

Article

From Scripture to Practice: The Semantic Multivalence of *Parimukhaṃ Satiṃ Upaṭṭhapetvā* and the Divergence of *Vipassanā* Meditation Traditions

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Abstract

The Pāli formulaic phrase *parimukhaṃ satiṃ upaṭṭhapetvā* appears throughout the *Nikāyas* in contexts ranging from breathing meditation to non-breathing practices and idiomatic descriptions of meditative states, yet its central term, *parimukha*, was never defined within the canon. The subsequent commentarial literature did not unify this semantic openness. Rather, through a cumulative process in which each successive text preserved prior interpretations while adding new layers, the meaning of *parimukha* became progressively multilayered. Five modern *Vipassanā* traditions—Pa-Auk, Mahāsi, Goenka, Shwe Oo Min/Tejaniya, and Sunlun—have constructed fundamentally different meditative methodologies in terms of the object of attention, the architecture of practice, and the practitioner's embodied experience by emphasizing different layers of this accumulated semantic heritage. This divergence is not arbitrary but traceable to different interpretive decisions regarding the same Pāli phrase. By tracing this process, this study argues that interpretive decisions regarding scriptural terms are themselves the formation of practice. Scriptural language functions not merely as a medium for transmitting religious thought but as an enabling condition that shapes religious practice itself. The interpretive history of *parimukha* is a concrete case of this enabling condition in operation.

Keywords: *parimukha*; *sati*; Pāli; interpretation; semantic multivalence; *vipassanā*; *Theravāda*; commentarial literature; Buddhaghosa; meditation traditions

1. Introduction

In the Pāli canon, the formulaic phrase *parimukhaṃ satiṃ upaṭṭhapetvā* appears without exception wherever breath meditation is discussed. Representative instances include the breath meditation formulae of the *Ānāpānasati-sutta* (MN 118), the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* (MN 10), the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna-sutta* (DN 22), and the *Ānāpāna-saṃyutta* (SN 54). Moreover, the phrase is used repeatedly in diverse practice contexts beyond breath meditation, including the removal of the five hindrances (e.g., the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta*, DN 2), the attainment of the four *jhānas*, and the cultivation of the *brahmavihāras*. Thus, how one understands this single phrase determines one's understanding of the starting point of all *vipassanā* practice. Yet despite its pivotal position, the meaning of the central term *parimukha* was never explicitly defined within the *Nikāyas*.

The compound *parimukha* can be analyzed into the prefix *pari-* (around, surrounding, completely) and the noun *mukha*, whose range in Pāli extends from “mouth” and “face” through “entrance” and “front” to “cause, means, way” and “foremost, chief,” yielding a



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range of possible meanings such as “around the face,” “in front,” or “forward.” A comparable flexibility appears in other *mukha* compounds: in *apāya-mukha* the term denotes the cause of ruin or loss, and in *āya-mukha* the opening through which income arrives, and hence the means of income—in neither case a part of the body (Rhys Davids and Stede 1921–1925, s.v. “*pari*,” “*mukha*,” “*parimukha*”; cf. Monier-Williams 1899, p. 599). The Pāli *Nikāyas* employ *parimukha* without explication as a formulaic element at the onset of practice, a usage suggesting that the term was self-evident to its audience as part of the everyday vocabulary of the renunciant practice community. However, the subsequent commentarial literature—the *Vibhaṅga*, the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, the *Visuddhimagga*, the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī*, and the *Sammohavinodanī* (hereafter VbhA)—analyzed the term with progressively increasing precision in roughly chronological order, while simultaneously exhibiting both partial agreement and partial divergence among their respective analyses. Some commentaries faithfully inherited the interpretations of their predecessors, while others added new meanings or refined existing ones. This interpretive multilayeredness at the commentarial stage finds divergent practical echoes in five modern *Theravāda Vipassanā* traditions—Pa-Auk, Mahāsi, Goenka, Shwe Oo Min/Tejaniya, and Sunlun—with the result that today the meaning of *parimukha* remains undetermined, having diverged into distinct meditative methodologies.

This interpretive history is not merely a philological problem, because it directly impacts practice. If *parimukha* means “at the tip of the nose” or “at the upper lip,” the practitioner fixes attention on a specific anatomical point. If it means “in front” or “forward,” the instruction shifts to a psychological orientation—bringing the meditation subject to the forefront of awareness. These are not merely different translations of the same word. They are different instructions that generate different meditative experiences and, over time, give rise to different practice systems.

Existing scholarly research on *parimukha* has treated the term primarily as a philological or commentarial problem. Vetter proposed that *parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā* could mean holding one’s attention within a narrow range of vision, citing the breath meditation section of the *Kāyagatāsati-sutta* (MN 119) as evidence (Vetter 1988, p. 24). Anālayo acknowledged the possibility of both a literal reading (the nostril area) and a metaphorical one (the firm establishment of *sati*), concluding that the meaning is context-dependent (Anālayo Bhikkhu 2003, pp. 128–29). Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, drawing on *Vinaya* usage and non-breath practice contexts, argued that *parimukha* is an idiomatic expression that does not designate a body part, offering the most systematic critique of the commentarial interpretation (Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu 2012, pp. 110–12). However, existing scholarship has not systematically traced the relationship between this interpretive divergence and the divergence of actual practice. The present study addresses this gap. The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 examines the contexts in which *parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā* is used in the *Nikāyas*, classifying them into three categories—breath meditation, non-breath practices, and idiomatic descriptions of meditative states—to demonstrate that the phrase was used in ways that resist reduction to a single meaning. Section 3 traces how the meaning of this term was interpreted across five key commentarial texts—the *Vibhaṅga*, the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, the *Visuddhimagga*, the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī*, and the *Sammohavinodanī*—in roughly chronological order. Section 4 analyzes how five modern *Vipassanā* traditions—Pa-Auk, Mahāsi, Goenka, Shwe Oo Min/Tejaniya, and Sunlun—have each arrived at distinctive approaches to the commencement of practice, whether by following, reinterpreting, or independently departing from the commentarial interpretations examined in Section 3. Sections 3 and 4 thus offer two independent lines of response to the semantic openness identified in Section 2, without presuming that all five traditions necessarily derived their approaches through a single continuous line of commentarial transmission. Section 5 syn-

thesizes the findings and discusses how interpretive divergence and divergence in practice are related. Section 6 presents the conclusion.

This study demonstrates that the diversity of modern *Vipassanā* practice traditions is not arbitrary but traceable to a history of interpretation. Differences in interpretive decisions regarding the same Pāli phrase correspond to distinct practice traditions—evidence that scriptural language functions not merely as a medium for transmitting religious thought but as an enabling condition that shapes religious practice itself. The interpretive history of *parimukha* is a concrete case of this enabling condition in operation.

2. The Contextual Uses of *Parimukha* in the Nikāyas

The *Nikāyas* do not define *parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā*; the determination of its meaning is not seriously attempted until the later commentarial literature examined in the next section. The task here is accordingly limited to showing where and in what practice contexts the phrase appears, since this distribution provides the starting point for the discussion of interpretive history that follows.

The occurrences are classified into three contextual types: breath meditation contexts (Section 2.1), non-breath practice contexts (Section 2.2), and idiomatic descriptions of meditative states (Section 2.3). Throughout this section, *parimukha* is rendered in transliteration without fixing its meaning.

2.1. Breath Meditation Contexts

The most frequent occurrence of *parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā* is in the instructions for mindfulness of breathing (*ānāpānasati*).

The representative discourse on breath meditation is the *Ānāpānasati-sutta* (MN 118; MN III 78–88). In this discourse, the Buddha presents the preparatory posture immediately prior to the sixteen stages of breath meditation in the following formulaic passage:

Idha, bhikkhave, bhikkhu araṇṇagato vā rukkhamūlagato vā suñṇāgāragato vā nisīdati pallāṅkaṃ ābhujitvā ujum kāyaṃ paṇidhāya parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā. So sato va assasati, sato passasati. (MN III 82)

“*Bhikkhus, a bhikkhu, having gone to the forest, to the root of a tree, or to an empty hut, sits down cross-legged, sets the body erect, and establishes mindfulness parimukha. Mindful, he breathes in; mindful, he breathes out.*”¹

The Pāli text of this formulaic passage is verbatim identical in the contemplation of the body through breathing (*kāyānupassanā*) in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* (MN 10; MN I 56) and the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna-sutta* (DN 22; DN II 291). All three discourses function as practice manuals, and in each case the formulaic phrase is presented together with the physical preparatory stage of going to a quiet place, sitting cross-legged, and setting the body erect. This indicates that the phrase functions as the formalized starting point immediately prior to the commencement of practice.

The *Ānāpāna-samyutta* (SN 54; SN V 311–341) in the *Samyutta Nikāya* consists of twenty suttas dealing with mindfulness of breathing. Of these, the formulaic phrase *parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā* appears repeatedly in seventeen suttas, with the exceptions of the *Bojjhaṅga-sutta* (SN V 312–313), the *Icchānaṅgala-sutta* (SN V 325–326), and the *Kaṅkheyya-sutta* (SN V 327–328). These three discourses do not include instructions for commencing practice, owing to their respective characters as doctrinal exposition, personal recollection, and advanced instruction.

This distribution demonstrates that *parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā* functions as the formalized opening procedure for breath meditation: it appears wherever the *Ānāpāna-samyutta* directly presents practical instructions and is omitted only where such instructions are unnecessary.

If one considers the breath meditation context alone, the later commentarial tradition's interpretation of the phrase as referring to the physical contact point where the breath is observed (the tip of the nose or the upper lip) possesses internal coherence within this context. However, the same formulaic phrase appears repeatedly in practice contexts unrelated to breathing.

2.2. Non-Breath Practice Contexts

The phrase *parimukhaṃ satīṃ upaṭṭhapetvā* also appears as a formulaic element immediately before three practice contexts unrelated to breathing: the removal of the five hindrances (*pañca nīvaraṇa*), the attainment of the four *jhānas*, and the cultivation of the *brahmavihāras*.

2.2.1. Immediately Before the Removal of the Five Hindrances

The representative discourse in which *parimukhaṃ satīṃ upaṭṭhapetvā* appears immediately before the removal of the five hindrances is the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta* (DN 2; DN I 47–86). In the relevant passage (DN I 71), the practitioner sits cross-legged, sets the body erect, and establishes mindfulness *parimukha*, immediately after which he proceeds to remove, one by one, the five mental hindrances: covetousness (*abhiijhā*), ill will (*vyāpāda*), sloth and torpor (*thīna-middha*), restlessness and remorse (*uddhacca-kukkucca*), and doubt (*vicikicchā*). The same structure is repeated in the *Udumbarikā-sihanāda-sutta* (DN 25; DN III 49), the *Mahā-assapura-sutta* (MN 39; MN I 274), and the *Gaṇakamoggallāna-sutta* (MN 107; MN III 3).

In this context, once the practitioner has established mindfulness *parimukha*, what follows is not the observation of breathing but the removal of five psychological hindrances. Since the focus of practice here is the purification of psychological obstacles, confining the interpretation of *parimukha* to the physical contact point of the breath does not explain why the same formulaic phrase is used identically in practices unrelated to breathing.

2.2.2. Immediately Before the Attainment of the Four *Jhānas*

In the *Veṇāga-sutta* (AN I 182), the Buddha recollects his own practice, describing how he went into the forest, gathered grass or leaves to prepare a seat, sat down cross-legged, set the body erect, established mindfulness *parimukha*, and then directly entered the first *jhāna*, progressing through to the fourth *jhāna*. In this context, once the practitioner has established mindfulness *parimukha*, what follows is not the observation of breathing but the sequential attainment of the stages of *jhāna*.

2.2.3. Immediately Before *Brahmavihāra* Cultivation

In the same *Veṇāga-sutta* (AN I 183), the section following the four *jhānas* concerns the cultivation of the *brahmavihāras*—loving-kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*). In this section as well, the same cross-legged posture and the formulaic phrase establishing mindfulness *parimukha* are repeated, after which the practitioner proceeds to extend loving-kindness upward, downward, sideways, and in all directions without limit.

