religions

MDPI

Article

Why Should Sīla Lead to Samādhi? Hindrances, Pleasure, and the Transformation of Mind in Early Buddhism

Grzegorz Polak

Institute of Philosophy, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University (UMCS), pl. Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej 4, 20-031 Lublin, Poland; grzegorz.polak@umcs.pl

Abstract

Why should *sīla* lead to *samādhi*? If *samādhi* is interpreted as an independently trainable capacity for sustained concentration, its systematic dependence on ethical and motivational cultivation is difficult to explain. I argue that, in relevant Nikāya contexts, being *samāhita* need not be constituted by a particular relation between mind and object, including the exclusive occupation of consciousness by a single determinate content. Cognitive workability and readiness for purposive use may instead identify a more general functional feature of being *samāhita*, without excluding states of intense deliberate engagement with a particular object. Against this background, I examine the five hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*) as a possible bridge between conduct, *samādhi*, and understanding. Several hindrances do more than distract attention: they express motivational pressures that recruit cognition toward acquisition, resistance, reconsideration, or resolution. Disciplined conduct, sense restraint, moderation, and related practices can progressively weaken the motivational dispositions from which these pressures arise. Their weakening can therefore contribute directly to the mind's becoming gathered and workable by reducing processes that repeatedly pre-empt cognition. The same transformation also has an affective dimension. In the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*, recognition of the abandonment of the hindrances gives rise to *pāmojja*, *pīti*, tranquillity, and *sukha*. Drawing also on the *Cūḷadukkhakkhandha Sutta*, I suggest that this experience can do more than reinforce an intellectual understanding of the drawbacks of sensuality that remains soteriologically insufficient. When the desired object remains unobtained while wanting itself subsides and wellbeing nevertheless improves, the practitioner encounters potentially transformative experiential evidence concerning the causal structure of *dukkha*: what appeared to be a felt deficiency—one important form of *dukkha*—caused by the absence of the desired object may instead have been produced or intensified by the desire itself. The resulting model presents *sīla*, the absence of the hindrances, affective transformation, *samādhi*, and understanding as dynamically connected aspects of a single developmental process and helps explain why ethical discipline can progressively reduce both motivational disturbance and the need for continuous effortful regulation.

Keywords: early Buddhism; Pāli Nikāyas; sīla; samādhi; five hindrances (nīvaraṇa); jhāna; Buddhist ethics; pleasure

Check for updates

Academic Editors: Chien-Te Lin and Taesoo Kim

Received: 20 September 2026
Revised: 29 October 2026
Accepted: 31 October 2026
Published: 5 November 2026

Copyright: © 2026 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license.

1. Introduction: The Problem of the Sīla–Samādhi Relation

The threefold set of *sīla*, *samādhi*, and *paññā* belongs to the most familiar structures of Buddhist thought. Its familiarity, however, can conceal a significant explanatory problem. The *Dussīla Sutta* (AN 5.24)[1] states that when *sīla* is lacking, a supporting condition (*upanisā*) for right *samādhi* is destroyed, while the *Cakkavattirāja Sutta* (SN 55.1) describes the virtues

dear to the noble ones (*ariyakantāni sīlāni*) as *samādhisaṃvattanikāni*, that is, conducive to or leading toward *samādhi*. The *Mahācattārīsaka Sutta* (MN 117) makes the dependence even more explicit by presenting noble right *samādhi* as supported and equipped by the other seven path factors (*saupanisaṃ saparikkhāraṃ*). This strengthens the textual premise of the present inquiry without resolving its explanatory problem: the relation is explicitly affirmed, while the psychological processes through which these factors contribute to *samādhi* still require explanation. The texts thus present the connection not merely as a conventional ordering of successive stages of practice, but as a more fundamental causal or developmental relation whose nature requires further explanation.

From a functional point of view, it is relatively more straightforward to understand why *paññā* should depend on a settled mind. The preceding connection is, however, less self-evident. Why should refraining from killing, stealing, lying, sexual misconduct, or various forms of sensual indulgence make a person better able to attain *samādhi*?[2]

This becomes particularly problematic if *samādhi* is understood primarily as a trainable capacity for focusing and sustaining attention, as capacities of this general kind do not appear to depend in any obvious way on moral character. It is commonplace that immoral people can nevertheless be capable of prolonged attention, resistant to distraction, and exceptionally effective in pursuing complex goals. If *samādhi* is conceived as a capacity that can in principle be trained independently, its systematic dependence on ethical and motivational cultivation still needs to be explained rather than assumed.

One important explanation appeals to freedom from remorse (*avippaṭisāra*). Sun has recently drawn particular attention to canonical sequences in which moral discipline gives rise to freedom from remorse and this, through gladness, joy, tranquillity, and pleasure, eventually leads to *samādhi* (Sun 2024, pp. 2082–84). This certainly describes a genuine causal mechanism and not merely a formal association between morality and meditation. Conduct experienced as blameworthy may give rise to regret, self-reproach, agitation, or repeated reconsideration of what one has done, while the absence of such disturbance can clearly make mental settling easier. Sun is therefore right to insist on the importance of *avippaṭisāra* as an intermediary between moral discipline and meditation.

At the same time, freedom from remorse seems unlikely to provide an exhaustive explanation of the relation. Remorse can surely disturb only insofar as an action is in some way experienced as regrettable or blameworthy. Suppose that a person lies, steals, or behaves aggressively yet no longer feels remorse about doing so. What, on the remorse-based account alone, would prevent such a person from concentrating successfully? The problem becomes particularly acute if *samādhi* is understood primarily as an independently trainable capacity for sustained attentional concentration. In that case, remorse appears as a contingent psychological obstacle rather than as an explanation of why ethical cultivation should be conducive to concentration. Indeed, moral sensitivity might seem to create an additional vulnerability since the conscientious practitioner is disturbed by misconduct, whereas the morally insensitive one escapes precisely this cost. The point that I want to make here is not that remorse is unimportant, but that its removal appears to describe one route from disciplined conduct toward mental ease rather than the entire causal structure connecting *sīla* with *samādhi*. Sun's own treatment is broader than a simple guilt model, since it connects freedom from remorse with a wider network of meditative and affective states (Sun 2024, pp. 2088–90); the present question is whether still other mechanisms are required as well.

A different answer may perhaps be provided in terms of karma. If wholesome and unwholesome conduct have consequences for the future condition of the agent, then the dependence of meditative development upon conduct may be understood as one instance of this wider causal order. Nothing in the present argument requires us to reject such an

explanation. It operates, however, at a different explanatory level. To say that wholesome conduct karmically supports favourable conditions for meditation is to affirm a causal relation without yet specifying the psychological processes through which the transformation represented within the gradual training takes place. The question we are pursuing here concerns precisely this more proximate mechanism: what changes in a person who lives according to *sīla* so that *samādhi* becomes more readily possible?

A further line of response concerns the dangers associated with meditative attainments themselves. Ethical formation can plausibly protect a practitioner from becoming attached to intense meditative pleasure, from developing pride on account of unusual attainments, or from misusing supernatural powers (*iddhi*) and other extraordinary capacities. Such considerations may explain why meditative power without ethical development is dangerous or soteriologically incomplete. They do not, however, answer the prior question, since they concern how an already acquired capacity is used, interpreted, or integrated into a path of liberation. Nor do they explain why *sīla* should contribute to the production of that capacity in the first place.

The contents of the early Buddhist training make this problem still more striking. The *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* (DN 2) and several other texts of similar structure presenting the so-called gradual training include within their account of *sīla* familiar and expected prohibitions of killing, taking what is not given, sexual activity, and false speech, but the discipline extends considerably further. It includes abstention from dancing, singing, instrumental music and shows, from garlands, perfumes and adornment, and from luxurious beds and various other forms of indulgence; it also rejects mundane or idle conversation about such matters as rulers, wars, food, clothing, relatives, vehicles, towns, and other topics. Several texts (e.g., the *Sabbāsava Sutta* [MN 2]) instruct the practitioner to use food reflectively, not for amusement, indulgence, beautification, or adornment, but for sustaining the body and supporting the holy life. The broader gradual training adds sense restraint, moderation in eating, wakefulness, contentment, and *sati-sampajañña* before the development of deeper meditative states. Ben-David has emphasized that the gradual training contains an extended pre-meditative phase in which practices such as sense restraint, moderation in eating, wakefulness, contentment, and *sati-sampajañña* begin the process of mental development before formal meditation (Ben-David 2024, pp. 2386–87, 2389–95).

It is not necessary at this stage to decide whether abstaining from killing and abstaining from entertainment are "ethical" in precisely the same sense.[3]

What matters for the present argument is that the gradual training treats restraints of seemingly different kinds as relevant to the psychological transformation that precedes *samādhi*. Preventing harm to others alone cannot explain why eating for amusement, seeking entertainment, or engaging habitually in certain kinds of conversation should matter for meditative development. Nor can appeals to remorse, as the main psychological mechanism, easily do all the explanatory work, since many such activities need not be accompanied by any sense of wrongdoing. The range of the discipline therefore encourages us to look for a mechanism capable of connecting patterns of ordinary behaviour, motivation, affect, and the later condition of the meditating mind.

This problem has by no means been ignored. Recent scholarship has substantially advanced our understanding of the relation between ethical cultivation and meditation, and the next section will consider these contributions in detail. In this article, I do not attempt to offer a comprehensive theory of the *sīla–samādhi* relation. Rather, I consider whether several features that are often discussed separately—the weakening of urge-driven behaviour, the disappearance of the five hindrances, the arising of pleasure, the condition of being *samāhita*, and the subsequent possibility of insight and psychological transformation—can be understood as parts of a connected process.

Let us take the five hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*) as our starting point. If they were merely distractions from a meditation object, their relevance to *samādhi* would be relatively straightforward. The Nikāyas, however, also describe them as weakening understanding and preventing the mind from becoming malleable, workable, and properly *samāhita* (e.g., AN 5.51, SN 46.33, SN 46.39). This raises a wider question regarding the mechanism through which these states influence cognition. Several of them appear to express forms of motivational dissatisfaction: something is wanted, resisted, reconsidered, escaped, or resolved. Their disappearance may therefore matter not simply because an attentional obstacle has been removed, but because the mind is no longer already recruited by these competing demands.

A second question then arises. Why should freedom from the hindrances be affectively significant? I suggest that the answer may be simpler than it first appears. The ordinary experiential baseline should not be imagined as affectively neutral. A mind repeatedly driven by sensual wanting, aversion, restlessness, remorse, and doubt is continually confronted with something to be acquired, resisted, escaped, reconsidered, or resolved. A lucid mind temporarily free from these pressures is therefore already in a markedly improved condition: nothing further is immediately required for the present situation to be satisfactory. This need not mean that freedom from the hindrances is simply identical with the *sukha* that appears later in the canonical sequence. In DN 2, recognition that the hindrances have been abandoned gives rise to *pāmojja*, followed by *pīti*, bodily tranquillity, and *sukha*. Recognition of release can thus further develop and intensify the affective consequences of a condition that is already one of considerable wellbeing. The resulting wellbeing can in turn reduce the motivation to seek gratification or escape elsewhere and thereby support *samādhi*. Finally, such experience may give practical force to an understanding already present within Buddhist cultivation: wellbeing need not arise through successful satisfaction of the pressures that ordinarily motivate action, but may improve as those pressures themselves subside.

The argument therefore moves from conduct to motivation, from motivation to the hindrances, from the absence of the hindrances to wellbeing, pleasure, and *samādhi*, and finally from this transformed condition to a possible change in the practical significance of prior understanding. This is offered as a philosophical reconstruction of one psychologically important strand of the Nikāya path, not as an exhaustive, all-embracing theory of *samādhi*, liberating knowledge, or *nibbāna*.

