

Buddhist Pragmatic Phenomenology: an object-oriented inquiry

Sean Feit, 2012

1. Praxis

The early Buddhist teachings preserved in the Pali canon form the basis of a religion (Theravada Buddhism), but in themselves hew far more toward the pragmatic than the theological, though both kinds of teaching appear in the texts. Descriptions of heavens, hells, and celestial beings sit alongside instructions in ethical behavior and the cultivation of qualities necessary for release from suffering, or *dukkha*.¹ At the heart of the Buddhist project is a deconstruction of the habits of mind that give rise to stress and suffering, as indicated in the central formulation of the tradition, taught by the Buddha to a group of five of his friends immediately after his awakening: the Four Noble Truths (4NT).² These “Truths” form a “View” (*ditthi*) that is the necessary foundation for both the cultivations suggested and the philosophical and soteriological assertions of the faith. The 4NT are structured around a model common in medical practice of the Buddha’s time: the naming of a symptom (suffering/stress, or *dukkha*), its cause (grasping, or *tanha*, literally thirst), its relief (unbinding, or *nibbana/nirvana*), and the way to achieve that relief (the Noble Eightfold Path, or *ariya atthangika-magga/arya ashtanga-marga*). The Noble Eightfold Path³ itself begins with Right View (*samma ditthi*), which consists of seeing the 4NT, and so is both recursive and a paradox, as seeing the 4NT clearly would mean realizing *nibbana*, and so Right View as the first step of the Path must be

¹ The Buddhist technical terms will be used in their Pali versions, since I am speaking largely from a Theravadin perspective. Where a Sanskrit variant is more commonly known, I will put it after a slash: (*nibbana/nirvana*). When using English words that refer to specific technical terms, I will capitalize them: View, Truth, Characteristic.

² The Buddha. "Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta: Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion (SN 56.11)."

³ The Noble Eightfold Path: Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Mindfulness, Right Concentration, Right Wisdom. (*samma*, “Right” as in “upright”, is also translated as “Wise”.)

interpreted as seeing the 4NT *enough* to believe one's teachers and begin cultivation, while full understanding and embodiment of them only arises at the completion of the Path. The orientation toward the Noble Truths, however, isn't just an act of faith that prefigures the real work to come in the practice, it is the orientation that frames all the subsequent teachings. It is specifically this soteriological orientation — toward suffering and its release — that colors all the Buddha's ontological teachings with pragmatism. He was known for avoiding speculative and theological debates, and would rebuff questioners who came wanting to engage in them with silence or a reminder of the pragmatic nature of his teaching, as he does at the end of a dialogue with a monk, Malunkya, about what he refuses to teach.

“And why are they [answers to ten cosmological and ontological questions] undeclared by me? Because they are not connected with the goal, are not fundamental to the holy life. They do not lead to disenchantment, dispassion, cessation, calming, direct knowledge, self-awakening, Unbinding. That's why they are undeclared by me.

“And what is declared by me? ‘This is stress,’ is declared by me. ‘This is the origination of stress,’ is declared by me. ‘This is the cessation of stress,’ is declared by me. ‘This is the path of practice leading to the cessation of stress,’ is declared by me. And why are they declared by me? Because they are connected with the goal, are fundamental to the holy life. They lead to disenchantment, dispassion, cessation, calming, direct knowledge, self-awakening, Unbinding. That's why they are declared by me.”⁴

The Path of practice consists of three major trainings: ethical action (*sila*), cultivation of useful mental skills (*samadhi*), and inquiry leading to wisdom (*pañña*). The uprooting of the Thirst that leads to Suffering requires an inquiry into the subtleties of perception, since it is through the perception of objects as pleasurable or painful that we fall into grasping (and aversion, its twin). Inquiry, in this usage, refers not so much to an intellectual analytic process, but to the unfolding of intuitive knowing based on sustained embodied experience. The Buddha's instructions for practice in relation to perception are thus deeply phenomenological — we

⁴ The Buddha. "Cula-Malunkya Sutta: The Shorter Instructions to Malunkya (Majjhima Nikaya 63)."

must relate directly to the objects in our world without getting lost in ideas about them. As an example, a common training technique is to note our experience of bare (or as bare as possible given our skill in focused, non-discursive attention) sensory data arising from the five physical senses and the thinking mind, without indulging in speculation *about* the experience. The Buddha's instructions to a wandering ascetic named Bahiya exemplify this approach:

“Herein, Bahiya, you should train yourself thus: ‘In the seen will be merely what is seen; in the heard will be merely what is heard; in the sensed will be merely what is sensed; in the cognized will be merely what is cognized.’ In this way you should train yourself, Bahiya.

“When, Bahiya, for you in the seen is merely what is seen... [repeats for hearing and sensing], ...in the cognized is merely what is cognized, then, Bahiya, you will not be ‘with that.’ When, Bahiya, you are not ‘with that,’ then, Bahiya, you will not be ‘in that.’ When, Bahiya, you are not ‘in that,’ then, Bahiya, you will be neither here nor beyond nor in between the two. Just this is the end of suffering.”⁵

In this instruction, if we were to interpret it ontologically, we would have the beginnings of an object-oriented phenomenology. Seeing (likewise hearing, sensing, and cognizing) does not lean into the object, creating more relationship than is necessary for the inquiry to unfold. It's not that relationship doesn't exist — the Buddha doesn't deny that context and personality and all the details of phenomena exist, they're just not necessary for the task at hand. When trained thus, Bahiya will be neither “with that” (in contact with the object), nor “in that” (merged with the object), “neither here” (fixated *in situ*, in self-position), “nor beyond” (there is no transcendent or reified self to be found), “nor in between the two” (confused or unclear about existence). This bare sensing takes only what is needed, which is to recognize the objects of the senses without giving rise to grasping, aversion, or confusion in relation to them. It offers to things the respect of non-projection. Everything is just what it is. Even thoughts, being things, are just what they are. Released from being participants in our

⁵ The Buddha. "Bahiya Sutta: About Bahiya (Udana 1.10)."

drama, things simply are, and released from the extraneous relationships that we habitually nurture with things, we ourselves may be also able to simply be. Thus *Being* is to be not-situated, released from so many painful relationships. “Neither here nor beyond nor in between the two. Just this is the end of suffering.”

