

Ways to let go of tensions, ways to start meditation practice in a clean and bright way
Saturday September 12 2020 Zoom Samatha talk by Peter Harvey, b.peter.harvey@gmail.com

Our conditioned and changing world includes a variety of sources stress, be they from work, from home, from other relationships, from concerns over health, or from the flow of disturbing news. When such things come at us, we sometimes feel impinged-on, and may seek to set up some kind of psychological barrier to them. This may be helpful to a degree, but is of limited effect. Stressors can lead to mental, and related bodily tensions which can get stored and recycled even after the particular stressor subsides: the mind, particularly emotions, affect the body, and then the body feeds back to affect the mind.

Sometimes, one does not realise one is carrying a burden of accumulated tensions and strains, but when these subside, there is a natural relaxation. This is similar to how there may be a background but unnoticed noise, such as a distant car alarm; when this hardly registered sound stops, a sense of easeful relaxation arises.

Now you may be aware of a buzz of tensions and strains in your system, but don't realise that it is OK, and possible, to put down this burden, at least for a while. This can be like putting down heavy shopping bags that you have been carrying for a long time. When you do this, there is a natural surge of relief and a sense of lightness. It is good to 'put down the burden', to let go of 'me and my problems' for a while and appreciate the calm space that this opens up.

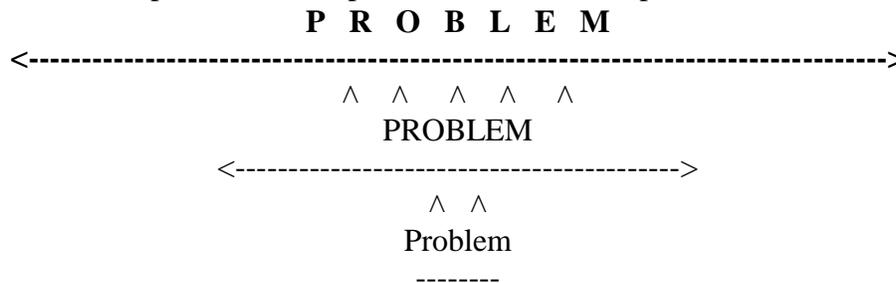
It is good to be aware of these tensions both when they are still arising and when residual, and have tools for letting go of and /or dissolving them.

Most directly related to the main Samatha practice is to do a **few slow, longest breaths while reflecting** e.g.:

'breathing in, there is irritation', 'breathing out, there is irritation',
'breathing in, there is tension', 'breathing out, there is tension'.

This helps one stand back from the irritation or tension and link to practice-related states of mindfulness and calm as a 'place' from which to observe these states without being stuck to or stuck in them.

In dealing with problems in life, it is good to **keep things simple**. Don't make a further problem, e.g. worry, out of the fact that you have a problem, or an even further problem out of the fact that your response to the initial problem has frothed up an additional problematic mental response, such as blaming someone else.



If something can be effectively done to sort out the source of stress, fine, do it. If nothing can be done at present, one needs patience and equanimity, and reflection on impermanence: difficult situations and states of mind are not fixed and unchanging.

When one is already reasonably calm and a stressor is knocking at your mind-door, one can use wise attention to help mindfully recognize it, and recall the pesky friends that it is likely bring into your 'house'. Keep connected the door-chain of mindfulness of breathing, and politely say to your potential visitor: 'no thank you, not today; but be well and happy'. As one *sutta* says:

