



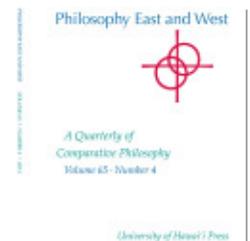
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THE FUNCTION OF SAÑÑĀ IN THE PERCEPTUAL PROCESS ACCORDING TO THE SUTTAPIṬAKA: AN APPRAISAL



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This article deals with the meaning and function of *saññā* in perception according to the *Suttapiṭaka*. As regards its meaning, the discussion stresses the fact that the renderings “perception” and “apperception” seem to overinterpret the actual function/activity of *saññā*. Also the translations “idea” and “ideation” should be used cautiously, in order to avoid misunderstandings, since these terms are fraught with very specific philosophical and psychological implications in the Western context. Moreover, though “cognition” could be a good rendering, “recognition” seems to be a more adequate translation for *saññā*, because it conveys the meaning of both cognizing and naming, which are the two main activities carried out by *saññā*. In this sense, cognition should be envisaged as a recording process that labels (and gives names to) the data coming from the senses. As regards its role in perception, *saññā* takes place after contact (*phassa*) and sensation (*vedanā*). Its task is to collect the not yet well-defined information provided by *phassa* and *vedanā*, and to organize this information into a datum that is so made available to, and handled by, the consciousness (*viññāṇa*). The task of *viññāṇa*, in its turn, is to interpret this datum according to subjective “values.” The present study stresses also the fact that the recognition carried out by *saññā* can be both simple (colors, tastes, etc.) and complex (danger, death, etc.). For this reason, after having dealt with simple perceptions, a section is devoted to the analysis and possible explanation of complex recognitions. Moreover, since the textual sources record the fact that *saññā* can fail in its task to recognize things, another section is added, in which incorrect recognitions are taken into consideration.

1. Preliminary Remarks

In the *Suttapiṭaka* the term *saññā* has two principal senses.

(a) *Saññā* refers to a particular perceptual *function* or, perhaps better said (as we will see below), to the *fruit* of the particular perceptual *action* expressed by the verb *sañjānāti*. This is the case, for example, with the occurrences of the term *saññā* in compounds like *rūpasaññā*, “*saññā* concerning form(s)/color(s),” or *saddasaññā*, “*saññā* concerning sound(s);” *aṭṭhikasaññā*, “*saññā* concerning the skeleton”; *puḷavakasaññā*, “*saññā* concerning [a corpse infested by] worms”; *ādīnavasaññā*, “*saññā* concerning danger”; *aniccasaññā*, “*saññā* concerning what is impermanent”; *anattasaññā*, “*saññā* concerning the not-self”; and so on.¹

(b) When *saññā* occurs in the compound *saññākhandha* (*khandha*, “aggregate”), it indicates one of the five factors that constitute the psycho-physical organism, specifically the factor responsible for the aforesaid activity.

Moreover, (a) can be further subdivided, since the activity of *saññā* can take place both (a.1) in a ‘normal’ state of consciousness, and (a.2) in a state of meditation.² In this article I will deal mainly with the point (a.1) and, only when and if necessary, I will corroborate my discussion with reflections pertaining to (a.2). The aim of the present study is, therefore, to investigate the way in which *saññā* carries out its activity during a normal perception. In order to define the specific role of *saññā*, its relation to *phassa*, *vedanā*, and *viññāṇa* will be taken into account with particular attention.

1.1. The Meaning of Saññā

The modern scholars who have dealt with *saññā* in their works have translated this term in so many different ways that one could safely say that there is no common agreement on the Western word(s) to which *saññā* should correspond. Though in most cases scholars have well motivated their own rendering of *saññā*, there are still justified doubts about the adequacy of some of these translations. Therefore, as a preliminary remark, in the next section a list of the principal modern interpretations of *saññā* is provided and discussed.

1.1.1. *Various Translations of Saññā.* To begin with, we notice that Isaline Horner (2002, 1: 352; translation of MN 1.293(2)(3), quoted below) translated *saññā* as “perception” and *saññānāti* as “he perceives.” More recently, Piya Tan has also accepted the same rendering, which he explains in the light of the following considerations (2007, p. 102):

Perception (*saññā*) works very closely with consciousness (*viññāṇa*). Once one is conscious of an object through one of the sense-doors (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, or mind)—that is, through ‘form’ (*rūpa*)—one *perceives* (or more technically, *apperceives*) it as a form: one then tries to make sense of it by naming it so that one can control it, as it were, and do things with it. Having named an object or experience, the mind is then able to recognize it (rightly or wrongly) after that. (underscores in the original).

Despite the accurate description provided by Tan, in his summary we find references to functions (like “apperception”) that do not—and could not—fall within the framework of *saññā*, as we will clarify below. In my opinion what is relevant to pinpoint here is that what we call perception does not work “very closely with consciousness.” Rather, *viññāṇa* (consciousness) works together with *vedanā* and *saññā* in *constituting* perceptual activity (see below, the opening statement of our section 3).³

Another translation of *saññā* has been provided by Edward Hare (see Woodward and Hare 1994, III: 65; translation of AN 3.79, quoted below), who on some occasions opts for “thought.” In this respect, it is worth noting how Hare (1994, III: 65 n. 2) hastened to specify that *saññā* is “as vague a term as is popularly our ‘thought,’” a specification that implicitly foreshadows the idea that there would be a sort of “vague” impossibility for an adequate translation of *saññā*. However, as we will

see, in the *Suttapiṭaka*, *saññā* is dealt with as a well-defined psychological function that is not vague and cannot be equated to a concept like “thought” in its popular or common meaning.

Rune Johansson (1979, pp. 92–95 and 111–113) translated *saññā* as “ideation,” “idea,” or “mental image”—and, shortly before Johansson, the translation “idea” was proposed also by Alex Wayman (1976) and Padmasiri de Silva (1979, p. 26). In so doing, however, Johansson opens the door to the risk of unclarity, since he translates both *dhamma* (as object of mind-perception) and *saññā* as “image.” This leads to the result that the terms *dhamma* and *saññā* are not well defined as distinct concepts; the word “image,” by virtue of this semantic overlapping, also turns out to be quite unclear. The term “idea” is likewise problematic, since it involves the possibility of theoretical misunderstandings. Indeed, “idea” has such a semantic weight and richness in the peculiarly Western philosophical and psychological traditions (Plato, Hegel, Husserl, etc.), to the extent that this richness could turn out to be an obstacle for the correct understanding of *saññā*. In addition, it should be remarked that an idea does not necessarily or strictly originate in dependence on a sensory stimulus: We can, indeed, derive ideas from other ideas, as in the case of mathematics. Such a consideration leads us to think that, even if *saññā* can process *dhammas*, and even if *dhammas* are something very similar to mental images or ideas, being the proper object of *manas* as a sense organ, this does not mean that *all* ideas are necessarily *dhammas*. Put in other terms, the activity of *saññā*, as we will see below, depends on a sensory stimulus; however, not all the ideas are sensory stimuli, and hence we conclude that the translation of *saññā* as “idea” sounds inappropriate. In passing, on the subordination of the activity of *saññā* to a sensory stimulus see, in particular, Sarathchandra (1958, p. 9), who indeed suggests that *saññā* is a sort of consciousness, and affirms that it has a primary empirical base: “*saññā*, by which word, therefore, we should understand empirical consciousness.”

Also the translation “apperception,” proposed by Luis Gómez (1976, p. 141) and taken into consideration with more accuracy by Sue Hamilton (1996, p. 57),⁴ deserves a brief discussion here insofar as Hamilton (pp. 57–58) suggests a double interpretation of *saññā*. According to Hamilton indeed, when *saññā*(*kkhandha*) refers to the function that processes the data coming from the sense organs, it is “apperception”; in all the other cases *saññā* is “conception” (pp. 58–59). Hamilton affirms that “apperceiving refers to the identificatory process that takes place on receiving incoming sensory data and conceptualizing refers to the process of bringing to mind any abstract images, conceptions, ideas and so on which are not contemporaneous with incoming sensory data” (p. 62). However, here the use of “apperception” is in my opinion an incautious decision. This term, indeed, not only refers to a complex activity overstepping the function of *saññā*, but evokes a precise philosophical framework, which would be difficult—and unauthorized—to ignore, it being a word that conveys many cultural nuances that are peculiar to Western thought. It follows that “apperception” can possibly be used in the Buddhist context only in a broad sense, and only in consequence of an appropriate semantic restriction.

However, as Hamilton explains *saññā*—“perhaps the most satisfactory translation of *saññā* would be ‘apperception,’ which implies both that its function is discriminatory, and also that it incorporates a function of assimilation or comprehension of what has been perceived so that identification can take place”—her perspective seems to be in contrast to the definition given by Leibniz himself—the “father” of the philosophical use of the term apperception—according to whom an apperception is a perception emerging into and to the consciousness (Leibniz [1720] 2001, p. 40): “Ainsi il est bon de faire distinction entre la *perception*[,] qui est l’état intérieur de la Monade représentant les choses externes; et l’*apperception*, qui est la *conscience* . . . de cet état intérieur” (italics in the original). If we try to read this definition by Leibniz in a comparative way, we derive that an “apperception” requires the activation of some deeper state of (self-)awareness, which seems not to be involved—as we will see—at the level of *saññā*.