2. Previous Approaches to the Sīla–Samādhi Relation

The connection between *sīla* and *samādhi* has received increasingly serious treatment in recent scholarship. While these approaches differ considerably in their understanding of the relevant mechanism, they together undermine a simple picture in which ethical conduct merely precedes meditation as an external qualification. Instead, they suggest that the practices grouped around *sīla* can alter intention, affect, habitual behaviour, and the condition of the mind that subsequently enters seated meditation.

As broader background, Gethin's comparative study of schemes of the Buddhist path in the Nikāyas and Āgamas shows that the gradual pattern on which much of the present argument relies is neither peculiar to a single discourse nor an incidental arrangement of its components. The Dīgha Nikāya/Dīrghāgama scheme recurrently moves from moral restraint through guarding the senses, mindfulness and awareness, contentment, and seclusion to abandonment of the five hindrances, the *jhāna*s, and subsequent knowledges; related versions occur elsewhere in the Nikāya–Āgama literature (Gethin 2020, pp. 15–17, 24–25). Gethin accordingly regards this as an important, and in the Dīrgha collections apparently normative, way of presenting the path, while also emphasizing the existence of other schemes. The present inquiry concerns the psychological relation among several stages

within this particular and widely attested pattern rather than claiming that it exhausts early Buddhist accounts of cultivation.

Giustarini has argued against treating *sīla* as a preliminary stage that has fulfilled its function once meditation begins. On his reading of the Nikāyas, conduct and intention (*cetanā*) influence one another reciprocally. Action proceeds from intention, but disciplined action can in turn modify intention and habitual patterns of response. In this sense, the repeated practice of restraint does not merely prevent particular actions: it participates in a gradual movement away from attachment and toward renunciation. Giustarini extends this point beyond the initial stages of practice, arguing that *sīla* continues to affect cognitive factors throughout the path and may therefore be assigned what he calls a "quasi-cognitive function" (Giustarini 2017, pp. 54–56, 67). His discussion of sense restraint and moderation in eating is particularly relevant here, since these practices occupy precisely the territory between overt behavioural discipline and the transformation of mental processes (Giustarini 2017, pp. 59–60). He also interprets mature ethical development as involving increasingly spontaneous wholesome action and a corresponding reduction in the need for deliberate volitional exertion (Giustarini 2017, pp. 55–56). Regardless of whether one agrees with all elements of this interpretation, it offers an important account of *sīla* as a practice that can reshape the motivational conditions of subsequent cognition rather than simply constrain outward behaviour.

Sun approaches the transition from a different direction by concentrating on freedom from remorse (*avippaṭisāra*). As noted above, canonical sequences connect established virtue with the absence of remorse and then with gladness, *pīti*, tranquillity, pleasure, and *samādhi*. Sun shows that this relation deserves to be treated as an important mechanism in its own right rather than as a minor moral preliminary (Sun 2024, pp. 2082–84). His analysis also places remorse within a wider network involving *uddhacca*, *kukkucca*, all five hindrances, and the affective transitions leading toward concentration (Sun 2024, pp. 2088–90). Freedom from remorse therefore provides a particularly clear example of how conduct can change the immediate condition of the mind. At the same time, as already suggested, this need not be taken to imply that all of the effects of *sīla* on meditation are mediated by remorse; Sun's analysis itself points toward a broader relation between ethical conduct, affective disturbance, and the hindrances rather than a narrowly guilt-centred model.

Ben-David raises a further question: where should the boundary between ethical and meditative cultivation be drawn in the first place? He emphasizes that practices such as *sati-sampajañña*, moderation in eating, wakefulness, contentment, and sense restraint occur before formal meditative development while already involving a significant degree of mental training. On this reading, the gradual path does not move abruptly from a merely behavioural *sīla* to an entirely different practice called *samādhi*. It contains a transitional pre-meditative phase in which bodily and verbal restraint increasingly turns into mental regulation and prepares the conditions for deeper meditation (Ben-David 2024, pp. 2386–87, 2389–95). This is particularly important for the present problem, since it suggests that the relation between *sīla* and *samādhi* is best sought in a continuous process extending through everyday conduct, sense restraint, moderation, mindfulness-related practices, and only then formal meditative attainment.

Shulman's recent work goes further in questioning whether ethical cultivation and *samādhi* must remain conceptually distinct even at advanced stages. His analysis of the *brahmavihāra*s presents loving-kindness, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity as the perfection of ethical cultivation and, in some textual configurations, as themselves constituting a comprehensive form of *samādhi* capable of playing a liberative role (Shulman 2025, pp. 2066, 2068–72). The importance of this proposal extends beyond the *brahmavihāra*s themselves, as I take it to suggest that the Buddhist path need not always be represented as

ethics first, followed by a morally neutral mental technology. Positive ethical qualities can remain constitutive of advanced meditative states. Shulman also draws attention to textual sequences in which ethical purification gives rise to delight, *pīti*, tranquillity, pleasure, and *samādhi*, thereby making affect central to the transition between the ethical and meditative domains (Shulman 2025, pp. 2069–72).

Arbel's work questions the assumption that *jhāna* should be understood principally as deliberate absorption into a meditation object and emphasizes the gradual cultivation preceding the first *jhāna* and the central role of relinquishment (*vossagga*) and separation from the hindrances and other unwholesome states (Arbel 2015, pp. 186–88). This changes the way in which one can pose the following causal question: if *jhāna* is reached through relinquishment rather than simply through increasing attentional fixation, then the transformation effected before formal attainment becomes part of the explanation of *jhāna* itself. Arbel also gives *pīti* and *sukha* a substantive soteriological role. Her reading of the *Cūḷadukkhakkhandha Sutta* (MN 14) stresses that properly understanding the limited gratification and predominant drawbacks of sensual pleasures does not by itself guarantee freedom from sensual attraction. A nonsensual form of *pīti* and *sukha*, or something more peaceful, provides an experiential alternative capable of weakening the continued appeal of sensual gratification (Arbel 2015, pp. 198–203). The importance of pleasure for ethical and motivational transformation will become central later in this article.

A particularly relevant, although rather different, answer was proposed by Bronkhorst. Discussing the practices preceding meditation in his *Absorption*, he interprets withdrawal from ordinary social involvement, abstention from violence and sexual activity, the cultivation of concord, and related forms of restraint as means of reducing emotional and bodily arousal. On his account, their function is not primarily to articulate a social ideal of Buddhist morality but to calm body and mind and reduce bodily tension as preparation for the psychological work of meditation (Bronkhorst 2012, p. 182). Mindfulness and awareness then restrict action to what is consciously undertaken, thereby preventing underlying urges from finding automatic expression.

Bronkhorst's proposal is especially valuable because it identifies a possible common consequence of apparently diverse practices, namely a reduction in bodily and emotional activation. It will become still more important below when the question turns to tranquillity and pleasure. For the purpose of our inquiry, however, one limitation is particularly relevant. The model primarily addresses the psychophysical side of the transition and is developed largely in terms other than the Nikāya category of the hindrances itself. Bronkhorst's scepticism elsewhere concerning the transformative efficacy of relatively uninterpreted mystical insight should not be confused with his account of Buddhist absorption. His claim that such insight by itself need not destroy attachment or suffering (Bronkhorst 2019, p. 4) concerns a different proposed mechanism. In his account of Buddhist absorption, the distinctive affective and psychophysical conditions of meditation, especially strongly reduced bodily tension, can themselves contribute to the modification of entrenched motivational patterns (Bronkhorst 2012, pp. 144–47; 2023, pp. 9, 12). The contrast is therefore not between altered states that transform and those that cannot, but between different mechanisms through which transformation might occur.

My own earlier work approached the same general problem from the relation between urges, action, and mental disturbance. I suggested that much of our ordinary behaviour is shaped by an evolutionarily conditioned motivational system, in which urges, desires, discomforts, and affectively charged impulses move us toward actions associated with gratification or relief. Through repeated enactment, the practical relation between urge and response becomes increasingly well established. The discipline of the gradual path can

interrupt this pattern by introducing reflective and rule-guided action between the arising of an impulse and its ordinary enactment.

In ordinary urge-driven behaviour, an impulse tends to lead directly to the habitual response from which gratification or relief is expected. The discipline of the path interrupts this sequence by inserting recognition, reflection, and an adopted rule of conduct between the arising of the urge and its enactment. The practitioner may then refrain from the habitual response or deliberately choose another course of action.

Repeatedly refraining from automatically enacting an urge may, on this hypothesis, gradually weaken the pattern that continually produces such urges in the first place (Polak 2024, pp. 279–81). The point was not that following rules mechanically produces liberation, nor that suppression by itself removes desire. Rather, the pre-meditative discipline was interpreted as a way of progressively replacing an urge-driven pattern of behaviour with a more consciously and rationally regulated one. At early stages this requires effort; its intended result is a reduction in the very impulses that make such effort necessary.

This has direct relevance to meditation. Urges do not merely issue in overt actions. Wanting, resisting, seeking gratification, and attempting to remove discomfort are accompanied by thoughts, feelings, anticipation, planning, fantasy, and repeated mental return to what is wanted or rejected. A person whose ordinary life continually reinforces such patterns therefore enters meditation with a correspondingly active motivational system. Conversely, weakening them may remove an important source of spontaneous mental movement without requiring that each resulting thought be suppressed once sitting meditation has begun (Polak 2024, pp. 280–84). I take this earlier proposal as one of the starting points for the present discussion, rather than as its conclusion.

Taken together, the scholarly approaches briefly summarized above already constitute substantial progress. They show, from different directions, that *sīla* can reshape intention and habitual response, diminish affective disturbance, alter psychophysical condition, provide alternative forms of pleasure, and reduce sources of spontaneous mental movement. This is a big improvement over reading *sīla* merely as "morality" or "ethics". What remains less fully articulated is how these effects fit together within the Nikāya transition from everyday conduct to *samādhi* and subsequently to understanding.

The distinctive suggestion developed below is that several hindrances do not merely add distracting or competing contents to consciousness. Their operation itself consists partly in recruiting cognition into activities of seeking, resisting, revisiting, comparing, or resolving. Their weakening may therefore alter not only what occupies the mind but the extent to which its capacities remain available for purposive use. This proposal does not replace the explanations considered above; rather, it suggests a way in which several of them may be connected. The motivational dispositions addressed through ordinary restraint may reappear within meditation as desire, aversion, restlessness, remorse, doubt, and tendencies toward disengagement. If their weakening moves the mind toward a gathered and cognitively ready condition, while their disappearance also brings substantial wellbeing and initiates the further affective development described in the Nikāyas, then *sīla*, *samādhi*, pleasure, and cognition need not be treated as separate mechanisms merely succeeding one another. They may form parts of a mutually reinforcing developmental process. The first task, however, is to ask whether the usual understanding of *samādhi* as an activity of sustained concentration adequately captures the condition to which this process is supposed to lead.

3. From Ethical Transformation to Samādhi: Settling and Cognitive Readiness

It needs to be said that the interpretations considered in the preceding section still remain compatible with the historically dominant understanding of *samādhi* as a capacity developed through deliberate concentration. If ethical discipline and the wider pre-meditative training diminish remorse, sensual preoccupation, hostility, bodily agitation, and the mental activity associated with urge-driven behaviour, they should certainly make it easier to sustain attention on a chosen object. On such an interpretation, however, the psychological effects of *sīla* remain principally facilitative. They remove or weaken obstacles to concentration, while concentration itself is developed through a more specifically meditative procedure.

These effects become much more significant if being *samāhita* can, at least in some Nikāya contexts, include a developed condition of cognitive potency and readiness rather than being exhausted by the continuous performance of a particular object-focused activity. This need not be formulated as an opposition between *samādhi* as an activity and *samādhi* as a static state. An activity can become effortless or automatic, while a developed condition can itself involve considerable cognitive activity. Nor is it necessary to deny that a *samāhita* mind may at times be intensely engaged with a particular object. The narrower question is whether deliberate and continuing orientation toward a determinate object or cognitive task is necessarily what constitutes the mind's being *samāhita*.

