

# Hierarchy of Awareness

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1. The fundamental nature of our experience can be described as a *hierarchy*, which Ven. Nāṇavīra Thera tried to explain in his Fundamental Structure (*Notes on Dhamma*). We are what we experience, it is not possible to view (or imagine) this hierarchy from 'outside', independent of us, because regardless of how far one steps back, one cannot abandon the experience as such.

2. The experience, whether mundane or subliminal, possesses certain characteristics, and the most prominent among them is that it is *hierarchically ordered*. This hierarchy goes into infinity in both directions, and this is something which can be seen from the nature of *particulars* and *generals*. If we take a look at our own experience as it is, we can see that there are two aspects which appear as being more pronounced than anything else. Those aspects are known as *immediacy* and *reflexion*. Together they comprise this hierarchy of the experience as a *whole*. Thus, the hierarchy we have been referring to can be called *reflexive hierarchy*.<sup>1</sup> If we want to be more precise we can say that immediacy and reflexion, respectively, represent two different modes of experiencing this hierarchy. In immediacy, reflexion is not directly present; it is there, but placed in the background. In reflexion, the immediate object is seen from an *additional point of view*, which means that once we reflect upon something, immediacy *does not* disappear, it rather becomes secondary to the field of attention but, nevertheless, it remains there:

In immediate experience the thing is present; in reflexive experience the thing is again present, but as implicit in a more general thing. Thus in reflexion the thing is twice present, once immediately and once reflexively. This is true of reflexion both in the loose sense (as reflection or discursive thinking) and *a fortiori* in the stricter sense (for the reason that reflection involves reflexion, though not vice versa). See MANO and also VIÑÑĀNA.—Nāṇavīra Thera, *Notes on Dhamma*, ATTĀ, p. 54, footnote a.

3. The presence of this reflexive hierarchy, as it can be seen from Fundamental Structure,<sup>2</sup> generates another dimension to the experience. This dimension is also hierarchically ordered, superimposed upon the original reflexive one; dependent upon it, but at the same time responsible for the existence of it. This simply means that their type of dependence is not temporal, i.e. it does not occur in sequence. This new hierarchy is the *hierarchy of awareness*, and although this hierarchy cannot go 'below' the experience as such (awareness is always awareness *of* something in-the-world), there is no limit for ascending levels of this hierarchy. As the term 'generating' implies, with the presence of reflexive hierarchy the hierarchy of awareness is also present—*simultaneously*; and as it was already said, the existence of this

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<sup>1</sup> For more on this subject see Nāṇavīra Thera, *'Clearing the Path'*, Path Press 1987, L. 86, p. 354. It is not possible to clarify the point any further, simply because of the nature of the subject. When one reflects, in a strict sense (i.e. reflexion), one is *aware*. What is then present in one's experience is hierarchy of awareness *together* with those things that were reflected upon i.e. revealed by reflexion.

<sup>2</sup> *Notes on Dhamma*, FUNDAMENTAL STRUCTURE, I Static Aspect, p.122, para. 16.

hierarchy, makes the reflexion possible in the first place.

4. Let us try and say something more about the nature of superimposition, which is relevant for these two hierarchies. When things are *superimposed* they are not *directly* or *linearly* related. They are simply *there*, next to each other and any thought along the lines of *causality* distorts them as they are.<sup>3</sup> This superimposed way of existing is nothing else than what is meant by being *akālika*, 'timeless' or 'beyond time'. Two things are there, dependent, yet not directly related to each other. That is the reason why we said that with the *presence* of reflexive hierarchy there is the *presence* of the hierarchy of awareness. This precedes any notions of causality or of time. Nevertheless, if we still insist on describing their mutual relationship, the most accurate way would be to simply say—with reflexion, awareness *is*; without reflexion awareness *is not*. This is clearly a reference to *paṭīcasamuppāda* itself, so now would be the right time to say something more about it.

5. *Paṭīcasamuppāda* is a *principle of timeless dependence* i.e. existential superimposition. With the presence of one thing the other thing is simultaneously present, too. Thus, it is not possible to conceive or imagine *paṭīcasamuppāda* without actually seeing it within the experience, simply because conceiving and imagining, in its nature, *involve sequence* (i.e. it is linear from the point of view of this new hierarchy, and as such pertains solely to the reflexive hierarchy). So, although hierarchy of awareness cannot go 'under' or 'in front' of the immediate-and-reflexive experience, as we noted above, it can always come 'closer' than it is<sup>4</sup>. The point is that these two hierarchies *do not touch* or *overlap*, they are *perpendicular*.<sup>5</sup> When we say 'hierarchy of awareness', this should not be understood in a sense that one is always aware. On the contrary, revealing this hierarchy requires effort, which is being manifested through the practice of mindfulness. Nevertheless, this hierarchy *exists*, and because of that the whole other reflexive hierarchy is possible (see above). The difficulty lies in a fact that this hierarchy cannot be *directly* grasped, and that is because any notions of directionality originate from it.