The phenomenology of the Buddha, then, is pragmatic in that it eschews ontological hypotheses in favor of experiential understanding, and privileges experiences that are useful for the Path. The Buddha doesn't go into whether and how things exist, only that our relationship to them, our projections that turn them into the objects of desire or revulsion, is what gets in the way of our happiness and freedom. And so Right View is necessarily solipsistic, the Path phenomenological, the frame correlationist, to use Quentin Meillassoux's term for ontologies that privilege the human relationship to things.⁶ But on deeper reflection, the correlationism perhaps wavers a bit. For it is not the case that things depend on us at all for their existence. The situation is more dire than that. I am so lost in my ideas about things, looking out from my skully perch, that I feel like the center of the world, and so depend on the world for identity, for existence. Copernicus Maximus! You don't even *see* sights, *hear* sounds, *sense* sensations, *think* thoughts, the Buddha is saying to Bahiya, you only see, hear, sense, and think yourself. Let the seen be. Let the sounds and sensations be. Let the thoughts be! This takes training, but as we learn to do so, gives the world back to itself. What a relief it must be when someone comes along not taking from the seen all the time but just letting the seen be the seen. Bahiya's training is anti-capital, anti-property, anti-empire. In letting go of grasping onto things, Bahiya is not only liberated from all fixation — neither here nor there nor in-between — but Bahiya liberates the world from Bahiya. Which works because there never was a Bahiya to begin with.

⁶ See Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2011). 12.

2. Perception

“Bhikkhus, how do you conceive it: is form permanent or impermanent?” —
“Impermanent, venerable Sir.” — “Now is what is impermanent painful or pleasant?” —
“Painful, venerable Sir.” — “Now is what is impermanent, what is painful since subject to
change, fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine, this is I, this is my self’”? — “No, venerable
sir.”⁷

The Buddha, though known for not doing ontological speculation, does offer some descriptions of reality, couched as always in the practice of *seeing clearly* (*vipassana/vipashyana*). Two interwoven descriptions are contained in the classical lists of the Five Aggregates (*panca-khandha/skandha*) and the Three Characteristics (*ti-lakkhana*, also Signs, Marks of Existence). Between the two, the Buddha offers both a taxonomic map for understanding how our consciousness comes into contact with the world of things, and a framework for recognizing the characteristics of those things that are most useful for our liberation. The framing structure, as always, is the soteriology of suffering and its release, as in the well-known saying of the Buddha, “I teach on thing and one thing only: suffering and the end of suffering.”⁸ The *khandha* are five categories of things — literally “heaps” — that are known as Aggregates because they are the constituent parts of conscious, or “sentient” experience.⁹ Though they

⁷ The Buddha. "Anatta-lakkhana Sutta: The Discourse on the Not-self Characteristic (Samyutta Nikaya 22.59)."

⁸ [from author's memory. Specific sutta unknown — but I'll keep looking...]

⁹ Existential distinction is not made in the texts between the sentience or consciousness of an ant and a human, or any other kind of being (like ghosts), though it is asserted that humans (more than animals, ghosts, and various kinds of celestial beings) experience the most conducive conditions for practice, namely by not being subject to extremes of pain (in the hells), habitual activity (in the animal realm), or pleasure (in the heavens). The “human realm”, with its mix of pleasure, pain, and self-awareness is considered optimal for practice. Of course, this is a human-centric View! It is countered, however, by stories of the Buddha in his previous lives as animals practicing the Perfections (*parami/paramita*), and by the enlightenment stage of Non-Return, in which a practitioner is close enough to full Unbinding (*nibbana*) that upon death they are born only once more, as a celestial being in a heaven realm, where they complete their practice and are liberated there from birth and death (*samsara*).

are framed in the light of sentient experience, they also are seen as a description of phenomenal reality, via the recognition that a being can't have an experience that is not described by one of these labels. The Five Aggregates are:

1. Form (*rūpa*)
2. Feeling (*vedana*)
3. Perception (*sañña*)
4. Formations (*sankhara/samskara*)
5. Consciousness (*viññana/vijñāna*)

Form, in this list, refers to everything physical, including the body, energy, and all “external” things. In the text, each of these Aggregates is described to include temporality, referentiality, subtlety, sublimity, and relative location:

“Whatever form [feeling, perception, formation, consciousness] is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: That is called the form [etc.] aggregate.”¹⁰

The listed qualities describe a relationship, in which the practitioner knows a given object relative to her own sense of time and space. Two sets of qualities are spatial: internal/external, and far/near. Two refer to qualities that describe the practitioner's apprehension of the object: blatant/subtle, and common/sublime (which technically refers to aspects of deep concentration). The strangest one is the temporal. What would it mean for a given form to be “past, future, or present”? A memory of a form, after all, is not a form but a *thought*, as is a plan for one. The paradox of temporality in Buddhist practice is that since the method is so doggedly phenomenological, it is also doggedly *present*. A common reflection in practice is that past and future consist largely of thoughts. So on that level they don't exist with the same solidity as physically present things. However, we've already concluded that thoughts share the

¹⁰ See The Buddha. "Khandha Sutta: Aggregates (SN 22.48)."

same existential reality as things, even if much more insubstantial. That would mean that the past, even if just a thought — and memory is always imprecise, a fiction — is as real as that which is demonstrably happening *now*. In addition, the teaching of *karma*, which understands the relationship of cause and effect as undeniable and infinitely contextual, relies on the passage of time for its logic. Is it the case that objects affect objects in sequence, creating events that pass through preexisting Time? Or is it the case that objects affecting objects *creates* time by causing new thing after new thing to appear? If karma is the unfolding of influence, the transmission of impulse, time is the perception of change. (Karma and causation will be unpacked in part 4 of this essay.)

