

# Is joy (*pīti*) a feeling (*vedanā*)? Perspectives from early Buddhism

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**ABSTRACT**—Different schools of systematic Buddhist thought disagree on whether joy (*pīti*) belongs to the bundle of feeling (*vedanakkhandha*) or to the bundle of conditioning factors (*saṅkhārakkhandha*). In this paper I suggest this discrepancy may stem from how different traditions solved a scholastic problem concerning the meditative states known as *jhāna*. Scholars have projected the Theravādin conception of *pīti* as a *saṅkhāra* back onto the *suttas*, interpreting it as a conative element, mostly intense or agitating, and bodily, none of which is apparent in canonical *pīti*. Instead, I argue we have grounds to read joy in the Pali *suttas* as a feeling (*vedanā*), and as roughly synonymous with happiness (*somanassa*). I base this on texts that show *pīti* and *somanassa* as interchangeable, therefore possibly pointing to the same experience; and on how their subtypes—domestic/renunciant (*gehasita*, *nekkhammasita*) for *somanassa*, carnal/spiritual (*sāmisa*, *nirāmisa*) for

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*pīti*—seem equivalent as well. These equivalences reveal how various early Buddhist practices have basically the same outcome in affective-hedonic terms, allowing us to see the underlying hedonic curve of that soteriology. But they also raise the question of why have different terms, which I explain with recourse to the parallelism between Buddhist *pīti* and Brahmanical *ānanda*.

**KEYWORDS:** *pīti*, *vedanā*, happiness, pleasure, positive affect, *jhāna*, meditation, early Buddhism, Pali Buddhism

## Introduction

When discussing *pīti*, some scholars of early Buddhism (Arbel 2017: 59; Bucknell 1993: 381; Gunaratana 1980: 82) specify that it is not a *vedanā*, but a *saṅkhāra*. In doing so, they are aligning themselves with the Theravāda interpretation.<sup>2</sup> While the early discourses do not always classify things into neat categories, we must approach them with the awareness that later exegeses disagreed on what category *pīti* belonged to. So, relying exclusively on the Theravādin view does not do justice to the early discourses, even the Pali *suttas*. It can hinder seeing how *pīti* works in them, how it relates to other skilful positive affective states, and how the concept of *pīti* evolved in Pali literature.

Imagine a tomato. People think of it as a vegetable, even though botanically it is a fruit—a berry, to be specific. But given how I use tomatoes and how I use strawberries in the kitchen, I am unlikely to group them together in my mind, no matter my botanical knowledge. Similarly, we must emphasise how joy *functions* in the texts besides how it may (or may not) be defined and classified. For, in a way, the *suttas*' undefined stance on joy foretells the later abhidharmic disagreement over classifying it.

I aim to establish that reading *pīti* as a feeling in the *suttas* is very plausible and reveals correspondences between various descriptions of how spiritual progress is supposed to feel. If we go beyond ‘category politics’, we can see how even in the later Pali tradition *pīti* retains much in common with the feeling called *somanassa*—though of course, perfect synonyms rarely exist. While my

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<sup>2</sup> This is not necessarily a criticism. Gunaratana, for example, is studying the *jhānas* in the Theravāda tradition.

focus is the Pali tradition, I use other texts and existing comparative works when relevant to emphasise possibilities of interpretation and engage with *pīti* in a way that facilitates discussing positive affective states in early Buddhism.

This paper begins with the canonical raw material on *pīti*. Then it compares that data to scholarly views that *pīti* is mainly intense, even agitating, and bodily. Following this, the third section looks at the exegetical debate on classifying *pīti* and suggests why abhidharma schools may have ended up with different views. In the fourth section, I assess arguments for reading *pīti* in the Pali discourses as pleasant mental feeling and as a synonym of *somanassa*. I suggest both terms have roughly the same experiential referent, and in the fifth section I establish the centrality of such positive affective state in early Pali Buddhist soteriology. In the sixth and final section, I explore the parallelism between Buddhist *pīti* and Brahmanical *ānanda*, since I believe this can help us understand why and how the Pali *suttas* use two different terms—*pīti* and *somanassa*—for the same affective experience.