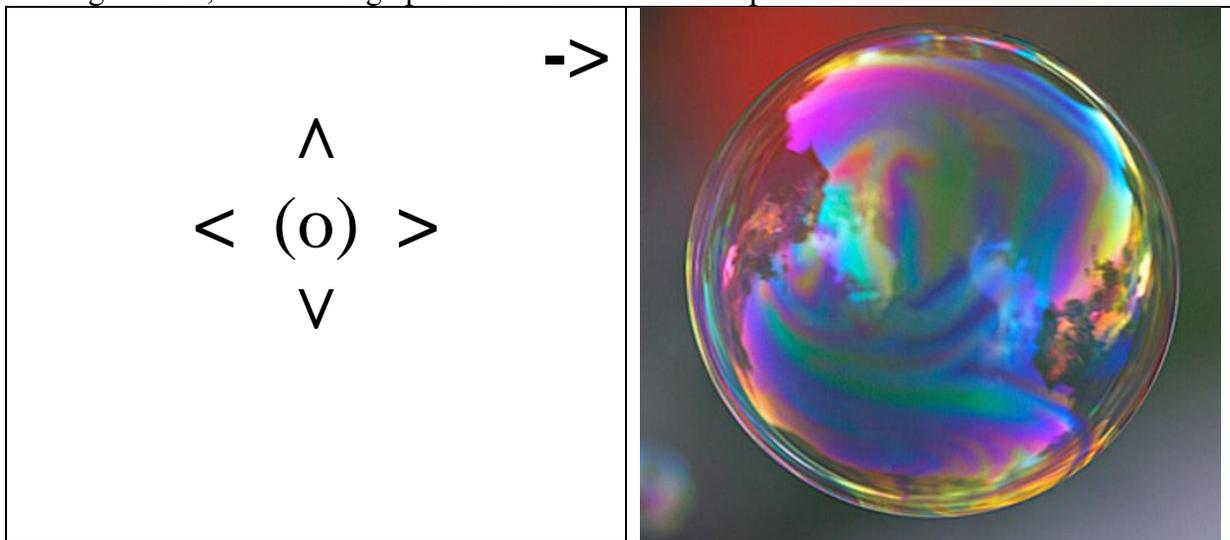
This mind is brightly shining, but it is defiled by visiting defilements. (AN.I.10).
Just after this, it says that even a finger-snap moment of lovingkindness is of great benefit.

Of course, your 'visitor' may still gain entry and sit down at your kitchen table for a snack... and in time start ordering you around ... At which point, you need to stop feeding them, and politely, but firmly, ask them to leave 😊

A useful practice is **‘putting down one’s baggage’ bowing practice**. We usually associate bowing with devotion, as a way of expressing respect for those who fully embody the kind of qualities that we aim to develop by meditation. But bowing is also helpful apart from its devotional aspect, as a practice in its own right. It is best done three times, while kneeling. Start by sensing any emotion-related tensions in the body, and think of such negative energies as like a slightly gloopy fluid. Then perhaps place your hands together in front of your chest, then throat/lips and then forehead. Then lower your head to the floor and lay your palms face down. At this point, image any gloopy ‘tension’ fluid draining away into the floor, through your hands, head and knees, leaving you with a calmer, clearer, inner space. Do this with each bow, and if there are noticeable remaining negative energies before the third bow, imaging squirting water into the top of your head or back to loosen up such residual negative states and so enable them to drain away more easily when you bow again. As the orange ‘sage’ of America says ‘Drain the swamp’ :-). Sometimes one can almost feel the tension draining away through one’s hands, and an easeful joy arising at this.

This practice can be done at any time, when needed. And when bowing before a practice, one can include this aspect along with the devotional aspect

A practice that I have found useful over the past year or so is what can be termed **‘expanding one’s apparent edges’**. This is to expand the scope of one’s body-centred awareness. To, as it were, ‘push the envelope’ of what one takes as ‘within’, so as to blur one’s edges. First, one attends to the surface of one’s body, especially any area that holds tension. Then one slowly opens one’s awareness out to the front, then in each of the other directions around one, then below and then above – to include more within the scope of here/now – like a bubble of awareness that is no longer the shape of one’s body, no longer contained within its ‘edges’ ... though it does not itself have any clear outer edge. Here I am not talking about ‘thinking about’ things and people around one, or even looking at them, but ... being open to and mindful of the space around one.



This is not as different from normal as one might think. If using a walking stick or staff, its end becomes integrated as being part of one’s arm in terms of sensing the surroundings. When driving a car past other cars or into a parking space, likewise, its wings are kind of perceived as part of one as the driver.

When one ‘expands one’s edges’ (by perhaps a couple of metres), this has the interesting effect of – oneself and one’s tensions/issues being experienced as just a small part of a sphere of mindfulness ... and so less a focus of concern, less ‘sticky’. It dilutes and helps to disperse such things as tensions, irritations and worries. In a bigger ‘world’, these reverberate less, and so are easier to let go of. To use a phrase coined by the one-time teacher of Zen, Alan Watts, it helps one go beyond one’s ‘skin-encapsulated ego’. Expanding into the surrounding space helps dilute one’s sense of identity, of ‘me-and-my-problems’; as awareness expands outwards, ‘me’ reduces.