The essence of *brahmavihāra* practice is not the concentration of the mind on a single point but its expansion in all directions. Interpreting *parimukha* as a specific bodily point in this context creates a semantic tension.

The occurrences of the phrase across these three non-breath practice contexts demonstrate that the same formulaic expression was used not as a formula restricted to breath meditation but as a general opening form for practice at large. The idiomatic descriptive usages examined next reinforce this finding.

2.3. Idiomatic Descriptions of Meditative States

The third type comprises cases in which *parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā* appears not as an instruction to the practitioner but as a description of a person already engaged in meditation. This type is divided into two subcategories: cases in which an external observer other than the Buddha describes the appearance of a meditator (Section 2.3.1), and cases in which the Buddha, upon observing the meditative state of his disciples, utters an inspired verse (*Udāna*) (Section 2.3.2).

2.3.1. Description by External Observers

In the *Brāhmaṇa-saṃyutta* of the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, there are cases in which *brahmins*—external observers—describe the Buddha’s meditative appearance using *parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā*: the *Bahudhītara-sutta* (SN I 170–171), the *Navakammika-sutta* (SN I 179–180), and the *Kaṭṭhahāraka-sutta* (SN I 180–181). In these cases, the observers would have seen only the outward appearance of the Buddha sitting cross-legged, with body erect, in a state of stillness and concentration. Given that the *brahmins*, as external observers, could not have known the meditator’s internal point of attention, *parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā* in this context appears to function as an idiomatic expression denoting the outward impression of meditative stillness and concentration.

2.3.2. The Buddha’s Description of Disciples in the Udāna

Usages as idiomatic description are found even more abundantly in the *Udāna* of the *Khuddaka Nikāya*. The *Udāna* is a genre of discourse in which the Buddha, after observing a situation, spontaneously utters an inspired verse (*Udānaṃ udānesi*). In several discourses of the *Udāna*, the Buddha observes his close disciples engaged in meditation, describes their state, and then utters an inspired verse.

In the *Sāriputta-sutta* (Ud 3:4; Ud 27), which describes the meditative posture of the Venerable *Sāriputta*, the Buddha sees a disciple sitting cross-legged, with body erect, *parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā*, and utters an inspired verse. In this discourse, the formulaic phrase is used not in a context where the Buddha instructs a disciple in a method of practice but in a context where he narrates the posture and state of a disciple already engaged in meditation.

2.4. Summary of Section 2

The three contextual types examined in this section—breath meditation, non-breath practices, and idiomatic descriptions—demonstrate that *parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā* was neither defined nor restricted to a single practice context within the *Nikāyas*. In the breath meditation context, an anatomical interpretation referring to the physical contact point where the breath is observed can possess internal coherence. However, in the non-breath practice contexts (removal of the five hindrances, the four *jhānas*, the *brahmavihāras*) and the idiomatic descriptive contexts, the same interpretation gives rise to semantic tension.

Whether this absence of definition reflects a genuine semantic openness in the term itself or whether *parimukha* carried a stable meaning within an oral or disciplinary context that was not committed to writing cannot be determined from the textual record alone. Within the textual record, the phrase remains undefined. This absence of definition is the source of the interpretive space within which the later commentarial literature was able to construct its own interpretations.

3. The Interpretive History of *Parimukha* in the Commentarial Literature

The following five texts are examined in order: the *Vibhaṅga*, the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, the *Visuddhimagga*, the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī*, and the *Sammohavinodanī*. These five texts are selected because they trace the cumulative development of the commentarial interpretation

of *parimukha*, from its first explicit gloss in the *Vibhaṅga* to its final specification in the *Sammohavinodanī*.² This order roughly follows the chronological sequence of the texts' composition. The *Vibhaṅga* and the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* belong to the canonical *Tiṭṭaka*, while the *Vissuddhimagga*, the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī*, and the *Sammohavinodanī* are fifth-century works of Buddhaghosa. However, this arrangement is intended to trace the cumulative development of interpretation, not to assert a strict chronological sequence (for an overview, see Norman 1983; von Hinüber 1996). Between the period in which the *Nikāyas* were composed and the composition of these commentarial texts lies a gap of several centuries, during which the oral transmission of the canon may have altered the conditions under which *parimukha* was understood. Whether the commentarial analyses represent the recovery of an original meaning that had become obscure, or the construction of new meanings on a term whose original sense was no longer fully accessible, cannot be determined from the available evidence. What can be traced is the textual record of interpretation itself.

3.1. The *Vibhaṅga*: The Starting Point of the Spatial Reading

The *Vibhaṅga*, the second treatise of the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*, is a representative text that classifies and explains the doctrinal system of early Buddhism. It treats various meditation subjects analytically and distinguishes the meanings of terms used in the Pāli canon in a more definitional and practice-oriented manner. Its interpretation of *parimukha* accordingly reads as a practice instruction.

A detailed explanation of *parimukha* appears in the *Suttantabhājanīya* of the *jhāna vibhaṅga* section of the *Vibhaṅga* (Vbh 252)³:

Parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā ti: tattha katamā sati? Yā sati anussati . . . pe . . . sammāsati: ayaṃ vuccati sati. Ayaṃ sati upaṭṭhitā hoti supaṭṭhitā nāsikagge vā mukhanimittē vā, tena vuccati parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā ti. (Vbh 252)

“*parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā*, it is said: therein, what is *sati*? That which is *sati*, recollection (*anussati*) ... *pe* [the standard Pāli abbreviation for repeated formulaic passages] ... right mindfulness (*sammāsati*): this is called *sati*. This *sati* is established, well established, at the tip of the nose (*nāsikagge*) or at *mukhanimitta* (the sign of *mukha*). Therefore it is called *parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā*.”

The *Vibhaṅga* defines *parimukha* in terms of the tip of the nose or *mukhanimitta*. Translated in accordance with the *Vibhaṅga*'s intent, *parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā* means “having properly established mindfulness at the tip of the nose or at *mukhanimitta*.”

However, the *Vibhaṅga* does not clearly specify what *mukhanimitta* precisely refers to. The Pāli term *mukha* carries the following range of meanings: (i) the mouth and face as body parts; (ii) a physical entrance; (iii) cause, means, method, or reason; (iv) front part, head, or foremost part; (v) chief, highest, or foremost (adjectival usage); and (vi) in front of, before (adverbial usage) (Rhys Davids and Stede 1921–1925, s.v. “*mukha*”). Accordingly, *mukha nimitta* can be rendered as (i) the sign of the mouth, (ii) the sign of the face, (iii) the sign of the entrance (i.e., the gateway of breathing), or (iv) the sign of the front (i.e., the mark of what is ahead).

Since *nāsikagga* (the tip of the nose) appears immediately before in the text, connected by *vā* (or), *mukhanimitta* can only be conjectured as referring to an area near the nose—whether the mouth, the face, or the gateway of breathing. In this regard, Ānandajoti Bhikkhu observes that if a specific body part had been intended, a more precise term such as *oṭṭha* (lip) could have been used (Ānandajoti Bhikkhu n.d.). Indeed, the very choice of *mukha*—a word with such a broad semantic range—suggests that the meaning of this passage may not have been intended to be confined to a specific body part.

3.2. The Paṭisambhidāmagga: The Emergence of an Independent Etymological Analysis

The Paṭisambhidāmagga belongs to the Khuddaka Nikāya as a canonical text, but its character is closer to Abhidhamma analysis. Traditionally attributed to Sāriputta, its content and structure overlap considerably with those of the Vibhaṅga (Norman 1983, pp. 87–89). In the Ānāpānakathā (“Discussion on In-breathing and Out-breathing”), the third kathā of I.Mahāvagga, an independent etymological analysis of *parimukha* is presented.

Paṭisambhidāmagga section 33 (Paṭi I 176) states:

Parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā ti. Parī ti pariggahaṭṭho. Mukhaṃ ti niyyānaṭṭho. Sati ti upaṭṭhānaṭṭho. Tena vuccati parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā ti. (Paṭi I 176)

“*parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā*, it is said. *Parī* has the meaning of *pariggaha* (taking up, grasping). *Mukha* has the meaning of *niyyāna* (going out, exit). *sati* has the meaning of *upaṭṭhāna* (establishing, presence). Therefore it is called *parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā*.”

This definition differs markedly from the Vibhaṅga’s interpretation of *parimukha* (Vbh 252). Whereas the Vibhaṅga explained *parimukha* in terms of a spatial location—the tip of the nose (*nāsikagga*) or *mukhanimitta*—the Paṭisambhidāmagga analyzes *pari* and *mukha* independently through etymological decomposition, glossing *pari* as *pariggaha* and *mukha* as *niyyāna*. There is no mention whatsoever of the tip of the nose, the mouth, or any specific body part.

This etymological analysis, however, is not a rigorous linguistic derivation but a method of inferring *pariggaha* from the phonetically similar *pari*, and *niyyāna* (going out, exit) from one of the semantic ranges of *mukha*. This mode of word analysis appears throughout the Paṭisambhidāmagga and aims at the systematization of doctrinal meaning rather than etymological precision. The glossing of *sati* as *upaṭṭhāna* follows the same method: *upaṭṭhāna* is a compound of *upa* (near) and *sthā* (standing), meaning “standing near, presence,” whereas the *upaṭṭhapetvā* of the formulaic phrase is the absolutive of a causative verb that brings about that state.

What, then, does this etymological analysis concretely mean? The term *pariggaha* carries the meanings of (i) encircling, surrounding; (ii) seizing, taking up, acquisition; (iii) possessions, property; (iv) wife; and (v) friendship, favor (Rhys Davids and Stede 1921–1925, s.v. “*pariggaha*”). The term *niyyāna* carries the meanings of (i) going out, departure, and (ii) exit, liberation, deliverance (Rhys Davids and Stede 1921–1925, s.v. “*niyyāna*”). If these terms are combined, one may take *pariggaha* in its second sense of “taking up, receiving” and *niyyāna* in its first sense of “going out, departing,” yielding the rendering: “having established presence (*upaṭṭhāna*) at the gateway where [breath] is received (*pariggaha*) and goes out (*niyyāna*)—that is, at the place where the breath makes contact.” Given that the passage in question is situated within the Ānāpānakathā, the third kathā of I.Mahāvagga, this rendering is contextually the most plausible.

Indeed, section 21 of the same Ānāpānakathā explicitly states that these three dhammas—the *nimitta*, the in-breath, and the out-breath—are not the object (*ārammaṇa*) upon which the unified mind depends, while adding that these three dhammas are nonetheless not unperceived (Paṭi I 171–172). In the saw simile of the following section 22, the *nimitta* corresponds to the tip of the nose (*nāsikagga*) and *mukhanimitta*; the *nimitta* here can thus be understood as the place where mindfulness is stationed in relation to breathing. Just as when sawing a log placed on level ground, one attends to the point where the saw-teeth touch the wood without directing the mind toward the saw-teeth as they come and go, so too the bhikkhu establishes mindfulness at the tip of the nose (*nāsikagga*) or at *mukhanimitta* without directing the mind toward the in-breaths and out-breaths as they come and go (Paṭi I 171). Here, as in the Vibhaṅga, there is no explanation of what *mukhanimitta* concretely refers to; it can only be inferred, from its connection with *nāsikagga* by *vā* (or), as denoting an area near the nose. That is, the tip of the nose or *mukhanimitta* is the place (*nimitta*) where mindfulness is stationed, and the in-breaths and out-breaths are passively perceived at that place rather

than being the object toward which the mind is intentionally directed. In this simile, the spot where the log rests corresponds to the *nimitta*—the place where mindfulness is stationed—and the saw-teeth going back and forth correspond to the in-breaths and out-breaths. The fact that *pariggaha* (taking up) and *niyyāna* (going out) in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*’s etymological analysis of *parimukha* can be read as symbolizing the entry and exit of the in-breath and out-breath corresponds precisely to this saw simile.

The *Paṭisambhidāmagga* thus presents an independent etymological analysis of *parimukha* (*pari* = *pariggaha*, *mukha* = *niyyāna*) that differs from that of the *Vibhaṅga*, while simultaneously employing the same spatial expression as the *Vibhaṅga* (*nāsikagge vā mukhanimitte vā*). This dual mode of explanation suggests that the interpretation of *parimukha* was already non-unitary at this stage.

