

# Vipassana: Instructions and Theory

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**Goal vipassana** Diminishing mental suffering, via investigation of mind/body. Developing resilience towards stress, by developing the Threefold training

discipline  $\mapsto$  concentration  $\mapsto$  insight

Discipline is needed for concentration, which gives temporary resilience. Insight, needing concentration, develops sustainable resilience. Together these three enable liberation (aka realization, enlightenment).

## 1 Discipline

Craftsmanship discipline: following the exercises at three levels.

1. Exterior discipline: doing exercises with dignified posture, being on time.
2. Interior discipline. Also an interior dignified attitude.
3. Perseverance: not giving in when there is resistance or when one feels sick.

Ethical discipline: five rules of respect for the following.

1. life (no killing/harming living beings, including oneself);
2. possessions (no stealing, or taking that what has not been given);
3. speech (before speaking ask yourself: is it true? is it necessary? can it be hurting/harmful?);
4. intimate relationships (only with mutual consent and within agreement of your living situation);
5. body (no drugs, alcohol, tobacco; coffee is allowed).

General attitude. Work with friendly relaxation and patience towards continuous practice of mindfulness. We will have a good time discovering phenomena and develop curiosity. Teachers available 24h/day, in urgent cases.

As further preparation before one starts to meditate, one first relaxes, as much as is possible. One also possibly assumes a friendly attitude.

## 2 Concentration

*Sensory objects* One checks sensory input: Seeing, hearing, and sensing (touch). Attention to the other two physical senses, tasting and smelling, are not used during sitting meditation; that may be done later during a meal. Input from one of the senses is called an object.

*Attention* Being aware, one usually notices that attention changes within a single sense from one object to another, and also from objects in one sense to those in another. Effortless attention moves around. In fact the function of attention in homo sapiens and other animals is to act like a radar, to be on the alert if a danger or opportunity occurs. It can be observed that this attention can be directed by our will, by our intention. One can do this within one sense on various objects. And then we may change and do the same within another sense. Finally one can check that hopping from one object in one sense to another one in another sense is something one does all the time.

*Meditation object* Then one chooses the meditation object. It is the input on which one exercises concentration, by remaining with that object.

**Sitting meditation** In the Mahasi style of vipassana meditation that we practice one chooses the sensations of raising and falling of the abdomen caused by the breath. Below we will simply call this the cycle of the breath. After this choice one can settle on the meditation object. In our case the (cycles of the) breath. First it is good to focus on just one cycle, as fully as possible, after which one takes a small break. When one is ready one does it again, this time paying attention that during the full cycle attention is present and on the breath. There is *sitting* meditation. One sits (on a chair, a bench, or a pillow), straight and dignified. One observes the cycle of the breath as explained above.

*Qualities* To help this full attention one looks at qualities of the breath. Is it long or short? Is it smooth or undulating (like after crying)? Is it ample or restricted? These qualities better not be named, but one just can observe them. In the same way as bicycling taking a turn one doesn't say, "Hey, now I'm making an inclination". One simply does it, and knows that one does it. An important quality of breath is the following.

*Controlled vs spontaneous breath* There is controlled breath and spontaneous breath. The controlled breath can be interrupted easily, the spontaneous not. Nevertheless the latter can be observed carefully. We can enter it when we are distracted by another object (like thinking) and return to the breath. Then it is always spontaneous (but may change to be controlled). The spontaneous breath already contains the 'anatta' (selflessness) experience. Therefore it sometimes causes fear or gets constricted. At those moments we may switch to the objects *sitting*, observing the posture of sitting straight, and *touching*, observing the

bodily sensations caused by our bottom touching the pillow, bench or chair.

*Naming & counting* After being familiar to observing attentively one cycle, one starts repeating this. One observes the cycles one at the time, on time, all the time. To be helped in this endeavor, one may use naming saying silently ‘raising’ and ‘falling’, at the right moment. Also one may count the number of cycles one has observed. But if one forgets observing to count, then one restarts at the number one.

*Noting* But if one also wants to develop mindfulness, using language through naming and counting is only an approximation. A more direct form of attention is ‘noting’. This is simply the awareness that the sensorial object, with all its qualities, is present. During noting one may easily loose focus and drift away towards for example the inner thoughts dealing with one’s personal life. If this happens often, then one may return to the method of naming.