This practice is best done with the eyes closed, either lying down or standing up, though one can also do it when sitting at the start of a practice. As different tensions may exist at different levels of the body – face/head, throat, chest, stomach, legs – one can sometimes do the expanding at each of these different levels.

This expanding of the scope of one's awareness can be related to a number of Buddhist teachings:

- Mindfulness of bodily form: as the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (MN *sutta* 10) says that this is to be done internally, externally, and regarding both. E.g. the elements of solidity, fluidity, heat and wind/movement occur equally in and outside the body; bodily postures, movements and breathing occur on both one's 'own' body and the bodies of other beings;
- Also with breathing: as one breathes in and out, what was 'external' becomes 'internal', and then 'external' again. In the Touching stage, one is focussing on a point at the meeting of 'inner' and 'outer', which is both and neither of these. And in Settling, the *nimitta* has no real in/out location.
- In deep concentration approaching or in *jhāna*, the normal sense of the body and its edges may fall away.
- Each of the *brahma-vihāras* or immeasurable states – of lovingkindness, compassion, appreciative joy and equanimity – is to be meditatively pervaded thus: 'One abides pervading one direction with a mind imbued with lovingkindness; likewise the second, the third, and the fourth direction; so above, below, around, and everywhere, and thus to all as to himself' (e.g. MN II 207–208). This leads the mind to *jhāna*, as does work on the breath.
- The teaching that 'in this fathom-long carcase, with its perception and mind, lies the world, the origin of the world, the stopping of the world, and the path to this' (SN I 62). That is, the world that we live in, the lived world of experience, is the world-as-perceived; 'it' is kind of within the body-mind. Yet it is also true that the body-mind is dependent on the surrounding world. It depends on food, air etc. and consciousness depends on sense-input.
- The teaching that nothing can be found that is a permanent, essential I/me/Self. What is identified with as 'me' is actually a cluster of changing conditioned states. But we tend to settle on them as something to do with a supposedly constant 'me', so as to make them more seemingly solid and important.
- Letting go: as the mind calms and opens, it learns to let go, to loosen its grip on things that it makes a home in, as here-mine. It is said that the enlightened mind does not make a 'home', a roosting place, anywhere (SN III 9–10) within the processes of body and mind An enlightened person has 'broken the egg-shell of ignorance' (AN IV 176). The *Avadāna-śataka* says of the enlightened person: 'the sky and the palm of his hand were the same to his mind'. The mind of such a person is 'without boundaries' as there is no clinging to or aversion for anything (MN III 30). One who feels no attraction or aversion for any object of the five senses or mind, having mindfulness of the body, is said to 'dwell with a mind that is immeasurable', rather than the mind being small and limited (MN.I.270).

In terms of practice, one can from time to time during the day, if needed, expand the envelope of one's awareness. Always end it by coming back to the here-now of how the body is, and how it is located.

Also, at the start of a sit, one can sometimes 'expand one's edges', perhaps also including the four intermediary directions, such as that between in front and to the right. Or one can think of the similar elements within the body and outside of it.

How one starts a practice is important for how it will tend to go. It contains its seeds. It sets up the level at which one enters the practice. In the long and complex Chinese Huayan Buddhist path, it is said that the end is contained in the beginning. Note that in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the way to approach mindfulness of breathing is when one 'dwells contemplating the body in respect of the body diligent, clearly comprehending, and mindful, free from longing for and unhappiness with the world'.

The last aspect of this implies that **the hindrances are suspended**, or close to being so. In practice, though, one needs to get into mindfulness of breathing before the hindrances become more fully undermined. It is said (DN.I.73) that once the hindrances are suspended, 'gladness' (*pāmuja*) arises, and:

for one who is gladdened, joy (*pīti*) is born; the body of one who is joyful becomes tranquil; one whose body becomes tranquil experiences easeful pleasure (*sukha*); the mind of one who experiences easeful pleasure becomes concentrated.

The same sequence of states is said to arise from unwavering confidence in the Buddha, Dhamma and Saṅgha (MN.I.37–8), which would also naturally suspend the hindrances.

Devotional bowing – attuning reflections before each of three devotional bows

To the great Lord of Calm and Insight, who breathed in *Dhamma*, became

Dhamma, and radiated *Dhamma*, I humbly bow.