On the interpretation explored here, the transformation produced by the preceding way of life does not merely remove obstacles to the operation of an independently trainable focusing faculty. Changes in conduct, motivation, affect, and bodily condition contribute to the circumstances in which the mind itself becomes *samāhita*. Furthermore, instead of simply denoting a mental act of being concentrated on a particular object or datum, *samāhita* may in relevant contexts designate a mind that has become fit for further cognitive use. On this interpretation, being *samāhita* need not be defined by a particular relation between mind and object, including consciousness being wholly occupied by a single determinate content at a given moment; it may instead characterize a developed functional quality of the mind itself, without excluding states in which such single-object unification occurs.

Cognitive readiness would then be an important functional dimension of *samādhi*, without being proposed here as an exhaustive definition of the term. The psychological effects of *sīla* would therefore form part of the explanation of how *samādhi* arises, rather than merely explaining why concentration is easier for an ethically disciplined person.

A potentially contrary formulation occurs in the *Cūḷavedalla Sutta* (MN 44), which identifies *samādhi* with *cittassa ekaggatā*. MN 44, however, should not simply be taken as supplying "the Nikāya definition" of *samādhi*. Such a move would conflict with the methodological caution adopted in the present article: the Nikāyas are a stratified and doctrinally non-homogeneous corpus, and formulations occurring in one text should not automatically be generalized to materials that may have different histories or represent different stages of conceptual development. This consideration is particularly relevant to MN 44, an analytically and exegetically developed *vedalla* discourse that has good grounds for being treated as representing a relatively late or systematizing strand of Nikāya thought. Its formulation is therefore evidence for the position of this particular text, or of the strand it represents, rather than a definition that can retrospectively determine the meaning of *samādhi* elsewhere in the Nikāyas. This is especially significant because *cittassa ekaggatā* is absent from the standard four-*jhāna* formula, which instead introduces *cetaso ekodibhāva* with the second *jhāna*. Moreover, *ekaggatā* itself need not entail exclusive occupation of consciousness by a single object. Whatever its precise meaning in MN 44, the expression does not by itself establish the stronger phenomenological claim that being *samāhita* consists in consciousness being wholly occupied by one determinate content.

This possibility has important precedents. Wynne has questioned the traditional interpretation of the fourth *jhāna* as a state of "inner concentration" pursuing the "concentrative ideal of trying to confine the mind within a box" (Wynne 2007, p. 123; 2018a, p. 103). Arbel has similarly challenged accounts of *jhāna* centred on deliberate absorption of attention into an object, emphasizing instead the gradual process of relinquishment preceding the first *jhāna* (Arbel 2015, pp. 186–88). Shulman approaches the issue from another direction by arguing that *brahmavihāra* cultivation can function both as the perfection of ethical practice and as a form of *samādhi* (Shulman 2025, pp. 2068–72). I take these accounts to complicate any account in which *samādhi* is treated invariably as a morally neutral focusing faculty added to ethical cultivation from outside. In earlier work, I argued more specifically that several Nikāya formulas are difficult to reconcile with understanding *samādhi* simply as the ongoing performance of concentrated attention and suggested that the quality of being *samāhita* can designate a developed condition or potency of mind (Polak 2024, pp. 254–57).

The *Cetanākaraṇīya Sutta* (AN 10.2), together with its parallel in AN 11.2, provides particularly important evidence for this possibility. These texts present a sequence beginning with accomplished *sīla* and proceeding through freedom from remorse, gladness, *pīti*, bodily tranquillity, and pleasure to *samādhi*, followed in turn by knowledge and vision of things as they really are, disenchantment, dispassion, and liberating knowledge. At successive stages the same formula is repeated: there is no need to perform a further act of intention (*na cetanāya karaṇīyaṃ*) that the next state should arise. Thus one who experiences pleasure need not intend, "May my mind become *samāhita*" (*cittaṃ me samādhiyatū*); it belongs to the natural course of things (*dhammatā*) that the mind of one who is happy becomes *samāhita* (*sukhino cittaṃ samādhiyati*).

Taken by itself, this formula does not establish that *samādhi* is ontologically a condition rather than an activity. An activity can become automatic and cease to require explicit prospective intention. AN 10.2 therefore supports a more limited but still significant conclusion. Once the relevant antecedent conditions have been established, the transition to the mind's becoming *samāhita* does not require a further prospective act whose content is that *samādhi* should now be produced. The text presents pleasure as the immediately relevant antecedent and the mind's becoming *samāhita* as what follows from it according to *dhammatā*.

The link which follows immediately remains significant. One whose mind is *samāhita* need not form the intention, "May I know and see things as they really are"; such knowledge and vision likewise follow according to *dhammatā*. This does not show that subsequent cognition occurs without agency or deliberate orientation. Other Nikāya passages clearly retain both. It does show, however, that the sequence places the *samāhita* mind between a transformed affective condition and subsequent cognition without introducing, at this point, a further act by which a previously absent concentrating capacity must first be manufactured.

The *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* (DN 2) presents a related but not immediately identical structure. After the fourth *jhāna*, the mind is described as *samāhita*, purified, bright, unblemished, malleable (*mudu*), workable (*kammaniya*), steady, and imperturbable. Only then is it directed or inclined toward particular forms of knowledge, which is rendered by the verbs *abhinīharati* and *abhininnāmeti*. The mind first possesses a developed set of qualities and is subsequently put to a particular cognitive use. A similar relation occurs in the *Paṃsudhovaka Sutta* (AN 3.101). Once *samādhi* has become peaceful, refined, tranquil, and unified, the practitioner may incline (*abhininnāmeti*) the mind toward a particular higher knowledge (*abhiññā*) "if one wishes" (*sace ākaṅkhati*).

Taken together, however, these passages also generate a *prima facie* tension. If, as in AN 10.2, knowledge follows from *samādhi* according to *dhammatā* without the need

for a further prospective intention, why do other texts still describe the practitioner as apparently deliberately inclining the mind toward knowledge? If, for the moment, we bracket questions of textual stratification and doctrinal homogeneity of these suttas and ask how the two patterns might be read together, the question is therefore not simply whether agency disappears, but which forms of deliberate intervention are no longer required and which remain possible once the mind has become *samāhita*.

One possible explanation would be to distinguish the prospective *cetanā* denied in AN 10.2 from the later purposive use of an already developed mind.[4]

Some Nikāya passages permit such a hypothesis, but the evidence is too diverse to make a lexical distinction between *cetanā* and *abhininnāmeti* carry the argument.

A simpler explanation can perhaps be found by considering what the act of intention is about. The prospective formulations in AN 10.2 represent the succeeding condition as something presently lacking: "May my mind become *samāhita*"; "May I know and see things as they really are." The wish presents the desired state as something that still has to be brought into existence but is not readily available. The positive sequence governed by *dhammatā* describes a contrasting situation. Once the immediately relevant condition has been fulfilled, the succeeding state or capacity need no longer be approached as something absent that must first be produced by wishing for it.

This distinction may help explain the relation to DN 2 and AN 3.101. There the practitioner is not attempting to create a meditative capacity that is presently lacking. The mind is already *samāhita*, purified, malleable, workable, steady, and imperturbable; it can now be directed toward a cognitive use for which it has become fit. AN 3.101 makes this particularly clear because purposive wishing has not disappeared: the practitioner may incline the mind toward one or another higher knowledge *sace ākaṅkhati*, "if he wishes." The preceding gold simile has the same structure. Once gold has been purified and made workable, the goldsmith can use it for whatever ornament he wishes to make. Similarly, once the mind has reached the necessary condition, the relevant cognitive capacity is ready for exercise.

The gold simile is useful here precisely because it supports a functional claim without deciding the ontology of *samādhi*. The workability of purified gold is not identical with the particular operation subsequently performed with it. In the same way, the qualities possessed by the *samāhita* mind make purposive cognitive deployment possible without requiring us to decide whether some form of organized mental activity continues throughout the state.

The significance of AN 10.2 may therefore lie less in the mere absence of *cetanā* than in the content of the *cetanā* that is said to be unnecessary. To wish "May my mind become *samāhita*" or "May I know and see things as they really are" is to represent the relevant state as not yet available. In the person for whom the preceding conditions have been fulfilled, however, the text presents these states as available without the need for such prospective wishing. DN 2 and AN 3.101, by contrast, describe the purposive use of a condition or capacity that has already become available. "Available" does not imply that the mind is inactive, or that a determinate act of knowledge is continuously and consciously occurring before the mind is "bent" towards a particular kind of knowledge. It concerns the readiness of the relevant capacities for purposive deployment.

This seems to be the least demanding way of reading the passages together. It does not require the stronger claim that *cetanā* and *abhininnāmeti* denote fundamentally different forms of agency. More importantly for the present argument, it allows a distinction between the processes through which a developed state or capacity is produced and its subsequent purposive use. This distinction will become important when we turn to the role of the hindrances.

Of course, we cannot be certain that the passages in question are doctrinally homogeneous or belong to the same stratum of early Buddhist development.[5]

Wynne, for example, interprets the post-fourth-*jhāna* formula of a purified mind deliberately turned toward a specific object of knowledge as belonging to the Sāriputta-associated calm–insight model, which he understands as a later development shaped by Upaniṣadic influence (Wynne 2018a, pp. 89–90, 103). Their relative dating, doctrinal relationships, and historical provenance therefore remain open questions.

For the present argument, however, complete harmonization is unnecessary. Across passages that may have different histories, a recurrent functional pattern can still be discerned: deliberate cultivation establishes certain conditions; the mind reaches a developed condition or capacity that is not simply identical with the particular activity used to bring it about; and this can subsequently support further cognition. The argument below relies on this more limited pattern rather than on the claim that all relevant Nikāya passages express one original and fully systematic psychology.

The *Bhikkhunupassaya Sutta* (SN 47.10) illustrates why the distinction should not be reduced to a simple opposition between active and passive meditation. The discourse considers circumstances during *satipaṭṭhāna* practice in which agitation arises, the mind becomes sluggish, or it is distracted externally. The practitioner is then instructed to deliberately direct the mind toward an inspiring or gladdening feature (*pasādanīya nimitta*). Gladness arises, followed by *pīti*, tranquillity, pleasure, and eventually *samādhi*. Once the mind has become *samāhita*, however, it is withdrawn from that feature; the special intervention need no longer be maintained. I have previously interpreted this procedure as an optional and temporary corrective measure rather than as prescribing that feature as the permanent object of an increasingly intensive concentration procedure (Polak 2024, pp. 247–48).

The relevant contrast does not therefore seem to lie between deliberate and non-deliberate practice or between the usage or non-usage of intention. What changes over the course of cultivation is the role played by deliberate intervention. The practitioner may intentionally regulate conduct, refuse habitual responses, redirect the mind when difficulties arise, and establish conditions favourable to settling. Yet the success of these activities need not consist in their indefinite continuation. Some interventions perform a task and then become unnecessary; some states arise once appropriate antecedent conditions have been established; and an already developed mind can possess capacities distinct from the effort through which those capacities were acquired. SN 47.10 thus provides an example of an intervention that can be corrective without being constitutive of the resulting condition: its success does not require its continued performance once the mind has become *samāhita*.

Interpreting cognitive readiness as an important functional dimension of *samādhi* therefore does not require eliminating intention or will from meditation altogether. It changes their explanatory status. Deliberate acts remain available as tools used under particular conditions, but the particular interventions through which settling is assisted need not constitute the continuously sustained mechanism by which the mind remains *samāhita*.