After Form, which encompasses everything that isn't the individual's mental-emotional world, the other four *khandha* deconstruct the constituent parts of a moment of sense perception. Feeling (*vedana*) refers not to emotions but to a valence that arises contiguous with every sense perception in which a given object (physical or mental) is sensed as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Feeling is key to the process because based on our sense of things as pleasant, we tend to grasp onto them. Aversion is rooted in the sense of things as unpleasant, and delusion, or spacing out, is associated with the sense of things as neutral. Already, we see that this taxonomy privileges the human perspective, which we can call Dasein, after Heidegger's knowing-existing-one, but again it does not actually assert anything about the reality of things. *Vedana* asserts that it is impossible for Dasein to sense things directly in-and-of-themselves, not because they have a reality that is hidden from view (pace Kant), though they may indeed, but because Dasein has a habit of projection that gets in the way! When I think an thing is ugly, say a pine couch with brown naugahyde cushions in a faux-woodsy ski lodge, I am directed by the teaching on *vedana* to notice the couch as form, specifically noting my action of seeing. I see an image, but notice that there is also a *separate* valence of unpleasantness

present. Feeling is said to arise directly on the heels of sense contact (see the chain of Dependent Co-arising,¹¹ in part 4), too quickly for even skilled meditators to sense, but it is still an independent experience because it can be isolated in awareness. *Vedana* is conditioned, like nearly everything, and so we see that our history and accumulated habits and views color our contact with every thing, including our own thoughts. There is then no such thing as direct contact with objects, only mediated relationships warped to a greater or lesser degree by our habitual preferences.

The remaining three Aggregates break down the process in more detail, describing three mental acts that also accompany every sense contact. Perception (*sañña*) refers technically here to recognition, the process by which memory is accessed in order to separate a thing from its background and note it as familiar or not. Perception names the couch “couch”, whether the word is thought or not, and without concern about how closely this particular couch conforms to the learned sign “couch”. The task of seeing *sañña* clearly is difficult, because its habits are so ingrained. Try *not* understanding a familiar word when someone speaks it to you or when reading it on the page! Heidegger’s assertion that we don’t really notice things until they break or otherwise disrupt our habitual use of them, speaks to the necessity of becoming aware of *sañña* in process. To actually Perceive a thing is to note its readiness-to-hand — it has surfaced out of the ocean of objects surrounding us and been recognized. Before this happens, even if I’m passively aware that it’s there, my habitual sense of normalcy is operating, my sleepwalking, and things are “merely” present-at-hand. Just there, but not shining in any particular way. This is a prejudice we do well to see through. Everything is always already shining. The challenge for a practitioner is to see things *as if* for the first time, circumventing the stupefying rhythm of rote recognition, allowing the shining Being of things to be known.

¹¹ The Buddha. "Paticca-samuppada-vibhanga Sutta: Analysis of Dependent Co-arising (SN 12.2)."

Moments where perception is *wrong* are useful to this end. Outside the lodge where I'm writing is a thin scrap of cheap carpet that at first glance looked like a huge, beautiful, fuzzy caterpillar. Excited, I bent to look closer, and discovered that I had recognized "caterpillar" wrong, and it was in fact a scrap of carpet. Immediately my pleasure in seeing a huge fuzzy creature was replaced by disdain at the shoddiness of workmanship that would leave a scrap lying around outside like that, and my aversion to industrial carpet in general and the aesthetics of faux-rustic ski lodges. All those aversive thoughts — everything that happened beyond the initial hit of unpleasantness, which I missed and only reconstructed later — are Formations (*sankhara*), and it doesn't actually matter that I had a pleasant mistake replaced by an unpleasant reality. The waking up from the illusion brought the object into a different focus for me. Some aspect of its shining shone forth. Carpet! (Whatever I may think of it.)

Mental Formations (or Fabrications) is the Aggregate of thoughts and emotions. Everything we think, from the most concrete ("there's the couch") to the most abstract (imaginary numbers, say) is a Formation in the thinking mind. Framed in this way, thoughts are invited to be seen as *process* ("thinking is like this") rather than for their *content*. For the purposes of clear seeing (*vipassana*), all that is necessary for becoming aware of the workings of stress and grasping is to note thought as thought. And the challenge, as before, is that it's so habitual that we mostly don't notice it. If thought is a sense object like things outside our body, then the same limitations apply as apply to all things: we can never fully apprehend thinking itself because our attachment to the content of thought (and its *vedana*) usually gets in the way. This also means that thoughts are just as real as anything, even if immaterial. After all, they have direct effects on the world all the time, and if you believe the studies on the efficacy of prayer, may have a force that we can neither understand nor control. Thought, and certainly consciousness, escapes scientific materialism, but it still is seen, sensed. And if I can sense it,

and it behaves in all important respects like other objects, then the challenge is to see it as not mine. If I can't control my thoughts, and can witness them from some sense of (inner) distance, then their provenance as *my* voice is shaken. What if they are their own things, conditioned by the past to say certain things, repeat certain stories (endlessly! Why would I do that to myself? I wouldn't!), dwell on certain preferences. What if *my* thoughts have very little to do with *me*?

Consciousness (*viññana*) is the bare knowing of a thing. The *khandha* of Consciousness is not my sense of self, or the Witness, or any higher order inner thing. *Viññana* is not Dasein.

Consciousness is the *knowing* of an object, and arises, like the others, virtually simultaneously with sense contact. Consciousness is not an ongoing awareness that passively receives incoming data, maintaining its witness perch and existence between each contact, but is specific to each contact and disappears when that contact disappears. Thus there is eye-Consciousness, ear-Consciousness, body-Consciousness, etc. And those Consciousnesses are forever coupled to the "intentional object", as Merleau-Ponty notes.¹² Consciousness appears in a slightly different form in the sequence of Dependent origination, and in that context reveals its conditioning and importance in the process of things giving rise to things. It sits at the heart of the puzzle about who we are. What is this thing, Being Conscious? I know I am, when i'm not asleep, but when I try to sense the thing itself? Nothing. All I get is more objects. I try to sense the *knowing* of the couch, but all I see is couch. "In the seen is just what is seen." But in another translation of the same text (the *Bahiya Sutta*), we read, "In the seeing is just the seeing". Wait — that's the other side of the coin! Is there just the seen or just the seeing? It turns out that both work for the purposes of practice, and the grammar of the Pali original is open enough to admit both versions. Whether I focus on the objects or on seeing itself, the task is the same. With all the Aggregates, as the verse that opens this section teaches, the task at

¹² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New York: Routledge, 1962). 139-40.

hand is to notice their Impermanence, their Painfulness (or Unsatisfactoriness), and their being unfit to be regarded as “mine, I or my self”. All things — and the Aggregates describes all things, heaps of them — are to be regarded in light of their possessing these Three Characteristics. This is all the Buddha says about things: that they all demonstrate these Characteristics. What they might *be* or *do* beyond this frame is unknown, but what’s useful to *us* is to see them this way.