Other translations of *saññā* are provided by Peter Harvey (1995, p. 141), who suggests “cognition,” and Mattieu Boisvert (1995, p. 78), according to whom *saññā* is “recognition.” In my opinion, these are the more accurate English equivalents for *saññā*, even if in certain contexts “naming”—as Tan pointed out—also can be a proper rendering. In the following section I will try to substantiate these conclusions with textual evidences.

1.1.2. *Recognizing and Naming.* According to the *Suttapiṭaka*, *saññā* processes several elements, among which colors are mentioned. In the following passage, for instance, we can read (MN 1.293(1)):

saññā saññā ti āvuso vuccati. kittāvatā nu kho āvuso saññā ti vuccati. sañjānāti sañjānātīti kho āvuso, tasmā saññā ti vuccati, kiñ ca sañjānāti: nīlakam pi sañjānāti, pītakam pi sañjānāti, lohītakam pi sañjānāti, odātam pi sañjānāti.

“*Saññā saññā*” is said, O friend. Indeed, O friend, now in what respect it is said “*saññā*”? “*Sañjānāti sañjānāti*,” O friend, therefore it is said “*saññā*”; and what *sañjānāti*? One *sañjānāti* the dark-blue, one *sañjānāti* the yellow, one *sañjānāti* the red, one *sañjānāti* the white.⁵

A similar idea is found in *Milindapañha with Milindaṭṭikā* 61, where the discussion between Nāgasena and Milinda runs thus:

sañjānanalakkhaṇā mahārāja saññā. . . . opammaṃ karohīti. yathā mahārāja rañño bhaṇḍāgāriko bhaṇḍāgāraṃ pavisitvā nīlapītalohitodātamañjetṭhāni rājabhogāni rūpāni passitvā sañjānāti, evam eva kho mahārāja sañjānanalakkhaṇā saññā ti

[Nāgasena]: “*Sañjānana*, O great king, is the characteristic of *saññā*. . . .” [Milinda:] “Make an example!” [Nāgasena:] “O great king, it is like a royal treasurer who, having entered the storehouse and having seen the colors of the king’s possessions—[which are] dark-blue, yellow, red, white, crimson—, *sañjānāti* [those colors as such]. Indeed, exactly in this way, O great king, the *sañjānana* is [said to be] the characteristic of *saññā*.” (Trenckner and Jaini 1986)

In addition to ‘simple’ perceptual data (like colors), other texts emphasize the fact that *saññā* can process also more complex ‘objects,’ such as concepts and ideas. For example, in *AN* 3.79 we are told:

pañc’imā bhikkhave saññā bhāvītā bahulikatā mahapphalā honti mahānisaṃsā amatogadhā amatapariyosānā. katama pañca. asubhasaññā maraṇasaññā ādīnavasaññā āhāre paṭikkūlasaññā sabbaloke anabhiratasaññā.

O *bhikkhus*, these five *saññās*, [when] developed and cultivated, are of great fruit, of great advantage, plunged in deathlessness, they have deathlessness as [their] end. Which five? The *saññā* concerning what is impure, the *saññā* concerning death, the *saññā* concerning peril, the *saññā* concerning what is wrong in food, the *saññā* concerning all the world [considered] as not delightful.⁶

I hope the reader will agree if I say that, in all these excerpts “recognition,” “he recognizes,” and “act of recognizing” are satisfactory translations for, respectively, *saññā*, *sañjānāti*, and *sañjānana*. *MN* 1.1–2 supports these translations. In this text we meet with sentences such as *paṭhavim paṭhavito sañjānāti . . . āpaṃ āpato sañjānāti . . . tejaṃ tejato sañjānāti . . . vāyaṃ vāyato sañjānāti . . . bhūte bhūtato sañjānāti . . . deve devato sañjānāti*, and so on. What *MN* 1.1–2 is telling us is that one recognizes (*sañjānāti*) the earth (*paṭhavim*), simply by perceiving the earth (*paṭhavito*). The same is repeated for the remaining elements, namely water, heat, and so on. In other words, the meaning of *paṭhavim paṭhavito sañjānāti* is that one recognizes the earth as earth by means of *saññā*.

Interestingly enough, besides the—so to speak—bare recognition, it shall be observed also that when *saññā* recognizes something as such, the action of giving a name to what is recognized seems to be involved in the process.⁷ This aspect of *saññā* emerges from the following four examples:

(c) *MN* 1.271: *samaṇā ti vo bhikkhave jano sañjānāti* (“The people recognize you, O *bhikkhus*, as ‘*samaṇas*’”);⁸

(d) *DN* 1.93: *manussā pisāce disvā pisācā ti sañjānanti* (“Men, having seen the *pisācas*, recognize [them] as ‘*pisācas*’”), and, because the *pisācas* in this *sutta* are said to be black, the text continues: *tena samayena manussā pisāce kaṇhā ti sañjānanti* (“Man, at that time, [having seen] the *pisācas*, recognize [them] as ‘black ones’”);

(e) *MN* 3.234–235: *idha, bhikkhave, tad ev’ekaccesu janapadesu pātīti sañjānanti, pattan ti sañjānanti, vitthan ti sañjānanti, sarāvan ti sañjānanti, dhāropan ti sañjānanti, poṇan ti sañjānanti, pisīlan ti sañjānanti* (“Here, O *bhikkhus*, this same [bowl], in different provinces they recognize [according to different names] as ‘*pāti*,’ as ‘*patta*,’ as ‘*vittha*,’ as ‘*sarāva*,’ as ‘*dhāropa*,’ as ‘*poṇa*,’ or as ‘*pisīla*’”);

(f) *AN* 5.198: *ānandoti kho me āvuso nāmaṃ . . . sace hi mayaṃ sañjāneyyāma āyasmā ānando ti . . .* (“[Ānanda:] Indeed, ‘Ānanda’ is my name, O friend . . . [Kokanuda:] Indeed, if I had recognized ‘[this is] the venerable Ānanda’ . . .”).

What is relevant in all these passages is the presence of the particle *itī* (enclitic *tī*), which occurs after the recognized elements. As is well-known, in cases like these *itī* conveys the sense of direct speech. It follows that the presence of *itī* allows us to infer that *saññā* is the faculty responsible for the activity of giving names—to the

perceived objects, we add. Accordingly, it can be suggested that in (f) one recognizes Ānanda not only by grasping his figure, but also by knowing that his name is “Ānanda.” Similarly, in (c) one recognizes a *bhikkhu* not only because s/he sees a shaven person dressed with orange clothes and blankets, but also by knowing that the name used to refer to this kind of person is “*samaṇa*.” The same goes for (d), where an evil spirit is known by the name “*pisāca*” or “black one.” This last consideration leads us back to *MN* 1.293(1), and allows us to suggest that the act of naming takes place also when colors are concerned: *saññā* recognizes them by the names “black” or “yellow,” and so on. Also the abovementioned sentence *paṭhavim paṭhavito sañjānāti*, therefore, can be now conceptually rendered as “s/he recognizes the earth by knowing that its name is ‘earth.’”

In the *Suttapiṭaka* this particular name-giving function of *saññā* is expressed in its most general terms as follows (*AN* 3.413): *katamo ca bhikkhave saññāṇam vipāko. vohārevepakkhāhaṃ bhikkhave saññā vadāni; yathā yathā naṃ sañjānāti, tathā tathā voharati evam saññī aho sin ti* (“And what is, O *bhikkhus*, the maturation of recognitions? I say, O *bhikkhus*, that the recognitions result in worldly discourses; the one who recognizes in a certain way, that one asserts: ‘Thus I recognized’”). Parenthetically, we notice that the close connection existing between *saññā* and the name-giving activity has been stressed by *Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda*. While examining the compound *papañcasaññāsaṅkhā*, he indeed writes (1986, p. 5): “‘*papañca-saññā-saṅkhā*’ can mean concepts, reckonings, designations or linguistic conventions characterized by the prolific conceptualizing tendency of the mind.”⁹

Hence, on the basis of the passages so far taken into account, a first conclusion can be drawn, namely that *saññā* has a double function: (g) a pre-*iti* recognition of the sense datum, and (h) its subsequent *iti*-nominalization.