3.3. The Visuddhimagga: Synthesis and Expansion of the Interpretive Tradition

3.3.1. The Juxtaposition of Two Etymological Readings

The *Visuddhimagga* is a fifth-century meditation treatise in which Buddhaghosa systematized the Mahāvihāra tradition of Anurādhapura, synthesizing the earlier commentarial tradition while achieving an independent systematization. The *Visuddhimagga*’s explanation of *parimukha* is concentrated in the *ānāpānasati* section of Chapter VIII, and it exhibits a threefold structure that incorporates the interpretations of both the *Vibhaṅga* and the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* while adding a third interpretation found in neither. These are: (i) a directional reading (placing mindfulness toward the meditation subject), (ii) a functional–etymological reading (inheriting the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*’s *pariggaha-niyyāna* analysis), and (iii) a spatial reading (the progressive specification of the contact point as the tip of the nose or *mukhanimitta*). This numbering follows the order of appearance in the *Visuddhimagga* itself; in the present paper’s analysis, the order (i) spatial, (ii) etymological, (iii) directional is used to reflect the chronological priority of the spatial reading that originated in the *Vibhaṅga*.

Visuddhimagga VIII (Vism 271) presents the following explanation of *parimukha*:

Parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā ti kammaṭṭhānābhimukhaṃ satim ṭhapayitvā. Athavā: pari ti pariggahaṭṭho, mukhaṃ ti niyyānaṭṭho, sati ti upaṭṭhānaṭṭho; tena vuccati parimukhaṃ satin ti. Evaṃ Paṭisambhidāyaṃ vuttanayena p’ ettha attho daṭṭhabbo. Tatrāyaṃ sankhepo: — pariggahitaniyyānasatiṃ katvā ti. (Vism 271)

“*parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā*, it is said: having placed mindfulness facing the meditation subject (*kammaṭṭhānābhimukhaṃ satim ṭhapayitvā*). Or (*Athavā*): *pari* has the meaning of *pariggaha* (taking up, grasping). *Mukha* has the meaning of *niyyāna* (going out, exit). *Sati* has the meaning of *upaṭṭhāna* (establishing). Therefore it is called *parimukhaṃ satim*. Thus, the meaning here should also be understood according to the method stated in the *Paṭisambhidā[magga]*. In brief: ‘having established the presence of mindfulness at the place where [breath] is taken up and goes out (*pariggahita-niyyāna*).’”

This passage calls for three observations.

First, Buddhaghosa presents as his first interpretation one that appears in neither the *Vibhaṅga* nor the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*. The gloss *kammaṭṭhānābhimukhaṃ satim ṭhapayitvā* (having placed mindfulness facing the meditation subject) reads the *mukha* of *parimukha* as synonymous with *abhimukha* (facing toward, in the presence of). In this reading, *pari-* is not separately analyzed, and *parimukha* as a whole is treated as an adverbial meaning “toward.” This interpretation understands *parimukha* not as a specific body part but as the directionality of mindfulness—a reading absent from the two preceding texts.

Second, the second interpretation is introduced by *Athavā* (or) and directly quotes the etymological analysis of the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* (*Paṭi* I 176) (*pari* = *pariggahaṭṭho*, *mukhaṃ* = *niyyānaṭṭho*). Buddhaghosa explicitly cites the source: “*Evaṃ Paṭisambhidāyaṃ vuttanayena*” (thus, according to the method stated in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*). This is a conscious acknowl-

edgment that the second interpretation is drawn from an earlier tradition, not his own original contribution.

Third, the summary compound *pariggahitaniyyānasatiṃ katvā* compresses the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*'s three-element analysis (*pariggaha* + *niyyāna* + *upaṭṭhāna*) into a single compound. Read in the context of the entry and exit of breath, this can be understood as "having established the presence (*upaṭṭhāna*) of mindfulness at the place where [breath] is taken up (*pariggaha*) and goes out (*niyyāna*)." What is notable is that Buddhaghosa does not independently explicate the meaning of *pariggaha* and *niyyāna* but simply quotes the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*'s formula and summarizes it as a compound (*pariggahitaniyyānasatiṃ*). No definitive determination is offered as to whether *pariggaha* means "grasping" or "taking in (=inhalation)," or whether *niyyāna* means "exit" or "going out (=exhalation)." Consequently, the interpretive flexibility of these terms, which was already open at the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* stage, is preserved unresolved in the *Visuddhimagga*.

Buddhaghosa introduces the second interpretation with *athavā* (or) without negating or discarding the first, and subsequently draws upon both interpretations in a practical context (Vism 280–284). The first interpretation is neither withdrawn nor corrected, even though the second is accompanied by an explicit source citation of the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* and a summary statement (*Tatrāyaṃ sankhepo*). Both readings of *parimukha*—(i) as the directionality of mindfulness (facing the meditation subject) and (ii) as taking in and sending out (breathing)—are thus presented as possible. Ñānamoli, in his standard English translation, renders this first interpretation as "setting up mindfulness in front of him, that is, setting mindfulness facing the meditation subject," and comments that the second interpretation follows the etymological analysis of the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* (Ñānamoli [1956] 2010).

3.3.2. Practical Elucidation Through Three Similes

In *Visuddhimagga* VIII (Vism 280–282), Buddhaghosa explains what the practice of establishing mindfulness *parimukha* concretely means through three similes. These similes are situated within the context of elucidating "touching" (*phusanā*) and "fixing" (*thapanā*) among the eight stages of *ānāpānasati* practice, and they share a single core principle: do not follow the breath inward and outward, but remain at the contact point.

The Simile of the Lame Man (*Paṅgulūpamā*; Vism 280–281): A lame man sets a swing in motion for a mother and son who are playing on it, then sits at the base of the swing post and watches the swing-board as it comes and goes at both ends and in the middle, without moving from his seat to see the ends and the middle. Likewise, the bhikkhu sits with mindfulness at the sign (*nimitte*) [such as the tip of the nose] and observes the place where the in-breaths and out-breaths come and go and make contact (*phuṭṭhaṭṭhāne*), without moving [inward or outward] to observe them.

The Simile of the Gatekeeper (*Dovārikūpamā*; Vism 281): Just as a gatekeeper does not investigate every person inside and outside the city but examines only those who arrive at the gate (*dvārappatta*), so too for the bhikkhu, the in-breaths that have gone inside and the out-breaths that have gone outside are not his concern; only what arrives at the gate is his concern.

The Simile of the Saw (*Kakacūpamā*; Vism 281–282): This simile is quoted from the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* (Paṭi I 170–171), and Buddhaghosa explicitly acknowledges the source. Just as when sawing a log placed on level ground, a person's mindfulness is established by the saw-teeth touching the wood, yet the person does not attend to the saw-teeth themselves as they come and go, so too the bhikkhu establishes mindfulness at the tip of the nose (*nāsikagge*) or at *mukhanimitta* and sits, without attending to the in-breaths and out-breaths that have entered or exited.

In all three similes, the essential point is the distinction between "the place where one remains" and "that which comes and goes." Mindfulness is established and remains at the

contact point, while the breath is passively perceived as it passes through that contact point. This structure corresponds to the saw simile of sections 21–22 of the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* analyzed in Section 3.2, demonstrating that Buddhaghosa faithfully inherits the earlier tradition.

These three similes, however, do not directly gloss the word *parimukha* itself. Rather, they appear in the process of elucidating the meaning of *phusanā* (touching) and *thapanā* (fixing) in a practical context, subsequent to the etymological interpretation of *parimukha*. That is, the semantic interpretation of *parimukha* (Vism 271) and its practical application (Vism 280–282) are treated at separate levels in the *Visuddhimagga*, with the latter concretizing the implications of the former at the level of practice.

3.3.3. The Concrete Specification of the Contact Point

The *Visuddhimagga* goes a step further than the *Vibhaṅga* and the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* by specifying the concrete bodily areas where the breath makes contact. Vism 283–284 states:

Ime hi dīghanāsikassa nāsapuṭaṃ ghaṭṭentā pavattanti, rassanāsikassa uttarotṭhaṃ. Tasmā 'nena imaṃ nāma thānaṃ ghaṭṭentī ti nimittaṃ thapetabbaṃ. (Vism 283–284)

“These [in-breaths and out-breaths] proceed by striking the inside of the nostrils (*nāsapuṭa*) in one with a long nose, and the upper lip (*uttarotṭha*) in one with a short nose. Therefore, he should fix the sign (*nimitta*) by noting ‘it strikes this place.’”

Buddhaghosa then cites the canonical statement: “*Bhikkhus*, I do not teach the development of mindfulness of breathing to one who lacks established mindfulness and clear comprehension” (SN V 337), emphasizing that mindfulness (*sati*) must be accompanied by clear comprehension (*sampajañña*).

Furthermore, the *Visuddhimagga* (Vism 284) generalizes this contact point through the concept of *pakati-phutthokāsa*—literally “the place (*okāsa*) that is naturally (*pakati*) touched (*phuttha*)”—which designates where the breath ordinarily makes contact:

Tā hi ca pana sati-paññāhi samannāgatena bhikkhunā na te assāsapassāsā aññatra pakati-phutthokāsā pariyesitabbā. (Vism 284)

“A bhikkhu endowed with mindfulness and wisdom should not seek those in-breaths and out-breaths anywhere other than the place where they ordinarily touch (*pakati-phutthokāsa*).”

This concrete specification of location appears first in the *Visuddhimagga* among the texts examined here, being absent from both the *Vibhaṅga* and the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*. By specifying *nāsapuṭa* (the inside of the nostrils) and *uttarotṭha* (the upper lip), Buddhaghosa concretizes at the level of practice the contact area that the earlier texts had left open with *nāsikagga* (the tip of the nose) and *mukhanimitta*. However, Buddhaghosa himself does not explicitly map these two locations onto the *Vibhaṅga*’s *nāsikagga* and *mukhanimitta*, respectively, and a definition of what *mukhanimitta* concretely refers to is still not provided.

3.3.4. Summary Assessment

The *Visuddhimagga*’s interpretation of *parimukha* is distinguished from the two preceding texts in the following respects.

First, the addition of a third interpretation. The reading *kammaṭṭhānābhimukhaṃ satim thapayitvā* (having placed mindfulness facing the meditation subject), absent from both the *Vibhaṅga* and the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, appears first in the *Visuddhimagga* among the texts examined here, and with it a reading of *parimukha* not as a specific body part but as the directionality of mindfulness becomes available in the commentarial tradition.

Second, the conscious synthesis of preceding traditions. Buddhaghosa juxtaposes the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*’s etymological analysis with *Athavā* (or) while explicitly citing the source, and employs the same spatial expression as the *Vibhaṅga* (*nāsikagge vā mukhanimutte vā*)

in the context of the saw simile. Through this, he integrates the etymological reading (*Paṭisambhidāmagga* lineage) and the spatial reading (*Vibhaṅga* lineage) within a single system.

Third, the deepening of practical specification. Through three similes, the practical principle of “remaining at the contact point without following the breath” is repeatedly confirmed, and the specific locations of *nāsapūṭa* (the inside of the nostrils) and *uttaroṭṭha* (the upper lip), together with the generalized concept of *pakati-phutthokāsa* (the place where [the breath] ordinarily touches), are presented—thereby concretizing at the level of practice the contact area that the earlier texts had left open. However, the meaning of *mukhanimitta* itself remains undetermined. This unresolved element is not settled until the *VbhA*, examined in Section 3.5.

Yet this specification stands in tension with the first interpretation (*kammaṭṭhānābhimukha*). Buddhaghosa glosses *parimukha* with the directional meaning of “facing the meditation subject” (*Vism* 271) while also explaining practice in terms of establishing mindfulness at specific spatial locations such as the tip of the nose or the upper lip (*Vism* 280–284). These two levels are not so much mutually contradictory as they are operative at different registers: the directional reading functions in the context of etymological analysis, while the spatial specification functions in the practical stages of meditation. Buddhaghosa himself does not explicitly discuss the relationship between the two.