3. *Things*

When I see a thing, what is happening? Over there is the same ugly brown couch. All the Aggregates are firing as I see it. I see it (Form), immediately dislike it (aversion based on unpleasant Feeling), know that it’s a couch (Perception), have ideas about mountain lodge aesthetics (Formations), and am aware that there’s a couch there (Consciousness). All at once, pretty much. Does any of that solipsistic activity say anything at all about the couch *itself*? It does not. But nobody I know would deny that the couch exists, though they would probably have various associations arise in relation to it, possibly including pleasant *vedana* and very different ideas about the relative merits of fake leather couches. Graham Harman’s reading of Heidegger, in *Tool-Being*,¹³ recognizes that nothing we can say about the couch is able to limit its existentiality in any way. The couch has as much Being as I do, and as many independent relationships — to itself, to other objects, to everything. It persists through time, changing, yes, but consistent *enough* that if I come back to this lodge next year and it is still here, I will recognize it, even if it’s broken, torn, stained with a year’s worth of sugary spills and summer camp abuse. Even if it’s broken. For its being “couch” to me is *not* dependent on its readiness-to-hand, or to-butt, as the case may be, and its Being, of course has nothing to do with me and my words and use for it. The couch in its couch-ness *is* infinitely more than that, and indeed

¹³ Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002).

recedes from view. As a Buddhist practitioner, however, what is *useful* to me to know about the couch? The Buddha describes three omnipresent Characteristics of things as of use for the process of Unbinding. Unbinding, which is one way to translate *nibbana/nirvana*, is what the process *does*. It Unbinds me from things — which means ideas *about* things, of course, since that's where I get caught. But if my only connection to a thing is in my ideas about it — as we saw above in the discussion of *vedana* — then Unbinding me from those ideas does Unbind me from the thing. And Unbinding liberates things from us as much as it liberates us from things. This separation from things, in a text from a parallel tradition, the *Yoga Sutra of Patañjali*, is called *kaivalya*: Great Solitude.¹⁴ Recognizing that the awareness of a thing and the thing are separate, and never were in true contact, is the sign of the end of the Path for Patañjali. In that recognition, the grasping onto things ceases, and one rests, recognizing that one has always (already) been Alone.

Back to the Buddha describing reality. The Three Characteristics of all things are Impermanence (*anicca*), Suffering (*dukkha*), and Not-self (*anatta*). Here's that verse again:

“Bhikkhus, how do you conceive it: is form permanent or impermanent?” —
“Impermanent, venerable Sir.” — “Now is what is impermanent painful or pleasant?” —
“Painful, venerable Sir.” — “Now is what is impermanent, what is painful since subject to change, fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine, this is I, this is my self’?” — “No, venerable sir.”¹⁵

As the quote makes clear, the Characteristics are taken in sequence, leading to the punch line: Not-my-self. The Buddha traps his monks in a rhetorical corner here. He leads with the most obvious observation: things change. How can we understand Impermanence ontologically? The

¹⁴ See Patañjali, *The Yoga-Sūtra of Patañjali: A New Translation with Commentary*, trans. Chip Hartranft (Boston: Shambhala, 2003). Patañjali's yoga (~200CE) is a direct descendent of the early Buddhist teachings discussed here.

¹⁵ Buddha, "Anatta-lakkhana Sutta: The Discourse on the Not-self Characteristic (Samyutta Nikaya 22.59)."

phenomenological realization of Impermanence arises as a spontaneous insight in the course of observing the arising and passing of sense contacts in a sustained way. The practice requires two complementary qualities: focused attention and persistent observation. These qualities are known in the texts as Aiming (*vitakka*) and Sustaining (*vicāra*), and are cultivated in parallel. Aiming is the action of directing the attention toward a sense object, either one chosen (like the breath, a standard meditative object) or arising spontaneously (like the sensation of pain in the hip from long sitting), and can be inner or outer — any *khandha*. But what does it mean to Aim toward and Sustain attention on an object? Simply enough, I first just aim my sensory apparatus in its direction. When I sense it, I then tune out other competing sensations in order to focus on just one. So, in looking over at the couch, I intend my eyes toward it, then consciously keep them there, resisting the urge to look around at other things nearby: fireplace, stuffed stag head, glowing red Coke machine. Or feeling for the breath in my belly, I close my eyes (unnecessary, but helpful for me) and direct my attention to an area of space where I feel a movement I identify as rising and falling. I then ignore the ache in my hip and look “closer” at the movement, tuning out everything else to the point where my mind has no room to entertain thoughts, and a silence fills my inner space. Momentarily distracted by the roaring silence, I note the pleasure of the space, but attempt to Sustain my “contact” with the sensation of movement. For as long as I succeed at resting my attention there, the sensations associated with breath fill my awareness, and other sensations — nearby sounds or smells, mental images, other body sensations, my general emotional tone — recede into the background of my awareness, though for me they don’t disappear.¹⁶ Can I be said to be aware of the background things even when I’m focusing elsewhere? Yes, I clearly am aware of them. But if I attend very closely to my experience, I notice that my attention actually is subtly flickering,

¹⁶ States of very deep concentration, called *jhana*, are described in the texts and in contemporary meditator’s experience in which absorption with an object can be so complete that other sensory input *does* disappear.

and that it *does* go to the sound, the smell, the image in the mind, the emotion, even for a micro-moment, but it's enough to register all the *khandha*: I know it, what it is, and whether I like it or not. So one of the first objects I might notice as constantly changing is my attention itself! And when I do manage to rest with an object for more than a few moments, I will notice that it too is changing. Maybe obviously, like the breath or a sound, or imperceptibly, like the couch, but I know that even the seemingly reliable couch is assembled of materials that will decay, and though I can imagine coming back here in a year and finding the couch in much the same condition as now, I cannot imagine coming back here in a thousand years and finding the couch — and the stag's head, and the Coke machine — all still glowing, just as they are now. Impermanence is recognized as a characteristic of every thing, every *khandha*, every heap of things. And if the Being-ness of the couch is specific to this couch (we're not going back to Plato here), then that "couch-being" is also Impermanent. Likewise, of course, my breath, the pain in my hip, and my body itself, as much as I resist letting the knowledge in. Impermanent.