Let us now return to the psychological accounts of *sīla* considered in the preceding section, whose significance changes in light of these observations. If *samādhi* is understood primarily as the ongoing exercise of deliberate attentional concentration, the psychological effects of *sīla* remain largely preparatory: they reduce the disturbances that would interfere with that activity. If, however, cognitive workability and readiness constitute an important functional dimension of the *samāhita* mind, the same psychological changes acquire greater significance. They are no longer merely external conditions that make a separate focusing operation easier. If a disciplined way of life diminishes remorse, urge-driven behaviour, sensual preoccupation, hostility, agitation, and related sources of mental movement, these

changes can contribute directly to the process through which the mind becomes gathered, workable, and ready for further cognitive use.

This claim does not require deciding whether *samādhi* should ultimately be classified ontologically as an activity, a condition, a dispositional capacity, or some combination of these. Nor does it identify freedom from the hindrances with *samādhi*. The more limited claim is that the psychological changes preceding *samādhi* need not be treated merely as background conditions for an otherwise independent concentrating operation. They can be causally involved in the mind's becoming *samāhita*, while the resulting reduction in competing demands helps explain the workability and readiness characteristic of that mind.

The *sīla–samādhi* problem can therefore be reformulated. If *samādhi* were simply an additional act of focused attention, ethical and motivational cultivation would chiefly make that act easier. If being *samāhita* includes, in relevant contexts, a developed workability and readiness for cognitive use, then the processes that cease before this condition emerges become part of the explanation of *samādhi* itself. We should therefore ask not merely what distracts a meditator from a chosen object. What do the hindrances actually do while they are present, and what becomes possible when they disappear?

4. What Do the Hindrances Actually Do?

Within the historically dominant object-centred model of concentrative meditation, the obstructive role of the hindrances is relatively straightforward. If meditation consists in sustaining attention on a selected object, such as a *kasiṇa* or the breath, then sensual thought, hostility, worry, doubt, or drowsiness competes with that object. To the extent that one of these becomes prominent, attention is no longer continuously maintained where the meditator intends it to be. The hindrance therefore obstructs concentration because some competing process has displaced or weakened engagement with the chosen object.

The Nikāya descriptions suggest that something more general is at stake. The *Upakkilesa Sutta* (SN 46.33) compares the five hindrances to impurities in gold and states that a mind affected by them is not malleable (*mudu*), workable (*kammaniya*), or radiant (*pabhassara*), and does not become rightly *samāhita*. The *Rukkha Sutta* (SN 46.39) calls them "obstructions and hindrances, overgrowths of the mind" (*āvaraṇā nīvaraṇā cetaso ajjhāruhā*) and factors that "weaken understanding" (*paññāya dubbalīkaraṇā*). The following *Nīvaraṇa Sutta* (SN 46.40) describes them as producing darkness (*andhakaraṇā*), lack of vision (*acakkhukaraṇā*), and non-knowledge (*aññāṇakaraṇā*), and as obstructing understanding (*paññānirodhikā*). These descriptions do more than say that the hindrances interrupt attention to a meditation object. They connect their presence with diminished mental workability and diminished capacity to know.

The passages just considered do not themselves provide a detailed psychological mechanism. Perhaps we can find a clue by considering what desire, aversion, restlessness, remorse, and doubt actually require the mind to do. Sensual desire does not merely insert an alternative content into consciousness. It sends cognition toward what is wanted: imagining, anticipating, remembering, comparing, planning, and looking for opportunities for gratification. Aversion recruits it into resistance, monitoring, rehearsal, avoidance, or attempts to alter what is disliked. Remorse repeatedly returns the mind to what has been done or omitted. Doubt keeps alternatives open and demands renewed comparison, checking, or reconsideration. Restlessness more generally makes continued settling difficult by repeatedly drawing cognition toward alternatives. In these cases cognition has already been recruited by pressures generated within the motivational system.

The important point is therefore not simply that another object appears in awareness. The mind is already doing something in relation to that object: seeking, resisting, revisiting, comparing, correcting, or resolving. As a result, the present condition does not stand as

sufficient in itself; something appears to need to be acquired, removed, escaped, reconsidered, or settled. Several of the hindrances thus generate further mental activity and commit part of the mind's capacities to demands that arise independently of the practitioner's present purpose.

This helps clarify the difference between ordinary distraction, active concentration, and the kind of cognitive readiness suggested by the post-*jhānic* formulas. A scattered mind has its capacities distributed among several competing processes. A mind actively concentrating upon one selected object may have gathered those capacities, but it is already deploying them in a determinate task. The mind described after the attainment of the fourth *jhāna* is different again: it is already gathered, purified, malleable, workable, steady, and imperturbable, and only then is it inclined toward a particular cognitive object. Its significance therefore seems to lie not only in what it is presently attending to but also in what it has become capable of doing.

For this reason, cognitive readiness can be treated as an important functional dimension of *samādhi* in these contexts without identifying *samādhi* exhaustively with such readiness. The relevant contrast is not between an active and an inactive mind. A mind governed by the hindrances may already be highly active, but much of this activity is elicited and directed by motivational pressure: desire draws cognition toward what is wanted, aversion into resistance, removal, or escape, remorse into reconsideration, and doubt into checking or resolution. The *samāhita* mind need not be inactive in the sense of lacking conscious, deliberate mental activity. DN 2 and AN 3.101 explicitly allow it subsequently to be directed toward particular forms of knowledge. What has changed is the mode in which cognitive activity is recruited. Instead of being repeatedly drawn into tasks imposed by craving, resistance, or uncertainty, the developed mind can be deliberately directed toward a chosen cognitive end. In this respect, the relation resembles the transformation already sketched at the level of everyday conduct: activity does not disappear, but becomes less governed by immediately compelling impulses and more available for deliberate, path-oriented use.

This distinction should not be reduced to the claim that cognitive occupation as such is problematic. Deliberately chosen activities can employ attention, memory, imagination, and reasoning just as intensively. What distinguishes the hindrance-driven cases is partly the conditions under which these capacities are recruited. A person may decide not to act upon sensual desire, redirect attention away from it, or undertake practices intended to weaken it without thereby being able simply to stop wanting. The same applies, in different ways, to aversion, remorse, or unresolved doubt. Their presence can therefore continue to generate cognitive demands even when the practitioner has decided not to comply with them. Cognitive readiness concerns not the absence of mental activity but the extent to which cognitive capacities remain free from such pre-emptive demands and available for purposive deployment.

The *Dvedhāvitakka Sutta* (MN 19) provides an important comparison. The discourse distinguishes unwholesome thoughts from thoughts of renunciation, non-ill will, and harmlessness. Yet even the latter are not simply continued indefinitely. The Bodhisatta reflects that due to prolonged thinking and examining (*aticiraṃ anuvitakkayato anuvicārayato*) the body would get tired; when the body is tired, the mind becomes disturbed, and a disturbed mind is far from *samādhi*. He therefore settles and unifies the mind. MN 19 thus shows that ethical wholesomeness and cognitive demand are distinct. Wholesome cognition may be useful and deliberately cultivated while its prolonged exercise still carries a psychophysical cost.

This differs in an important respect from the recruitment described above. The wholesome thinking of MN 19 is not presented as a motivational pressure that continues to impose its own cognitive agenda despite the practitioner's decision. It is useful activity that can

be cultivated and relinquished when its function has been served. The developmental movement is therefore not from cognitive activity to inactivity. It may proceed from cognition repeatedly recruited by unwholesome motivational pressures, through deliberate corrective and wholesome cognition, toward a condition in which such corrective activity no longer needs to be continuously maintained. Cognition remains available for further purposive use.

MN 19 therefore also clarifies why the problem is not merely competition for limited attentional bandwidth: several hindrances generate further work for cognition, whereas even wholesome cognitive work can eventually become dispensable. *Thīna-middha*, usually rendered as sloth and torpor, requires qualification. Its physiological dimension is especially obvious: fatigue, sleepiness, and reduced arousal can weaken cognitive capacity independently of any competing motivational project. It can also involve tendencies toward disengagement or withdrawal of effort, but it does not fit the recruitment model in exactly the same way as sensual desire, aversion, remorse, or doubt. The five hindrances therefore need not constitute a psychologically homogeneous class in order to converge upon diminished mental workability. Indeed, *thīna-middha* makes especially clear why the relevant ideal cannot be reduced to reduced mental activity. A mind can be relatively inactive because it is exhausted, dull, or drowsy and for that very reason be poorly suited to knowledge. What matters is the conjunction of freedom from competing motivational demands with lucidity and responsiveness.

A possible objection concerns the structure of DN 2 itself. The abandonment of the hindrances is described after the practitioner has resorted to a secluded dwelling, sat down cross-legged, made the body erect, and established mindfulness. The sequence is therefore entirely compatible with further work on the hindrances taking place during seated practice. It does not follow, however, that such work consists in maintaining one-pointed attention on a meditation object, or that the motivational transformation described in the preceding stages ceases to operate once the practitioner sits down.

The wording of the hindrance formula itself leaves the process somewhat open. For sensual desire, for example, the practitioner is described as *abhijjhaṃ loke pahāya vigatābhijjhena cetasā viharati, abhijjhāya cittaṃ parisodheti*: "having abandoned" covetousness, he dwells with a mind free from covetousness[6] and "purifies" the mind of it. The same structure recurs with the other hindrances. The absolutive *pahāya* presents abandonment as anterior to the ensuing *viharati*, but does not by itself specify where within the preceding course of cultivation the process began. At the same time, the finite present *parisodheti* retains a processual formulation: the practitioner is cleansing or purifying the mind of the hindrance. The wording is therefore compatible with continuing or completing a process of purification in the seated context. The argument need not depend upon extracting a precise temporal sequence from the grammar.

Nor should the schematic ordering of the gradual training be converted into a strict temporal division between an earlier period devoted to *sīla*, sense restraint, and *sati-sampajañña* and a later period in which these practices have been completed and a wholly different psychological mechanism takes over. DN 2's own description of *sati-sampajañña* includes clear comprehension while walking, standing, sitting (*nisinne*), sleeping, waking, speaking, and remaining silent. Sitting therefore already occurs within a mode of cultivation described before the secluded abandonment of the hindrances.

Secluded sitting may instead alter the conditions under which an ongoing cultivation operates. Immediate bodily, social, and practical demands are reduced, fewer actions and responses have to be coordinated with the environment, and residual motivational pressures can become more conspicuous. Mindfulness, restraint, redirection, and relinquishment cultivated in ordinary activity can continue under these simplified conditions. Some final

abandonment of the hindrances may consequently occur while seated without requiring us to posit, at this point in the sequence, a wholly new mechanism consisting in continuous one-pointed concentration.

Other Nikāya passages indicate what such continuing regulation may involve. MN 19 describes recognition and abandonment of unwholesome thought, deliberate cultivation of wholesome alternatives, and eventually the relinquishment even of prolonged wholesome thinking when its continuation becomes psychophysically costly. The *Vitakkasaṇṭhāna Sutta* (MN 20) offers a graded series of interventions to be used when problematic thoughts persist, while SN 47.10 describes a gladdening intervention which is no longer maintained once the mind has become *samāhita*. Such procedures are conditional and corrective. Their success does not consist in their indefinite continuation. Seated practice can therefore intensify or complete forms of regulation already present in the wider training without those regulatory acts themselves having to constitute mature *samādhi*.

None of this establishes that object-directed concentration techniques were absent from early Buddhism. The narrower point is that such a technique need not be supplied as the constitutive mechanism of the gradual-training sequence where the sequence itself does not specify it and where the Nikāyas independently attest problem-specific corrective procedures.