Consequently, the *Visuddhimagga* expands rather than contracts the semantic multivalence of *parimukha*. At the semantic level, (i) the directional reading (*kammaṭṭhānābhimukha*) and (ii) the functional reading (*pariggaha-niyyāna*) are juxtaposed; at the practical level, (iii) the spatial expression of the earlier texts (*nāsikagge vā mukhanimitta vā*) is inherited, while the contact area is progressively specified through *nāsapūṭa/uttaroṭṭha* and *pakati-phutthokāsa*. This threefold structure reveals the depth of meaning carried by the single term *parimukha*.

3.4. The *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* (Sv): Compression and Synthesis

The *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* (hereafter Sv) is the commentary that Buddhaghosa composed on the *Dīgha Nikāya*, known to have been written after the *Visuddhimagga*. A direct gloss on *parimukha* appears in only one place—the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta-vañṇanā* (the commentary on the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta*) (Sv I 210–211)—and this is the sole passage in all three volumes that directly explicates *parimukha* (as confirmed by the PTS editor’s Index of Words and Phrases, Appendix III). In the commentaries on the remaining discourses, even where the same formulaic phrase appears, no separate explanation of *parimukha* is given. The *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna-sutta-vañṇanā* (commentary on DN 22) in Sv III states that “what is to be explained in this *ānāpāna* chapter is as explained in the *Visuddhimagga*,” thereby delegating the detailed commentary on breath meditation, including *parimukha*, to the *Visuddhimagga*. Within the *Silakkhandhavagga-Aṭṭhakathā* (commentary on the *Silakkhandhavagga*) of Sv I, the following explanation of *parimukha* appears:

Parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā ti kammaṭṭhānābhimukhaṃ satim thapayitvā, mukha-samīpe vā katvā ti attho. Ten’ eva vibhaṅge vuttam—‘ayaṃ sati upaṭṭhitā hoti supaṭṭhitā nāsikagge vā mukhanimitta vā, tena vuccati parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā’ ti. Athavā: parī ti pariggahaṭṭho, mukhaṃ ti niyyānaṭṭho, sati ti upaṭṭhānaṭṭho; tena vuccati parimukhaṃ satin ti. Evaṃ Paṭisambhidāyaṃ vuttanayena p’ ettha attho daṭṭhabbo. Tatrāyaṃ saṅkhepo—pariggahitaniyyānasatim katvā ti. (Sv I 210–211)

“*parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā*, it is said: having placed mindfulness facing the meditation subject (*kammaṭṭhānābhimukhaṃ*), or having placed it near the mouth (*mukha-samīpe*)—this is the meaning. For this very reason it was stated in the *Vibhaṅga*: ‘This *sati* is established, well established, at the tip of the nose (*nāsikagge*) or at *mukhanimitta*. Therefore it is called *parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā*.’ Or (*Athavā*): *pari* has the meaning of *pariggaha*. *Mukhaṃ* has the meaning of *niyyāna*. *Sati* has the meaning of *upaṭṭhāna*. Therefore it is called *parimukhaṃ satim*. Thus, the meaning here should also be understood according to the method stated in

the *Paṭisambhidā[magga]*. In brief: ‘having established the presence of mindfulness at the place where [breath] is taken up and goes out (*pariggahita-niyyāna*).’”

This passage borrows almost verbatim from the *Visuddhimagga*’s interpretation (Vism 271), yet exhibits two noteworthy differences.

First, the spatial interpretation *mukha-samīpe vā katvā* (or having placed it near the mouth) has been added. The *Visuddhimagga*’s first interpretation presented only a purely directional reading: *kammaṭṭhānābhimukha* (facing the meditation subject). The Sv appends immediately after this interpretation a spatial alternative: “or (*vā*) having placed it near the mouth.” This reads the *pari-* of *parimukha* as “near, around” — an etymological reading distinct from both the *-mukha* of *abhimukha* (denoting directionality) and the *pariggaha* of the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*.

Mukha-samīpa and *mukhanimitta* are different terms. *Samīpa* means “near, in the vicinity,” while *nimitta* means “sign, mark.” The fact that Buddhaghosa uses *mukha-samīpa* (near the mouth) and *mukhanimitta* (the sign of *mukha*) as separate expressions within the same paragraph demonstrates that the two concepts are not identical. If *mukhanimitta* already meant “near the mouth,” there would have been no reason to add *mukha-samīpa* separately.

Second, the *Vibhaṅga* is explicitly cited. With the phrase “*Ten’ eva vibhaṅge vuttaṃ*” (for this very reason it was stated in the *Vibhaṅga*), the Sv directly quotes the *Vibhaṅga*’s *nāsikagge vā mukhanimitte vā* passage as the authoritative basis for the spatial interpretation. This citation is absent from the *Visuddhimagga*’s etymological analysis passage (Vism 271). Through this citation, the Sv connects the new interpretation *mukha-samīpa* with the *Vibhaṅga*’s traditional formula, thereby conferring canonical authority on the spatial reading.

As a result of these two additions, the Sv synthesizes within a single paragraph the interpretations that in the *Visuddhimagga* were developed across separate contexts. The Sv explicitly juxtaposes three layers: (i) the directional reading (*kammaṭṭhānābhimukha*), (ii) the spatial reading (*mukha-samīpe + nāsikagge vā mukhanimitte vā*), and (iii) the etymological reading (*pariggaha-niyyāna*). This synthesis suggests that Buddhaghosa himself understood these three readings as complementary rather than mutually exclusive.

However, even in this paragraph of the Sv, no definition of what *mukhanimitta* concretely refers to is provided. Nor is the relationship between *mukha-samīpa* (near the mouth) and *mukhanimitta* (the sign of *mukha*) made explicit.

Consequently, the Sv reveals the semantic multivalence of *parimukha* more explicitly than the *Visuddhimagga*. The multilayered interpretations that were dispersed across the *Visuddhimagga*’s expository structure are compressed into a single paragraph in the Sv, making their juxtapositional character visible on the textual surface. This shows, through Buddhaghosa’s own writings, that the word *parimukha* cannot be reduced to a single meaning.

3.5. The *Sammohavinodanī* (VbhA): The Final Determination of *Mukhanimitta*

The *Sammohavinodanī* (*Vibhaṅgattakathā*, hereafter VbhA) is the commentary that Buddhaghosa composed on the *Vibhaṅga*. A detailed gloss on *parimukha* appears in only one place — the commentary on the *jhāna vibhaṅga* (VbhA 368–369) — and this is the sole passage in the text that directly explicates *parimukha* (VbhA 349 contains a structural reference to *parimukha* as *yogārambhaparidīpanaṃ*, “a description of the commencement of practice,” but offers no analysis of the term’s meaning). The full commentary on *parimukha* reads as follows:

Parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā ti kammaṭṭhānābhimukhaṃ satim thapayitvā, mukhasamīpe vā katvā ti attho. Ten’ eva vuttaṃ: ayaṃ sati upaṭṭhitā hoti, sūpaṭṭhitā, nāsikagge vā mukhanimitte vā ti. Mukhanimittan ti c’ ettha uttarotṭhassa vemajjhappadeso daṭṭhabbo, yattha nāsikāvāto paṭihaññāti. Atha vā: Parī ti pariggahaṭṭho. Mukhan ti niyyānaṭṭho. Sati ti upaṭṭhānaṭṭho. Tena vuccati parimukhaṃ satin ti. Evaṃ Paṭisambhidāyaṃ vuttanayena p’ ettha attho daṭṭhabbo. Tatrāyaṃ saṅkhepo: pariggahitanīyyānaṃ satim katvā ti. (VbhA 368–369)

“*parimukhaṃ satiṃ upaṭṭhapetvā*, it is said: having placed mindfulness facing the meditation subject (*kammaṭṭhānābhimukhaṃ*), or having placed it near the mouth (*mukhasamīpe*)—this is the meaning. For this very reason it was stated: ‘This *sati* is established, well established, at the tip of the nose (*nāsikagge*) or at *mukhanimitta*.’ And *mukhanimitta* here should be understood as the middle area of the upper lip (*uttaroṭṭhassa vemajjhappadeso*)—the place where the nasal wind (*nāsikāvāto*) strikes. Or (*Athavā*): *Pari* has the meaning of *pariggaha*. *Mukha* has the meaning of *niyyāna*. *Sati* has the meaning of *upaṭṭhāna*. Therefore it is called *parimukhaṃ satiṃ*. Thus, the meaning here should also be understood according to the method stated in the *Paṭisambhidā[magga]*. In brief: ‘having established the presence of mindfulness at the place where [breath] is taken up and goes out (*pariggahita-niyyāna*).’”

This passage shares almost the same content as the Sv (Sv I 210–211) and the *Visuddhimagga* (Vism 271), yet it contains one decisive difference. A minor but telling textual point should be noted first: whereas the Sv cites the *Vibhaṅga* by name (“*Ten’ eva vibhaṅge vuttam*”), the VbhA writes simply “*Ten’ eva vuttam*” without naming the source. This is because the VbhA is itself the commentary on the *Vibhaṅga*, making explicit self-reference unnecessary. The decisive difference, however, is that the VbhA provides the only explicit definition of *mukhanimitta* among the commentarial texts examined in this paper. The *Vibhaṅga* (Vbh 252) presented the formula *nāsikagge vā mukhanimitte vā* but did not define what *mukhanimitta* concretely refers to. Neither the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, the *Visuddhimagga*, nor the Sv determined the meaning of *mukhanimitta* itself, even while continuing to use the expression. The VbhA is the sole text that fills this gap:

Mukhanimittan ti c’ ettha uttaroṭṭhassa vemajjhappadeso daṭṭhabbo, yattha nāsikāvāto paṭihaññati.

This definition consists of two elements. First, an anatomical location: *uttaroṭṭhassa vemajjhappadeso* (the middle area of the upper lip). Second, a functional criterion: *yattha nāsikāvāto paṭihaññati* (the place where the nasal wind strikes). That is, *mukhanimitta* is defined not as a fixed point but as the area where the breath actually makes contact. By combining anatomical description with a functional criterion, the specification of the location is grounded in the practitioner’s actual experience. It should be noted that although the word *uttaroṭṭha* also appears in the *Visuddhimagga* (Vism 283–284), the context there is a practical distinction based on the length of the nose—not a definition of *mukhanimitta*. What the VbhA shares with the *Visuddhimagga* is the word *uttaroṭṭha* alone; the level of analysis is different. In the *Visuddhimagga*, *uttaroṭṭha* is one of two alternative contact points; in the VbhA, it constitutes the first explicit definition of *mukhanimitta* itself.

The interpretive-historical significance of this determination is as follows. In the *Vibhaṅga*’s *nāsikagge vā mukhanimitte vā*, *nāsikagga* (the tip of the nose) points to a relatively clear location, but *mukhanimitta* was left open owing to the semantic range of the word *mukha*. The VbhA closes this open space. Through the equation *mukhanimitta* = *uttaroṭṭhassa vemajjhappadeso*, it delivers a final determination on the interpretive latitude that the *Vibhaṅga* had left behind.

However, whether this definition faithfully reflects the original intent of the *Vibhaṅga* or represents a later commentator’s concretization is a separate question. Since the *Vibhaṅga* itself did not define *mukhanimitta*, the VbhA’s definition is Buddhaghosa’s interpretive decision, not the self-evident meaning of the *Vibhaṅga*.

Consequently, the VbhA fulfills the role of determining the last unresolved element left by the preceding texts in the interpretive history of *parimukha*—the concrete meaning of *mukhanimitta*. The (i) directional reading (*kammaṭṭhānābhimukha*), (ii) spatial reading (*mukhasamīpa*), and (iii) etymological reading (*pariggaha-niyyāna*) had already been presented in the *Visuddhimagga* and the Sv. The VbhA inherits this threefold structure intact, and by assigning an anatomical–functional definition to *mukhanimitta*—the last undetermined element within the spatial reading (ii)—it brings the interpretation of *parimukha* to completion within the scope of the *aṭṭhakathā* literature examined in this paper.

3.6. Summary of Section 3

Across the five texts examined in this section—the *Vibhaṅga*, the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, the *Viśuddhimagga*, the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī*, and the *Sammohavinodanī*—the interpretation of *parimukha* developed as follows.