The second question may be more opaque to us — pleasure-loving denizens of a very abundant cultural moment. "Now is what is impermanent painful or pleasant?", the Buddha asks. "Painful, venerable Sir", they answer. Are they just saying it because they know it's the right answer? When I discuss *dukkha* (the Truth of Stress, or Suffering) with my yoga and meditation-practitioner peers in the Bay Area, I hear disagreement on this point. "Sure, things are Impermanent, but I can still enjoy them, knowing they'll pass. Maybe I'll even enjoy something *more*, knowing it's temporary." Wise Hedonism — influenced by prevalent popular teachings descended from non-dual Tantra, in which "worldly" pleasures are embraced as vehicles for spiritual awakening. The Buddha's stance, a thousand years before the Tantric schools appeared, is that we can't find happiness in temporary pleasures because they're never completely satisfying — they can't be: even while we enjoy them, we're haunted by their

imminent passing. This haunting pervades our perceptions of things, and so pervades the things themselves. Everything is haunted by its own imminent dissolution, its absence. This “haunting” could be a new translation for *dukkha*, the recognition that every moment is shot through with the reality of loss, separation, withdrawal. There is a poignancy to things in the light of the Characteristics. There they sit, couches, aches, numbers, gods, all quivering in the present, unable to prevent the inevitable from happening. In this way, the Characteristic, though it most directly speaks to our *relationship* to things, also may speak to the things themselves. What is satisfaction? *Dukkha* is sometimes translated as Unsatisfactoriness. Satisfaction is the fulfillment of desires. It’s an end point. “I’m satisfied” is rarely spoken with the reality check ending even implied: “for now”. When I’m satisfied that a debt has been paid off, it’s finished. Forever. So the sense of this translation of *dukkha* is that *nothing* will really satisfy me. My desires are too vast, too polymorphous. As soon as I get something, I want something else, and besides, the thing I got is already different from what I initially longed for. (Everyone who gets married knows this!) *Dukkha* as a Characteristic of things announces that nothing is an end point. There is no ultimate couch, the desire for which this particular couch could satisfy. This couch will never satisfy me — which we knew already, but I could as easily say, “this lover will never satisfy me”, and it would be just as true, though I adore my lover madly. Nothing can fill the void created by wanting, everything only can go part way. So no *thing* is complete. Everything is partial, an approximation, a trace, unfinished. And hovers between appearing in the world and dissolving back into it. I can’t get no, satisfaction.

The final Characteristic, Not-self, was a shot across the bow of the religious cultures in the Buddha’s proto-India, the early yogas of the Upaniṣads and the Brahmanic traditions, both of which claimed that there was a permanent, true self (*atta/atman*) at the heart of each being. *Yoga* consisted in some early teachings in realizing the soul’s non-separateness from the

Divine, merging the small self (*atman*) with the infinite “true” Self (*Atman*). The Buddha’s naming of the third Characteristic *anatta*, Not-self, was in direct rebellion against the prevailing onto-theology of the time. But followed in steps from *annicca* and *dukkha*, it is unavoidable. If everything we can sense — all the Aggregates — is Impermanent and therefore Unreliable as a source of happiness, then where do *I* take a stand? What’s left to call *me*, anyway, when even Consciousness is seen to come and go with objects? The Buddha never comes out and says categorically, “There Is No Self!” He doesn’t have to. Just the instruction to ask of every bit of experience, “Is this my self?” is enough. No thing can withstand the deconstruction. The traditional understanding of Not-self is just this: that nothing, inner or outer, can be pinned down and identified as a stable, reliable self. Even awareness itself comes and goes. If awareness is self, where is my self when I’m asleep? And all the stuff of my personality, all the ego business, which is how I mostly identify myself — I’m like this, not like that... — is just Formations, *sankhara*. When the inquiry of the Characteristics is applied to the personality, it doesn’t hold up. I search for some part of me that is the same since I was five, and I can’t find much. When I have moments of really seeing this, “I” crumble. The whole thing is built of splinters.

But ontologically, the more radical observation is how Not-self affects objects *other* than myself. I’ve already given it away, because it’s implied in the Four Noble Truths themselves, and the instructions to Bahiya led us there. When I see that the object is not me, not mine, not my self, I not only realize my separateness from it, but give it back its independence from me. All that was there before was projection, in which I saw reflections of my own needs, business, life, in the object. Seeing the couch before realization of *anatta*, all I can see is its availability for sitting (its readiness-to-hand) and its ugliness (how it reveals *my* aesthetic). After realization, the couch just *is* the couch (as the Zen saying, “Before practice, the mountain is the mountain.

During practice, the mountain is not a mountain. After practice, the mountain is the mountain.”), and I drop my projections. I don’t actually *know* the couch at all — that’s what “not me” means. I don’t own it, can’t control it, possess no authority over its Being, even if I take it outside and burn the damn thing under the starry Colorado sky — that’s what “not mine” means. And I certainly can’t use it to prop up my sense of my own existence. How could that ever succeed? Well, I tried. Descartes’ *cogito* taught me that when I think “couch”, I *ergo* know “me over here”, *sum*. I can’t think “couch” without knowing “me”. But the knowing “me”, seen as a Thing itself, as a thought, whether discursive or not, “Oh, here’s the thought ‘me’ again...”, is uprooted in the seeing. If I can see the thought “me” as a thought, and as a thing that arises and passes like everything else, then it reveals itself as fiction. “Not my self” is when I recognize that the thought of the couch says nothing about me at all. So in the Samurai act of cutting loose the threads of projection and manipulation that bind me to the world, I cut loose the things of the world themselves. They go on their way without me. Really, they hardly noticed me to begin with.