The role of the hindrances can therefore be stated more precisely. Their significance is not exhausted by their interruption of attention to a chosen object. Several of them repeatedly recruit cognition into wanting, resisting, reconsidering, searching, checking, or resolving, while *thīna-middha* can diminish workability by a partly different route. Their weakening can therefore contribute causally to the mind's becoming *samāhita* by reducing processes that disturb and pre-empt cognition. If cognitive readiness is one functional dimension of the *samāhita* mind, the same transformation also helps explain why such a mind is described as workable and available for subsequent cognitive deployment. This does not identify freedom from the hindrances with *samādhi*; it specifies one way in which their abandonment can contribute both to its arising and to the workability associated with it.

Let us now return to the problem of the relation between *sīla* and *samādhi*. If disciplined conduct, sense restraint, moderation, and related practices progressively weaken the motivational patterns that generate such demands, they do more than make it easier to hold attention on a meditation object. They diminish processes that interfere with the mind's becoming gathered and cognitively ready.

This also clarifies why the apparently diverse practices of the gradual training can converge upon a single meditative consequence. Refraining from sensual indulgence, regulating speech, moderating eating, restricting stimulation, and declining to act automatically upon irritation or boredom need not all share one moral rationale. Yet they can converge psychologically insofar as they weaken habitual patterns in which the present condition repeatedly generates a demand for acquisition, avoidance, stimulation, reconsideration, or withdrawal. The mind which meditates is not psychologically separate from the mind shaped by these ordinary responses.

The Nikāya accounts add a further feature. In DN 2, recognition that the hindrances are absent gives rise to gladness, followed by *pīti*, tranquillity, and *sukha*. The same processes whose disappearance makes cognition less subject to motivational demands are therefore also connected with a marked affective improvement. The next question is why their disappearance should improve experience and how this improvement develops into the *sukha* preceding *samādhi*.

5. Why May the Absence of the Hindrances Give Rise to Pleasure?

The disappearance of the hindrances has an affective consequence as well as the cognitive one just described. In the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* (DN 2), once the practitioner recognizes that the five hindrances have been abandoned, gladness arises, followed by *pīti*, bodily tranquillity, pleasure, and *samādhi*. Why should their absence give rise to pleasure?

There is a danger of making this question more difficult than it is. Readers accustomed to active concentration models naturally approach such passages looking for the decisive meditative operation: a technique, an object, a *nimitta*, or some altered state to be produced once preliminary obstacles have been removed. The abandonment of the hindrances can then appear as little more than clearing the ground for meditation proper. But in doing so, we risk reading an additional mechanism into the sequence before taking seriously what it explicitly describes. The texts themselves place considerable weight on the disappearance of desire, aversion, restlessness, remorse, doubt, and torpor, and on the gladness and pleasure that follow. What looks merely preparatory from within a later paradigm may already contain much of the psychological point.[7] The first point to notice is that the relevant contrast is not between an affectively neutral ordinary baseline and a pleasurable state subsequently produced through meditation. For the ordinary untrained person, experience is repeatedly shaped by wanting, aversion, boredom, impatience, restlessness, regret, uncertainty, and other forms of dissatisfaction with the present condition. These need not amount to continuous painful feeling in the narrow sense of *dukkha-vedanā*. Yet they continually present something as missing, objectionable, unresolved, or in need of change. The ordinary baseline is therefore already burdened rather than neutral.

The gradual training itself suggests that this burden begins to diminish before the abandonment of the hindrances is complete. Accomplished virtue is associated with internal faultless pleasure (*anavajjasukha*), sense restraint with internal undiluted pleasure (*abyāsekasukha*), and the practitioner is repeatedly characterized as content (*santuṭṭha*). Contentment is particularly significant here. It does not merely describe possession of a restricted range of material goods; in the context of the gradual training it marks a condition in which the practitioner is increasingly able to remain satisfied without continually seeking supplementation from external objects and circumstances. The movement toward freedom from the hindrances is therefore continuous with an affective and motivational transformation already under way in disciplined life.

This also cautions against translating the problem too quickly into a modern opposition between "positive pleasure" and merely privative relief. The Nikāya use of *sukha* need not map neatly onto such a distinction. An especially striking case occurs in the *Nibbānasukha Sutta* (AN 9.34), where Sāriputta calls *nibbāna sukha* precisely despite the absence of *vedayita*: *etadeva khvettha, āvuso, sukhaṃ yadettha natthi vedayitaṃ*. I have discussed elsewhere the difficulty this creates for any simple identification of *sukha* with a distinctive introspectively accessible pleasurable feeling (Polak 2023). The context of AN 9.34 is exceptional and should not simply be generalized to DN 2. It nevertheless shows that the semantic and phenomenological range of *sukha* in the Nikāyas is wider than the English word "pleasure" may suggest. The present argument therefore does not depend upon deciding whether the improvement produced by the subsiding of these pressures should be classified as positive pleasure, relief, or the removal of disvalue; it requires only the comparative claim that experience can improve as the pressures themselves diminish.

At the same time, DN 2 itself does not simply identify the absence of the hindrances with the later *sukha*. The text states that, when the practitioner recognizes that the five hindrances have been abandoned in himself (*pañca nīvaraṇe pahīne attani samanupassato*), *pāmojja* arises, followed by *pīti*, bodily tranquillity, and *sukha*. The similes that precede this formula make the role of recognition especially clear. In each case the person reflects upon

the contrast between the former adverse condition and the present one—"it would occur to him" (*tassa evamassa*)—and "on that account" (*tatonidānaṃ*) experiences gladness and joy. When the similes are applied to the hindrances, this first-person appraisal is expressed more compactly through the verb *samanupassati*. The later *sukha* should therefore not simply be equated with the bare absence of the hindrances. Recognition of release appears to strengthen and further develop the affective consequences of a condition that is already markedly better.

To see why there is already something significant to recognize, we need to imagine the condition rather than merely recognize the technical vocabulary. Let us consider an alert and lucid mind in which nothing is presently wanted for sensual gratification; nothing is resisted with irritation or hostility; there is no impatience for the present situation to end; no boredom demanding another stimulus; no urge to check whether something more interesting is available; no regret returning to what should have happened differently; no unresolved uncertainty requiring further reconsideration; and no torpor or dullness. The person remains fully awake and responsive, but nothing within the mind is pressing for the present situation to become something else.

Looked at from within, such a condition might have a remarkably simple character: nothing is presently needed. This should not be taken to mean the disappearance of practical needs, intentions, or longer-term goals. A person may still know that food will be needed later, decide to complete a task, care for another person, or pursue an aim adopted for good reasons. What has disappeared is the immediate affective demand that wellbeing depends on acquiring, removing, changing, escaping, checking, or resolving something now. The mind is not waiting for some alteration in its situation before it can be at ease.

For an ordinary person this may be a much rarer condition than the familiar expression "absence of the hindrances" suggests. If we are not experiencing anything that we find pleasant or absorbing, we are often bored or impatient. Boredom already means that what is presently given is not enough. Impatience means wanting the present interval to disappear. Reaching repeatedly for a phone, looking for food without hunger, wanting conversation, novelty, entertainment, stimulation, or simply another activity all indicate, in small ways, that the relevant condition is absent. Irritation, worry, regret, and persistent uncertainty are more obvious examples. Much ordinary experience may consist of such low-level pressures precisely because they are so familiar that they are no longer noticed as disturbances.

Perhaps we have all had moments in which the possibility of being at least temporarily free from these pressures seemed almost within reach. One may sit alone looking at a tree, grass swaying in the breeze, an open landscape, or evening light and sense that the situation is almost sufficient in itself, that a deeper ease is somehow close at hand. Yet something separates us from it; the mind continues to introduce small demands: an irritation returns, another stimulus seems preferable, one thinks of food, conversation, a desired object, an unfinished matter, or simply of doing something else. None of these pressures need be dramatic. Their very ordinariness may be what prevents us from noticing how continuously they keep the present condition from being enough. Such moments should not be identified with freedom from the hindrances described in the Nikāyas, but they may provide an intelligible contrast through which one can glimpse what their temporary absence might be like.

If such pressures genuinely ceased, even temporarily, the external situation might remain entirely ordinary while its experienced character changed profoundly. The tree, clouds, patch of grass, or simple act of sitting would no longer need to compete with something supposedly preferable. No additional pleasurable object would necessarily be required. What appears externally as mere absence could be experienced internally as

release from a near-continuous sense that something is lacking or needs to change. The realization that nothing is presently missing may itself be an unusually happy condition.

The similes in DN 2 strongly support taking this possibility seriously. Abandonment of the hindrances is compared to recovery from illness, repayment of debt, release from confinement or slavery, and escape from danger. In each case the improvement consists primarily in the ending of an adverse condition. Recovery from illness or release from confinement does not become valuable only when supplemented by some further reward. These comparisons therefore give us good reason not to imagine absence of the hindrances as an affectively neutral zero point. Release is already a substantial improvement in the person's condition and can itself be experienced as wellbeing. DN 2 then describes a further development when this changed condition is recognized: *pāmojja* arises, followed by *pīti*, bodily tranquillity, and *sukha*.

Furthermore, assuming that the practitioner is already in deep one-pointed absorption at this stage creates a further interpretive difficulty. The sequence explicitly represents the practitioner as recognizing the disappearance of the hindrances before gladness, *pīti*, tranquillity, pleasure, and *samādhi* arise. If deep absorption is already presupposed, this reflective recognition becomes psychologically difficult to accommodate without reinterpreting the sequence.

Bronkhorst provides an important precursor to such an interpretation. His account of the practices preceding meditation emphasizes the reduction of bodily and emotional arousal and tension produced through renunciation, restraint, reduced social involvement, non-violence, sexual restraint, mindfulness, and related features of the ascetic life (Bronkhorst 2012, p. 182). The reduction of tension itself can be pleasant. This provides an important psychological model for understanding how apparently diverse forms of discipline might converge upon tranquillity and wellbeing.

The suggestion I am making here follows the same line of reasoning, but takes as its starting point phenomena which are more explicitly prominent in the Nikāyas. Desire, aversion, restlessness, remorse, and doubt themselves involve pressures toward acquisition, rejection, alteration, reconsideration, or resolution. Their cessation, even if temporary and not irreversible, can therefore be understood as release even without first translating them into a physiological theory of tension.

At this point, we may notice a certain ambiguity in ordinary gratification. Typically, two events occur together: a desired object is obtained, and the desire for it temporarily ceases. One wants something, acquires it, and feels better. The obvious conclusion is that the object produced the improvement. Often it undoubtedly contributes. Yet because acquisition and cessation of the desire in question normally coincide, ordinary experience makes it difficult to notice how much of the improvement may be due not to acquisition but to the ending of wanting itself.

Disciplined restraint can separate these two events. If desires are repeatedly not acted upon in daily life, they may weaken or disappear even without the desired object being obtained. If the resulting condition proves better, the practitioner encounters something that ordinary gratification tends to conceal: wellbeing can increase when desire ceases rather than when it succeeds. Ordinary gratification makes the cessation of desire almost invisible because it coincides with obtaining the desired object; Buddhist training can separate the two and thereby make the cessation itself experientially apparent.[8]

The same contrast extends beyond sensual desire. Aversion may cease although the disliked person or situation has not been removed; restlessness may settle without another stimulus or activity being supplied; remorse may subside although the past event itself cannot be altered; and doubt may cease to dominate cognition without every possible uncertainty having been exhaustively resolved. In each case the improvement need not result from

accomplishing what the motivational pressure initially presented as necessary. *Thīna-middha* is again somewhat different, since its disappearance may depend partly upon changes in physiological arousal rather than upon the cessation of a comparable motivational demand.

If disciplined living contributes to such periods, an important developmental possibility opens. A practitioner who experiences wellbeing without satisfying desire through its object has encountered a different relation between desire and happiness from the one ordinarily reinforced through gratification. Freedom from the hindrances need not be identified with the later *sukha* for this contrast to matter. The relevant point is that their absence already constitutes considerable wellbeing, while recognition of this release can initiate and strengthen the further affective development culminating in *sukha*.