*Ignorance* Nevertheless it is natural for the mind to be mindless, absentminded. To think about our to-do-list. Moreover this happens without us being aware of it, otherwise our discipline would have returned attention towards the meditation object. This phenomenon, being occupied with something without realizing this, is called ‘ignorance’. It is important not to become angry or feel guilty. At some point the meditator will notice to be mindless, being occupied by things that are not the meditation object.

*Relax and resmile* Then the exercise requires ‘to recognize, to release, to relax, and to resmile’. After that one is to ‘return (to the breath) and repeat’. This list of the six ‘r’ (recognize, release, relax, resmile, return, and repeat) are emphasized by Bhante Vimalaramsi. In meditation retreats we just mention the relax and resmile as the main extra ingredients. Practicing this way is an essential contribution to becoming calm and friendly.

Basic Exercise 1

Summarizing, we have now described the ‘Basic Exercise 1 (BE1)’:

Carefully pay attention to the cycles of breath.

One at the time, on time, all the time.

If one is side tracked, and this often happens before realizing it, then as soon as one does notice this,

one relaxes, resmiles, and goes back to the breath and restarts.

**Walking meditation** There is also *walking* meditation. One stands, straight and dignified. As preparation one observes the bodily sensations: temperature warm—cold; touch: hard—soft; movements: air along cheeks, circulation. Possibly more. When one is ready to observe the movements of the feet one starts. Right. Pause. Left. Pause.

During the pauses one relaxes and observes every now and then the mind. To

sharpen focus one may intend to be aware of the exact moment that the foot leaves the ground and the moment that it returns. Walking meditation is quite powerful, capable of developing concentration.

### Five Hindrances

1. desire;
2. aversion;
3. restlessness;
4. sleepiness;
5. doubt.

The five hindrances have five antidotes. These are the intention to have

1. moderation (against desire);
2. friendliness (against aversion);
3. relaxation (against restlessness);
4. wakefulness (against sleepiness);
5. curiosity (against doubt).

BE1 brings concentration that may be able to counter hindrances by temporary suppression.

#### *Loving kindness*

Another important way to counter hindrances, also temporarily, is to develop *metta* ‘loving kindness’ or more simply ‘sincere friendliness’.

## 3 Insight through mindfulness

There is a better remedy against the hindrances. If one succeeds to view a hindrance as a mere mind-state, and not enacted into an impulse, then the hindrances become much more manageable. For this change of view insight needs to be developed. This is done by practicing a variant of basic exercise 1.

#### Basic Exercise 2 (BE2)

One starts, like in BE1, observing the breath. Often we are distracted from the breath. This time, however, one also pays attention to what it is that has distracted us. We say that one has a *visitor*.

Rather than going back to observing the breath (after first intending to relax and to resmile) like in BE1, now we change meditation object and start observing the visitor for a few but distinct moments. After that one relaxes and resmiles, and only then one returns to the breath.

Exercises BE1 and BE2 differ. The first difference is that practicing BE2 one always can observe mindfully what is present in the mind. In BE1 one didn't do this, having to return to the breathing. Doing so it turns out that often the mind is quite busy with engaging itself with 1001 or more objects. Being aware of this one may diminish this stream by first continuing to practice BE1, so that a more clear picture arises of what comes and goes. After that one practices BE2.

### **Five Helpers**

1. Confidence (not dogmatism);
2. Effort, energy (in balance with concentration);
3. Mindfulness (light, friendly);
4. Concentration (without attachment);
5. Knowledge, wisdom (not intellectual).

**Visitors** All phenomena are visitors. But after having chosen a focus for one's practice, this is called the *meditation object* and all other phenomena the proper visitors.

There is **body**, with its five physical senses" hearing, seeing, touching, smelling, tasting. Then there is the rest, considered as part of **mind**: *feeling* (pleasant, neutral, unpleasant), *cognition* (thought slice, image), *volition* (intention to do something), and *consciousness/mind-state*. Together these form the five groups (skandhas) of visitors, from which our world of awareness is built up.

### **Classification of the visitors: the skandhas**

1. Body (input through physical senses);
2. Feelings (pleasant, neutral, unpleasant);
3. Cognition (slice of thought: concept, image);
4. Impulse/Volition (intention to act);
5. Consciousness (type).