2. *Saññā*, *Vedanā*, and *Viññāṇa*: General Assessment

Let us, now, take into consideration the interaction of *saññā* with both *vedanā* and *viññāṇa*. It will be helpful, in this respect, to begin by analyzing the role played, and the position held, by *saññā* among the *nāmarūpa* constituents. In a well-known passage occurring in *SN* 2.3–4, the constituents of *nāma* (“name”) are said to be five: sensation (*vedanā*),¹⁰ *saññā*, volition (*cetanā*),¹¹ contact (*phassa*) between the senses and their respective objects, and attention (*manasikāra*). The constituents of *rūpa* (“form”) are the four great elements (*mahābhūtas*: earth, water, heat, and air), as general base, and the shape that they assume, as specific factor.¹² Therefore, the term *rūpa* in the compound *nāmarūpa* refers more or less to the physical, tangible parts of an individual (though it is worth noting that the specific form, i.e., *this particular* form possessed by the object, can be known as particular form only in consequence of a mental categorization: table-form, cow-form, tree-form, man-form, etc.), whereas the term *nāma* indicates the psychological factors belonging or pertaining to the sphere of perception.¹³

In addition to this, the *Suttapiṭaka* tells us that there is a significant relation between *saññā*, *vedanā*, and *citta*. In *SN* 4.293 and *MN* 1.301 we read indeed: *saññā*

ca vedanā ca cetasikā ete dhammā cittaṭṭibaddhā (“*saññā* and *vedanā* are mental [in the sense that] these *dhammas* are bound to mind,” or “*saññā* and *vedanā*, these are mental *dhammas* [since they are] bound to mind”).

From the passages just quoted, hence, we derive that *saññā* and *vedanā* have a mental nature. It remains, then, to understand how these two factors are in relation with *viññāṇa*. To begin with, it is relevant to notice here that the *Suttapiṭaka* seems to stress the idea that these three functions cannot be *de facto* separated or distinguished from each other during the course of a perceptual activity (*MN* 1.293(2)):

yā c’āvuso vedanā yā ca saññā yañ ca viññāṇaṃ ime dhammā saṃsaṭṭhā no visaṃsaṭṭhā, na ca labbhā imesaṃ dhammānaṃ vinibbhujitvā vinibbhujitvā nānākaraṇaṃ paññāpetuṃ.

What is, O friend, sensation, what is *saññā*, and what is consciousness, these three *dhammas* are united, not separated, it is not possible to make known the diversity of these *dhammas* by continuously distinguishing them.

This passage suggests that *saññā*, *vedanā*, and *viññāṇa* are inseparable because if one of them were inactive when the external stimulus is grasped through the sense organ (*phassa*), then there could not be any transition from a—so to speak—bare grasping to a conscious grasping. However, in spite of their factual inseparability during the course of a perception, it is worthy of note that the *Suttapiṭaka* distinguishes among the different peculiar activities performed by *saññā*, *vedanā*, and *viññāṇa*.

As far as this—so to speak—virtual distinction is concerned, we notice that a sort of sequence is theorized, according to which *saññā* would take place after *vedanā*, and *viññāṇa* after *saññā*. This is clearly stated in, for instance, *MN* 1.293(3):

yaṃ h’āvuso vedeti taṃ sañjānāti, yaṃ sañjānāti taṃ vijānāti. . . .

What, indeed, O friend, one has sensation of, that one recognizes, what one recognizes, that one has consciousness of. . . .

This excerpt makes it clear, even if in very general terms, that *saññā* receives something from *vedanā* (after the intervention of *phassa*, as we will see in the following section), that this something is further processed by *saññā*, and that *saññā* makes the very result of its activity available to the mind/consciousness, that is, to *viññāṇa/citta*. This ‘something’ is the perceptual datum, which from *vedanā* to *viññāṇa* is subjected to subsequent modifications.

2.1. *Saññā and Vedanā (with Reference to Phassa)*

From the *Paṭiccasamuppādavāda* we know that the emergence of *vedanā* depends on the contact (*phassa*) between sense organs and their objects. Interestingly enough, however, in some passages of the *Suttapiṭaka* we are told that *saññā* also, and not only *vedanā*, is somehow conditioned by *phassa*. In *SN* 3.59–60, for instance, we read: *phassasamudayā saññāsamudayo phassanirodhā saññānirodho* (“From the origin of contact there is the origin of *saññā*, from the cessation of contact there is the cessation of *saññā*”). This sentence prompts us to wonder wherein lies the funda-

mental difference between sensation and *saññā*, as far as their respective peculiar relation with *phassa* is concerned. For a clear understanding of this point, it will be helpful here to take into consideration the whole passage SN 3.59–60:

katamā ca bhikkhave vedanā. chayime bhikkhave vedanākāyā: cakkhusamphassajā vedanā, sotasamphassajā vedanā, ghānasamphassajā vedanā, jivhāsamphassajā vedanā, kāyasamphassajā vedanā, manosamphassajā vedanā. ayam vuccati bhikkhave vedanā. phassasamudayā vedanāsamudayo phassanirodhā vedanānirodho. . . .

katamā ca bhikkhave saññā. chayime bhikkhave saññākāyā: rūpasaññā saddasaññā gandhasaññā rasasaññā phoṭṭhabbasaññā dhammasaññā ayam vuccati saññā. phassasamudayā saññāsamudayo phassanirodhā saññānirodho.

O *bhikkhus*, what is sensation? These six, O *bhikkhus*, are the groups of sensation: sensation born from the eye-contact, sensation born from the ear-contact, sensation born from the nose-contact, sensation born from the tongue-contact, sensation born from the body-contact, sensation born from the mind-contact. This, O *bhikkhus*, is called sensation. From the origin of contact there is origin of sensation, from the cessation of contact there is cessation of sensation. . . .

And, O *bhikkhus*, what is *saññā*? These six, O *bhikkhus*, are the groups of *saññā*: *saññā* of form/color, *saññā* of sound, *saññā* of smell, *saññā* of taste, *saññā* of touch, *saññā* of *dhammā*; this is called *saññā*. From the origin of contact there is origin of *saññā*, from the cessation of contact there is cessation of *saññā*.¹⁴

What the preceding text is pointing at, it seems to me, is the notion that *vedanā* is a *direct* result of the contact between an object and a sense organ (the passage speaks, indeed, of sensations born *from* the eye, *from* the ear, etc.), whereas *saññā* is the result of what, carried out by *phassa*, has already been collected in the form of—as it were—bare perceptual information (our excerpt, indeed, does not speak of *saññā* born from the eye or from the ear, but of *saññā* of form, of sound, etc.). This consideration is supported by textual evidence. As regards *vedanā*, the text makes use of the adjective-dependent *tappurisa* compound *samphassajā*, formed by *samphassa* and *ja*—in its feminine ending *jā*—a suffix derived from the verbal root *√jan*. Now, *samphassa*, as is well known, is in its turn a compound of *phassa* (lit. “touch”) and the prefix *sam* (“with”). This word conveys the sense of “con-tact,” that is, of “being in touch with,” and indicates an activity that takes place at least between two distinct elements. For this very reason, *samphassa* suggests also the idea of ‘touching directly,’ that is, without intermediaries. Moreover, though *samphassa* is generally employed *in fine compositi* as nothing but an euphonic form of *phassa*, the presence of the prefix *sam* in any case emphasizes very well the idea of “union” (*saṅgati*). This union is supposed to take place between an object, a sense organ, and a primary sense-awareness, and is said to be essential for the actual occurrence of a contact (as MN 1.111–112, quoted below, points out). The ending *jā*, on the other hand, means “born in / from / out of” and, referring here to *vedanā*, clearly stresses—once again—the immediacy of its ‘coming to be’ in direct dependence on *phassa* (or *samphassa*). It follows that also *jā* suggests the idea of an immediate and direct relation existing

between a sense organ and the characteristic(s) of those object(s) that that sense organ can grasp: eye/form, ear/sound, et cetera.

So much for *vedanā*. If we turn our attention to *saññā*, we find that the passage lists a succession of ‘fields’ *in* and *on* which this faculty carries out its function: The term *rūpasaññā* (another *tappurisa* compound), for example, can be properly translated as “*saññā* concerning form(s)/color(s)” or as “*saññā* of form(s)/color(s)” and similar expressions, but in no case could it be rendered as “*saññā* born from form(s)/color(s).” The same with *saddasaññā*: “*saññā* concerning/of sound(s)” is correct, and not “*saññā* born from sound(s),” and so on.¹⁵

These observations lead us to suppose that, though both *saññā* and *vedanā* are said to arise from the contact (*phassa*), the difference between the two lies in the fact that the latter depends *directly* on the sense organs and on the characteristics of the objects, but it has nothing to do—as it were—with the effect(s) of this very contact, whereas *saññā* takes place only in a second moment and its activity concerns exactly the *effect(s)* of the contact. Indeed, *saññā* processes the bare contact and the result of the bare contact (that is, *vedanā*) in order to transform such a result into an actual sensory ‘information’; that is, into a datum that is so made available to the consciousness. On the basis of what precedes, therefore, we can now explain why *SN* 3.59–60 does not mention any sensation (*vedanā*) of, for instance, forms or tastes. Forms and tastes, in fact, can be known *as such* (that is to say, as *this* form, *this* taste, etc.) only *after* the contact has taken place, because they are nothing but internal modalities, by means of which we manage the perceptual data coming, through *vedanā*, from the external world. At the level of bare contact, on the contrary, it is at most possible to have experience of gustative sensations (i.e., those sensations born from the simple contact of the tongue and a food) or visual sensations (born from the simple contact of the eye and an object), and so on. The classification of these sensations as, for example, hard, soft, sweet, rotten, red triangle, yellow square, black *pīsāca*, et cetera (as can be inferred from *MN* 1.293(1), quoted above), is the peculiar activity of *saññā*, which takes place—according to *MN* 1.293(3)—after *vedanā* (we will see in section 2.2.1. that one of the peculiar tasks of *vedanā* in perception is to feel pleasure and pain, which, however, are characteristics that do not concern *saññā*).