To the profound *Dhamma*, that is lovely in the beginning, lovely in the middle,

lovely in its culmination, I humbly bow.

To the Noble *Saṅgha*, that has breathed in *Dhamma*, plunged into *Dhamma* and

become *Dhamma*, I humbly bow.

When one's head is down in the bow, and can then chant the relevant phrase from p.1 of the chanting book.

Arahaṃ sammā-sambuddho Bhagavā – Buddhaṃ Bhagavantaṃ abhivādemī

Svākkhāto Bhagavatā dhammo – Dhammaṃ namassāmi

Supaṭipanno Bhagavato sāvaka-saṅgho – Saṅghaṃ namāmi

Chanting, of course, can be a good way to generate initial energy, joy, tranquillity, and suspend the hindrances. A mode of chanting that I find particularly useful is to go the phrases of the *Iti pi so* chant interspersed with a slow longest breath. On this, see an item on this is the *Samatha at Home* newsletter no.5, pp.11-13:

https://www.samatha.org/sites/default/files/Samatha%20at%20Home%20Issue%205_0.pdf :

<u>In-breath</u>	<u>Out breath</u>
.....	<i>Iti pi so bhagavā</i>
.....	<i>arahaṃ, sammā-sambuddho</i>
.....	<i>vijjā-carāna-sampanno</i>
.....	<i>sugato, loka-vidū</i>
.....	<i>anuttaro purisa-damma-sārathi</i>
.....	<i>satthā deva-manussānaṃ</i>
.....	<i>buddho, bhagavaaaaaa</i> <i>ti</i>
.....	<i>Svākkhāto bhagavatā dhammo</i>
.....	<i>sandiṭṭhiko akāliko ehipassiko</i>
.....	<i>opanayiko</i>
.....	<i>paccattaṃ veditabbo</i>
.....	<i>viññūhiiiiii</i> <i>ti</i>
.....	<i>Supaṭipanno Bhagavato sāvaka-saṅgho</i> ...
.....	<i>ujupaṭipanno Bhagavato sāvaka-saṅgho</i> ...
.....	<i>ñayapaṭipanno Bhagavato sāvaka-saṅgho</i> ...
.....	<i>sāmīcipaṭipanno Bhagavato sāvaka-saṅgho</i> ..
.....	<i>yad idaṃ cattāri purisa-yugāni</i>
.....	<i>aṭṭha purisa-puggalā</i>
.....	<i>esa Bhagavato sāvaka-saṅgho</i>
.....	<i>āhuneyyo pāhuneyyo dakkhineyyo</i>
.....	<i>añjalī-karaṇeyyo</i>
.....	<i>anuttaraṃ puñña-khettaṃ</i>
.....	<i>lokassaaaaa</i> <i>ti</i>

It can also good, if there is a need to counteract mental distractions, to **reflect on the qualities of the Buddha, Dhamma and Saṅgha:**