Basic 2	6 senses	5 skandhas	4 applications of mindfulness	All 9 (activity)
Body	Ear Eye Touch Nose Tongue	Body	Body	Hearing Seeing Touching Smelling Tasting
Mind	Mind	Feeling-tone Cognition Consciousness Volition	Feeling-tone Mind <sub>1</sub> : cognition Mind <sub>2</sub> : mind-state 'Mind-object'	Appreciating Thinking Tendency Acting

Feeling-tone: unpleasant, neutral, pleasant ( $\{-, 0, +\}$  on a continuous scale).  
Cognition: a concept or image, being a slice of a train of thought.  
Consciousness: a mind-state; readiness to act in a certain way.  
Mind-object: usually given as a list of lists of active mental factors that influence behavior in a certain direction.

*Size of a visitor* There is also another classification of visitors. Not according to type, but to size. A *small* (S) visitor is one that doesn't prevent one to be able to follow mindfully the meditation object. A *medium* (M) or *large* (L) visitor does eclipse the meditation object. The difference between these larger two visitors (M, L) is that after observing a medium visitor, and relaxing and re-smiling, one is able to return to the meditation object. From a large visitor it is not immediately possible to return to the meditation object. Large visitors are also called 'mind-objects'. How does one deal with a mind-object? This will be discussed.

S: those don't hinder the principal object.

M: eclipses the meditation object;  
dissolves when it is named, noted or examined.

L: like M eclipsing the meditation object, but these are sticky.

The L-sized visitors are also called 'bananas'. They usually form a coalition of elements of the five skandhas. All hindrances are L-sized visitors.

## 4 Liberation

### Relinquishing hindrances

For this to happen, an analysis of what is going on, is helpful. “There is desire; this is the physical (that is somatic) ingredient of it, this is its feeling tone, these are its accompanying concepts, this is the mind-state, and these are the resulting actions.” This analytical view is not to be held in an intellectual manner, but in an experiential manner. Carefully the major substates of the mind-state should be experienced (not imagined).

Having a clear insight in the dynamical collaboration of the elements of the skandhas may deconstruct the visitors, driving apart the coalition members. Concentration makes this process less painful. Notably metta is instrumental: “May I proceed steadily in the presence of suffering.” One should not start a meditation session in order to relinquish, otherwise hidden desire is present. One starts with curiosity and then relinquishment may happen.

#### *Factors of relinquishment*

<i>confidence</i>	<i>surrender</i>	} <i>joy</i>
<i>effort</i>	<i>determination</i>	
<i>mindfulness</i>	<i>equanimity</i>	
<i>concentration</i>	<i>calm</i>	
<i>wisdom</i>	<i>investigation</i>	

In italics are the traditional seven factors of enlightenment. We prefer to display all eleven: the five helpers, a considerable strengthening of them, and then on top of these two layers there is the factor joy. These eleven can be developed and used to relinquish large visitors.

### Freedom (enlightenment/realization)

The first level of partial enlightenment occurs when a ‘tree’ that grows certain types of bananas has been eliminated. That means that a certain type of hindrance no longer occurs or reoccurs. A banana tree doesn’t have deep roots. Relinquishing worldly L-sized visitors is often more difficult. Full enlightenment occurs when all hindrances have been relinquished.

This is what the teacher Shaila Catherine says about relinquishment and realization in her book “Focused & Fearless”, Wisdom Publications, 2008.

1. “Letting go in meditation is the relinquishment that involves no loss. Recognizing impermanence leads to the realization of the pure and ungraspable nature of things. Knowing this basic fact of things, one has nothing to fear. And the extraordinary delight that arises with realization surpasses all temporary pleasures, softening any residual fear that may want to grasp again what can never actually be possessed.” (p49-50)
2. “Awakening is a realization that is utterly unshakable; what’s more, it occurs to no one, requires no confirmation, and attains nothing.” p20

Freedom means that not only the hindrances have been relinquished, they also will not grow again. In principle it can be reached using just BE1, BE2. For this

longer retreats are helpful. **The milestones and trajectories of the path**

We will present in several ways diagrams of the milestones and major trajectories of the path.

*First description*

The most simple way to display the milestones and the path is the following.