I stare at the glowing screen, look up at the glowing Coke machine, up further to the “noble” head of stag mounted on the fireplace. What light shone in his eyes? What did he know, in his life in this forest, decimated now by Pine Beetles, snow melting earlier every year? And what is he now, stiff, eyes open, head turning slightly to the left as if seeing a familiar doe pass by. How does he recognize her, and she him, his nine-pronged antlers shining in the half-moonlight? I want to give him back his Being, removing my judgment, my grief, *my* life from his. I am a stranger here, alone in the glowing light. His head and I share a room for some moments, along with so much else, and when I walk out into the cool night air, heading for my own room where

I'll sleep, he'll still be here, and the couch, and the Coke machine, and everything else, all of us — myself included, I hope — abiding “independent, not clinging to anything in this world”.¹⁷

4. *because*

“And what is dependent co-arising? From ignorance as a requisite condition come fabrications. From fabrications as a requisite condition comes consciousness. From consciousness as a requisite condition comes name-&-form. From name-&-form as a requisite condition come the six sense media. From the six sense media as a requisite condition comes contact. From contact as a requisite condition comes feeling. From feeling as a requisite condition comes craving. From craving as a requisite condition comes clinging/sustenance. From clinging/sustenance as a requisite condition comes becoming. From becoming as a requisite condition comes birth. From birth as a requisite condition, then aging & death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair come into play. Such is the origination of this entire mass of stress & suffering.”¹⁸

In Graham Harman's object-oriented analysis of causation, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, he explores how, if objects always “withdraw from one another into the darkness, unable to affect each other directly... they interact at all.”¹⁹ For the receded Heideggerian Thing, there is both independence and interconnectedness. The Being of the object always withdraws, so can never be completely contacted — there's always some aspect of a thing, something about it, that eludes description or relationship. I can never fully *know* the thing, and this “never” applies not just to me as a sensing-thinking being (Dasein), but to all other objects as well. The fire never completely knows the log, or the log the fire, though they engage in a most intimate dance together. From this ontological vacuum, the problem of conditionality arises. How *do*

¹⁷ Anālayo, *Satipaṭṭhāna: The Direct Path to Realization* (Birmingham: Wind Horse, 2003). This is the end of the refrain that accompanies each instruction in the *Satipatthana Sutta*, the “Four Foundations of Mindfulness”, which is the core practice text for Theravada Buddhism. “And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in this world.”

¹⁸ Buddha, “Paticca-samuppada-vibhanga Sutta: Analysis of Dependent Co-arising (SN 12.2).”

¹⁹ Graham Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005). 91.

things interact, then — since they clearly do. Balancing, or challenging, the doctrine of withdrawal is the observation that a thing can never be completely separated from other things, and indeed from the whole uni-verse of things. One big thing. The flip side of withdrawal is holism. If the boundaries of a thing can't be truly established, *and* a thing can't be truly contacted, what of causation? How do objects interact? Continuing our exploration of the core structures of early Buddhism as expressed in the Pali canon, we turn to the central description of causality in the canon, Dependent Origination (D.O.).²⁰ D.O. is a circular model that describes the process by which conditions ripen into identity, suffering, birth and death. It can be interpreted in the light of the doctrine of reincarnation as describing the process of clinging that leads to physical rebirth, but is also commonly used as a model for the moment-to-moment arising of grasping that leads to the sense of self and concomitant suffering. It consists of a chain of twelve discreet experiences that condition each other in order, and so describes causality as a process of cumulative conditions leading to solidified experience. The twelve links, or “causes” (*nidana*) are:

1. Ignorance (*avidya* — literally “not knowing”, or not seeing clearly)
2. Karmic/Volitional Formations or Fabrications (*saṅkhāra/saṃskāra* — literally “that which puts together”)
3. Consciousness (*viññana/vijñāna*)
4. Name and Form (*nama-rupa*)
5. The Six Sense Doors (*saḷāyatana/ṣaḍāyatana* — the five physical senses and cognition)
6. Contact (*phassa/sparśa* — between an object and a sense door)
7. Feeling (*vedanā* — registering the contact as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral)

²⁰ Dependent Origination (DO) is my preferred translation of *paticca-samuppāda/pratītya-samutpāda*, and is probably the most common translation, though Thanissaro Bhikkhu, the translator of this passage, uses an alternative: Dependent Co-arising, which eliminates the problematic concept of “origin” as possibly indicating a static beginning point. Other translations include Co-dependent Arising, which triggers the unhelpful pejorative of “codependent”, and Interdependent Origination, which emphasizes the causal mutuality between the links.

8. Craving (*taṇhā/trṣṇā* — literally “thirst”)
9. Clinging (*upādāna* — literally “feeding”, or “fuel”)
10. Becoming (*bhāva*)
11. Birth (*jāti*)
12. Old age and Death (*jarāmaraṇa*)

The heart of the cycle, for our inquiry into objects and causality, are links 3-6, the sequence Consciousness-Name and Form-Sense Doors-Contact. (For practitioners looking to understand and sever the cause of their own suffering, the hinge of the sequence is between the next links: Feeling and Craving, since it is there — *and only there* — that the sequence can be interrupted. Links 1-2 are largely unconscious conditions that prefigure Contact, 3-7 arise essentially simultaneously, and once 8 (Craving) has arisen, the remaining links 9-12 topple over like dominoes, unstoppable, and begin again at Ignorance.) As we begin to look at the sequence, we notice that four of the five Aggregates are in this list, though not in the same order. Consciousness, which we have previously identified as consciousness-*of* an object, here arises dependent on Karmic or Volitional Formations. Formations (*saṅkhāra/saṃskāra*), as discussed above, refers specifically to mental patterns (thoughts and habits) that arise in reaction to a given sense contact. They also, since they become habits, preferences, and all the content of personality, condition future perceptions. If I learn to dislike something, say, grapefruit (which for reasons I don't understand I've never liked, but the few times I've tasted it still are available in memory as unpleasant sense experience), the Formation that develops around the sense object and Perception “grapefruit” will be the condition for my avoiding it in the future. When it appears on the potluck table, in the buffet line, or in front of me at the market, I hardly even notice it, my habitual aversion to it is so ingrained. Grapefruit, to me, is only ever present-at-hand, and its status as “merely” there is a function of this second link, Formations. The adjective *Karmic* is often included to indicate how these habits are conditioned, themselves the