The *Vibhaṅga* defined *parimukha* in terms of a spatial location—the tip of the nose (*nāsikagga*) or *mukhanimitta* (the sign of mukha)—without determining what *mukhanimitta* concretely refers to. The *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, at a different level from this spatial definition, presented an independent etymological analysis—*pari* = *pariggaha* (taking up), *mukha* = *niyyāna* (going out)—while simultaneously employing the same spatial expression as the *Vibhaṅga* (*nāsikagge vā mukhanimitte vā*). The *Viśuddhimagga* incorporated both preceding traditions while adding a third interpretation—*kammaṭṭhānābhimukha* (facing the meditation subject)—and deepened the practical specification through three similes and concrete contact points (*nāsapūṭa*, *uttaroṭṭha*, *pakati-phutthokāsa*). Yet the meaning of *mukhanimitta* itself was still not determined. The *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* compressed into a single paragraph the interpretations that in the *Viśuddhimagga* had been developed across separate contexts, while adding the spatial interpretation *mukha-samīpa* (near the mouth). Finally, the *Sammohavinodanī* determined the meaning of *mukhanimitta*, which all preceding texts had left open, as “the middle area of the upper lip, the place where the nasal wind strikes” (*uttaroṭṭhassa vemajjhappadeso, yattha nāsikāvāto paṭihaññati*).

Two points stand out in this development. First, the interpretation of *parimukha* did not become unified over time but rather became increasingly multilayered. This cumulative structure, in which later texts, without discarding the interpretations of earlier ones, inherited them while adding new layers, progressively expanded the breadth of meaning carried by the single term *parimukha*.⁴

Second, these multilayered interpretations contain potential points of divergence that can be linked to different practices. The directional reading can orient practice as a psychological direction; the spatial reading can direct the observation of breathing at anatomical locations such as the tip of the nose, the upper lip, or near the mouth; and the etymological reading can direct functional attention to the entry and exit of the breath. Buddhaghosa himself presented these interpretations as complementary rather than mutually exclusive.

4. The Reception of *Parimukha* in Modern Vipassanā Traditions

The commentarial literature, as traced above, did not unify the meaning of *parimukha* but expanded it into a threefold structure: (i) spatial reading, (ii) etymological reading, and (iii) directional reading.

Over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, modern *Vipassanā* traditions rooted in this commentarial inheritance have constructed distinctive meditative methodologies that configure the object of attention, the structure of practice, and the practitioner’s embodied experience in fundamentally different ways within the interpretive space of *parimukha*. This section comparatively analyzes five traditions that exhibit particularly marked methodological differences: Pa-Auk, Mahāsi, Goenka, Shwe Oo Min/Tejaniya, and Sunlun. These five are selected because they are representative lineages of the Myanmar-rooted *Vipassanā* movement and because they differ from one another precisely at the point this section examines—where practice begins; the selection is not exhaustive.⁵

The arrangement of this section follows not the historical order of the traditions’ founding but their relationship to the commentarial tradition traced in Section 3. The Pa-Auk tradition, which most faithfully inherits the commentarial spatial reading, serves as the starting point; the Mahāsi tradition, which constructs the most contrasting practice path from the same scriptural starting point, is placed immediately after to present the core contrast first. Goenka, Shwe Oo Min/Tejaniya, and Sunlun are then arranged according to their respective relationships

with the commentarial spatial reading. This arrangement enables the reader to grasp how the commentarial tradition's multilayered interpretations diverge in the field of practice.

The central question for each tradition is: at the very first moment of practice—the point at which the practitioner sits down, closes the eyes, and begins to meditate—where and how is mindfulness instructed to be established, and how does this initial instruction shape the overall structure of practice?

4.1. The Pa-Auk Tradition: Faithful Inheritance of the Commentarial Spatial Reading

The practice system of Pa-Auk Tawya Sayadaw (1934–) is the tradition among modern *Vipassanā* schools that most faithfully follows the practice system of the *Visuddhimagga*. Pa-Auk's system strictly adheres to the graduated structure of the threefold training (*sīla-samādhipaṇṇā*) and the seven purifications, grounded in the Pāli canon (*Tipiṭaka*) and its commentaries (Pa-Auk Tawya Sayadaw [1999] 2003).

In Pa-Auk's instructions for breath meditation (*ānāpānasati*), the practitioner is directed to turn attention to the point where the breath enters and exits the body—the nostrils or the upper lip area. Pa-Auk Sayadaw explains: “Just be aware of the breath at the most obvious place it brushes against or touches, either the top of the upper lip or around the nostrils” (Pa-Auk Tawya Sayadaw [1999] 2003, p. 41). The key phrase—“the most obvious place it brushes against or touches”—is virtually a direct translation of the *Visuddhimagga*'s concept of *pakati-phutthokāsa* (the place where [the breath] ordinarily touches), analyzed in Section 3.3.3.

When this instruction is compared with the threefold structure of the commentarial interpretation analyzed in Section 3, it becomes clear which layer Pa-Auk adopts. First, the designation of the area from the top of the upper lip to around the nostrils directly inherits the *Vibhaṅga*'s *nāsikagge vā mukhanimitta vā* (at the tip of the nose or at *mukhanimitta*), analyzed in Section 3.1. Pa-Auk, in a separate question-and-answer session, explicitly cites the commentaries: “The Commentary says the nostril *nimitta* (*nāsika nimitta*), and upper-lip *nimitta* (*mukha nimitta*) are the *parikamma-nimittas* for beginners” (Pa-Auk Tawya Sayadaw [1999] 2003, pp. 115–16). Pa-Auk here translates *mukha nimitta* as “upper-lip *nimitta*.” As analyzed in Section 3, the *mukha* of the *Vibhaṅga*'s *mukhanimitta* could bear a range of meanings—mouth, face, front, entrance—and its final determination as “the middle area of the upper lip” (*uttaroṭṭhassa vemajjhappadeso*) was achieved only in the *Sammohavinodanī*, analyzed in Section 3.5. Pa-Auk's reading of *mukha* as “upper lip” is an interpretive choice that takes this final determination as a given premise.

Second, the implication that the contact point varies according to the length of the nose reflects the *Visuddhimagga*'s distinction by nose length (*nāsapuṭa* for those with long noses, *uttaroṭṭha* for those with short noses), analyzed in Section 3.3.3. Third, the instruction to be aware of the breath at “the most obvious place” corresponds to the *Visuddhimagga*'s generalized concept of *pakati-phutthokāsa*, analyzed in Section 3.3.3.

In short, Pa-Auk's contact-point instruction integrates into a single practical directive the spatial formula of the *Vibhaṅga*, the anatomical specification of the *Visuddhimagga*, the *Sammohavinodanī*'s determination of *mukhanimitta*, and the functional criterion of *pakati-phutthokāsa*. By contrast, the *Visuddhimagga*'s first interpretation—*kammaṭṭhānābhīmukhaṃ satim ṭhapayitvā* (having placed mindfulness facing the meditation subject)—the directional reading, is not separately foregrounded in Pa-Auk's practice instructions; it is, rather, subsumed within the spatial reading, since the designated contact point is itself the place where the *kammaṭṭhāna* is observed.

Pa-Auk, while presenting these contact-point instructions, never once mentions the word *parimukha* itself (Pa-Auk Tawya Sayadaw [1999] 2003). This suggests that Pa-Auk's system does not consciously reinterpret *parimukha* but rather takes the entire spatial reading of the

commentarial tradition—from the *Vibhaṅga* through the *Sammohavinodanī*—as a given premise, embedding it within the practice system.

The defining feature of the Pa-Auk system is that the fixing of attention at the contact point leads to the arising of a meditation sign (*nimitta*). Pa-Auk employs the *nimitta* at two levels. First, the contact point itself is a *nimitta*—“The natural breath is a *nimitta*. The touching point is also a *nimitta*” (Pa-Auk Tawya Sayadaw [1999] 2003, p. 115)—and constitutes the first form of the preliminary sign (*parikamma-nimitta*). Second, as concentration deepens, visual phenomena arise at the contact point, progressing through a greyish light (preliminary sign) to a cotton-like white light (learning sign, *uggaha-nimitta*) and finally to a clear, radiant light like the morning star (counterpart sign, *paṭibhāga-nimitta*) (Pa-Auk Tawya Sayadaw [1999] 2003, pp. 47–48, 115–16). These two levels form an unbroken continuum, and it is here that the commentarial spatial reading is structurally indispensable as the starting point of this continuum.

Once the *nimitta* stabilizes, the practitioner fixes attention on the *nimitta* rather than the breath: “Forget about the breath, and be aware of just the *nimitta*” (Pa-Auk Tawya Sayadaw [1999] 2003, p. 49). By maintaining attention on the counterpart sign, the practitioner passes through access concentration to attain *jhāna* (Pa-Auk Tawya Sayadaw [1999] 2003, pp. 49, 55). For a practitioner who has mastered the four *jhānas*, the light of concentration is generated (Pa-Auk Tawya Sayadaw [1999] 2003, p. 57), and this light is used as a tool to discern ultimate materiality and mentality, thus proceeding to *vipassanā*. Accordingly, in Pa-Auk’s system, the initial fixing of attention at the *parimukha* point (the tip of the nose/top of the upper lip) is the starting point that generates the foundation for the entire practice path: breath observation at the contact point → progressive transformation of the *nimitta* → attainment of *jhāna* → *vipassanā*. The first link in this sequential path is precisely the observation of breathing at the *parimukha* point.

Pa-Auk’s system is a tradition that fully adopts the spatial reading among the threefold structure of commentarial interpretation analyzed in Section 3. This is because Pa-Auk’s system constructs a *samatha*-centered path leading from breath meditation to the attainment of *jhāna*. In this path, the contact point must be physically concrete. Since the contact point itself is the starting point of the *nimitta* continuum, the arising of the *nimitta*—a prerequisite for *jhāna* attainment in the Pa-Auk system—is possible only when attention is continuously fixed at a specific spatial location; the abstract reading of “psychological directionality toward the meditation subject” alone cannot induce this concrete meditative phenomenon.

Pa-Auk’s system demonstrates that the commentarial spatial reading does not remain merely a philological interpretation but can function as the foundation of a complete and internally coherent practice system. The path that proceeds from the contact point through the progressive transformation of the *nimitta*, attainment of *jhāna*, and on to *vipassanā* is consistent with the *Visuddhimagga*’s system of seven purifications, and the commentarial spatial reading plays an indispensable role as the starting point of this path.

4.2. The Mahāsi Tradition: The Practice-Theoretical Reorientation of the Directional Reading

Mahāsi Sayadaw (1904–1982) was a meditation teacher in Myanmar who received the method of abdominal observation from Mingun Jetavana Sayadaw (U Nārada) and developed it into a systematic *Vipassanā* methodology (Mahāsi 1971, p. ix). His methodology, when compared with Pa-Auk’s system analyzed in Section 4.1, represents the most significant departure from the commentarial interpretation of *parimukha*. Whereas Pa-Auk begins practice by observing the breath at the nostrils/upper lip area, Mahāsi instructs the practitioner to begin by observing the rising and falling movements of the abdomen (*udara*), not the tip of the nose.

Mahāsi’s direct practice instruction is as follows:

“Try to keep your mind (but not your eyes) on the abdomen. You will thereby come to know the movements of rising and falling in this region. If these movements are

not clear to you in the beginning, then place both hands on the abdomen to feel these rising and falling movements. After a short time the upward movement of inhalation and the downward movement of exhalation will become clear. Then make a mental note, rising, for the upward movement, falling for the downward movement.” (Mahāsi 1971, p. 3)

Mahāsi’s choice of the abdomen over the tip of the nose is not arbitrary. He explicitly presents the theoretical rationale for this choice. In *Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā*, Mahāsi explains that according to the commentaries, the wind element (*vāyodhātu*) should be observed first among the four great elements. Since the rising and falling of the abdomen, which occurs prominently with each breath while sitting, is precisely a function of this wind element, practice should begin with observing it (Mahāsi 1990, p. 12). Furthermore, in *A Discourse on Mālukiyaṭṭa Sutta*, Mahāsi explains that mindfulness of breathing (*ānāpānasati*) belongs to the *samatha* category in the *Visuddhimagga*’s classification and is not the direct object of *vipassanā*, which his system aims at (Mahāsi [1981] 2002, pp. 47–48).

