direction, if unnoticed, will usually turn into greed. But the least noticed *vedanas* are the neutral ones. Obviously they are by far the most frequently occurring. The Buddha teaches us that neutral *vedanas*, unnoticed by mindfulness, lead us in the direction of a zoned out, lukewarm state of mind (we know this state intimately). This state is the natural home of *avijja* or unknowing.

When we are stuck within a world of neutral feelings, delusion always holds sway. When we feel "zoned out," we don't know *what* we feel. And we don't have an inclination to investigate a "neutral mind state," because nothing "urges" us toward resolution of our situation. "I don't feel like meditating today" usually comes from a mind lost in neutral *vedana*.

Buddhist commentaries refer to three personality types. Greedy types

are those who are caught in attachment to positive vedanas. At meditation retreats, the greedy type manages to get to the front of the line for dinner even if he walks at a snails pace. He wants extra blankets, and searches hungrily for the most perfect cushion. Aversion types tend to wait until the greedy types have gone through the line. They seek a spot to eat where they won't have to deal with noisy, greedy eaters. Deluded types, those with neutral feelings, often look a little bewildered, as if they have arrived on a strange planet and are not sure about the rules. No matter which direction the three personality types are turned – away from, toward or confused – if they are caught in the eddy of vedana, they are swiftly on their way to the eighth nidana.