## 1. What is this thing called joy (pīti)?

I translate *pīti* as ‘joy’.<sup>3</sup> The PTS dictionary defines it as ‘emotion of joy, delight, zest, exuberance’ (Rhys Davids and Stede 1966: 462); Margaret Cone’s (2020: 484) as ‘joy, pleasure’; Stefan Baums’ and Andrew Glass’ dictionary of Gāndhārī renders *pridi* as ‘happiness’;<sup>4</sup> and for *prīti*, the Sanskrit dictionary of Monier-Williams (1994: 711) has ‘any pleasurable sensation, pleasure, joy, gladness, satisfaction’, ‘joy at having done anything’, as well as friendly disposition, affection, love, and ‘joy or gratification personified’. So, what is this thing? Just once do the early discourses give us something like a definition. We find it in the Discourse on the Spiritual (*Nirāmisa Sutta*, SN 36.31) of the *Vedāna Samyutta*. This presents three types of joy: carnal, spiritual and beyond-spiritual.<sup>5</sup> First, the text explains carnal joy (*sāmisā pīti*) as follows:

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<sup>3</sup> Many others have translated ‘joy’ (Anālayo 2019b; Gethin 2008: 28; Rhys Davids 2002: 2:84; Arbel 2017; Cousins 1973: 121; Bareau 1955, 175; Harvey 2018: 6). Others choose ‘rapture’ (Kuan 2005; Bronkhorst 2009: 124; Bodhi 2005), ‘delight’ (Walshe 1995: 95) or ‘zest’ (Bodhi and Narāda 2016; U Thittila 2002: 335).

<sup>4</sup> Available at <https://gandhari.org/dictionary> [Accessed: 13 November 2020].

<sup>5</sup> I choose the term ‘spiritual’ with some reservations, but it is quite common and it reflects the opposition between flesh (*āmisa*) and spirit, that is, what is not ‘of the flesh’. Margaret Cone (2001: 318) gives ‘not worldly; not physical or material; pure’, and the PTS dictionary has ‘free from sensual desires, disinterested, not material’ (Rhys Davids and Stede 1966: 370).

What are the five strands of sense desire? Forms known by the eye that are desired, pleasing, arousing ... tactile sensations known by the body that are desired, pleasing, arousing. These are the five strands of sense desire. The joy that arises conditioned by the five strands of sense desire is called carnal joy.<sup>6</sup>

Secondly, spiritual joy (*nirāmisā pīti*) is identified as the first and second *jhānas*. The third type, ‘beyond-spiritual’ joy (*nirāmisā nirāmisatarā pīti*), refers to ‘the joy that arises when a mendicant who has eliminated the intoxicants reviews their mind free from lust, aversion, and delusion’.<sup>7</sup> A more phenomenological description of joy, together with pleasure,<sup>8</sup> is found in the verses of the elder Khitaka:

So light is my body  
 Touched by great joy and pleasure.  
 Like cotton shaken by the wind,  
 So much my body floats.<sup>9</sup>

Joy shows up mostly, and almost invariably, in descriptions of progress towards awakening. Thus, in the early discourses we find joy in four formulaic places: in descriptions of *jhāna*, in the feeling section of mindfulness of breathing, as the fourth awakening factor (*pītisambojjhaṅga*), and in a sequence I call ‘the gladness formula’. We do not find it in *satipaṭṭhāna* instructions—

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<sup>6</sup> SN iv 235: *katamā ca, bhikkhave, sāmisā pīti? pañc' ime, bhikkhave, kāmaguṇā. katame pañca cakkhuviññeyyā rūpā itthā kantā manāpā piyarūpā kāmūpasamhitā rajaniyā ... pe ... kāyaviññeyyā phoṭṭhabbā itthā kantā manāpā piyarūpā kāmūpasamhitā rajaniyā. ime kho, bhikkhave, pañca kāmaguṇā. yā kho, bhikkhave, ime pañca kāmaguṇe paticca uppajjati pīti, ayam vuccati, bhikkhave, sāmisā pīti.* All translations from Pali texts are my own.