6. The description made so far refers to the experience as a whole in an *ideal* sense, i.e. the structure of experience has been described and this structure is the same in *arahant* and *puthujjana*. The difficulty is that the experience is, when we reflect upon it, already affected with *avijjā*. Ultimately, *avijjā* is nothing but the *non-seeing* of the nature of superimposition of the two hierarchies. Things are further complicated by the fact that even reflexive hierarchy is not a simple order of different levels of generality of things; even in this hierarchy, those levels are, in a way, superimposed in relation to each other, and they are all 'kept together', so to speak, by the fact that they can all be *attended to* from the perspective of the hierarchy of awareness. This hierarchy unifies them, determines them or 'keeps them together'. Here we can recognize the nature of *saṅkhāra*, which, as the Suttas tell us, exist through the presence of ignorance—*avijjāpaccayā saṅkhāra*. Thus, when one is not free from *avijjā*, the nature of the hierarchy of awareness is not understood and because of that, that hierarchy will be implicitly taken *par value*, as a kind of an owner-creator of the reflexive one, i.e. of our experience. This hierarchy of awareness appears as being *towards* the reflexive hierarchy, as if 'pressing' in the

<sup>3</sup> 'In whatever terms they conceive it, it turns into something other than that.'—*Dvayatanupāsana Sutta*, Sn 3.12.

<sup>4</sup> This is achieved in the practice of *jhāna*, which, however, will not concern us here.

<sup>5</sup> *Notes on Dhamma*, FUNDAMENTAL STRUCTURE, I Static Aspect, p.122, para. 16.

direction of it.<sup>6</sup> Simply by not-seeing that it is directly dependent upon the reflexive hierarchy, this 'pressing' of the hierarchy of awareness is being followed at its face value, and one comes to *assume and accept* that offered ownership over one's own experience<sup>7</sup>, i.e. one comes to assume that there actually *is* Self.

7. This is perhaps overly-simplified. As we said earlier on, the reflexive hierarchy generates the presence of the hierarchy of awareness. This in return, simultaneously determines reflexive hierarchy as such. However, since there is no first moment of ignorance being manifested, both of those hierarchies are affected by it, through and through. The hierarchy of awareness appears as somehow 'in between' our reflexive levels of experience, and that is what Ven. Nāṇavīra Thera meant by saying that they are perpendicular (see footnote no. 2). As a result of the presence of ignorance, this 'owner' which we mentioned above also appears like something which is *somewhere within* our experience, 'neither here nor there'. This elusiveness is maintained by the lack of one's capability of an indirect approach,<sup>8</sup> and as a result this 'owner' becomes identified with reflexive or immediate or reflexive-and-immediate or non-reflexive-nor-immediate aspects of life. In structural terms, simply not seeing this 'towards' of the hierarchy of awareness, makes the experience distorted, and following it means that one is going 'with the grain'—*anuloma*. Only, when 'towards' is *indirectly* seen as being *directly* dependent upon things which are impermanent, then the hierarchy of awareness will lose its 'pressure' and remain standing there, 'cut off at the root, like a palm stump'. At this point the actual hierarchy is *paṭiloma*, 'against the grain', i.e. 'towards' is seen as impermanent and because of that it ceases to be the *reason of one's actions*, i.e. Self is destroyed.

8. Thus, Self is the reason for the existence of Self, i.e. both reflexion and immediacy are equally affected by it. Only when reflexion-and-immediacy are seen as a whole as being determined by something else, the nature of the Self becomes revealed, which is that *it is not-Self* (neither owner nor master). Thus, that *thing* which was regarded as Self, does not disappear upon realization of *anicca* and *dukkha*, it 'changes direction', so to speak, and becomes not-Self, *anattā*. However, even then, the thing remains there and what disappears is Self-view,<sup>9</sup> and that is because the hierarchy of awareness has lost its 'pressure'<sup>10</sup>; thus certain assumptions in regard to reflexive hierarchy disappear.

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<sup>6</sup> 'It is in the nature of the *pañc'upādānakkhandhā* to press for recognition, in one way or another, as "self"—*Notes on Dhamma*, PARAMATTHA SACCA, p. 47, para. 6.

<sup>7</sup> One does not see that the 'owner' depends upon his ownership.

<sup>8</sup> By an 'indirect approach' we imply seeing the nature of superimposition. As it was outlined above, *direct* approach has been taken in this essay as *linear*, and as such it is incapable of reaching and understanding the hierarchy of awareness in a proper way (see para. 5). *Indirect approach* refers to seeing that with the presence of *what*, does *this* arise, and with the absence of *what*, does *this* cease. In other words, this is a phenomenological approach, or an approach founded upon *sati*, whereby the immediate things of experience are *not directly followed* at its initial appearance.

<sup>9</sup> View originating from the Self.

<sup>10</sup> Only an *arahant* is completely free from this pressing nature of experience. The case with other *sekhā* is that 'pressure' varies in degrees.