Therefore, it can be concluded that *vedanā* seems to perform some sort of activity that is limited only to the—so to speak—principal or bare sense-fields, whereas *saññā* performs *different* classifications and selections among and within those very fields. The following excerpt seems to corroborate and make clear exactly this point (*AN* 3.413): *aññā bhikkhave saññā rūpesu aññā saññā saddesu aññā saññā gandhesu aññā saññā rasesu aññā saññā phoṭṭhabbesu aññā saññā dhammesu* (“One, O bhikkhus, is the recognition of forms, another one is the recognition of sounds, another the recognition of smells, another the recognition of tastes, another the recognition of touches, another the recognition of dhammas”).

2.2. The Role and Function of Saññā

After having discussed the relation between *saññā*, *vedanā*, and *phassa*, we have enough material to address the question of the peculiar activity of *saññā*. Let us

begin, therefore, by taking into consideration another well-known canonical passage, namely MN 1.111–112:

cakkhuñ c'āvuso paṭicca rūpe ca upajjati cakkhuvīññāṇaṃ, tiṅṅaṃ saṅgati phasso, phassapaccayā vedanā, yaṃ vedeti taṃ sañjānāti, yaṃ sañjānāti taṃ vitakketi. . . .

And conditioned by the eye and the forms, O friend, the visual awareness originates; the union of the three is the contact; sensation is conditioned by contact; what one has sensation of, that one recognizes; what one recognizes, that one reflects [upon]. . . .¹⁶

Long ago, C.A.F. Rhys Davids (1914, p. 63) defined this excerpt as “the most general (as well as the earliest) formula of sense-consciousness” that can be found in the Pāli Nikāyas. Parenthetically, it is worth noting that *viññāṇa*, in this context, means nothing but a primary sense-awareness, that is, a bare sense-consciousness. This is also the opinion of Sarathchandra (1958, p. 16): “if we take the latter [*viññāṇa*] to mean mere sensory awareness, we might infer that *saññā* meant a later stage in the process, where distinctions were introduced into the primitive sensation by selective attention”; and of Tilmann Vetter, according to whom (2000, p. 64), in the present case, *viññāṇa* “may point to primary awareness with enough distinction (indicated by *vi-*) to be a starting-point for mental acts of interpretation.” In particular, Vetter (2000, p. 73) suggested that a proper explanation, for instance, of *cakkhuvīññāṇa* could be “*viññāṇa* coming to function in relation to the organ of sight.” Accordingly, in this context it would be improper to interpret *viññāṇa* as a synonym of *citta* and/or of *manas*.¹⁷

For a correct understanding of MN 1.111–112, it will be helpful here to make recourse to the insightful interpretation provided by David Kalupahana (1987, pp. 32–37), who subtly focuses his attention on the presence, in the passage, of a conceptual gap occurring in a precise moment of the sequence of the perceptual stages. After *phassapaccayā vedanā* (“sensation is conditioned by contact”), argues Kalupahana, a sentence like *vedanāpaccayā saññā* (“*saññā* is conditioned by sensation”) would be expected, instead of *yaṃ vedeti taṃ sañjānāti* (“what one has sensation of, that one recognizes”). According to Kalupahana (p. 34), the shifting from “sensation” (*vedanā*) to “what one has sensation of” (*yaṃ vedeti*), that is, from a general perceptual moment or concept to an activity that involves a real subject in flesh and blood, would represent a “sophisticated way of explaining the intrusion of the so-called Ego. . . . The uninterrupted description flows in such a way that by merely changing the linguistic expression, i.e., moving from ‘the language of dependence’ to a ‘language of agency,’ the Buddha is able to express the most crucial change taking place in the process of perception.”

This observation is not only fundamental for what concerns the Ego, but also opens the door to the consideration that the textual shifting, mentioned by Kalupahana, foreshadows a sort of modification concerning the manner according to which the datum is perceived. Such a modification is hinted at by the presence, in the text, of the two correlative pronouns *yaṃ* and *taṃ*. These two complementary considerations—the Ego’s intrusion on the side of the subject, and the modification

of the way the object is perceived—are two sides of the same coin. Indeed, if we admit, on the one hand, that the “so-called Ego” (equated by Kalupahana to the Upaniṣadic concept of self, *ātman* or *ahaṃ*) takes place between *vedanā* and *saññā*, we have likewise to admit, on the other hand, that the appearance of the “so-called Ego” must necessarily *coincide* with some sort of change occurring also in the way this ‘newborn’ Ego processes the datum. This modification on the side of the perceived object determines the fact that it ‘becomes’ something that can be, and is, actually usable on a psychic and psychological level. The perceived object acquires here the—as it were—role of perceived object *with respect to* the subject. The correlative pronouns *yaṃ* and *taṃ* make it clear that, at this level of the perception, the perceived object becomes a *datum* actually distinguished from the subject, and, as a consequence, it can be accepted and handled by the subject itself. In this respect, it is suggestive to note that the English term “datum” comes from the Latin verb *dare*, which means “to give.” The neuter noun *datum* means “gift,” but also “the given.” In the wake of such a semantic suggestion, we can figuratively evoke here the image according to which, with the appearance of what Kalupahana calls the “so-called Ego,” the ‘given’ (*yaṃ*, the external object) becomes a ‘taken’ (*taṃ*, the internalized object).

This point can be explained also from a different perspective. Up to the contact (*phassa*), the perceptual activity seems to be quite a passive activity, carried out by the sense organ(s). Only from the next level onwards, namely when one has *vedanā* of something (i.e., when one feels, *vedeti*), the sensation opens the door to a deeper psychological level and supports the entrance of an individuality, namely of an experiencer or an active taker of the perceptual datum. As a final remark, it should be noted that this ‘subjectivating’ function of the bare sensation—which is the peculiar task of *saññā*—could be carried on by means of subsequent and reiterated recognitions, classifications, and nominalizations (as the reference to *vitakka* in *MN* 1.111–112 makes clear).

2.2.1. *Excursus 1: The Relation of Viññāṇa to Vedanā and Saññā in Perception.* After having thus outlined the peculiar role played by *saññā* and its difference from *vedanā*, let us proceed by considering the function of *viññāṇa* in relation to both *vedanā* and *saññā*. In this respect, the reference to two canonical passages will suffice here. The first one runs as follows (*MN* 1.292):

vijānāti vijānātī kho āvuso tasmā viññāṇan ti vuccati, kiñ ca vijānāti: sukhan ti pi vijānāti, dukkhan ti pi vijānāti, adukkhamasukhan ti pi vijānātīti.

“One is conscious, one is conscious,” O friends, therefore indeed it is said “consciousness.” And how is one conscious? One is conscious of “pleasure,” and one is conscious of “pain,” and one is conscious of [what is] “neither pain nor pleasure.”

This excerpt reminds us of another one, in which, however, the subject dealt with is *vedanā*. In *SN* 3.86–87, indeed, we read: *kiñ ca bhikkhave vedanaṃ vadetha. vediyatīti kho bhikkhave tasmā vedanā ti vuccati. kiñ ca vediyati. sukham pi vediyati, dukkham pi vediyati, adukkhamasukham pi vediyati* (“And why, O bhikkhus,

should you say sensation? One has sensation, O *bhikkhus*, thus indeed it is said ‘sensation.’ And how has one sensation? One has sensation of pleasure, and one has sensation of pain, and one has sensation of [what is] neither pain nor pleasure”). What is noteworthy, here, is that in the *vedanā* passage *SN* 3.86–87 there is no presence of the particle *iti*, whereas in the *viññāṇa* passage *MN* 1.292 every element of the list is followed by *iti/ti*. Such a consideration stresses the fact that *viññāṇa* avails itself of a certain verbal activity. This verbal activity that takes place at the level of *viññāṇa* is made possible, we can suppose, by virtue of the previous basic nominalization carried out by *saññā*.

The same conclusion can be drawn—we note parenthetically—by comparing *MN* 1.111–112 and *MN* 1.293(3), where the idea of a complex verbal activity at the level of *viññāṇa* is foreshadowed, as it emerges from the synoptic reading of the two sentences *yaṃ saññānāti taṃ vijānāti* (in *MN* 1.293(3)) and *yam saññānāti tam vitakketi* (in *MN* 1.111–112). This is a first point. A further interesting point is derived from the second passage concerning *viññāṇa* (*SN* 3.87):

kiñ ca bhikkhave viññāṇaṃ vadetha. vijānāti kho bhikkhave tasmā viññāṇan ti vuccati. kiñ ca vijānāti. ambilam pi vijānāti, tittakam pi vijānāti, kaṭukam pi vijānāti, madhukam pi vijānāti, khārikam pi vijānāti, akhārikam pi vijānāti, loṇakam pi vijānāti, aloṇakam pi vijānāti.