This *sukha* may in turn contribute to *samādhi*. I previously suggested that the recurrent sequence in which pleasure leads to *samādhi* becomes psychologically intelligible if *samādhi* is understood in terms of non-scattering: dissatisfaction gives the mind a reason to seek elsewhere, whereas a person who already experiences wellbeing has less reason to do so (Polak 2024, pp. 257–58). But this explanation cannot apply indiscriminately to pleasure as such. Pleasure dependent upon acquiring, maintaining, returning to, or simply enjoying a desired object remains embedded in the same motivational cycle of wanting and gratification and may continue to recruit cognition toward that object or toward the conditions required for sustaining or repeating the experience. Such pleasurable engagement is therefore not cognitively neutral: while the mind remains occupied with the object, its capacities are correspondingly less available for other purposes, and many alternative tasks would require disengagement from the very object upon which the pleasure depends. This helps explain why the causal origin of the relevant *sukha* matters. If it develops from a condition in which the hindrances have subsided, wellbeing no longer depends upon satisfying a comparable object-directed demand. It can therefore reduce the incentive to seek another stimulus, obtain some desired object, or escape the present situation without at the same time reintroducing another demand that pre-empts cognition. In this sense, the relevant nonsensual *sukha* supports *samādhi* not simply because pleasure makes the present condition satisfactory, but because this particular form of wellbeing is compatible with, and may reinforce, the reduction of the processes that ordinarily scatter the mind.

This provides a plausible psychological reading of sequences such as the *Cetanākaraṇīya Sutta* (AN 10.2), in which the mind of one who is happy becomes *samāhita* without requiring an additional prospective act of willing that it become so. The suggestion need not be that pleasure, conceived as a discrete hedonic sensation, mechanically produces *samādhi*. In the context considered here, *sukha* is the developed affective expression of a process in which motivational disturbance and psychophysical mobilisation have already subsided. A mind in such a condition has less reason to seek another stimulus, obtain another gratifying object, escape the present situation, or continue resolving a felt deficiency.

The developmental importance of *sukha* should not, however, be confused with its being either the defining feature or the endpoint of meditative cultivation. In the standard formula of the fourth *jhāna*, *sukha* is itself abandoned together with *dukkha*, while the resulting condition is characterized as *adukkhamasukha* and by the purification of mindfulness through equanimity. This gives a further reason not to understand the path as a simple increase in the quantity or intensity of consciously felt pleasure. The disappearance of *sukha* at this later stage need not represent a deterioration in wellbeing. Bronkhorst's account provides one possible way of making this understandable: if pleasure accompanies a reduction in tension, it may diminish once the lower-tension condition has stabilized rather than continuing indefinitely (Bronkhorst 2012, p. 160). What matters for the present argument is only that *sukha* can play an important developmental role without constituting the final measure of meditative wellbeing. Once the motivational pressures that would draw the

mind elsewhere have sufficiently subsided, however, continued non-scattering need no longer depend upon the continued presence of *sukha*; the fourth *jhāna* can therefore be equanimous without returning to the motivational disturbance that the earlier affective development helped overcome.

The sequence in DN 2 therefore becomes considerably less mysterious. The practitioner does not move from an ordinary neutral condition to pleasure simply because a set of obstacles has been removed. The ordinary condition is already recurrently burdened by wanting, resistance, agitation, regret, uncertainty, and related pressures; disciplined life has already begun to alter this baseline through restraint, contentment, and forms of nonsensual wellbeing. When the hindrances are absent, the practitioner is therefore in a condition that is already substantially better than the one structured by these pressures. Recognizing this release gives rise to *pāmojja* and initiates further affective and psychophysical development through *pīti* and tranquillity to *sukha*. The later *sukha* is thus neither simply identical with the bare absence of the hindrances nor independent of it. It is a strengthened and developed affective expression of a transformation already under way.

One further feature of DN 2 will be important in the following section. The practitioner does not remain unaware of this change: the abandonment of the hindrances is apprehended in himself, and the similes similarly place an evaluative recognition of release before the arising of gladness. This recognition does not by itself amount to the general conclusion that wellbeing arises through the cessation rather than the satisfaction of desire. It does, however, mean that the affective transformation is not represented as wholly pre-reflective. The question is whether such an experienced and recognized contrast, interpreted within the wider framework of Buddhist cultivation, can contribute to a more enduring transformation in how desire and wellbeing are understood.

6. From the Abandonment of the Hindrances to Insight: Pleasure and Motivational Transformation

The preceding sections have suggested two consequences of the disappearance of the hindrances. On the reading developed here, their absence does not merely remove distractions that would otherwise interfere with a separate act of concentration. By withdrawing the motivational pressures that ordinarily pull cognition toward acquisition, resistance, reconsideration, or disengagement, it leaves the mind more gathered and workable, with its capacities less pre-empted by such demands. At the same time, the resulting condition involves a substantial affective improvement, developing through *pāmojja*, *pīti*, tranquillity, and *sukha*.

What happens if we consider these two consequences together? The cognitive potential released when wanting, resistance, agitation, regret, doubt, and disengagement subside need not be directed only toward some object unrelated to the process of cultivation. The transformation that made this cognitive readiness possible can itself become something to be understood.

This possibility should not be taken to mean that an altered experience automatically generates liberating insight. DN 2 does not describe the practitioner as moving from a wholly uninterpreted experience directly to a general theory of desire and wellbeing. As seen in the preceding section, neither does it represent the affective transformation as wholly unrecognized. The practitioner sees the hindrances as abandoned in himself, while the preceding similes explicitly place reflection upon the contrast between an earlier burden and present release before the arising of *pāmojja*. There is therefore already a movement from a changed condition to awareness of that condition. The further question is how such a recognized contrast can acquire broader motivational and soteriological significance.

In developing the explanation which follows, I also owe an important debt to Bronkhorst. His account of tension reduction helps illuminate the pleasantness of release (Bronkhorst 2012). More generally, his work suggests that human beings seek pleasure in objects and situations with which previous satisfaction has become associated in memory, although the improvement in experience may derive from something different. The theory thus distinguishes what actually makes experience better from the objects and situations to which that improvement is attributed. This provides a useful psychological model of how pleasure-seeking can misidentify its own cause.

As argued above, repeated disciplined action can reshape the dispositions from which later intentions and responses arise (Giustarini 2017, pp. 54–56, 59–60, 67), while repeated refusal to enact certain impulses may weaken the mental movements associated with them (Polak 2024, pp. 280–81). The present argument connects this process more directly with the hindrances: the urges encountered in ordinary life and several of the hindrances encountered in cultivation may express overlapping motivational dynamics. Their disappearance in meditation can therefore be continuous with a transformation already under way in everyday conduct rather than an isolated achievement superimposed upon an otherwise unchanged motivational life.

At this point Bronkhorst's general insight can be reformulated in terms more closely tied to the Nikāya material. Ordinary gratification normally combines two events: the desired object is obtained and the desire for it temporarily ceases. Because these events coincide, the subsequent improvement is naturally attributed to obtaining the object. From the perspective of someone experiencing desire, the apparent problem is that something wanted is absent, and the apparent solution is its acquisition. The cultivation described above can partly separate these factors. If the object remains unobtained while the wanting itself subsides and wellbeing nevertheless improves, the apparent causal picture changes. The practitioner acquires experiential grounds for recognizing that the deficiency may not have been produced simply by the absence of the desired object: the desire that presented acquisition as the solution may itself have been contributing to the *dukkha*. The significance of the contrast is therefore not merely that an unsatisfied desire can be tolerated. More radically, when the wanting itself ceases, the deficiency that seemed to require gratification may itself diminish or disappear.

The *Cūḷadukkhakkhandha Sutta* (MN 14) is particularly important here. Mahānāma reports that greed, hatred, and delusion can still invade his mind despite his understanding of the teaching. The Buddha's response is striking: even a noble disciple who has properly understood the limited gratification and predominant drawbacks of sensual pleasures may remain attracted to sensuality so long as he has not experienced *pīti* and *sukha* apart from sensual pleasures and unwholesome states, or something more peaceful than these. Correctly understanding the structure of sensuality is therefore not by itself sufficient to transform attraction.

Arbel has rightly emphasized the importance of this passage for understanding the liberative role of nonsensual *pīti* and *sukha*. The practitioner requires not merely insight into the danger of sensual pleasures but experiential access to a form of wellbeing that does not depend on sensual gratification (Arbel 2015, pp. 200–3). MN 14 is especially significant for the present argument because the relevant cognitive understanding is already present. What is missing is not additional information about sensuality but an affective alternative capable of weakening its practical power.

The point I want to make here is not simply that one nonsensual pleasure competes successfully with a sensual one. The broader Nikāya pattern in which various forms of nonsensual wellbeing accompany restraint, the weakening or abandonment of the hindrances, and meditative development can give practical force to a different understanding of the

causal structure of dissatisfaction: wellbeing need not depend upon satisfying desire, and the very pressure of desire may itself contribute to the deficient character of experience—one important form of *dukkha*—that it purports to remedy. MN 14 is especially important because it makes explicit that correct understanding of sensuality may remain practically insufficient until such an affective alternative has been experienced. On the interpretation proposed here, its transformative potential lies in the conjunction of non-gratification, the subsiding of desire, and an improvement in wellbeing.

This formulation also helps avoid attributing to MN 14 an inference that the sutta does not describe. The text does not portray an unstructured experience spontaneously generating a new reflective proposition. Rather, an understanding of sensuality already organizes the practitioner's path, while the affective alternative changes the experiential background against which that understanding operates. One may correctly intellectually acknowledge the dangers and limitations of sensual pleasure while sensual gratification continues, in practice, to appear as the most effective available means of improving one's condition. Experience of wellbeing that does not depend upon such gratification can transform the practical significance of a cognitive recognition that, by itself, had remained insufficient to overcome sensual attraction.

The relation between experience and understanding can therefore be reciprocal rather than a one-directional passage from experience to conceptual insight. This should not be taken to imply that the relevant transformation or experiential understanding is already completed with the arising of the nonsensual *pīti* and *sukha* of the first *jhāna*. At least in the gradual-training pattern exemplified by DN 2, the mind is directed toward a series of knowledges only after the fourth *jhāna*, when it is described as *samāhita*, purified, malleable, workable, steady, and imperturbable. This sequence culminates in directing the mind toward knowledge of the exhaustion of the *āsava*s (*āsavānaṃ khayañāṇāya*). The earlier arising of nonsensual wellbeing may therefore provide an experiential condition for transformation without itself constituting its completion. The successive *jhāna*s continue to refine the condition of the mind: *pīti*, although wholesome and developmentally important, subsides before the third *jhāna*, while *sukha* is abandoned with the transition to the fourth, which is characterized by *upekkhāsatipārisuddhi*, the purification of mindfulness through equanimity. On the interpretation developed here, this progression may be read as suggesting that the affective alternative initially provided by *pīti* and *sukha* is itself transitional. The mind moves beyond these forms of wellbeing toward a more equanimous condition of cognitive readiness, and it is from this more fully developed state of workability that the DN 2 sequence represents it as being deliberately directed toward various knowledges, culminating in the crucial knowledge of the exhaustion of the *āsava*s.

Here Bronkhorst's account becomes relevant once more. His theory similarly distinguishes the object to which satisfaction is attributed from the condition that actually produces the improvement. On his account, memory preserves the objects and situations associated with previous satisfaction even where these were not its true cause. Human beings consequently seek to reproduce external circumstances connected in memory with pleasurable episodes, although the source of the pleasure lies, in his reconstruction, in the reduction of bodily tension (Bronkhorst 2012, pp. 144–47).