results of past turns around this same wheel. At some point in the past, I (a complex Karmic Formation, identity) tasted (Contact) grapefruit (Name and Form), got (Consciousness) a jolt of sour that I didn't like (Feeling), and that I pushed away (Grasping — reacting to the unpleasant Feeling instead of receiving it equanimously), refusing to eat any more (Clinging — to my preference). After that sequence repeated a couple times, I turned into (Becoming) someone (Birth) who doesn't like grapefruit. That identity hasn't died yet, but was temporarily wounded when in Burma I ate, monastic style, whatever I was offered, and there was often something that *looked like* grapefruit (mistaken Perception, with the concomitant moments of disorientation), but wasn't hardly as sour. I liked it. Returning to the States, I tried grapefruit again once, curious to see if *I* had changed (it had been over a decade since I'd tried an American grapefruit). Maybe I had meditated away my aversion? No chance. One bite of that juicy pink fruit, my whole body shivered, I pushed it away, and was born again as One Who Doesn't Like Grapefruit. This is how the sequence works, moment to moment, as I lean toward one sensation — I am One Who Likes Fires in Big Stone Fireplaces, and away from another — I still don't like this damn couch. Or the Coke machine. Karmic Formations: I was predisposed to not like the Coke machine before I ever walked into this room.

That Consciousness precedes Name and Form in the sequence is initially mysterious. If Consciousness arises concomitant with a moment of Contact, why is it so far back in the list? Here, Consciousness seems to be conditioned only by Formations, which is another way to say history or contexture, especially mental context. Context in this sense reveals again that my ideas *about* a situation *are* its context, and that context can't be isolated as external. This reading of context is Derridean in its being situated more in the reader's perspective than the author's, more in the perceiver's perspective than that of the objects around. Formations are the *traces* of previous Becomings, and are what every reader/perceiver meets the text/object

with, layer upon layer. Again, this teaching is more pragmatic than ontological. The Buddha goes so far as to assert that since the only things we can be aware of are the objects of the senses, that the senses and their objects constitute the totality of what *is*, or “the All” (*sabba*):

“Monks, I will teach you the All. Listen & pay close attention. I will speak.”

“As you say, lord,” the monks responded.

The Blessed One said, “What is the All? Simply the eye & forms, ear & sounds, nose & aromas, tongue & flavors, body & tactile sensations, intellect & ideas. This, monks, is called the All. Anyone who would say, ‘Repudiating this All, I will describe another,’ if questioned on what exactly might be the grounds for his statement, would be unable to explain, and furthermore, would be put to grief. Why? Because it lies beyond range.”²¹

Of course, the most interesting part of this assertion is the last: “it lies beyond range.”²² This seems to mean that there *may be* a reality of things that lies beyond range of our sense contact and cognition. Is this *beyond range* the same unreachable that Graham Harman calls “a dark subterranean reality that never becomes present to practical action any more than it does to theoretical awareness”, the result of every object’s withdrawal?²³ If so, then the Buddha here continues his pragmatism, with the tantalizing ontological hint given simply as a warning against even trying to debate him on the matter. The *suttas* claim that a Buddha, or *Tathagata* (“One thus gone” — what the Buddha called himself), perceives and *knows* more than is possible to understand. The question of the extent of a *Tathagata*’s knowledge is one of the ten unanswerable questions that Malunkya asks, only to be rebuffed by the Buddha. Similarly, in a famous metaphor, the Buddha compared what he *knew* to the leaves in the entire forest, while

²¹ The Buddha. “Sabba Sutta: The All (SN 35.23).”

²² “It lies beyond range” is alternately translated “It would not be within his domain” (Piya Tan, translating from the Chinese version in the *Agamas*) and “It would not be within his scope” (John D. Ireland). Interestingly, the other two translations contain the possessive pronoun, suggesting that such perception is beyond the given practitioner (but not necessarily beyond one with supernatural perception, like a Buddha) while Thanissaro’s indicates simply that it is “beyond range”, period.

²³ Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*: 1.

what he *taught* was only a handful of those leaves — that which was useful for awakening.²⁴ The sequence of Dependent Origination is considered the core insight that the Buddha had in his awakening, and is traditionally considered the aspect of his teaching that is unique to him. Many of his other teachings, on ethical action (*sila*) and concentration (*samadhi*), for instance, were common in other yogas of his time, and had their roots in the *Upaniṣads*, the “whispered teachings” at the root of Hindu yoga, and which he clearly studied. His insight was into causality in two ways: first internally, into his own past lives, and then externally, knowing “the passing away & reappearance of beings”.²⁵ D.O. is the working out of the method for that reappearance.

We still haven’t ascertained why Consciousness *precedes* Name and Form. The nature of the relationship between the links may give us the clue. The condition for Consciousness to arise is the presence of Formations. So it seems like there is a stream in the mind that is already active, based on the presence of habits and historical momentum. They are like thoughts — they are a form of mental energy, but not fully enunciated, which is perhaps why they are different from “the cognized”, or Objects of Mind, that form the sixth of the six Sense Doors. Karma is momentum, and so we see that the (unenlightened) mind is not truly empty even when calm and quiet because there is this undertow of Karmic Formations, or tendencies. Thus Consciousness is hovering, always already invisibly there, based on the humming of habit and history just below the surface. Formations are the motor of the submarine of Consciousness, to use Tim Morton’s crazy-beautiful metaphor for the Heideggerian *Da-sein*.²⁶ Consciousness in this specific sense — which I’ll now take a leap and equate with *Dasein* — then, already

²⁴ The Buddha. "Simsapa Sutta: The Simsapa Leaves (SN 56.31)."

²⁵ The Buddha. "Maha-Saccaka Sutta: The Longer Discourse to Saccaka (MN 36)."

²⁶ Tim Morton, *Realist Magic* (unpublished manuscript, 2012). 320.

humming along, but not paying attention to anything in particular, is comfortable enough with the things around that even before specific contact happens, the Names of things are known. Dasein knows the couch is there out of the corner of its eye, but nothing happens until the Sense Doors (the traditional image is of a house with five windows and a door: five physical senses and the mind) are Contacted. And the traditional image of Contact — a man with an arrow stuck in his eye — is apropos to the predictable result. Contact comes with Feeling — pleasant/unpleasant/neutral — and if we don't notice, and we usually don't, pours headlong into Grasping and on down the chain toward the only inevitable.