And why, O *bhikkhus*, should you say consciousness? One is conscious, O *bhikkhus*, thus indeed it is said “consciousness.” And how is one conscious? One is conscious of the sour, one is conscious of the bitter, one is conscious of the acrid, one is conscious of the sweet, one is conscious of the alkaline, one is conscious of the acid, one is conscious of the salty, one is conscious of the insipid.

This passage is somehow problematic. At first glance, indeed, in its general terms it seems to convey the idea that the task of *viññāṇa* is to grasp the peculiar characteristics (tastes) of an object (food). However, we have seen that this kind of activity pertains to *saññā*, as *MN* 1.293(1), quoted above, testifies on account of colors. Moreover, neither can we suppose that tastes are the—as it were—peculiar domain of *viññāṇa*, whereas colors are peculiar to *saññā*, since the abovementioned *AN* 3.79 explicitly tells us that *saññā* recognizes also “what is wrong in food” (*āhāre paṭikkūlasaññā*), which may hint at the presence of either some kind of dirt or some disagreeable taste. Therefore, if *saññā* performs its function on the sensory data received from *phassa* and *vedanā* (these data come from *each* sense organ, as *AN* 3.413, quoted above, points out), and if it can recognize the different colors with regard to *rūpa*, it then remains quite unclear why *saññā* might not recognize the different tastes as regards *rasa*, or the different smells as regards *gandha*, and so on. In order to solve this apparent inconsistency we have necessarily to admit that *saññā* has to carry out, in one and the same manner, its recognitions of *all* the sense data. But if this is the case, then a question arises: wherein lies the distinction between *saññā* and *viññāṇa*? The answer to this question can be derived from what we have said above on account of *MN* 1.292. The presence of the *iti* particle in that passage, indeed, suggests a judging activity at the level of *viññāṇa* that is not

involved at the level of *vedanā* (SN 3.86–87). This means that, though one can experience pleasant or unpleasant sensations, these very sensations are judged as “pleasant” or “unpleasant” by *viññāṇa*. In other words, one feels pleasure and pain, but becomes aware that a certain sensation is pleasant or not only by means of, or after, the intervention of *viññāṇa*.

Interestingly enough, in this particular process it seems that *saññā* does not intervene. Indeed, nowhere in the *Suttapiṭaka* can we find a passage where *saññā* concerns what is *sukha*, *dukkha*, or *adukkhamasukha* (to tell the truth, there is only one exception, which we will take into account below, in section 3.1). This consideration leads us to suppose that, whereas *saññā* has the task of recognizing and categorizing as such the data coming from the senses (red as red, sweet as sweet, etc.), the task of *viññāṇa*, on the other hand, is to judge these recognitions by means of discriminations that point to—so to speak—the “value” of a sensation in relation to its subjective feedback (not sweet as sweet but sweet as pleasant, not rotten as rotten but rotten as unpleasant, etc.). In other words, *saññā* identifies (or tries to identify, since it can always fail, as we will see below) things as they are *in themselves*,¹⁸ whereas *viññāṇa* identifies things as they are *for the perceiver*.

This subjective “value,” I suggest, is elaborated insofar as *viññāṇa* determines how things are from a personal perspective, namely from what things mean for the person who perceives them. Accordingly—and arguably—we can also hypothesize that *viññāṇa* has the faculty of carrying out distinctions, which are more complex than those provided by *saññā*. For instance, if *saññā* can distinguish between two colors (red and yellow), *viññāṇa* could be able to grasp the—as it were—subjective differences existing between those two colors (the agreeable red of the leaves in autumn and the annoying yellow of a neon light). Such a value-assigning activity *saññā* would never be able to elaborate—and the reference to a *saññā* that recognizes “what is wrong in food” does not in itself entail the ability of judging whether what is wrong (be it a taste or whatever else) is also pleasant or not, painful or not. On this basis, therefore, the following pattern can be drawn: *vedanā* puts at the disposal of *saññā* the sense data received directly from *phassa*, and *vedanā* is in itself pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant; *saññā* recognizes the sense data as such *but* does not grasp what there is of pleasant, unpleasant, et cetera in them; *viññāṇa* then elaborates the recognitions coming from *saññā* by *integrating* them with the sensory impressions, pleasant, painful, et cetera, and finally produces a judgment (“this is pleasant, this is not”).

It is worth noting here that the evaluation of the recognitions of *saññā* in reference to the perceiver is made possible at the level of *viññāṇa*, since the intervention of the Ego takes place, as we have seen, between *vedanā* and *saññā*. The production of such a judgment within the perceptual process—and the crux of the matter concerning the distinction between *saññā* and *viññāṇa* lies here—modifies that very process from being a simple recording activity based on categories (to recognize something) to an actual interpretation (to be aware of something).

A last point deserves consideration here. Sometimes, in the passages dealing with this subject matter, *citta* takes the place of *viññāṇa*. Even if this does not occur

often in the *Suttapiṭaka*, and it is indeed very rare, there are at least two sentences that should attract our attention. They are repeated twice in the same passage, namely, MN 1.239: *uppannāpi sukhā vedanā cittaṃ pariyādāya tiṭṭhati . . . uppannāpi dukkhā vedanā cittaṃ pariyādāya tiṭṭhati* (“Even the originated pleasant sensation dwells by taking hold of the mind, . . . even the originated unpleasant sensation dwells by taking hold of the mind”).¹⁹ If we compare this excerpt with the abovementioned MN 1.292, it becomes clear that *citta* also is endowed with the ability of being aware of pleasures and pains derived from sensations.

2.2.2. *Saññā and Comparison*. As a corollary to what precedes, another aspect deserves our attention, since it seems that an activity of comparison between *different* data or objects should also be attributed to *saññā*. On this point, let us take into consideration the following passage, where an example concerning space-related recognitions is made. In AN 5.63, indeed, we read:

catasso imā bhikkhave saññā. katamā catasso. parittam eko saññānāti mahaggatam eko saññānāti appamāṇam eko saññānāti natthi kiñcīti ākiñcaññāyatanam eko saññānāti.

These four, O *bhikkhus*, are the recognitions. Which four? One recognizes the small, another recognizes the extensive, one recognizes the unlimited, another recognizes that “There is nothing [at all],” [and this is] the base of [mental] spoliation.

Although this passage is extrapolated from a context in which indications for the purification of the mind are provided (and so we have perhaps to consider it as related to some meditative exercise), in any case it remains the (interesting) fact that, in order to confer full sense to this excerpt, a comparing activity should be implicitly attributed to *saññā*. Otherwise, it would remain unclear on what basis *saññā* would recognize that a thing is small or big. Indeed, an object can always be considered as small or big in relation to other objects that are bigger or smaller than the first one.

Interestingly enough, we note parenthetically, this comparing activity of *saññā* could be inferred also from some of the canonical passages quoted thus far. For instance, a color, like “red,” can be recognized as such by virtue of a comparison with what is “non-red,” a comparison that leads to the assumption that “red” is neither yellow, nor green, et cetera. The same for the tastes: A sweet taste can be recognized as such by virtue of a comparison with what is non-sweet, that is, by recognizing that sweet is neither rotten, nor salty, et cetera. This aspect of *saññā* is very important as far as our discussion is concerned, since it makes clear that recognitions take place in two ways. On the one hand, there is a positive or direct way, with which the aforementioned cataloging activity is displayed (red as red) and, on the other hand, there is a negative or indirect way, which represents a sort of acid test in order, we may suppose, to be sure of the correctness of the classification of the received sense datum (red as non-yellow, non-green, etc.). In addition, this comparing activity carried out by *saññā* is in itself very functional also for the explanation of complex recognitions, as we will see in the following section.

3. Saññā and Complex Events

So far we have seen how *saññā* is a cataloging activity of several and different elements. Such a cataloging activity is carried out by recognizing the peculiar marks of/in the objects of which one has sensation. The selection and identification of the characteristics of what is processed by the senses is a feature of this arranging faculty that follows, firstly, generic modalities (in order to determine the domain, in a broader sense: taste, smell, etc.) and, subsequently, particular modalities (that specify more in detail the previous determination: red, yellow, etc.). These subsequent recognitions, moreover, seem to depend on a comparing faculty. This is the general description of a—so to speak—simple recognition. However, besides ‘simple’ recognitions, several canonical passages tell us that *saññā* can also process complex events, being capable of ‘large’ modalities of sense data construction. On many occasions, indeed, in the *Suttapiṭaka* we find that *saññā* can recognize and categorize ‘things’ like, for instance, death (*maraṇa*) and danger (*ādīnava*). Besides these more common occurrences, further examples of such a kind of articulated recognition can be found, for instance, in *DN* 2.206, *dīgharattaṃ kho ahaṃ bhante avinipāto avinipātaṃ sañjānāmi* (“Indeed, O honorable one, it is a long time since I recognize a good state of existence as a good state of existence”), and in *MN* 1.124, *ekāsanabhojanaṃ kho ahaṃ bhikkhave bhuñjamāno appābādhatañca sañjānāmi* (“Indeed, O *bhikkhus*, I am one who eats food enjoying [just] one meal [a day], and I recognize [my] good health”).²⁰

The case of complex recognitions deserves a detailed consideration here. Let us begin by saying that compounds such as *maraṇasaññā* or *ādīnavasaññā* occur typically in canonical passages in which meditative states are dealt with—a subject that, as said above, does not concern our discussion.²¹ However, it is exactly because the *Suttapiṭaka* speaks of, for instance, ‘normal’ *rūpasaññā* and ‘meditative’ *rūpasaññā* (as *kaṣiṇāyatana*)²² that we are allowed to suppose that also death, danger, not-self, et cetera can be processed by means of at least two different kinds of recognition. These two kinds would depend on two different modalities of *saññā*: the ‘normal’ one, that is, the one that takes place during a common perceptual act (such as the one concerning one’s good state of existence and/or good health), and the ‘meditative’ *saññā*, which takes place in the path toward spiritual emancipation (*vimutti*). It is with the ‘normal’ recognition of death, danger, et cetera that our discussion is now concerned.