Bronkhorst later develops this proposed mechanism through memory reconsolidation and related processes (Bronkhorst 2023, pp. 9, 12). The present reconstruction is close to his account insofar as both approaches suggest that ordinary pleasure-seeking can misidentify what actually improves experience. The difference between the two accounts may nevertheless be less sharp than this formulation suggests. If desire, aversion, worry, and related hindrances involve dissatisfaction with the present condition and mobilize cognition toward acquiring, rejecting, or resolving something, the resulting motivational pressure can itself

be understood as a psychological counterpart of the tension emphasized by Bronkhorst at the bodily level. The present account may therefore complement his psychophysiological reconstruction by describing, in terms closer to the Nikāya materials, the motivational and cognitive dimension of the same broader process of mobilisation and release.

Here the alternative understanding of *samādhi* developed in the preceding sections becomes important. If cognitive readiness or workability is one functional dimension of a *samāhita* mind, then the capacities released through the disappearance of the hindrances remain available for understanding. They can be directed toward the significance of the transformation itself. The post-*jhāna* formula in DN 2, in which the already *samāhita*, purified, workable, and imperturbable mind is inclined toward successive knowledges, fits this broader pattern.[9]

This perspective also helps explain why successful cultivation may progressively reduce the need for some of the corrective activities through which it was produced. As MN 19 illustrates, even wholesome thinking can be relinquished once its function has been served. The resulting process is therefore not simply linear. *Sīla*-centred cultivation and repeated restraint alter habitual responses to motivational impulses. As the relevant dispositions weaken, several hindrances arise less readily and cognitive capacities become less pre-empted by them. Their abandonment is accompanied by substantial affective improvement and subsequently by *pāmojja*, *pīti*, tranquillity, and *sukha*. Because wellbeing no longer depends to the same extent upon gratification or escape, the incentive to seek these elsewhere is reduced, thereby further supporting mental settling. At the same time, the recognized contrast between gratification and the cessation of motivational pressure can make experientially evident that wellbeing need not depend upon satisfying such pressures and that the pressures themselves may contribute to the deficiency they promise to remedy. Through repeated interaction, conduct, affect, *samādhi*, and understanding can thus reinforce one another and contribute to a more enduring transformation of motivation.

This contrast bears directly upon the structure of the noble truths. In ordinary desire, the situation presents itself in approximately the following form: something is missing or wrong; obtaining, removing, or changing something will improve the present condition. From within the motivational state, the apparent source of dissatisfaction is therefore the absence of the desired object or the presence of the unwanted situation. If, however, the object remains unobtained while dissatisfaction diminishes as the wanting itself subsides, the causal picture changes. The practitioner has experiential grounds for recognizing that the motivational pressure which presented itself as the route out of deficiency was actually itself contributing to the deficient character of experience.

This should not be taken as a derivation of the second and third noble truths from the phenomenology of the hindrances, still less as a claim that all *dukkha* in the Nikāyas can be reduced to the processes analysed here. The canonical claims concerning *taṇhā*, *dukkha*, and *nirodha* are considerably broader. Yet the proposed mechanism can make one central feature of those claims experientially intelligible. Craving need no longer appear simply as the attempted solution to a deficiency generated elsewhere; the practitioner can encounter cases in which weakening the craving itself alters the deficient character of experience. Correspondingly, cessation need not appear merely as deprivation.

An important distinction needs to be made between progressive cultivation and final transformation. Before liberating knowledge, the weakening or temporary disappearance of the hindrances remains conditioned and potentially reversible. A practitioner may repeatedly enter conditions in which sensual desire, aversion, restlessness, doubt, and related disturbances are absent without having irreversibly eliminated the dispositions from which they can arise. The standard liberation formulas claim something stronger only at the culmination of the path.

Here the structure of DN 2 is particularly suggestive. After the progression through the *jhāna*s, the mind that has become *samāhita*, purified, workable, and imperturbable is directed toward *āsavānaṃ khayañāṇa*, knowledge of the exhaustion of the *āsava*s. The first content of this knowledge is the fourfold understanding of *dukkha*, its arising, its cessation, and the path leading to its cessation, followed by the same fourfold analysis of the *āsava*s. The subsequent formula then specifies liberation from *kāmāsava*, *bhavāsava*, and *avijjāsava*. The mechanism proposed here has an especially evident relation to the sensual domain. Repeated experience of wellbeing that does not depend upon sensual gratification can weaken the motivational authority of sensual desire itself.

The relation is not one of simple terminological identity. *Kāmacchanda*, one of the five hindrances, should not be equated with *kāmāsava*, which belongs to a different canonical classification. Nor need everything covered by *kāmāsava* be reducible to the particular dynamics analysed here. The more limited claim is that the transformation of sensual motivation traced through restraint, abandonment of the hindrances, nonsensual wellbeing, and changing understanding bears directly upon the domain designated by *kāmāsava*.

A related, although necessarily more limited, connection can be made with *avijjāsava*. If ordinary motivational experience repeatedly presents successful gratification as the solution to dissatisfaction, then misapprehension of the relation between wanting and wellbeing can form part of the cognitive environment in which craving persists. Discovering that experience can improve when the demand itself subsides corrects at least one such misunderstanding. This cannot establish that *avijjā* in the Nikāyas is reducible to a mistaken understanding of pleasure, and the present argument does not offer a comparable account of *bhavāsava*. Nevertheless, the placement in DN 2 of the four noble truths, the analysis of the *āsava*s, and their subsequent exhaustion makes clear that the affective and motivational changes reconstructed here are not remote from the wider soteriological transformation toward which the gradual training is directed.

The mechanism identified here concerns one psychologically important component of transformation: a change in the experienced relation between wanting, wellbeing, and the need to act upon motivational pressures. On this reconstruction, *sīla*, *samādhi*, pleasure, and understanding are not independent achievements placed one after another. Disciplined conduct alters the motivational processes that give rise to disturbance; their weakening contributes both to cognitive settling and to forms of wellbeing that do not depend upon gratification; the resulting experiential contrast can in turn provide the practical force of an understanding that was already present at an intellectual level. What begins as restraint of behaviour can therefore contribute to a change regarding what appears worth wanting at all.

7. Contemporary Ethical Implications: Discipline, Motivation, and Meditation

What implications might the reconstruction proposed above have for our understanding of Buddhist ethical discipline in contemporary contexts? A simple way of distinguishing meditation from ethics is to treat meditation primarily as formal seated practice in which one follows and masters a technique through regular practice, while ethics concerns moral conduct, avoidance of harm, and the cultivation of benevolent attitudes. These are important dimensions of Buddhist practice, but the Nikāya material considered here suggests a more intimate relation between conduct and the condition of the mind. Practices concerning sensory stimulation, eating, entertainment, speech, wakefulness, and habitual responses to desire do not merely regulate socially harmful behaviour. They can be understood as interventions into the motivational patterns that later appear in meditation as wanting, aversion, restlessness, doubt, or disengagement.

On this interpretation, discipline need not be understood primarily as punitive self-denial or obedience to rules whose psychological purpose is obscure. Its purpose is to bring about transformation rather than retribution. Repeatedly refusing to organize action around every arising impulse can gradually alter the motivational system from which those impulses arise. The intended outcome is therefore not a life of permanent conflict in which desire remains unchanged while being continually suppressed. On the present model, successful discipline would progressively reduce the force of the very pressures that initially made discipline difficult. In this respect, restraint is paradoxically directed toward its own decreasing necessity.

An important ethical consequence that follows from this is that discipline understood in such a way need not be opposed to wellbeing. If the analysis of the preceding sections is correct, practices that initially restrict familiar routes to gratification may eventually disclose forms of wellbeing that depend less upon obtaining particular objects, changing circumstances, or continually seeking stimulation. Their value would then lie not in enduring discomfort for the sake of moral purity, but in changing what is experienced as necessary for a satisfactory life.

The Nikāya disciplinary regime cannot, however, simply be transferred wholesale into contemporary non-monastic life. Going forth in the early Buddhist setting involved much more than adopting additional moral rules or devoting more time to meditation. Property, livelihood, family obligations, social position, opportunities for sensual gratification, and control over the conditions of life all changed together. Full literal imitation would generally be impossible for contemporary lay practitioners with economic, familial, and social responsibilities. Moreover, the argument developed here does not establish that every restriction belonging to ancient monastic life has the same psychological function, or that reproducing particular rules outside their original institutional setting would necessarily produce the effects described above.

At the same time, the distinction between monastic and lay status should not itself be treated as the decisive psychological variable. Formal ordination in a contemporary institution does not necessarily reproduce all the conditions associated with early Buddhist homelessness, just as contemporary lay life does not necessarily exclude some of them. A lay practitioner may deliberately simplify material needs, reduce dependence on stimulation and status, restrict unnecessary consumption, and create significant periods of solitude, silence, and disciplined practice. Conversely, institutional monastic life can itself generate obligations, identities, loyalties, concerns about status, and other sources of motivational pressure. Renunciation therefore cannot be assessed solely by the external removal of particular objects or social roles: old forms of attachment can in principle be replaced by new ones while much of the underlying motivational structure remains intact.

What can be transferred more plausibly is therefore not the entire institutional form but something of its psychological logic. A person can alter the habitual relation between impulse and action, reduce repeated exposure to conditions that continually activate particular desires, and refrain from automatically providing the response through which an impulse has normally been gratified. The concrete form of such discipline will, of course, differ from that of an early Buddhist renunciant community. What matters for the present argument is whether a way of life actually weakens motivational pressures that repeatedly recruit cognition and sustain dependence upon gratification.

Such an understanding also bears on contemporary meditation practice. If *samādhi* depends partly upon the motivational patterns cultivated outside formal meditation, then seated practice cannot be treated as psychologically independent of the rest of one's life. A practitioner who spends much of the day repeatedly responding to boredom, desire, irritation, or the search for stimulation may be continually reinforcing precisely the ten-

dencies that later appear as obstacles during meditation. Conversely, modifications of everyday behaviour—how readily one follows impulses, how much stimulation one seeks, how one responds to discomfort, and how frequently one allows boredom to trigger another activity—may themselves constitute part of meditative training. Meditation can thus be conceived as extending into the organization of ordinary behaviour rather than beginning only when one sits down.

The practical significance of this point becomes especially clear in ordinary moments that may appear too trivial to count as "practice." The impulse to reach for a smartphone in order to fill an empty interval, to eat to release some tension, to look for something to watch because the present moment feels insufficient, or to engage in gossip or idle small talk simply because silence feels uncomfortable may each constitute a small instance of the motivational pattern described above. The significance of such moments does not depend on their being ethically harmful, nor merely upon their providing occasions for noticing them. Their importance lies in the possibility of interrupting the habitual passage from felt deficiency or impulse to its expected form of gratification. Repeatedly doing so may gradually change what the mind experiences as requiring action in the first place. On the interpretation developed here, this is one of the places where Buddhist discipline and meditation most directly converge in ordinary life.

This also changes how *sīla* and related forms of restraint may be understood and motivated. If they are approached primarily as rules or precepts adopted because they are prescribed by the Buddha or inherited from Buddhist tradition, while the psychological rationale for them remains unclear, restraint can easily appear as the sacrifice of an immediately available satisfaction for the sake of an externally accepted norm. If these practices are understood as ways of weakening the patterns through which the present condition repeatedly generates demands for gratification, avoidance, or stimulation, their rationale becomes psychologically intelligible. Not acting on an impulse need not then appear merely as deprivation or obedience. It can become part of a process through which the practitioner learns that wellbeing does not always depend on obtaining what is wanted, removing what is disliked, or immediately changing the present condition.

This does not make moral considerations irrelevant, nor does it reduce *sīla* to a technique for personal wellbeing. Non-harming, truthful speech, and other forms of ethical conduct retain interpersonal significance independently of the mechanism examined here. The more limited point is that Buddhist discipline can operate at both levels: it can regulate conduct in relation to others while also transforming the habits, expectations, and motivational responses of the person who practises it. One important dimension of *sīla* may therefore consist in making its own psychological rationale progressively available to experience.