<sup>7</sup> SN iv 235.

<sup>8</sup> *Pīti* and *sukha* stand often, though not always, next to each other. In some contexts they appear to happen simultaneously (*jhāna*), in others sequentially (the gladness and ‘bojjhaṅga process’ formulas), and still in others it is ambiguous (mindfulness of breathing). It is hard to tell how significant this is, but the terms are not equivalent, or at least that is not always a possibility. *Pīti* is mental in nature, as I argue below, whereas *sukha* can be both mental and bodily. This could suggest that the latter aspect is stressed when paired with *pīti*. The suttas do not solve these questions.

<sup>9</sup> Th 104: *lahuko vata me kāyo, phutṭho ca pītisukhena vipulena. / tūlami vaeritaṁ mālutenā, pilavatīva me kāyo ti.*

except in one *satipaṭṭhāna* text featuring the gladness formula<sup>10</sup>—nor in general definitions of *vedanā*. In what follows, I look first at formulaic, then non-formulaic appearances of joy.

To begin with, *pīti* appears in the first and second *jhānas*. In the first, the pair ‘joy and pleasure’ (*pītisukha*) are said to be born of withdrawal (*viveka*) from the hindrances, whereas in the second one they are born of collectedness (*samādhi*). All traditions coincide in these features (Bucknell 2019, 394). Here is a stock passage for the first *jhāna*:

Quite withdrawn from sense desires, withdrawn from unskilful qualities, they<sup>11</sup> enter and dwell in the first *jhāna*, which is the joy and pleasure born of withdrawal,<sup>12</sup> with thinking and reflection. They fill, drench and pervade their body with the joy and pleasure born of withdrawal, so that no part of the entire body is unpervaded with the joy and pleasure born of withdrawal.<sup>13</sup>

Secondly, we encounter joy in step five of mindfulness of breathing, the first of the *vedanā* section, immediately followed by pleasure. This is also shared by different transmission lineages (Anālayo 2007: 139). The mendicant trains as follows:

<sup>10</sup> SN v 156.

<sup>11</sup> While the subject in the Pali text is masculine (‘*bhikkhu*’), Collett and Anālayo (2014) have argued this functions as a gender-inclusive term that addresses a broader audience, not just male mendicants/monastics. Today, this is expressed with the singular gender-neutral pronoun ‘they’, and I follow this habit in this paper.

<sup>12</sup> Often translators treat joy and pleasure (and thinking and reflection) as things that the first *jhāna* *has* or *is accompanied with*, rather than what it *consists of* or *is*. I take *pītisukham* as being in apposition with *pāṭhamam jhānam*, the implication being that ‘first *jhāna*’ is a name for a particular kind of joy and pleasure that the formula describes. As Rāhula (1978, 105) writes: ‘a *dhyāna* is merely a designation for the arising of a certain number of psycho-physical qualities in a given combination. (...) For the convenience of linguistic expression we generally say that such and such a *dhyāna* has so many factors, but in fact we should say that such and such a *dhyāna* is the combination of such and such factors.’

<sup>13</sup> DN i 73: so vivicca kāmehi, vivicca akusalehi dhammehi savitakkam savicāram vivekajam pītisukham pāṭhamam jhānam upasampajja viharati. so imam eva kāyan vivekajena pītisukhena abhisandeti parisandeti paripūreti parippharati, nāssa kiñci sabbāvato kāyassa vivekajena pītisukhena apphuṭam hoti.