What does this sequence tell us about things? It tells us a lot about ourselves, and how we get caught and reborn moment to moment, but what about the Forms? I turn and stare into the fire. The steady, odorless, gas-fed flames lick the fake logs. I don't mind, though I prefer the smell and crackle of a wood fire. Can I say anything at all definite about the flames themselves? They're there. Every time I look over, there they are. They were on before the evening talk, I left and came back, and they're still on. Flickering, each tongue of flame subtly different from every other, only there for an instant, then replaced by another. All this I see and recognize (Contact, Preception, Name and Form, Impermanence), but can I *know* anything *real* beyond the names for things? What does the fire know? Does the fire Cling to the logs, or the logs to the fire, or the fire to the gas that bursts through the tiny nozzles? How are they related? The word for Clinging, *upādāna*, literally refers to how fire feeds on fuel, which references one of the earliest metaphors for *nibbana/nirvana*: extinction, or cooling, as happens when the fuel for a fire is exhausted. Where does the fire go when it goes "out"? The Mahayana and then Tantric critics of early Buddhism contended that the religion preferred transcendence — up and out — to the earthy immanence of things. In some ways, it's true, as a doctrinal preference. *Arahants* — completely enlightened ones — are not reborn. But where do they go? If it were really "up

and out”, it would be to another *place*. But there is no place not on the wheel. Where does the fire go when the fuel is exhausted? Nowhere. It just disappears. There can’t be “fire” independent of the condition of fuel, so there’s no fire-thing, no fire-being, to go anywhere. Likewise the *arahant*. There’s nobody left to travel. It just ends. So if the fire is a Being, just to stretch the model, it would have a kind of Consciousness that would be present dependent on its conditions, and which would attach to new Contacts as they arise. It seems strange to arrive at a thing being Conscious, but if it could be, then how can we know that the thing-Consciousness is *not* a kind of Dasein, not with a Mind in the way we sense it perhaps, but not an inert vacuity either? Tim Morton, discussing object-oriented causality arrives at a similar conclusion in different language,²⁷ and finds that “the meaning of a thing... is caught in its relations”.²⁸ The fire is caught, *upādāna*, in its relation with log, gas, nozzle, as well as stag head, Coke machine, Sean, couch, and everything else. Like me, it is bound in its conditions, and flickers, dancing, in its Being. If things Contact each other the same way I Contact things — incompletely, and colored wildly by habits, a million learned paths through the Forbidden Wood — then the sequence must apply to them as well.

Do objects suffer? Do they Cling to their preferences, and resisting reality fall into Becoming, Birth, Old Age and Death? Certainly things come and go. Is it Death when a rock is ground to beach sand? What’s the moment when it stops being “rock” and starts being “sand”? Name and Form. Does the fire fear the inevitable exhaustion of its fuel? Is the Earth afraid of ecological “disaster” — does it even conceive of its skin temperature and biodiversity as important? I provide a world for the thriving and populous cultures of bacteria in my gut. But if I drink

²⁷ “The fact that the ‘meaning’ of a relation is yet another relation is an object-oriented way of extending Heidegger's argument about the futural quality of Da-sein to all beings.” *Ibid.*, 315.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 314.

some grapefruit seed extract and commit bacterial genocide, pursuing a scorched-gut policy for the greater good (my desire for “health” and pleasant sensations), do I care about their little bacteria lives? Hardly. I clean out when I need to (maybe the few survivors make scriptures about a Great Flood that almost nobody survived), eat a bunch of yogurt and start over. Who do we think we are, anyway, great capital D Dasein, the Ones Who Are? Maybe everything’s awake in some way, having intimate relationships with each other all over the place, but we’re the only ones who suffer? Maybe it’s not that the human realm is the best one for awakening because we’re fortunate that way (as in the Tibetan concept of the Precious Human Birth), but that we’re the only ones who need to awaken.

Able to know nothing, really, about the reality of things, except perhaps simply that they *are*, or at least *seem to be*, it seems to help suffering humans, confused about how to relate, to think of things as illusory. It cuts through Clinging. I’ll end with this famous stanza from the *Diamond Sutra* that is usually interpreted as saying that the world *is* illusion, but of course it doesn’t say that. It wasn’t the Buddha’s way, as we’ve seen, to assert ontologies. The verse, like the whole handful of leaves, is an instruction. It doesn’t really matter what’s *true*, but if you *do* this, you’ll be free.

*taraka timiram dipo maya-avasyaya budbudam
supinam vidyud abhram ca evam drastavyam samskrtam*

Thus shall you think of all this fleeting world: a star at dawn, a bubble in a stream,
a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, a flickering lamp, a phantom, and a dream.²⁹

²⁹ Last verse of the Diamond Sutra, the gorgeous Mahayana Buddhist text that sings emptiness and the Way of Being of Bodhisattvas. Red Pine, *The Diamond Sutra*, trans. Red Pine (New York: Counterpoint Press, 2002).

I thought I was done, but this morning, sitting in the cool, silent hall at six, bluish light rising over the mountains, I thought of the star at dawn. And I realized that the *Diamond Sutra* verse, which I always took as a list of metaphors — all these things reveal evanescence, lasting for hardly a moment — is a list of *things*. The new Object Oriented Ontology club — Harman, Meillasoux, Morton, and the others — are notable for their enthusiasm for lists of things. These small, seemingly random lists pervade the literature, and seem to exult in the simple naming of far-flung objects. Coffee cup, manatee, wish. They always include both solid and imaginary objects, as if to assert over and over that *all this is real*. There's a love that shines through these lists, an adoration of the world, untouchable as everything might be, and that love shines through even the resurgent possibility of a vast nihilism. What if no thing *does* mean anything? Meaning, Morton writes, arises in relation — *is* relation.³⁰ “Thus shall you *think* of *all* this fleeting world”: star, bubble, flash. All the sweet things of sky, river, storm. Lamp, phantom, dream. Just as real as anything. *Think* of the world, the verse exhorts. Not of yourself, or of theories, but of things. Star — look up! Bubble — listen! Flash — wonder! Finally, it tells us to be with things as they are, interdependent — can you separate the bubble from the stream, the star from the sky? — and always already unique, effervescent, immediate. As vivid as a dream, and as real.

may all be free

³⁰ Morton, *Realist Magic*: 315.

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