The contemporary significance of the Nikāya model may therefore lie less in recovering a particular list of rules than in recovering a conception of discipline as training of motivation. How one repeatedly acts upon desire helps shape the desires that subsequently arise; those motivational patterns affect the possibility of *samādhi*; and experiences of wellbeing less dependent on gratification can in turn alter one's understanding of what is worth pursuing. Ethics, meditation, and wellbeing are not independent domains, because the organization of ordinary conduct can participate in changing the kind of mind that eventually enters meditation.

8. Conclusions

The question with which this article began—why *sīla* should lead to *samādhi*—becomes especially puzzling if *samādhi* is understood primarily as an independently trainable capacity for deliberate attentional concentration. The argument developed here has not attempted simply to supply an additional causal link within that model. It has suggested that the

model itself may obscure part of the relation. If cognitive workability and readiness are important functional dimensions of being *samāhita* in relevant Nikāya contexts, then the psychological transformations effected through *sīla* are no longer merely external forms of support to a separate concentrating activity. They can belong to the process through which *samādhi* itself comes about.

Repeated restraint can weaken dispositions toward gratification, resistance, agitation, reconsideration, and disengagement. As these pressures subside, cognition is less continually recruited by what is wanted, resisted, regretted, or unresolved. The mind thereby becomes not simply less distracted but more available for deliberate, path-oriented use. The claim is causal and functional: weakening processes that repeatedly disturb and pre-empt cognition contributes to the mind's becoming *samāhita* and helps explain the workability and cognitive readiness associated with that mind.

Their disappearance has an affective consequence as well. The ordinary experiential baseline should not be imagined as neutral: wanting, aversion, restlessness, remorse, doubt, and related pressures repeatedly present the current condition as insufficient or in need of change. Freedom from these pressures therefore already constitutes a substantial improvement in wellbeing. DN 2 does not simply identify this improvement with the later *sukha*. The practitioner recognizes the hindrances as abandoned; *pāmojja* arises, followed by *pīti*, bodily tranquillity, and *sukha*. Recognition thus further develops the affective consequences of release. Because the present condition no longer appears deficient in the same way, there is less incentive to seek gratification or escape elsewhere, and this can further support mental settling.

The resulting experience can also contribute to motivational transformation. Ordinary gratification normally combines two events: the desired object is obtained and the wanting itself temporarily subsides. Disciplined cultivation can separate them. A motivational pressure may weaken without its object having been obtained, while experience nevertheless improves. The *Cūḷadukkhakkhandha Sutta* (MN 14) helps explain why this affective transformation may matter soteriologically. As Arbel has emphasized, recognition of the limited gratification and predominant drawbacks of sensual pleasures can coexist with continuing attraction until the practitioner gains access to nonsensual *pīti* and *sukha*, or something more peaceful. The present argument suggests a further implication of this alternative experience. When wellbeing improves although the demand generated by desire has not been satisfied, and improves precisely as the wanting and associated disturbance subside, the practitioner encounters experiential evidence that gratification is not the only route out of felt deficiency. More strongly, the motivational pressure that promises to remedy the deficient condition may itself be experientially recognized as contributing to that deficiency. In this way, the experience of the hindrances being absent can do more than lend motivational force to an understanding already held: it can alter the experienced relation between wanting, gratification, and wellbeing.

The answer proposed here is therefore not that morality somehow improves an otherwise independent focusing faculty. Rather, *sīla*, the abandonment of the hindrances, wellbeing, *samādhi*, and understanding can be seen as interacting moments within a developmental process of motivational transformation. This does not provide an exhaustive account of *samādhi* or liberating knowledge, but it does make intelligible why the Nikāya path can present ethical and disciplinary cultivation as genuinely conducive to the arising of a gathered mind.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Acknowledgments: Generative AI (ChatGPT 5.6 Sol, ChatGPT Astra, ChatGPT 6) was used solely for English-language editing and for formatting the manuscript according to MDPI requirements. The argument, structure, source interpretation, and substantive scholarly content were developed entirely by the author. All AI-assisted edits were reviewed by the author, who takes full responsibility for the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Notes

[1] Pāli texts are cited from the *Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana Tipiṭaka*, as reproduced in the Digital Pāli Reader Online. English translations of Pāli passages are my own unless otherwise indicated. References to individual suttas follow the numbering used by SuttaCentral (suttacentral.net). This is particularly relevant to the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, whose numbering differs between editions.

[2] I generally leave *samādhi* and *samāhita* untranslated. Although "concentration" is a conventional rendering, contemporary English can suggest deliberate focusing, attentional narrowing, or sustained object-directed effort. Since the adequacy of precisely such an exclusively activity-centred understanding is at issue in this article, translating the terms uniformly as "concentration" would risk prejudging the argument. I therefore retain the Pāli except where "concentration" clearly denotes the particular interpretation under discussion.

[3] Throughout this article, references to *sīla*-centred or disciplinary cultivation should not be taken to imply that every practice discussed belongs to *sīla* in the same narrow classificatory sense. The Nikāya gradual-training schemes combine precepts concerning interpersonal conduct with sense restraint, moderation in eating, wakefulness, contentment, restrictions on entertainment and adornment, and *sati-sampajañña*. These practices may differ in ethical, karmic, and specifically meditative significance. The present argument concerns their possible convergence at the level of motivational and psychological transformation rather than their taxonomic identity.

[4] There are nevertheless reasons for considering such a distinction. *Cetanā* is closely related to *saṅkhāra* in some Nikāya contexts: SN 22.56 analyzes the *saṅkhāra* aggregate through classes of *cetanā*, while in SN 12.38 intending (*ceteti*), planning (*pakappeti*), and latent tendency (*anuseti*) provide a basis for the establishment of consciousness, thus occupying a similar position with regard to *viññāṇa* as *saṅkhāra* in the scheme of dependent origination. AN 3.101 may point in a related direction: an earlier, imperfect and constrained *samādhi* is characterized as *sasaṅkhāraniggayhavāritagata*, which denotes the presence and active role of *saṅkhāra* whereas the more mature state is no longer so characterized, even though purposive inclination toward a chosen higher knowledge is described afterwards. Such passages permit the hypothesis that cultivation reduces some forms of effortful or constructive regulation without abolishing agency.

[5] The methodological problem extends beyond textual stratification. Wynne has emphasized the danger of allowing assumed doctrinal coherence to determine historical exegesis and has reconstructed more than one early Buddhist orientation toward meditation and liberating cognition (Wynne 2018a, pp. 94–95, 103; 2018b, pp. 102–4). The present argument adds two further methodological considerations. Even if several formulations are assumed to derive from a single historical teacher, this would not by itself entail their homogeneity or conceptual immutability over the course of a long teaching career. Nor would historical authenticity settle the philosophical question: first-person familiarity with unusual contemplative states may provide especially important evidence concerning their phenomenology without guaranteeing a complete or infallible causal explanation of how they arise. Textual earliness, historical attribution, contemplative expertise, and philosophical adequacy should therefore not be treated as mutually entailing.

[6] DN 2 here uses *abhijjhā* rather than the more usual heading *kāmacchanda* for the desire-related member of the hindrance set. This should not be confused with *kāmāsava*, which belongs to a different doctrinal classification and occurs later in the discourse.

[7] Developed Theravāda concentration theory integrates the abandonment of the hindrances into a more elaborate technical account involving the strengthening of the *jhāna* factors, development of the meditation sign (*nimitta*), and increasingly stabilized absorption (Vism IV.31–138). The point here is not that such later models are illegitimate, nor that deliberate concentration techniques were absent from earlier Buddhism, but that this explanatory architecture should not automatically be read back into a gradual-training sequence that does not itself specify it at this point.

[8] This explanation need not, of course, account for every occurrence of *sukha*. The *anavajjasukha* associated with faultless conduct and the *abyāsekasukha* associated with sense restraint may include somewhat different forms of satisfaction, and their precise relation to the later *sukha* following *passaddhi* remains open. DN 2 likewise does not explicitly identify the *sukha* following *passaddhi* with the *vivekaja pītisukha* of the first *jhāna*, nor either of these with the *samādhija pītisukha* of the second. The repeated terminology suggests developmental continuity, but the present argument does not require phenomenological identity among them. Nor does

restraint by itself guarantee the experience described here. Frustrated or forcibly suppressed desire may be anything but pleasant. The relevant case is one in which the motivational pressure itself has actually weakened or subsided.

[9] AN 9.36 provides a canonical comparison at the level of structure. Having entered *jhāna*, the practitioner contemplates the phenomena present there as impermanent, suffering, empty, and not-self, and turns the mind toward the deathless. The content of this analysis differs from what is proposed here: AN 9.36 concerns insight into the conditioned phenomena present in the meditative attainment, whereas the present reconstruction concerns the motivational and affective significance of the absence of the hindrances. The resemblance is therefore structural—the cultivated meditative condition and phenomena present within it can themselves become cognitively significant—rather than an identity of the understanding produced.

References

Primary Sources

Aṅguttara Nikāya (AN), Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana Edition.
Dīgha Nikāya (DN), Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana Edition.
Majjhima Nikāya (MN), Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana Edition.
Saṃyutta Nikāya (SN), Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana Edition.
Visuddhimagga (Vism), Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana Edition.

Secondary Sources

Arbel, Keren. 2015. The Liberative Role of Jhānic Joy (*Pīti*) and Pleasure (*Sukha*) in the Early Buddhist Path to Awakening. *Buddhist Studies Review* 32: 179–205. [CrossRef]
Ben-David, Aviran. 2024. Bridging the Gap Between *Sīla* and *Samādhi*: The Role of Mindfulness in Pre-Meditative Practice. *Mindfulness* 15: 2386–401. [CrossRef]
Bronkhorst, Johannes. 2012. *Absorption: Human Nature and Buddhist Liberation*. Paris: University Media.
Bronkhorst, Johannes. 2019. What can we learn from Musīla and Nārada? *The Indian International Journal of Buddhist Studies* 20: 1–19.
Bronkhorst, Johannes. 2023. The Buddhist noble truths: Are they true? *Religions* 14: 82. [CrossRef]
Gethin, Rupert. 2020. Schemes of the Buddhist Path in the Nikāyas and Āgamas. In *Mārga: Paths to Liberation in South Asian Buddhist Traditions*. Edited by Cristina Pecchia and Vincent Eltschinger. Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, pp. 5–77.
Giustarini, Giuliano. 2017. The Interaction of Morality (*Sīla*) with Cognitive Factors in the Pāli Nikāyas. *The Indian International Journal of Buddhist Studies* 18: 43–70.
Polak, Grzegorz. 2023. The Pleasure of Not Experiencing Anything: Some Reflections on Consciousness in the Context of the Early Buddhist Nikāyas. *Religions* 14: 1347. [CrossRef]
Polak, Grzegorz. 2024. *Nikāya Buddhism and Early Chan: A Different Meditative Paradigm*. Sheffield: Equinox Publishing.
Shulman, Eviatar. 2025. An Ethical *Samādhi*: Brahma-vihāra Meditation and the Flexible Early Buddhist Path. *Mindfulness* 16: 2066–79. [CrossRef]
Sun, Hao. 2024. On Freedom from Remorse (Avipratisāra/Avippaṭisāra): Its Place on the Well-Trodden Path from Moral Discipline to *Samādhi* Meditation. *Mindfulness* 15: 2082–92. [CrossRef]
Wynne, Alexander. 2007. *The Origin of Buddhist Meditation*. London and New York: Routledge.
Wynne, Alexander. 2018a. Sariputta or Kaccāna? A preliminary study of two early Buddhist philosophies of mind and meditation. *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies* 14: 77–107.
Wynne, Alexander. 2018b. Text-critical history is not exegesis: A Response to Anālayo. *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies* 15: 78–105.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.