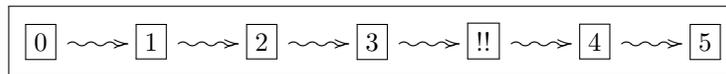


Figure 1: The path of liberation and its milestones

The milestones.

- 0 Start.
- 1 Distinguishing controlled from spontaneous breath.
- 2 Serenity with pride.
- 3 The three characteristics.
- !! Utter urgency & serene confidence.
- 4 Equanimity.
- 5 Liberty.

The trajectories.



One starts meditating at 0 and mainly one practices BE1. This temporarily suppresses hindrances. At 1 one is able to distinguish the natural breath and proper vipassana starts. As the observation of the natural breath already gives a glimpse of anatta, non-self, one needs to overcome some hesitation (that in the body is felt like a restriction of the capacity to breath). This can be done using BE2.



One distinguishes visitors so that in principle everything can be a meditation object on which one focuses attention and mindfulness (a friendly ‘knowing’). One observes whether the visitors are of size S(mall), M(edium) and L(arge). One makes an intuitive (i.e. non-intellectual) analysis of the visitors and discovers how they are a coalition of forces in the five skandhas. By doing this the

L-visitors loose power and may melt away. One doesn't do the practice in order that hindrances (L-visitors) melt away, but in order to get a clear picture of what is going on. As beneficial side effect the hindrance may weaken and melt away. The high-point of this trajectory is that most, or even all, hindrances have melted away (but may come back). In a temporary state of absence of hindrances one enters a state of serenity. Usually some pride is developed. This is very natural: all life is conditioned by vedana (feeling-tone) and being able to reside in serenity will become a goal and an object of self-identification.

2  $\rightsquigarrow$  3

In order to proceed it may be sufficient to note or name this pride to proceed. Another way consists of looking carefully to details of the raising and falling, or of the foot steps. Then one suddenly may observe the three characteristics: non-permanence (the usual view of the environment collapses into many fluctuating phenomena in body and mind), non-self (one is not able to control what is happening with these phenomena), and suffering (*dukkha*, the nausea for emptiness according to the Visuddhimagga). This gives a strong blow to 'ego', wrong-view, the illusion that we exist as something substantial and are in control. But this is not the case: everything is determined by causes and conditions.

3  $\rightsquigarrow$  !!  $\rightsquigarrow$  4

In principle the experience of non-permanence (vibrations) and non-self (uncontrollability) do not need to cause suffering. That they do is caused by wrong view. At milestone 3 one sees that this view is really not valid. But one is not yet ready to give it up. This causes strong suffering:

- fear (without finding an object of which to be afraid);
- the delusion of danger (if one cannot see something to be afraid of, it is natural to suspect that there is a lurking danger);
- disgust (one wants to get out of here never to return).

One develops determination to get out of this 'dark night'. Continuing the practice one no longer is able to do BE2, as the visitors (fear, seeing danger, disgust) eclipse the meditation object. One gives up hope. At a certain point one feels an extreme urgency (*samvega*) to get out of the situation and gets a serene confidence (*pasada*) that this is possible. Then one returns to exercising BE1 in a reinforced way, possibly by using naming instead of noting. One practices metta (loving kindness) in order to soften the suffering. One may make a wish that the hindrances are gone for a split second (this will work as soon as attention succeeds in observing the breath). One increases the wish: "May the dukkha be absent for two moments; then three four etcetera. In this way one reaches equanimity in which the dukkha is absent for most of the time. This is the state of equanimity.

4  $\rightsquigarrow$  5

Now sila (discipline) becomes very important. One needs to continue practice

without wanting to deconstruct ego. Because like an eye that sees, but cannot see itself, also ego can undo, but cannot undo itself. One needs to continue, not by pushing the method, but by continued discipline, which makes it go by itself. In the tradition it is called “Here we are at the end of vipassana.” One may deconstruct effort and concentration, while keeping sila. But practice continues. If vipassana is ‘mature’ the practice continues, using the 11 factors of letting go. Then at a certain moment the three characteristics appear in such a clear way that they cannot be avoided and one observes them calmly. Then one intuitively understands that wrong view was just a misunderstanding. This is the end of wrong view and ‘one has reached the first path’.

