

# Buddhist Phenomenology, Part II

an addendum to the cover-up model

Henk Barendregt

August 20, 2008

## Abstract

A ten day intensive vipassana retreat was conducted together with Henk van Voorst as co-teacher (Denekamp, the Netherlands, July 20-30, 2008). There I learned from him the “washing-machine model” of the vipassana progress. The experience corresponding to this model were already described, but not explicitly, in *Barendregt* [1996]. As the process is memorable it is given in this addendum to the model described in mentioned paper.

## 1 The washing-machine model

The long meditation sessions, notably sitting for an entire hour, create suffering. Physical suffering may be transformed into mental suffering: “Do I have to sit that long?!” Older pains may come up as well. Concentrated mindfulness makes it possible to undergo phenomena that otherwise are too much painful. This applies both to physical and to mental pain. Being an observer of the phenomena, without identification, creates a distance between these and the observer. This enables one to remain calm. With an equanimous mind suffering becomes bearable.

Using this ‘success’ of the practice, one sharpens the discipline and concentration. One is capable of longer sitting and more continuous attention. One feels good about this. At first one even may be able to observe this ‘feeling good’. But usually at some time one loses the capacity to remain equanimous about the success. Then one gets identified with the (at first) pleasant phenomena. One is no longer a pure observer.

After a while this causes the yogi to lose the success. In fact, soon after losing to be a pure observer also unpleasant phenomena are ‘taken in’. This means that one suffers again. The yogi comes to the teacher with the complaint that one has lost the capacity to meditate. The teacher exhorts the yogi to go on. After a while the suffering of the yogi may be very strong. The teacher tells the yogi to go back to simple naming: “Say ‘*pain, pain, . . .*’. Moreover, remain with the sensations of your body, as a sturdy anchor.” All this in order to recreate the distance between the phenomena and the observer. The yogi continues the work. In the back of his or her mind is the previous success. There is an expectation that doing the vipassana exercises, one diminishes the suffering. But as long as there is this expectation, there is not enough distance from the phenomena. Mindfulness consists of observing all phenomena, with a distance and equanimity, hence without expectation. Therefore the suffering continues. The teacher tells the yogi that this phase of the practice is particularly purifying. With some final discipline the yogi may try to continue, waiting for renewed success. But, eventually he or she walks against a solid wall, impossible to push away. Then one collapses and loses all expectations.

If the yogi discontinues to do the meditation exercises, then the teacher calls for continuation of the discipline. Perhaps this is not necessary and the yogi recaptures

the work spontaneously. Mentally and physically down, without hope of any improvement the yogi observes the phenomena. And then the yogi suddenly obtains the right mindfulness! Letting go of the hope of improvement turns out the key to renewed success. Discipline, concentration and mindfulness become strong and fresh. The yogi starts feeling again delight. This time one is more careful and keeps a keen eye on the delight, holding it at a distance. But surely this phase is relaxing and refreshing.

The above paragraphs describe a repeating pattern. There is a phase of suffering and a phase of success. The suffering phase may be seen to correspond to a washing-cycle of a cleaning program in an automatized washing-machine and the successful cycle corresponds to refreshing the water. Like in a washing-program there is the need of undergoing several times the cycles of cleaning and of water refreshing, similarly in the path of vipassana meditation there are the cycles of purification through suffering followed by success. In fact it is unknown how many cycles the yogi has to undergo. Often at the relaxing phase the yogi may forget what right mindfulness is: observation with equanimity. And this then starts the next phase of suffering and purification. If the teacher repeats that the right mindfulness consists of gently observing whatever arises, without making preferences, and the yogi remembers this, even then he or she may not be capable of doing this and then the washing-phase of the process restarts again.

A superficial outsider may get the idea that the purification process is unhealthy. But what is happening here is a process of de-conditioning. Our ego is based on its conditioning to obtain whatever is pleasant and to avoid whatever is unpleasant. During the washing-machine cycles this ego-conditioning is put into a stronghold and is seen to cause more and more suffering. Only when this suffering is strong enough and using the concentrated right mindfulness one learns not any longer to follow this conditioning of the ego. In this way one becomes more and more deconditioned. This is because an initial smaller purification makes it possible to have a more refined concentration and mindfulness. This enables the yogi to undergo stronger purification through stronger suffering (although it is not felt as such: each time during the purification process the suffering feels more or less at a similar level). The resulting relaxation will also be more and more deep. This the washing-machine model does not only describe a repeating cycle, each time the ups and downs are becoming higher and deeper.

## 2 The singular points

Mathematically nothing is wrong with a function that cycles with larger and larger tops and valleys. A real function like

$$f(x) = x \sin x$$

has a perfectly understandable graph, going beyond all possible limits. But in actual physical systems, and the body-mind system of a human being is no exception of this, there will be extreme values, due to limits of energy for example. The moments in which the extreme values are obtained may be called ‘singular points’.

One of the (local) tops of the progress on the path of purification at such a singular value is a mystical experience, also called a *vipassana jhana*. One is in a mental state with some effort for concentration, with resulting joy, loving kindness and equanimity. Letting go one by one of the effort, joy and even loving kindness, creates deeper and deeper states of jhanas in which finally only equanimity remains. In Barendregt [1996] we have treated the danger of these highly pleasant states: the yogi does not want to progress with purification, while that is still necessary. One

has to continue the practise, while treating the jhana as a ‘mind-object’. Then eventually one detaches from it.

Among the (local) valeys on the path of purification there is at another singular point the value of the nausea, the existential fear in optima forma. It is called the *big dukkha*, where ‘dukkha’ literary means ‘the nausea (du) for emptiness (kha)’. Again one has to treat it as a mind-object.

Both the states of jhana and of dukkha have as feature that they continue (though not forever) even if one stops meditating. During the work with the mind-object of the big dukkha one first temporarily domesticates it. Then it eventually becomes familiar enough that one dares to look it “into the eyes”. Then one realizes: “Is that all?”, bringing it to a definite end.

The moral is that the cycles of the washing-machine model get larger and larger until the whole process derails and one is to develop the final right mindfulness. If one gets stuck into a vipassana jhana, then one has to treat it like a mind-object.

### 3 Conclusion: the pseudo-paradox of vipassana

The method of concentrated mindfulness, observing without expectation, works in a powerful way. As soon as the ego gets an understanding of that, it wants to use this method for its own goal: increasing pleasure. But then the method does not work any longer: one is no longer equanimous. Nevertheless, ego tries to make it work at all costs. Finally ego fails and gives up. If one keeps the discipline of meditation, then at this moment the method of observation without expectation works again. The method seems to work because it does not work! This seems like a paradox, but is not really so. The method consists in observing with equanimity. And it is not so easy to do that. But one is ‘hit on the fingers’ if one is not equanimous. This brings about a strong purifying conditioning (through punishment).

After that, ego usually does revive again and one has to start from scratch. By repeating this *ad nauseam* one finally can untangle the knot. This final step cannot be done intentionally, it has to happen. But one may make a wish for that happening. Again, without expectation. This usually requires some more washing cycles.

## References

- Barendregt, H.P. [1996]. *Mysticism and Beyond, Buddhist Phenomenology Part II, The Eastern Buddhist, New Series XXIX*, pp. 262–287. URL: <[www.cs.ru.nl/~henk/BP/bp2.html](http://www.cs.ru.nl/~henk/BP/bp2.html)>.