However, Mahāsi did not prohibit the observation of breathing at the tip of the nose. In the same work, he clarifies: “We do not urge meditators to practise mindfulness of respiration as we maintain that it contradicts statements in the *Visuddhimagga* and Commentaries on the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, ... but we do not deter anyone from practising *ānāpānasati*” (Mahāsi [1981] 2002, p. 50). Abdominal observation is the preferred method in the Mahāsi tradition, not an imposed one; practitioners who wish to do so may practice *ānāpānasati*.

Mahāsi’s practice structure differs fundamentally from Pa-Auk’s sequential *samatha-vipassanā* path (Section 4.1). Without passing through a separate *samatha* stage, the practitioner enters *Vipassanā* directly through the observation of the abdomen’s rising and falling. The practitioner applies mental noting to each moment of experience (Mahāsi 1971, pp. 3–10), aiming to progress through the sequential stages of insight knowledge (*vipassanā-ñāṇa*) without the arising of a *nimitta* or the attainment of *jhāna*.

This is the approach known as “pure insight” (*suddha-vipassanā*). Mahāsi describes this practitioner as one “who has neither produced access concentration nor full concentration, but from the very start applies insight to the five groups of grasping” (Mahāsi [1950] 1965, p. 3). Moment-to-moment awareness itself generates momentary concentration (*khaṇika-samādhi*), and this momentary concentration provides sufficient mental unification for *Vipassanā*. In Pa-Auk’s path, the *parimukha* point is structurally indispensable as the starting point of the *nimitta* continuum. In Mahāsi’s path, this point is never established in the first place.

For the interpretation of *parimukha*, Mahāsi’s departure is decisive. We have confirmed that Pa-Auk fully adopts the spatial reading among the commentarial interpretations. Mahāsi does not adopt this spatial reading. By beginning practice at the abdomen rather than at the tip of the nose or the upper lip, he separates himself from the commentarial practice of fixing attention at the contact point.

However, this separation does not signify a rejection of the commentarial tradition itself. While not following the spatial interpretation of *parimukha*, Mahāsi actively draws upon other parts of the same *Visuddhimagga* to justify his own practice system. He cites the provision that pure-insight practitioners (*suddha-vipassanā-yānika*) begin practice with the discernment of the four elements, supports the choice of abdominal observation with the principle that observation should start from easily discerned objects, and justifies the position that *jhāna* is unnecessary with the argument that access concentration (*upacāra-samādhi*) alone provides a sufficient basis for insight practice (Mahāsi 1971, pp. 52–61). What Mahāsi does not follow, then, is not the commentarial tradition as a whole but the specific path of the spatial interpretation of *parimukha*; his system is built upon different interpretive resources within the same commentarial tradition—element discernment (*dhātu-vavatthāna*), pure insight (*suddha-vipassanā*), and the sufficiency of access concentration.

Mahāsi's choice aligns with the *Visuddhimagga*'s first interpretation analyzed in Section 3.3.1—*kammaṭṭhānābhimukhaṃ satim̐ ṭhapayitvā* (having placed mindfulness facing the meditation subject). In this reading, *parimukha* does not designate a specific body part but signifies the directionality of mindfulness—bringing the meditation subject to the forefront of awareness. For Mahāsi, *parimukhaṃ satim̐ upaṭṭhapetvā* functions not as an instruction to fix attention at a specific body part but as an instruction to firmly establish mindfulness toward the meditation subject—in this case, the wind element observed at the abdomen.

Like Pa-Auk, Mahāsi does not explicitly discuss the word *parimukha* itself. However, the implications of the two silences differ. Pa-Auk had no need to discuss *parimukha* separately because the commentarial spatial reading was accepted as a given premise (Section 4.1); for Mahāsi, the context in which the spatial interpretation of *parimukha* would need to be discussed never arises, because the contact point is not established as the starting point of practice.

This silence cannot be attributed to unfamiliarity with the commentarial strata. Mahāsi was himself an authority on the subcommentarial literature. He authored a Burmese *nissaya* translation of the *Visuddhimagga-Mahāṭīkā*, completed in 1966 (aimwell.org n.d.). His *Manual of Insight* draws extensively on the *Paramatthamañjūsā* to justify central doctrinal positions: the category of the pure-insight practitioner, *suddhavipassanāyānika*, and the indispensability of momentary concentration, *khaṇika-samādhi*, are both argued on the basis of that subcommentary. He also invokes the Dīgha Nikāya-ṭīkā phrase *rūpamukhena vipassanaṃ abhinivisanto* to justify beginning insight practice with material phenomena (Mahāsi 2016). These subcommentarial resources serve the doctrinal justification of his practice system; none of them concerns *parimukha*. Indeed, when quoting the canonical breath-meditation passage, Mahāsi begins at *satova assasati*, omitting the preparatory formula containing *parimukhaṃ satim̐ upaṭṭhapetvā*. His silence on the term, despite demonstrable expertise in the *ṭīkā* literature, is therefore an interpretive choice rather than an omission.

4.3. The Goenka Tradition: From the Contact Point to Full-Body Scanning

S. N. Goenka (1924–2013) received *Vipassanā* training from Sayagyi U Ba Khin (1899–1971) in Myanmar (Hart 1987, pp. ix–x). Goenka's system occupies a unique position vis-à-vis the commentarial interpretation of *parimukha* when compared with Pa-Auk (Section 4.1) and Mahāsi (Section 4.2). Pa-Auk embeds the commentarial spatial reading as a given premise without mentioning it; Mahāsi does not take the contact point as the starting point of practice, so the context for discussion never arises. Unlike these two traditions, Goenka explicitly discusses *parimukha* and *mukhanimitta* and directly cites the commentaries.

In Goenka's ten-day course, the first three days are devoted to *ānāpāna* practice. According to the official practice instructions, the practitioner must “keep the attention in the area below the nostrils and above the upper lip. Remain aware of each breath as it enters or leaves” (dhamma.org n.d.). The area designated by this instruction—below the nostrils, above the upper lip—corresponds to the final form of the spatial reading among the threefold commentarial structure analyzed in Section 3.

There is a decisive difference between Pa-Auk and Goenka. Pa-Auk embeds the commentarial spatial reading within the practice system without ever mentioning the word *parimukha* itself (Section 4.1). Goenka, by contrast, explicitly interprets *parimukha* and directly cites the commentaries. In a question-and-answer session on *ānāpāna* meditation, Goenka explains as follows:

“Because again, it is a very clear instruction given by the Enlightened One. In *Patisambhidamagga*, he clearly says that you must be aware of the incoming breath, the outgoing breath, and *mukha*-this area above the mouth. He calls it *mukhanimitta*. It is clearly explained in *Patisambhidamagga* and in *Vibhanga*, what is *mukhanimitta*: it means *nasikagga*, the front portion of the nose at the entrance of the nostrils. Also, the Buddha says that it must be *Uttarotthassa*

majjhimappadese. *Uttara* means above; *ottha* is lip; and *majjimappadese* is the middle portion. And in the *Mahasatipatthana sutta*, he says, establish your awareness here, *parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā*. *sati* means awareness; *parimukhaṃ* means the area above the lips. The Buddha is so clear in his instructions. We cannot deviate from his instructions.” (Goenka n.d.).

Three points deserve comment. First, Goenka explicitly cites the *Vibhaṅga* and the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, even directly mentioning the expression “the middle area of the upper lip” (*uttaroṭṭhassa majjhimappadese*). However, Goenka presents this interpretation as already established in these two texts, whereas according to the analysis in Section 3, this determination was achieved only in the *Sammohavinodanī* (VbhA 368–369). The *Paṭisambhidāmagga* itself offers not a spatial identification but an etymological analysis of *parimukha* (*pariggaha-niyyāna-upaṭṭhāna*, *Paṭis* I 176; see Section 3.2), and the *Vibhaṅga* provides the two terms *nāsikagge* and *mukhanimitte* without specifying their precise bodily referent (Vbh 252; see Section 3.1). Goenka presents the spatial determination as clearly explained in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* and the *Vibhaṅga*. The analysis in Section 3 traces how this determination developed cumulatively across five commentarial texts. Second, Goenka presents this interpretation as “the Buddha’s instructions,” actively conferring canonical authority upon it. Third, Goenka’s rendering of *parimukha* as “the area above the lips” is an interpretive choice that presupposes the VbhA’s determination of *mukhanimitta*, analyzed in Section 3.5.

In Goenka’s Day 3 discourse, the function of the contact-point practice is made explicit: “Keep observing reality within the area of the nostrils. Keep sharpening your mind so that when you start *vipassanā* tomorrow, you can penetrate to the deeper levels ...” (Goenka 1987, p. 29). From Day 4 onward, the practitioner transitions to full-body scanning: “Move your attention systematically from head to feet and from feet to head, observing in order each and every part of the body by feeling all the sensations that you come across” (dhamma.org n.d.).

This transition from Day 3 to Day 4 is not merely a shift in the area of observation but a change in the *kammaṭṭhāna* itself. Hart describes the first phase as “an exercise of mental concentration” that is “preparatory to the technique of *vipassanā* proper” (Hart 1987, p. 7). During the first three days, the practitioner observes the breath at a spatially designated contact point—an application of the commentarial spatial reading. From Day 4 onward, the object of mindfulness is no longer the breath at the contact point but *vedanā* (sensation) throughout the entire body. The spatial reading, having fulfilled its preparatory function of sharpening concentration, gives way to a practice that is structured by the directional reading: the practitioner establishes mindfulness toward a new meditation subject. Goenka’s system thus employs the two core axes of the commentarial interpretation not simultaneously (as in Pa-Auk, where the spatial and directional readings converge at the same point) but sequentially—the spatial reading first, then the directional reading.

Although both traditions begin from the same *parimukha* area, Pa-Auk remains there, pursuing the depth that leads through *nimitta* to *jhāna* attainment (*samatha*-centered), whereas Goenka departs from there, pursuing the breadth of full-body scanning (*vipassanā*-centered). Anālayo’s classification of the *samatha* component across these traditions—Pa-Auk “much,” Goenka “some,” Mahāsi “none”—captures one axis of this structural difference (Anālayo Bhikkhu 2012, p. 29).

Goenka’s system demonstrates that the spatial reading of *parimukha* can serve either as the permanent foundation of the entire practice (as in Pa-Auk) or as a preparatory phase that yields to a practice structured by the directional reading (as in Goenka). The same interpretation performs entirely different functions depending on its position within the practice system. This shows that the interpretive openness of *parimukha* operates not only at the level of the word’s meaning but also at the level of the function that meaning performs within the architecture of practice.

4.4. The Shwe Oo Min/Tejaniya Tradition: Decoupling from a Fixed Attention Point

Shwe Oo Min Sayadaw (Pāli name Kosalla, 1913–2002) was a meditation teacher who, after being active within the monastic community of Mahāsi Sayadaw, developed an independent teaching method (Khemavamsa Bhikkhu [2002] 2004, pp. 9–10). He left no systematic written exposition of his methodology; his teachings are currently accessible through the records of his disciple (Khemavamsa Bhikkhu [2002] 2004). His teachings were inherited and systematized by his disciple Sayadaw U Tejaniya (2008, p. 4). This section analyzes the interpretive position of this tradition regarding *parimukha* by consulting the teachings of both.

The most prominent feature of the Shwe Oo Min/Tejaniya tradition is its emphasis on contemplation of mind (*cittānupassanā*), among the four establishments of mindfulness, as the primary gateway to practice. Tejaniya explains: “If you do *cittānupassanā* and *dhammānupassanā*, *kāyānupassanā* and *vedanānupassanā* are already done” (Sayadaw U Tejaniya 2008, pp. 167–68). The core teaching of Shwe Oo Min Sayadaw, recorded by Khemavamsa, directly illustrates this principle: “The watching of the mind by the mind. With all practices, in all postures:... Watch the mind. Look into the mind, don’t worry about the body so much” (Khemavamsa Bhikkhu [2002] 2004, pp. 16–17).