*Further levels of liberation*

Level	L-sized visitors eliminated
(i) Streamwinner	wrong view, doubt, belief in rites
(ii) Once returner	aversion and desire (partly)
(iii) Non-returner	aversion and sensual desire (totally)
(iv) Arhant	conceit, desire for (non-)being, sleepiness, restlessness, ignorance

After having eradicated wrong view, there are still other mental factors that cause attachment and suffering, the main ones being *aversion*, *desire* and *ignorance*. Therefore this path needs to be traversed in total four times to eradicate all hindrances. The following is a table of the unwholesome mental factors that are released each of the four times.

*Second description: falling back*

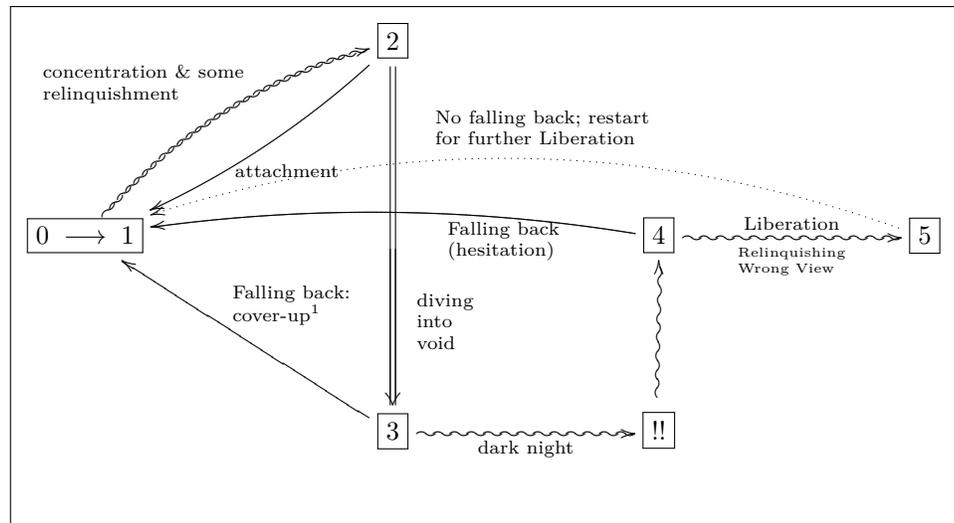


Figure 2: The path, milestones, tendencies to slide back

Often the path is not traversed in one run: one needs several retreats to go from  $\boxed{0}$  to  $\boxed{5}$ . The reason is that one has multiple occasions to fall back, intentionally or not. In the following diagram we identify 0 and 1 and there are three moments in which one can fall or slide back, at milestones 2, 3, and 4. This may make the path considerably longer, depending on the number of times falling back. The vertical dimension indicates feeling-tone. See Figure 2.

*Third and more complete picture*

This version now includes a model of samsara, the everlasting cycle of suffering in ordinary daily life, the left vertical column. See Figure 3.

*Explanations of the Dhamma Goose game*

1. The left column of four points represent daily life with different levels of feeling-tone: --, -, 0, +, ++: very unpleasant, unpleasant, neutral, pleasant, very pleasant. These feeling-tones occur respectively in a trauma(tic event), in pain, in a neutral situation, in a pleasurable situation, in a situation that causes bliss. The upwards arrows indicate how in daily life raising the feeling-tone may happen: therapy, mourning, finding pleasure, and enjoying intimacy ('volupté').
2. The arrows downwards happen because of the conditions of life.
3. There is an important point between  $\boxed{3}$  and  $\boxed{4}$  in which one decides 'enough is enough' and makes a wish for liberation. It happens at  $\boxed{!!}$  as an essential turing point: there is utmost urgency (*samvega*) combined with serene confidence (*pasada*). This combination enables the practitioner to continue.
4. The arrow from  $\boxed{3}$  to  $\boxed{0}$  can also go to  $\boxed{-}$ ,  $\boxed{+}$ , or  $\boxed{++}$ .

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<sup>1</sup>Here 'cover-up' refers to the mechanism of hiding the emptiness of no-self (called 'Lack' by the psychiatrist Lacan) by some armored type of personality (with rigid side effects).