- The Buddha as seeking, and then showing the way to, that which is beyond the ageing, sickness and death of possessions and the key ingredients body and mind – earth/solidity, water/fluidity, fire/heat, wind/motion, space and consciousness – and of life’s *dukkha* in general.
- The *Dhamma* as the profound and subtle Basic Pattern of things that the Buddha awakened to: Conditioned Arising and the transcending of this: ‘the stilling (*samatha*) of all constructing activities of the mind, the relinquishing of all acquisitions (possessions, but also the body and mind as (‘mine’), the destruction of craving (for sense-pleasures, for being a certain way/having a certain identity, and not-being a certain way), non-attachment, stopping, Nirvana’ (MN.I.167).
- The *Saṅgha* as embodied particularly in the eight enlightened *Arahats* of the *Buddha-maṅgala gāthā* chant (chanting book, p.9), circling around the Buddha (and oneself) in a clockwise direction, starting with Koṇḍañña in front, we can think of:
 - Koṇḍañña as the one who, at the Buddha’s first sermon, gained the *Dhamma*-eye of the stream-enterer, plunging into *Dhamma*, seeing the Basic Pattern that, as *dukkha* arises from conditions, it *can cease* when these cease. Exemplar of *seeing*.
 - Mahā-kassapa as an ascetic character who easily saw the dangers of attachment to sense-pleasures, yet also appreciated the natural beauty of wild places. Exemplar of *non-attached appreciation*.
 - Sāriputta, one of the Buddha’s two chief disciples, being one who excelled in wisdom: subtle, discerning, analytical insight into all aspects of the path, and the precise nature of particular *dhammas* and their inter-relations. Exemplar of *wisdom*.
 - Upāli as one who was an expert in monastic discipline, that is, how to wisely apply *Dhamma* to matters of personal and communal conduct and harmony. Exemplar of *discipline (the precepts and related matters)*.
 - Ānanda, the Buddha’s attendant, as one with a great memory of the taught *Dhamma*, with a good understanding of it, and of the meaning of words, nature of language, and orderly development of ideas. Exemplar of *mindful memory*.
 - Gavampati, as one with meditation-based psychic power over nature and a communicator between gods and humans on the desirability of open-hearted generosity. He had strong insight into the deep inter-relation of each of the four True Realities for the Noble Ones. Hence he was a master of connections between aspects of *Dhamma*. Exemplar of *connecting*.
 - (Mahā-)Moggallāna, the other chief disciple, as one who could very quickly enter *jhāna* as a basis for knowing other realms and using psychic power as an aid to teaching beings. That is, he had a mastery of the inner potency of certain *dhammas*. While Sāriputta is said to have trained people up to stream-entry, Moggallāna trained them on the Arahatsip. Exemplar of *resolve*.
 - Rāhula, the Buddha’s son, as one who was keen to learn *Dhamma*, and who emphasized non-attachment to sense-pleasures and undermining conceit by seeing the impermanence of all conditioned *dhammas*. Exemplar of *watchfulness*.

Then above one visualises the Buddha ... and below one is the form earth.

Apart from initial bowing, chanting, and reflections, setting up the **posture** is key: having an appropriately upright posture, and a leg posture that is comfortable enough for a long sit, if that is what practice-energy tends to. For many years, my left leg became uncomfortable after ~ 40 minutes, as the knee did not really want to touch the ground. Simply putting something under the left calf, as a support, has ended this problem, and allowed a sit of up to an hour or a little more.

One needs to mindfully acknowledge contact with the ground: your feet and legs with the floor, and backside with what you are sitting on. Then to bring to mind your posture as ‘**Sitting, sitting, just sitting**’ (or kneeling, kneeling, just kneeling’). Mindfulness of posture is one aspect of mindfulness of the body in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, and Sōtō Zen’s term for its main practice is: ‘Just Sitting’.

It is then helpful to relax around the spine by doing the following. Focus attention, and mindfulness, on the bottom of the spine, and sense any tensions around it Do this as a kind of gift to this area. Then slowly **clockwise spiral your mindful attention around and up the spine** (i.e. in a corkscrew style way), doing the same at its different levels. When you get to shoulder height, do a wider spiral, to take in the breadth of the

shoulders, and any tension across them. Then move back to a smaller loop, around the neck, then taking in the head at the level of the jaw, then nose and eyes, then forehead, and come to rest at the crown of the head, a place of equanimity. Perhaps then do a brief scan back down and up the spine. This whole kind of body-scan can produce relaxation, better posture, joy and then equanimity (though this image is actually anti-clockwise):



Then one can expand one's edges, as previously described: to the front, front-right, right, back-right, back, back-left, left, and then front left, to complete an enveloping loop or disc. Then below and above, to complete a bubble, a sphere, of space infused with mindfulness – with a sitter sitting in the middle. One might then think of lovingkindness, kindness, bubbling up in one's chest, and then flowing out to pervade the bubble. Then think of the bubble expanding to take in your immediate neighbourhood, and the people and animals you know in it. Then expand it further to encompass your village/district, town ... region ... country ... the whole earth (including those in the international space-station), and think of all its beings being pervaded by kindness.



But of course many people and animals will currently be suffering, so arouse compassion for them in their suffering....

Again, many will be experiencing times of happiness, so appreciatively rejoice at this. Given both the downs and ups of us all, end with even-minded equanimity.

Let the effect of this heart-opening settle into one, then start the breathing practice.