Khemavamsa summarizes the reference point of this practice as follows: “The noting mind in this practice is the reference point-anchor, and all other minds are objects” (Khemavamsa Bhikkhu [2002] 2004, p. 14). The use of the term “reference point-anchor” rather than “contact point” reflects the fact that in this tradition the anchor of practice is the mind itself, not a physical contact. If Mahāsi (Section 4.2) replaced the contact point of *parimukha* from the tip of the nose to the abdomen, Shwe Oo Min replaced even the abdominal reference point with the mind. The movement from body to a different bodily location (Pa-Auk → Mahāsi), and then from body to the mind itself (Mahāsi → Shwe Oo Min), is made explicit here.

However, it would be inaccurate to conclude that Shwe Oo Min Sayadaw offered no bodily reference point whatsoever. Khemavamsa’s records include the instruction: “Put your mind at the solar plexus. Don’t label. Just be aware of what is happening” (Khemavamsa Bhikkhu [2002] 2004, p. 15). The location designated here is not the tip of the nose or the upper lip but the epigastric area—a location entirely different from the commentarial spatial reading. Yet, as the teaching immediately following this instruction shows—“It’s only meditation when there are two minds: Knowing/noting mind and observing mind” (Khemavamsa Bhikkhu [2002] 2004, pp. 15–16)—the focus of practice shifts immediately from location to the structure of the mind.

In Tejaniya’s teaching, not only does such a bodily reference point no longer appear, but the privileged status of the tip of the nose or the upper lip is explicitly denied. “Which object is better, the incoming/outgoing breath at the nostrils or the rising/falling motion of the abdomen? Answer: It’s neither! One object is not better than another” (Sayadaw U Tejaniya 2011, pp. 19–20). Furthermore, Tejaniya actively criticizes concentration at the tip of the nose as actually limiting present-moment awareness: “If you are only aware of what is happening at the nostrils to the exclusion of everything else, can you say you are fully in the present moment?... Can you say that you are aware when you catch one, but miss the other 99?” (Sayadaw U Tejaniya 2011, pp. 70–71).

The Shwe Oo Min/Tejaniya tradition can be seen as the broadest reception of the *Vissuddhimagga*’s directional reading—*kammaṭṭhānābhimukhaṃ satim̐ ṭhapayitvā* (having placed mindfulness facing the meditation subject). Pa-Auk specifies *kammaṭṭhāna* as the breath (tip of the nose); Mahāsi specifies it as the wind element (abdomen); Shwe Oo Min/Tejaniya takes whatever arises in the mind as the meditation subject. This retains the structure of *kammaṭṭhānābhimukha* while decoupling it from a fixed meditation subject. However, whether

this reception aligns with Buddhaghosa's original intent in presenting *kammaṭṭhānābhimukha* is a separate question.

This tradition does not explicitly discuss the word *parimukha*. However, the implication of this silence differs from that of Pa-Auk or Mahāsi. Pa-Auk had no need to discuss *parimukha* separately because the commentarial spatial reading was accepted as a given premise (Section 4.1); for Mahāsi, the context for discussing *parimukha* never arose because the contact point was not established as the starting point of practice (Section 4.2). In the Shwe Oo Min/Tejaniya tradition, this silence arises because *parimukha* is read not as a specific location but as the establishment of mindfulness toward the meditation subject, practiced as the broadest reception of *kammaṭṭhānābhimukha*.

4.5. The Sunlun Tradition: The Practical Bypassing of the Contact-Point Problem

Sunlun Sayadaw U Kavi (1878–1952) was a practitioner of unique background who became a meditation teacher through a practice that was nearly self-taught. According to Kyaw, Sunlun Sayadaw heard about the *vipassanā* meditation method of Ledi Sayadaw and began practice, developing an independent methodology based on being aware of the touch of breath (Kyaw 2019, pp. 251–53, 260). His practice system is characterized by the use of strong, rapid breathing and the observation of the intense bodily sensations thereby induced. The most detailed practice instructions currently accessible are “The Sunlun Way of Mindfulness” (hereafter Sunlun Way), compiled by his successor disciple Sunlun Shin Vinaya (Sunlun Shin Vinaya n.d.); the tradition is treated academically by Kyaw (2019) and Kornfield ([1977] 2007).

In the Sunlun Way, the location of the breath contact is described as follows: “Strong, hard and rapid breathing will cause inhaled and exhaled breath to touch with increased friction against the tips of the nostril holes, the upper lip or some other part of the body in that region. Be mindful of that touch of breath” (Sunlun Shin Vinaya n.d.).

However, the instruction immediately following reveals a decisive shift: “Do not take note of the area of touch of breath whether it be the nostril tip or upper lip. Let awareness be only of the sensation of touch of breath. Be mindful only of the sensation of touch” (Sunlun Shin Vinaya n.d.). Furthermore, the same guide prohibits not only following the breath inward and outward but also placing the mind at the tip of the nose, the top of the head, the rising and falling of the abdomen, or the solar plexus (Sunlun Shin Vinaya n.d.). This prohibition list effectively covers all the attention points of the other traditions examined in this paper, suggesting that the Sunlun tradition consciously differentiates its methodology from those of its contemporaries. Whether this prohibition specifically targets other traditions or is a practical measure to prevent incoming practitioners from maintaining prior habits cannot be determined from the available sources.

According to Kyaw, the key formula designating the process of establishing mindfulness in the Sunlun tradition is the Burmese *htí-thí-thatí* (touch-consciousness-mindfulness) (Kyaw 2019, p. 259). This three-stage formula demonstrates that what matters in Sunlun is not where the breath touches but the cognitive process of sensation itself → awareness of that sensation → mindfulness.

Unlike the other four traditions, which observe natural breathing, Sunlun instructs the practitioner to breathe intentionally hard, strong, and fast. Once the intense breathing has induced a sufficient level of sensation, the strong breathing is stopped, and the practitioner remains mindful of the induced sensations with the body completely still, without changing posture (Sunlun Shin Vinaya n.d.). Sunlun Sayadaw instructs: “If cramped don’t move, if itchy don’t scratch, if fatigued don’t rest” (Kornfield [1977] 2007, p. 107). At this point, the object of mindfulness becomes the most prominent sensation throughout the entire body (Sunlun Shin Vinaya n.d.). When the mind becomes totally merged with the sensation, the practitioner no longer feels the form of the body, nor feels that “I” am suffering. What was felt as pain or

burning moments before is now experienced only as intense sensation, without the element of infliction (Sunlun Shin Vinaya n.d.).

In natural breathing the breath sensation is subtle, making “where to place attention” practically important. In Sunlun’s intense breathing, however, the contact sensation is so overwhelming that the problem of precise adjustment of location practically dissolves.

The Sunlun Way explicitly states that when the in-breaths and out-breaths achieve balance, they become “continuous, like the touch of saw against wood,” noting that this simile is mentioned in the Pāli canon (Sunlun Shin Vinaya n.d.). The Sunlun tradition’s citation of the saw simile analyzed in Section 3.2 shows that this tradition consciously references the practice-theoretical heritage of the canon. However, the context of application in Sunlun—the balance of intense breathing—differs from the original context—the establishment of mindfulness during natural breathing.

In terms of *parimukha*, the Sunlun system occupies a paradoxical position. Its practice instructions formally acknowledge the commentarial spatial reading by explicitly mentioning “the tip of the nostrils” and “the upper lip,” yet instruct the practitioner not to place attention at those locations but to be mindful only of the sensation of contact, while the methodology of intense breathing practically dissolves the very problem of locational precision.

When this dual structure is compared with the threefold commentarial structure of Section 3, the following picture emerges. Sunlun (i) acknowledges the spatial reading at the formal level of mentioning the location but does not adopt its practice-theoretical function—fixing attention at the location to generate a *nimitta*. (ii) The etymological reading, while indirectly connectable with Sunlun’s emphasis on the touch of breath, is not separately cited in Sunlun’s instructions. (iii) Sunlun is situated within the structure of the directional reading (*kammaṭṭhānābhimukha*), yet it is distinctive in that it derives the meditation subject from the practitioner’s direct bodily experience, whereas Mahāsi receives the directional reading on doctrinal grounds and Shwe Oo Min/Tejaniya through the openness of the meditation subject.

4.6. Comparative Analysis: Three Dimensions of Divergence

The analyses from Sections 4.1–4.5, traced individually how each of the five traditions has configured its approach to the commencement of meditation practice in relation to *parimukha*. This section compares the five traditions within a single framework, systematically revealing three dimensions along which divergence occurs: the object of attention, the architecture of practice, and the practitioner’s embodied experience. These three dimensions emerge directly from the commentarial interpretive structure traced in Section 3: the spatial and directional readings determine where attention is placed (Section 4.6.1), the position of the contact point within each system shapes the architecture of practice (Section 4.6.2), and the resulting configuration produces qualitatively distinct forms of embodied experience (Section 4.6.3).

4.6.1. The Object of Attention: Where Is Mindfulness Established?

To the question of where mindfulness is directed at the very first moment of practice, the five traditions offer different answers. Among the threefold commentarial structure traced in Section 3, the etymological reading (*pariggaha-niyyāna*) explains the function of breathing at the location designated by the spatial reading; it is a subsidiary layer embedded within the spatial reading rather than an independent axis of divergence. Accordingly, the two core axes that determine the divergence of modern traditions are the spatial reading and the directional reading, and the five traditions are distributed along these two axes.

The traditions that directly adopt the spatial reading as the starting point of practice are Pa-Auk (Section 4.1) and Goenka (Section 4.3), though in Goenka’s case the spatial reading serves as a preparatory phase that subsequently yields to the directional reading (Section 4.3). The traditions that align with the directional reading are Mahāsi (Section 4.2) and Shwe Oo

Min/Tejaniya (Section 4.4): the former specifies the meditation subject as the wind element (abdomen), while the latter takes whatever arises in the mind as the meditation subject. Sunlun (Section 4.5) instructs mindfulness to be placed on the sensation itself rather than the location of contact, and is situated within the directional reading's structure while being distinctive in deriving the meditation subject from the practitioner's direct bodily experience.

4.6.2. Practice Architecture: The Position of the Contact Point Within the System

If the object of attention answers the question “where,” the architecture of practice answers the question of what function that “where” performs within the practice system as a whole. In Pa-Auk, the contact point is the foundation of the entire practice process, leading through the *nimitta* continuum to *jhāna* attainment. In Goenka, the contact point is a preparatory concentration tool; once it has fulfilled this function, the *kammaṭṭhāna* itself changes from breath at the contact point to *vedanā* throughout the body, and the practice shifts from the spatial reading to the directional reading. In Mahāsi, the contact point is never established in the first place (absence). In Shwe Oo Min/Tejaniya, the privileged status of any specific bodily point is dissolved, and the observing mind itself becomes the anchor of practice (decoupling). In Sunlun, intense breathing maximizes the contact sensation, so the very problem of locational precision practically dissolves (de-problematization). Anālayo's classification of the *samatha* component across three traditions—Pa-Auk “much,” Goenka “some,” Mahāsi “none”—captures one axis of this structural difference (Anālayo Bhikkhu 2012, p. 29). This classification, however, covers only three traditions; Shwe Oo Min/Tejaniya and Sunlun fall outside its framework.

4.6.3. Embodied Experience: What Does the Practitioner Feel?

Although all five traditions ground their practice in the same formulaic phrase—“having established mindfulness *parimukha*”—what the practitioner actually experiences differs fundamentally across traditions. The deepening of concentration at a single point, transitioning into the internal visual phenomenon of the *nimitta* (Pa-Auk); systematic observation of sensations throughout the body and equanimity toward them (Goenka); direct observation of impermanence at each moment (Mahāsi); meta-awareness of the quality of the observing mind (Shwe Oo Min/Tejaniya); the dropping away of the notion of self through unwavering mindfulness of intense sensation (Sunlun)—these five embodied experiences demonstrate that the semantic multivalence of *parimukha* is not merely an academic diversity of interpretations but is realized as a diversity of the practitioner's physical and cognitive experience.