For example, let us begin by taking into consideration *maraṇasaññā*. Though this datum cannot be directly perceived by ordinary senses—indeed, nobody can assert to be able to perceive *the* death, or *a* death—nonetheless the perception of this kind of ‘object’ can be explained by supposing that it depends on recognitions of similar characteristics in dissimilar elements, or of dissimilar characteristics that belong to the same element, which undergoes one or more modifications over time. Therefore, one can recognize *maraṇa*, for instance, by grasping and categorizing, first, a body whose characteristic is to be alive, then, the same body characterized by the presence of worms (*puḷavaka*), and, finally, that body reduced to a skeleton (*aṭṭhika*).²³

The arranging activity of *saññā*, hence, seems to involve in itself the ability of recognizing a thing in its passing through different and subsequent experiences. In this complex process *manas* as a sense organ could play a central role. Indeed, in the Pāli Nikāyas it is repeatedly pointed out that the mind (*manas*) as a sense organ not only can grasp its proper object (the *dhamma*), as all the other sense organs do with their own proper objects, but also has the capacity to gather and coordinate the impressions carried by the other senses.²⁴ Such a collecting activity, performed by *manas* as coordinating *function*, could lead to an arrangement of a mental image (a *dhamma*). This mental image, since it is the proper object of the mind as sense organ, is in its turn made available for a further grasping performed by *manas*. Accordingly, the following pattern can be suggested. In a complex perception, first, (i) *saññā* processes the ‘bare’ impressions coming from all the five material organs, then, (j) after these impressions have been coordinated by *manas* and composed in the form of a mental image, this image is in its turn grasped by *manas*. Furthermore, (k) the perceptual datum aroused by the mental image, since it is carried out by *manas* as a sense organ, can be further processed by *saññā*. On the basis of this pattern, we can hypothesize that point (i) reflects the abovementioned (g) pre-*iti* activity of *saññā*, whereas point (k) reflects the (h) *iti*-nominalization.

The general terms of this *manas*-involving model of recognition of complex events can further be explained in two different ways.

If we take into account, for instance, the recognition of danger, they are as follows. (1) Danger can be considered an *attribute* (*lakkhaṇa*) of a certain ‘object.’ It follows that it must be perceived according to the same modalities through which all the other attributes (such as color and form) are perceived. However, our common experience testifies that danger is not the kind of datum that can be grasped by the so-called material sense organs. Yet, the *Suttapiṭaka* affirms that danger can be recognized by *saññā*, which—as we know—processes the data carried by *phassa* and *vedanā*. This leads us to the conclusion that danger must be a nonmaterial attribute grasped by nonmaterial organs. In other words, it is an attribute of a *dhamma*, which can be grasped by *manas*. Therefore, just as the eye sees the red of an apple, and *saññā* recognizes that red as red, and just as the tongue tastes a bad food, and *saññā* recognizes that food as bad, and so on, just so, similar recognitions take place also in the case of *manas* and mental objects. According to this perspective, the mind would grasp the attribute of danger, and *saññā* should recognize (*should*, because *saññā* can fail!) that danger as danger. The subsequent step is to make this recognition available to *viññāṇa*. In the light of such an explanation, we observe that *saññā* performs only a one-level recognition: the object *with* its attributes.

(2) Or, another explanation can be the following. Danger is not an attribute, but rather a mental image (*dhamma*), which is arranged by *manas* in consequence of several co-ordinations of impressions received by the other senses. What changes from the previous explanation is that here memory is involved in the process, and *saññā* performs not a one-level but a two-level recognition. The first level concerns the ‘bare’ object and the second one concerns the memorized mental image “danger.” This is an interesting suggestion because, if danger is interpreted not as a

mere attribute, but rather as a *dhamma* (i.e., an actual but mental object of perception that can possibly, but not necessarily, be referred or attributed to other things), it follows that it can be recognized also without the support of a material object. This means that it can be grasped by having recourse to a memorized mental impression, called to mind when necessary (and probably it is also for this reason, I suspect, that *saññā* plays such a central role in meditation). Parenthetically, it is worthy of note that the intervention of (*manas'*) memory during a recognition process can be inferred from canonical passages such as: *ajjhataṃ rūpasaññī eko bahiddhā rūpāni passati* ("One who recognizes internally a form/color sees external forms/colors"). I assume that this passage is hinting at the idea that wants that, before recognizing something, one needs to recollect the proper category that the external datum belongs to. The lack of the intervention of memory, on the contrary, does not change the fact that a certain object meets the sense organ, but impedes its recognition: *ajjhataṃ arūpasaññī eko bahiddhārūpāni passati* ("One who does not recognize internally a form/color, sees [in any case] external forms/colors").²⁵

Instead of opting for one of the two possibilities, on the basis of what can be consistently inferred from the *Suttapīṭaka*, in my opinion both interpretations are equally plausible in order to explain how 'normal' recognitions of complex events do take place.

As a final remark, it emerges that in such complex recognitions the comparing activity of *saññā* plays an important role. The recognition of danger, for instance, can be the consequence of a particular mental organization of some perceptual information coming from the surroundings, after a comparison with other non-dangerous, or less dangerous, situations (that could be stored in memory as *dhammas*).

To sum up, *saññā* is said to perform a recognizing activity and a subsequent arrangement of the several data coming from internal (related to *manas*) and external (related to all the other senses) sense data. This arrangement depends on several assimilations, that is to say, on the faculty of putting the similar with the similar in a reiterated manner, also by virtue of comparisons.²⁶ This being the case, it follows that the term "recognition"—which I take as the most appropriate translation for *saññā*—should be intended in a broader sense, that is, not limited to simple sense data (as colors or tastes) but concerning also complex events (as death or danger). This multi-level activity of arranging the sense data according to similarities and dissimilarities is expressed, as said above, by the verb *sañjānāti*, "s/he recognizes."

In the light of all the preceding, then, we argue that the translations of *saññā* proposed by both Boisvert and Harvey seem to be the most suitable—even if it should be pinpointed that Harvey, who prefers the term "co-gnition," focuses his attention mostly on the co-gnizing activity of *saññā*, confining its arranging activity only in the background.²⁷ Harvey, indeed, does not accept the translation "recognition" since, he says (1996, p. 94):

'[R]ecognition' has the unfortunate connotation that it is always a form of correct knowledge. In English, to say one 'recognises' something or someone precludes any error in cognition. *Saññā* certainly is a form of classificatory, labelling, interpreting activity, but it includes both correct labelling ('recognition') and incorrect labelling (misinterpretation).

Though I agree with Harvey on this last aspect of his explanation, I would like nonetheless to suggest here a different interpretation for ‘recognition.’ Even if it is true that, according to common sense, ‘recognition’ refers to the act of identifying something or someone, the etymology of this word, however, conveys the sense of “act of cognizing again” (from the Latin *re-cognitio*), and “act of cognizing rightly” is a secondary or derived meaning. Therefore, strictly speaking, a recognition is nothing but a cognition taking place after another similar cognition. For this very reason, *only* if we accept that *saññā* performs recognitions (correct or incorrect though they may be) we can *also* admit that it can perform an arranging activity (which is in itself based on subsequent recognitions).

3.1. Excursus 2: When Saññā Fails

Let us now take into account the case in which *saññā* fails its task. As is well known, according to the *Suttapiṭaka*, *saññā* is indeed not always reliable, and wrong recognitions can take place. Hence, throughout the Pāli Nikāyas we meet with passages that list four wrong *saññās*, as in AN 2.53:

1. *anicce niccan ti saññāvipallāso* (“The distortion of recognizing the permanent in what is impermanent”),
2. *dukkhe sukhan ti saññāvipallāso* (“The distortion of recognizing pleasure in what is painful”),
3. *anattani attā ti saññāvipallāso* (“The distortion of recognizing the self in what is not-self”), and
4. *asubhe subhan ti saññāvipallāso* (“The distortion of recognizing the pure in what is impure”).