A useful simple chant, that one can do as an immediate lead-in to starting the breathing practice, is a revolving **chant on *ānāpāna-sati***, 'mindfulness (*sati*) of breathing in (*āna*) and breathing out (*apāna*)'. This follows the pattern of one of the Yogāvacāra-style chants Lance Cousins taught me:

du sa ni ma,

*sa ni ma du,
ni ma du sa,*

ma du sa ni (which is on the four True Realities for the Noble Ones: *dukkha, samudaya, nirodha, magga*)

The *ānāpāna-sati* chant is:

*ānāpāna-sati
apāna-sati-āna
sati-ānāpāna*

tī-ānāpāna-sa ... tī [The final *tī* being what signifies ‘end quote’, but also mends and broken
sa-tī, mindfulness ☺]

While this can be done as a vocalized chant, doing it whispered, without vocalization, with a slow longest breath, is a way of starting to actually do mindfulness of breathing. The first line is done while breathing in, the second while breathing out, the third while breathing in, the fourth while breathing out. The syllables are spaced out, like counted numbers:

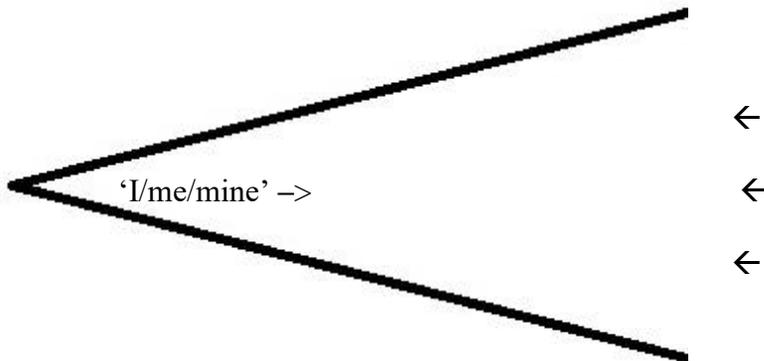
*ā ... nā ... pā ... na ... sa ... tī
a ... pāna ... sa ... tī ... ā ... na
sati ... ā ... nā ... pā ... na
tī ... ā ... nā ... pā ... na ... sa ... tī*

One can do all four lines before longest of Counting, or do them as a form of longest of Counting, using the syllables instead of counting 1 to 9. If the mind is already very calm and focused, one can use the first two lines, softly whispered, as the Counting stage, then the last two lines for the Following, but without any whisper, but just the tongue and lips moving as one tracks the flow of the breath in the body. Then on to Touching and Settling...

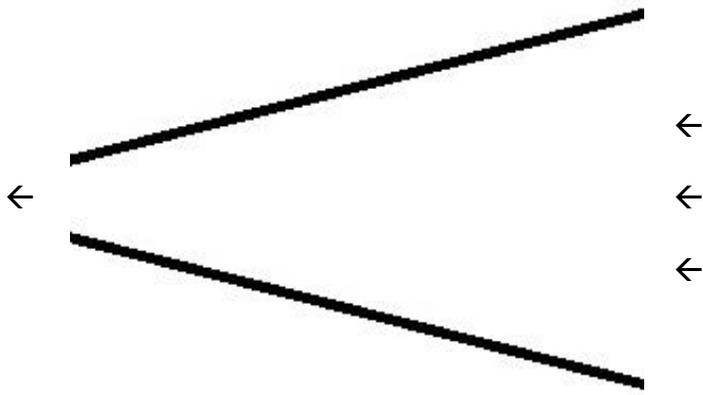
So the above is a box of tools to dip into and try some time...

A final thought – letting things pass through where ‘I/me/mine’ would normally arise

A mental model I sometimes bring to mind is the following. The open triangle is my body-mind system, and the 3 arrows are incoming inputs of the senses or mind that tend to produce a disturbance and call for a response. Delusion conjures up the sense of an ‘I/me/mine’ lurking in the recesses of the mind, plus a feeling-bothered and a sense that ‘it’ needs to react:



But if one opens up this inner recess, the impinging seeming threat can pass straight through one and come out the other side, so that equanimity is experienced:



The pinnacle of this kind of response is seen in the story of the *Arahat* Adhimutta, who disconcerted some potential assailants by fearlessly asking why he should be perturbed at the prospect of the end of the constituents of ‘his’ personality: he had no thought of an ‘I’ being here, but just saw a stream of changing phenomena (*Thag.*715–16). This so impressed the robbers threatening him that they became Adhimutta’s disciples.