<sup>2</sup>The putative mechanism of trauma is as follows. The thing that happened is too painful to accept. Then the person to whom it happened suppresses one of the five skandhas. This causes the self (collaborating skandhas for a balanced way of survival) to stop functioning. Then the victim comes into  $\boxed{3}$ , without insight, and experiences PTSD. One needs to go back to partial reexperiencing the event. With therapy one may reexperience in such a way that one is beyond the trauma, by giving it a place. The reason that one needs therapy and cannot proceed using meditation is that concentration hasn't been developed.

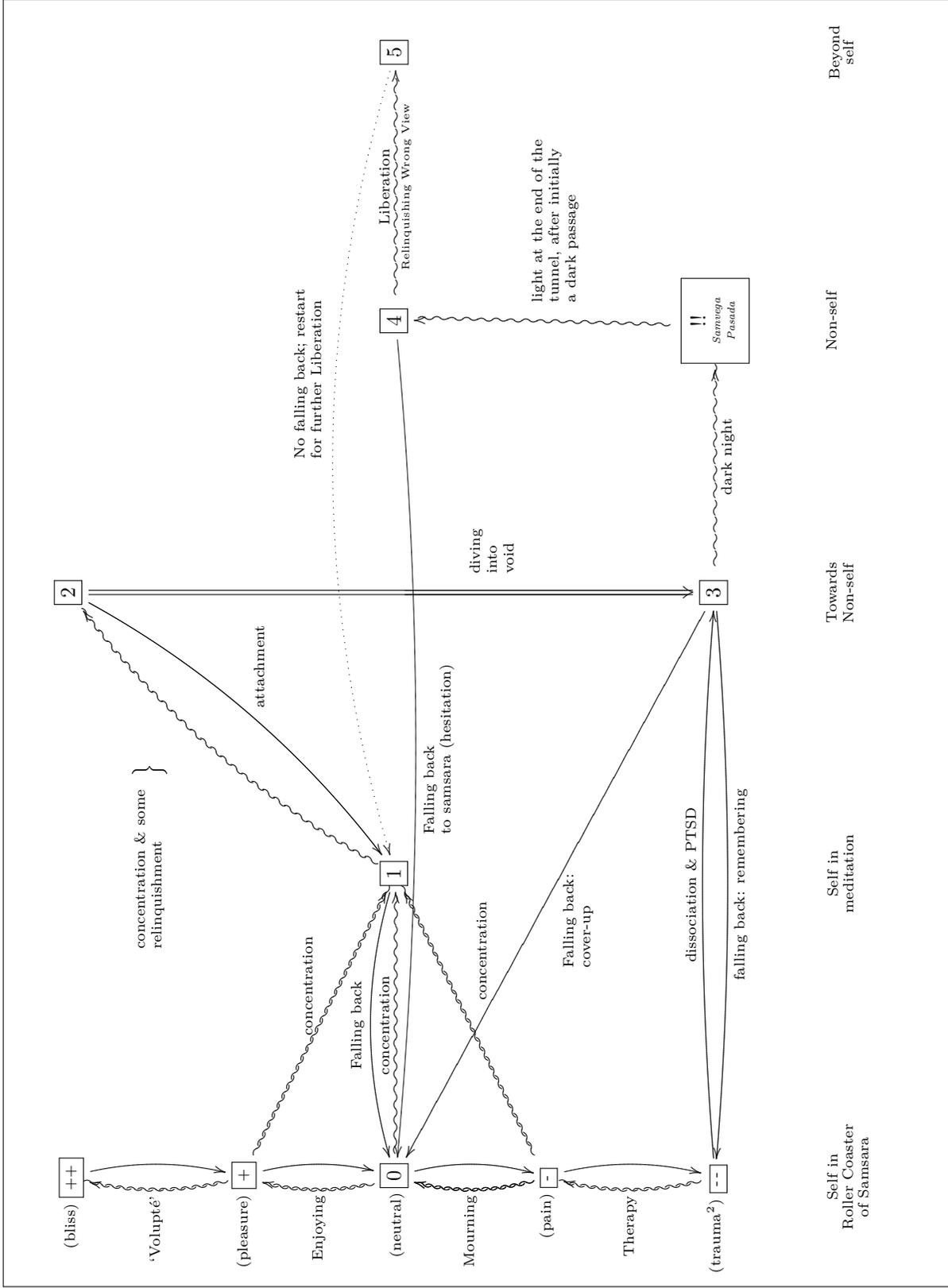


Figure 3: The Goose Game of life, suffering and its release.