4.6.4. Synthesis: From Semantic Multivalence to Divergence in Practice

Synthesizing the comparison across these three dimensions, the divergence of the five traditions exhibits the following structure. Along the dimension of the object of attention, the five traditions are distributed according to their proximity to the two axes of commentarial interpretation—the spatial reading and the directional reading. Along the dimension of practice architecture, the position that the contact point occupies within the practice system—permanent foundation (Pa-Auk), preparatory phase yielding to a new *kammaṭṭhāna* (Goenka), absence (Mahāsi), decoupling (Shwe Oo Min/Tejaniya), de-problematization (Sunlun)—shapes the overall path of practice in fundamentally different ways. Along the dimension of embodied experience, the same scriptural starting point is realized as five qualitatively different experiences. These three dimensions are not independent but mutually interlocking, and at the starting point of this interlocking stands a single underdetermined term: *parimukha*.

5. Discussion

The semantic openness that the *Nikāyas* left undefined (Section 2) was not discarded but cumulatively multilayered in the commentarial literature (Section 3), and this multilayered legacy has been realized in different ways across three dimensions—the object of attention, the architecture of practice, and embodied experience—in modern practice traditions (Section 4). This section discusses three questions raised by this overall picture.

5.1. Why Did the Cumulative Interpretive Structure Form?

The key phenomenon traced in Section 3 is a cumulative structure in which later texts, without discarding earlier interpretations, preserve them while adding new layers. The *Paṭisambhidāmagga*'s etymological analysis was added atop the *Vibhaṅga*'s spatial reading; the *Visuddhimagga* introduced the directional reading while juxtaposing the two preceding interpretations with *Athavā* (or); and the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* compressed all of these into a single paragraph. How should we understand why this structure was formed?

One possibility is that Buddhaghosa genuinely judged the multiple interpretations to be complementary. The directional reading (*kammaṭṭhānābhimukha*) specifies the psychological direction of practice; the spatial reading (*nāsikagge vā mukhanimutte vā*) concretizes the bodily location where that direction is realized; and the etymological reading (*pariggaha-niyyāna*) explains the functional aspect of breathing at that location. On this reading, the three interpretations each explain different aspects of the establishment of mindfulness, and their juxtaposition is the product of a conscious scholarly judgment.

A second possibility, however, must be considered. The *Vibhaṅga* and the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* belong to the canonical texts. Discarding or correcting the interpretations found in these texts may not have been an option available to Buddhaghosa as a commentator. If canonical authority effectively compelled the preservation of earlier interpretations, then the use of *Athavā* becomes not a scholarly judgment but an editorial strategy within the constraints of tradition. In that case, the cumulative structure is not Buddhaghosa's intentional design but the product of a tension between canonical authority and interpretive freedom.

The analysis presented in this paper alone makes it difficult to reach a definitive judgment between these two possibilities. However, whichever is the case, the result is the same. The meaning of *parimukha* was transmitted to later generations not as a unified meaning but as a multilayered one, and this multilayered legacy provided the interpretive space within which the divergence of the modern practice traditions analyzed in Section 4 could occur.

5.2. Interpretation Is Practice: From Semantic Divergence to Divergence in Practice

The central finding emerging from the analysis of Section 4 is that interpretive decisions regarding scriptural terms are themselves the formation of practice. Depending on whether *parimukha* is read as “at the tip of the nose or the upper lip” or as “toward the meditation subject,” the practitioner's direction of attention at the very first moment of meditation is determined; this initial decision shapes the overall structure of practice; and ultimately it configures the practitioner's embodied experience in qualitatively different ways.

The logic proceeds in three stages. First, when the meaning of a scriptural term is not fixed to a single determination, the interpreter (commentator, translator, meditation teacher) must choose one reading. This choice inevitably involves interpretive judgment. Reading *parimukha* as “at the tip of the nose or the upper lip” and reading it as “toward the meditation subject” are two interpretations of the same word, and neither is conclusively confirmed or excluded by the canonical text. Second, in the context of meditation instructions, this interpretation conveys a directive to the practitioner. “Establish mindfulness at the tip of the nose or the upper lip” and “establish mindfulness toward the meditation subject” are two renderings of the same Pāli phrase, but the instructions they convey to the practitioner are qualitatively different. The

former is an instruction to fix attention at a specific body part; the latter is an instruction to bring the meditation subject to the forefront of awareness. Third, different instructions produce different practice experiences and, over time, give rise to different practice systems. As confirmed in Section 4, Pa-Auk's contact-point-centered *samatha-vipassanā* path and Mahāsi's abdomen-observation-centered pure-insight path are each internally coherent and practically effective practice systems, and the divergence between these two systems is traceable to different interpretive choices regarding *parimukha*.

However, this argument is not a causal claim that the multilayeredness of commentarial interpretation was the "cause" of divergence in practice. The formation of modern *Vipassanā* traditions involved a complex interplay of factors beyond textual interpretation—teacher–student lineages, each teacher's personal meditation experience, and the social context of the post-colonial lay meditation movement in Myanmar. This study argues that the multilayeredness of commentarial interpretation provided the interpretive space within which such divergence could occur. Had the meaning of *parimukha* been definitively fixed at the commentarial stage, it would have been difficult to justify abdominal observation (Mahāsi), full-body scanning (Goenka), or contemplation of mind (Shwe Oo Min/Tejaniya) as practices grounded in the same scriptural starting point.

5.3. Reconsidering the "Accuracy" of Scriptural Interpretation

The analysis also bears on how the "accuracy" of scriptural interpretation should be evaluated in a Buddhist context.

If the criterion of accuracy is the recovery of a single original meaning, the interpretive history of *parimukha* may appear as a story of progressive departure from authorial intent. From this perspective, the commentarial tradition's "at the tip of the nose or the upper lip" is close to the original meaning, while Mahāsi's "the abdomen" represents a far departure from it.

However, if one acknowledges that the canonical text itself permits multiple readings—as the three contextual categories of Section 2 suggest—then interpretive diversity becomes not a problem to be resolved but a natural consequence of the text's semantic multilayeredness. From this perspective, both the commentarial tradition's "at the tip of the nose or the upper lip" and Mahāsi's "the abdomen" are well-grounded readings within the semantic openness of the canon, each having produced a coherent and effective practice system.

This is not a relativism that says "any interpretation will do." The distinction between well-grounded and ungrounded readings still holds. Consistency with canonical usage, the validity of grammatical analysis, and continuity with the commentarial tradition serve as criteria for evaluating the soundness of a reading. What this paper argues is that the readings meeting these criteria may be plural rather than singular, and that this plurality is what has opened the interpretive space for the diversity of Buddhist meditation traditions.

5.4. Limitations of This Study

The limitations of this study must be acknowledged. First, the analysis of the five traditions in Section 4 relied on each tradition's major published works and publicly available practice instructions, and was not based on ethnographic investigation of actual teaching methods in practice settings. There may be differences between published instructions and the oral guidance actually given in practice, and such differences would need to be examined through future field research.

Second, this paper focused on tracing the interpretive diversity of *parimukha* and analyzing the significance of that diversity, while intentionally reserving an independent philological argument for the original meaning of *parimukha*. The present study, which maps the terrain of interpretation, and a study that philologically argues for a specific interpretation, have dif-

ferent methodological requirements; the latter is to be addressed in a separate study based on non-formulaic usages within the canon.

6. Conclusions

This study has traced how a single term, *parimukha*, in the Pāli formulaic phrase *parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā*, has been read in multilayered ways across a three-stage interpretive history encompassing the canon, the commentarial literature, and modern practice traditions.

Within the *Nikāyas*, *parimukha* was used across diverse contexts without being defined, and this semantic openness invited the interpretive interventions of the later commentarial literature (Section 2). The commentarial tradition, through a cumulative process of preserving earlier interpretations without discarding them while adding new layers, formed a threefold structure of spatial, etymological, and directional readings (Section 3). Five modern *Vipassanā* traditions—Pa-Auk, Mahāsi, Goenka, Shwe Oo Min/Tejaniya, and Sunlun—constructed different meditative methodologies across three dimensions—the object of attention, the architecture of practice, and the practitioner’s embodied experience—by emphasizing different layers of this threefold structure (Section 4). From remaining at the tip of the nose or the upper lip (Pa-Auk), to departing from there toward the entire body (Goenka), to replacing the contact point with the abdomen (Mahāsi), to dissolving the privileged status of any specific bodily point (Shwe Oo Min/Tejaniya), to practically bypassing the question of location through the intensity of breathing (Sunlun)—*parimukha* has functioned as a starting point from which a single term generates five qualitatively different meditative experiences.

This tracing reveals a consistent pattern: interpretive decisions regarding scriptural terms shape practice. Such decisions are converted into practice instructions, and practice instructions shape the practitioner’s experience and the practice system as a whole. By tracing the process in which the semantic underdeterminacy of a scriptural term invites later interpretive interventions, and those interpretations shape the physical form of practice, this study has proposed that scriptural language can function as an enabling condition that participates in the formation of religious practice. Accordingly, the “accuracy” of scriptural interpretation cannot be evaluated solely by the recovery of a single original meaning; it must also take into account whether a well-grounded reading within the semantic multilayeredness of the text can produce a coherent and effective practice system.

The semantic openness of *parimukha* was not a confusion to be corrected. It was a productive condition that gave each tradition the interpretive space to develop its own distinctive meditative methodology upon the same scriptural starting point. This case, in which the “underdeterminacy” of a scriptural term functioned not as a “failure” of interpretation but as its “possibility,” may contribute to the broader scholarly discourse on the translation, transmission, and interpretation of Buddhist texts.

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Notes

- ¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of Pāli passages in this article are the author’s own, based on the PTS editions cited. In this and subsequent renderings of the formula, the term *parimukha* is deliberately left untranslated, since its meaning is the subject of the present investigation.

- 2 After the *Sammohavinodanī*, the commentarial determination of *parimukha* is complete (Section 3.5). The author has examined the later commentarial and subcommentarial literature—the *Saddhammappakāsīnī*, the *Paramatthamañjūsā*, the *Vibhaṅga-mūlaṭṭikā* and *-anuṭṭikā*, and the *Dīghanikāya-ṭīkā* (*Līnatthavaṇṇanā*)—and found no new gloss on *parimukha* itself. These texts either reproduce the readings established by the five texts examined here (e.g., PsA II 490, reproducing the directional reading; DN-ṭ I 334–335, deriving both of Buddhaghosa’s readings from the polysemy of *pari-*) or refine individual terms within them (e.g., *pariggaha* glossed as *ñāṇa* in the *Vibhaṅga-mūlaṭṭikā*); the *Saddhammappakāsīnī*’s identification of *mukhanimitta* as *uttaroṭṭha* (PsA II 479) remains within the *Sammohavinodanī*’s determination. The doctrinal elaborations of this later literature merit separate treatment and are reserved for a future study.
- 3 The term *parimukha* occurs twice in the *Vibhaṅga*, both within the *jhāna vibhaṅga* (Ch. 12): at Vbh 244, as part of the quotation of the meditation formula without further analysis, and at Vbh 252, where the only analytical definition is provided. The latter is the passage examined here.
- 4 Inheritance and innovation operate together at every stage of this development: the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* retains the *Vibhaṅga*’s spatial formula (*nāsikagge vā mukhanimitte vā*) while presenting its own etymological analysis (Paṭis I 176); the *Visuddhimagga* reproduces that analysis (Vism 271), while the directional reading appears there first among the texts examined; the *Sumaṅgalavilāsīnī* borrows almost verbatim from the *Visuddhimagga* while adding *mukha-samīpa* (Sv I 210–211); and the *Sammohavinodanī* inherits the threefold structure while providing the first definition of *mukhanimitta* (VbhA 368–369). Which of the two processes is primary at any given stage cannot be determined from the available evidence (see the opening of this section).
- 5 The comparison undertaken in this section is primarily typological: it maps how each tradition’s point of departure relates to the layers of commentarial interpretation traced in Section 3, and it does not necessarily demonstrate direct historical transmission from the commentarial texts to the modern traditions, or their conscious adoption of particular interpretations of *parimukha*. Of the five traditions, only Goenka explicitly cites the commentarial texts by name (see Section 4.3). Sections 3 and 4 accordingly offer two independent lines of response to the semantic openness identified in Section 2 (see Section 1), and Section 5.2 states the corresponding limits of any causal claim.

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