In all of these, note the presence of *iti/ti*. As regards *dukkhe sukhan ti saññāvipallāso*, a brief note is needed here. Indeed, in section 2.2.1 we have seen that *saññā* cannot recognize pleasure and pain, whereas these feelings are directly grasped by *viññāṇa/citta* from *vedanā*. I am persuaded that the present sentence does not contradict our previous assumption. In its entirety the passage runs thus: *dukkhe bhikkhave sukhan ti saññāvipallāso cittavipallāso diṭṭhivipallāso*, that is, “O bhikkhus, [there are] the distortion of recognizing, the distortion of being conscious of, the distortion of seeing [lit. the recognition-distortion, the consciousness-distortion, the view-distortion] pleasure in what is painful.” A possible explanation is that these three distortions seem in some way to be closely related to each other, so that we can perhaps suppose that they take place all together. The presence of *citta*, furthermore, should suffice to allow us to imagine that consciousness somehow ‘informs’ both *saññā* and *diṭṭhi* on *dukkha* and *sukha*. Or, a still easier—and perhaps more likely—solution is to consider that in AN 2.53 the terms *dukkha* and *sukha* have a meaning that is essentially different from the meaning they have in the passages taken into consideration in section 2.2.1. Indeed, in these passages *sukha* and *dukkha* indicate factual feelings that affect the body, since the context concerns the pleasure that depends on, for instance, a sweet taste or the pain that depends on seeing an annoying light. In AN 2.53, on the contrary, the

framework is epistemological: not bodily feelings but an act of knowledge is primarily involved.

This assumption becomes clearer when we consider that according to Buddhist ‘ontology’ (let me use this term here, for the sake of brevity) nothing is *sukha*; rather, everything is essentially *dukkha* (first Noble Truth). According to Buddhist psychology, on the contrary, the existence of pleasant experiences is actually admitted. Therefore, if this epistemological interpretation of *dukkha* and *sukha* in AN 2.53 is accepted, it also follows that this case can be explained by having recourse to the models (1) *dukkha* as *lakkhaṇa* of things, and/or (2) *dukkha* as a *dhamma*, in the previous section 3. Accordingly, *sukha* cannot be admitted, either as a *lakkhaṇa* or as a *dhamma*. Indeed, if things are essentially *dukkha*, then *sukha* cannot be detected as an actual attribute of things (*sukha* and *dukkha* being mutually exclusive), and therefore a correct *saññā* cannot grasp any *sukha* in them. The text seems to corroborate this perspective, since it explains: *dukkhe bhikkhave dukkhan ti na saññāvipallāso* (“O bhikkhus, [there is] the non-distortion of recognizing pain in what is painful”)—but there is no mention of recognizing pleasure in what is pleasurable here, or elsewhere in the *Suttapiṭaka*. The conclusion is that, in AN 2.53, we are in the presence of a failure of *saññā* concerning the recognition of *dukkha* as *dukkha* in a process aiming at grasping *dukkha* itself, that is, *dukkha* as an objective category. For this reason, no reference is needed in AN 2.53 to any further personal interpretation involving the ‘value’ that *dukkha* has for the perceiver (which is, as we have seen, the task of *viññāṇa*).

We find another very particular example of an erroneous recognition in a sort of prophecy occurring in DN 3.73:

dasavassāyukesu bhikkhave manussesu sattāhaṃ satthantarakappo bhavissati, te aññamaññamhi migasaññam paṭilabhissanti tesam tiṅhāni satthāni hatthesu pātubhavissanti

When men [will] live ten years, there will be an interval of time of seven days [called] ‘of the swords.’ They [i.e., those men] will recognize each other as prey [more literally: the one will get in the other the recognition of a gazelle] and sharp swords will appear in their hands.

A further type of failed recognition—even if the term *saññā* does not occur in the text—is described in MN 1.359–360, where Gotama (!), misled by Potaliya’s clothes, wrongly infers that the latter, who had renounced the worldly life, is still a householder. The two have the following discussion:

tayidaṃ bho gotama nacchannaṃ, tayidaṃ nappatirūpaṃ, yaṃ maṃ tvaṃ gahapati vādena samudācarasīti. te hi te gahapati ākāra te liṅga te nimittā yathā taṃ gahapatissāti

[Potaliya:] “This, O honourable Gotama, is not proper, this is not suitable, that you address me with the word ‘householder.’” [Gotama:] “But, O householder, your appearance, marks, and signs are like those of a householder.”

The presence here of the terms *ākāra* (“form,” “appearance”), *liṅga* (“mark,” “characteristic”) and *nimittā* (“sign”) allows us to conclude that also in this last case a process

of failed recognition is taking place, since appearance, marks, and signs are—as we have seen—the data that *saññā* processes.

4. Conclusions

This general assessment of *saññā* can be summarized as follows. The word *saññā*, in its technical meaning referring to a ‘normal’ perception (section 1), indicates an ordering activity that is carried out by grasping the distinctive marks of things of which one has sensation. This activity involves (correctly or wrongly—section 3.1) recognition and naming (section 1.1.2). Hence, among the various translations of *saññā* proposed by Western scholars (section 1.1.1), the one accepted here is “recognition.” In order to classify the various sense data received from *phassa*, *saññā* is also endowed with a comparing faculty (section 2.2.2). This faculty concerns the object, but does not concern the subjective “weight” or “value” involved in a sensation, whether pleasant, painful, et cetera. To be more precise, *saññā* can recognize (or should recognize) both simple objects and complex events (section 3) as they are, whereas the value-assigning judgment is an activity pertaining to *viññāṇa*, which seems to derive the pleasantness and/or the painfulness of a sense datum directly from *vedanā* (section 2.2.1).

Moreover, although perception is said to be a unitary event, nonetheless our textual sources clarify the following: The activity of *saññā* takes place after the sensation (*vedanā*) has processed the sense-object (as a pleasant, unpleasant, or indifferent feeling), and *saññā* has the task of collecting the objective information coming from *phassa* (which leads to *vedanā*—section 2.1), of carrying out a subsequent organization of that information into a datum, and of making it eventually available to the consciousness (*viññāṇa*) (section 2). By virtue of its process of constitution of the categories, according to which the various sense data are classified, *saññā* takes place in the moment of the emergence into perception of the sense of Ego, that is, when the grasper/categorizer begins to be differentiated from the object grasped/categorized (section 2.2). Hence, it is in consequence of the intervention of the sense of Ego at the level of *saññā* that *viññāṇa* can subsequently carry out its aforesaid subject-oriented value-assigning activity.

Even if the present study is confined to the analysis of the function of *saññā* in ‘normal’ perceptions, I hope that the assessment of its role and activity provided here—however incomplete it is—could help further investigations related mainly to two different domains.

On the one hand, a better definition of the ‘normal’ *saññā* could provide a basis on which to develop further analysis of the meditative training according to the early Buddhist texts. In particular, an interesting aspect in this sense could be the investigation of the differences and/or similarities existing between the ‘normal’ perception—this involves mainly *phassa*, *vedanā*, *saññā*, and *viññāṇa*—and the perception in a state of meditation, specifically for what concerns the peculiar function of *saññā*. In this respect, of a certain interest might be to try to better understand if there is, and wherein does it lie, a difference between the activity performed

by *saññā* in normal perception and in meditation. This approach could shed light on the meaning of those *saññā*-related expressions—as for instance the still not entirely clear but emblematic construct *nevasaññānāsaññāyatana*—that indicate particular mental attitudes taking place in the higher levels of meditative absorption or *jhāna*.

On the other hand, the present article provides material that can be useful for the study of *saññā* in the Buddhist classification of living/sentient beings. As is well known, indeed, in the Pāli Canon living/sentient beings are classified by the number of legs they have, by their form, and also by the possession or non-possession of *saññā*. A possible starting point for such an analysis could be the interesting taxonomy that we find in *SN* 5.41–42:

sattā apadā vā dvipadā vā catuppadā vā bahuppadā vā rūpino vā arūpino vā saññino vā asaññino vā nevasaññino vā nāsaññino vā

Living beings that have no legs or have two legs, or four legs or many legs, that have form or do not have form, that have *saññā* or do not have *saññā*, that neither have *saññā* nor non-*saññā*.²⁸

Finally, in this particular context, a further investigation could concern a comparative analysis of the two terms *nevasaññīna* and *nāsaññīna* with the aforementioned expression *nevasaññānāsaññāyatana*.

Notes

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The following abbreviations are used in the text and Notes:

AN *Aṅguttara Nikāya*. See Morris, Hardy, and Warder 1995.

DN *Dīgha Nikāya*. See Rhys Davids and Carpenter 1995.

MN *Majjhima Nikāya*. See Trenckner and Chalmers 1993.

SN *Saṃyutta Nikāya*. See Feer and Somaratne 1999.

- 1 – For *rūpasaññā* and *saddasaññā* see *DN* 2.309, *MN* 1.62, etc. For *aṭṭhikasaññā* see *AN* 2.17, *SN* 5.129 ff. For *puḷavakasaññā* see *AN* 1.42, 2.17; *SN* 5.131. For *ādīnavasaññā* see *AN* 3.79, 5.107; *DN* 1.79, 3.253, etc. For *aniccasaññā* see *AN* 3.443, 4.353; *SN* 3.155, 5.132; *MN* 1.138, etc. For *anattasaññā* see *AN* 1.41, 3.444; *SN* 5.133; etc. Moreover, see Boisvert 1995, p. 85 and nn. 40–43).

- 2 – Consider, for instance, the relevant role played by *saññā* in the so-called four immaterial *jhānas* (Gunaratana 1980, pp. 133–135, 138–140). Moreover, compare AN 2.167 (in which *hānabhāgiyā saññā*, *ṭhitibhāgiyā saññā*, *visesabhāgiyā saññā*, and *nibbedhabhāgiyā saññā* are mentioned) with DN 3.277 (in which mention is made of four kinds of concentration: *hānabhāgiyo samādhi*, *ṭhitibhāgiyo samādhi*, *visesabhāgiyo samādhi*, and *nibbedhabhāgiyo samādhi*). Consider also AN 4.302–306 and 5.63. In this respect, particularly worthy of note are sentences such as *obhāsañceva sañjānāma dassanañca rūpānaṃ* (“We recognize the radiance and the appearance of the [devas’] shapes”—MN 3.157); *tepi tenobhāsenā aññamaññaṃ sañjānanti* (“And those [beings] recognize each other by means of this radiance”—MN 3.120, 3.124; DN 2.12, 2.15; AN 2.130–131; etc.); *bhagavato sāsane uḷāraṃ pubbenāparaṃ visesaṃ sañjānanti* (“They recognize what is excellent in the instruction of the Bhagavanta, [and they also recognize] the subsequent attainment [in meditation] by means of the previous one”—MN 2.121, 2.124; SN 5.154, 5.156; etc.), and so on, which refer to some deep state of self-awareness. Exemplary and somehow hyperbolic is, in this context, *Suttanipāta* 874ab (Andersen and Smith 2010): *na saññasaññi na visaññasaññi | nopi asaññi na vibhūtasaññi* | (“He is neither a recognizer of recognitions, nor a recognizer of non-recognitions, neither a non-recognizer nor one whose recognitions have disappeared”).
- 3 – Harvey 1996, p. 94: “The more usual ‘perception’ is certainly too broad, as it covers the combined activity of *saññā* and *viññāṇa*, and in any case hardly covers *saññā* of a mental object”; and (p. 141): “‘*Saññā*’ is often translated as ‘perception,’ but this is inappropriate, both because it is only part of the perceptual process and because one can have a *saññā* of a mental object but cannot, in English, be said to ‘perceive’ such an object.”
- 4 – Seyfort Ruegg (1998, p. 138) accepts Gómez’ and Hamilton’s renderings, while Vetter (2000) admits both the meanings of “ideation” and “cognition.”
- 5 – In my translation I leave for the moment in Pāli not only the term *saññā*, but also the verb *sañjānāti* (and the neuter *sañjānana* in the following quote), which refers to the peculiar activity of the *saññākkhandha*. This passage occurs also in SN 3.87 and *Milindapañha with Milindaṭṭhaka* 61 (Trenckner and Jaini 1986); see, moreover, AN 1.40. This excerpt led Vetter (2000, pp. 24–25) to discuss, even if in brief, the relation existing between *saññā* and the *kasiṇāyatana*s (DN 3.268; MN 2.14–15; AN 5.46, 5.60). Consider the particular role of *saññā* when it processes colors as *kasiṇāyatana*s, in DN 3.260–261.
- 6 – See also AN 5.107.
- 7 – In classical Sanskrit (see Monier Williams 1996, s.v.) one of the meanings of *saṃjñā* is “name.” By virtue of its derivation from *saṃjñā* (lit. “to know together with,” and hence “to agree”), this term signifies also “agreement”: it can be supposed that these meanings depend on the fact that to be in agreement with someone one needs the use of a common way of communication, which is in its turn based on a common and shared way of naming things.

- 8 – Same passage in *MN* 1.281.
- 9 – In the light of these considerations, should we consider the meditative base called *nevasaññānāsaññāyatana* as conveying perhaps the sense of a neither naming nor non-naming status of mind?
- 10 – Although *vedanā* is usually rendered in English by “feeling,” I prefer here to translate it with “sensation” both because *vedanā* depends on *sense* organs and because it *has* a sense, that is, a precise direction that begins with the encounter of the single sense organ and its object and ends, as we will see, in a (pleasant, unpleasant, indifferent) feeling.
- 11 – The definition of *cetanā*, according to Rhys Davids and Stede (1997), is: “state of *ceto* in action, thinking as active thought.” McDermott (2003, p. 28) clarifies: “*cetanā* is not a matter of will alone, but also involves the impulse or drive to carry through with what is intended.”
- 12 – *SN* 2.3–4: *katamañca bhikkhave nāmarūpaṃ. vedanā, saññā, cetanā, phasso, manasikāro, idam vuccati nāmaṃ. cattaro ca mahābhūtā catunnañca mahābhūtānaṃ upādāya rūpaṃ, idam vuccati nāmarūpaṃ.* See also *MN* 1.53 and 1.185. The meaning of *mahābhūtānaṃ upādāya rūpaṃ* is examined by Boisvert (1995, pp. 37–40). Moreover, see Vetter 2000, pp. 21–22 and nn. 26, 27.
- 13 – Compare this perspective with what Harvey (1995, p. 117) argues on *SN* 2.3–4: “Here, *nāma*, literally ‘name,’ refers to those mental states which are particularly associated with sensitivity to and reaction to objects of the physical senses and the mind-organ.” Vetter (2000, p. 21) pinpoints that, by *rūpa*, “the body must be meant, as in *MN* . . . I, 190;] the enclosure of space that depends on bones, sinews, flesh and skin is said to get the name *rūpa* and in *SN* [3.59] . . . the definition is immediately followed by the remark that the arising and cessation of *rūpa* depend on the arising and cessation of food (*āhāra*).”
- 14 – See also *SN* 2.3; *AN* 3.413, 4.147; *DN* 2.58, 3.244.
- 15 – Compare with *DN* 2.308–309, 3.244–245, etc., in which the same compounds are used: *cakkhusamphassajā* etc., for *vedanā*, and *rūpasaññā* etc., for *saññā*.
- 16 – The same description is repeated also for the other sense organs.
- 17 – For a clear examination of the two different concepts of *viññāṇa* (i.e., as a synonym of *citta* and as bare primary sense-consciousness) in the Pāli Canon, I refer the reader to Vetter 2000, pp. 63–73.
- 18 – It will be clearer in section 3 that not only the sense data coming from *phassa* but also the result of the arranging activity of *manas* over the data coming from the other senses can be recognized by *saññā* as a thing in itself, that is, a thing that, at this level, has no subjective ‘value.’
- 19 – Compare with similar expressions in *MN* 1.240, 1.243–244, 1.247–249; *SN* 5.302. Moreover, see Johansson 1965, p. 171.
- 20 – Same sentence in *MN* 1.437 and 1.473.

- 21 – As regards these particular cases, Vetter (2000, p. 26) suggests translating *saññā* as “contemplation.” Consider, for instance, *MN 3.104: evameva kho ānanda bhikkhu amanasikarivā gāmasaññaṃ amanasikarivā manussasaññaṃ arañña-saññaṃ paṭicca manasikaroti ekattaṃ*. Let us translate this excerpt following Vetter’s suggestion: “Even so, indeed, O Ānanda, a *bhikkhu*, not developing attention on the contemplation of a village, not developing attention on the contemplation of men, develops attention on the ground of the contemplation of the forest.”
- 22 – See note 5 above. Taking into consideration Vetter’s suggestion referred to in the preceding note, and as far as, for instance, the domain of color is concerned, we could distinguish between its *recognition* (normal *saññā*) and its *contemplation* (*saññā* during meditation).
- 23 – See note 1 above. On the role and centrality of *saññā* as faculty of recognition of the different states of a corpse’s decay, see also *Milindapañha with Milindaṭṭhikā* 332 (Trenckner and Jaine 1986). Moreover *DN 3.226, AN 4.48–49*, etc.
- 24 – See *MN 1.295 and SN 5.218 (imesaṃ kho brāhmaṇa pañcannam indriyānam nānāvisayānaṃ nānāgocarānaṃ na aññamaññassa gocaravisayam paccanubhontānam mano paṭisaraṇam mano ca nesaṃ gocaravisayam paccanubhoti)*. See Johansson 1965, pp. 183–184.
- 25 – See *DN 2.110, 3.260–261; MN 2.13–14; AN 1.40–41*; etc.
- 26 – Consider Harvey, who writes (1995, p. 141): “it [scil. *saññā*] can cognize it [scil. the color], i.e. know that it is like other similar phenomena, or recognize it.”
- 27 – See Harvey 1995, p. 141: “‘co-gnition’ . . . can, in fact, be seen as an appropriate translation.” Boisvert, on the contrary, suggests that “recognition” has to be considered the most correct term for translating *saññā*; indeed, Boisvert specifies (1995, p. 78): “The word ‘recognition,’ on the other hand, tends to imply that the subject imposes certain categories upon the percept in order to classify it. The term ‘recognition’ can definitely not be mistakenly ascribed to the concept of *viññāṇa*.”
- 28 – Same passage in *AN 2.34*.

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