‘I will breathe in experiencing joy’, ‘I will breathe out experiencing joy’, ‘I will breathe in experiencing pleasure’, ‘I will breathe out experiencing pleasure’.<sup>14</sup>

Thirdly, joy is the fourth of the seven awakening factors. Here are two passages describing it:

A: When a mendicant’s energy is activated, spiritual joy arises. On that occasion the awakening factor of joy is activated in the mendicant, they cultivate it, and it becomes fully developed in them.<sup>15</sup>

B: When there is joy with thinking and reflection, and when there is joy without thinking and reflection, that is the awakening factor of joy.<sup>16</sup>

Passage A shows it is spiritual joy that constitutes the awakening factor of joy. To identify this awakening factor with spiritual and therefore jhānic joy, as Arbel (2017: 107) has done based on an observation by Gethin (2001: 170–72), finds further support in passage B, which strongly suggests the first and second *jhānas*, and in two other texts that define spiritual joy as jhānic joy: the *Nirāmisa Sutta* (SN 36.31), seen earlier, and the *Subha Sutta* (MN 99). The latter compares a fire that burns without depending on fuel to a joy that does not depend on sensory desire and unskilful qualities—the definition of spiritual joy—and explains it as the first and second *jhānas*.<sup>17</sup> In spite of all this, Anālayo has argued that the joy awakening factor need

<sup>14</sup> MN iii 82: *pītipatisamvedī assasissāmī ti sikkhati, pītipatisamvedī passasissāmī ti sikkhati, sukhapatisamvedī assasissāmī ti sikkhati, sukhapatisamvedī passasissāmī ti sikkhati.*

<sup>15</sup> SN v 68: *yasmiñ samaye, bhikkhave, bhikkhuno āraddhavīriyassa uppajjati pīti nirāmisa, pītisambojjhañgo tasmiñ samaye bhikkhuno āraddho hoti, pītisambojjhañgam tasmiñ samaye bhikkhu bhāveti, pītisambojjhañgo tasmiñ samaye bhikkhuno bhāvanāpāripūriñ gacchati.* Also found at SN v 332, where it is addressed to Ānanda.

<sup>16</sup> SN v 111: *yada pi, bhikkhave, savitakkasavicārā pīti tada pi pītisambojjhañgo, yada pi avitakkaavicārā pīti tada pi pītisambojjhañgo.*

<sup>17</sup> MN ii 204: *katamā ca, māñava, pīti aññatreva kāmehi aññatra akusalehi dhammehi? idha, māñava, bhikkhu vivicceva kāmehi ... pe ... pañhamāñ jhānam upasampajja viharati. ayam pi kho, māñava, pīti aññatreva kāmehi aññatra akusalehi dhammehi. puna c' aparam, māñava, bhikkhu vitakkavīcārānam vūpasamā ... pe ... dutiyāñ jhānam upasampajja viharati. ayam pi kho, māñava, pīti aññatreva kāmehi aññatra akusalehi dhammehi.*

not be *jhānic* joy, for it can come from insight.<sup>18</sup> He points to some verses in the Dhammapada where contemplating the impermanence of the *khandhas* gives rise to joy and gladness (*pītipāmojja*).<sup>19</sup> However, it does not seem his inference is textually supported. The commentary does not see that joy as an awakening factor, instead glossing it as ‘joy in the dharma, gladness in the dharma’.<sup>20</sup> It never calls that joy ‘spiritual’, whereas as we are seeing, the discourses do call the awakening factor of joy ‘spiritual’, and they explicitly define spiritual joy as *jhānic* joy.<sup>21</sup> Here we have a lot of consistent internal cross-references, fingers pointing at the same moon. Instead, Anālayo’s example belongs to a sometimes ambiguous type of *pīti* that is skilful and ethical, yet it is not called spiritual, and which I address below.

The last of the formulaic places to house joy is ‘the gladness formula’:<sup>22</sup>

When one is glad, joy is born. When the mind is joyful, the body relaxes. With a relaxed body, one experiences pleasure. When one experiences pleasure, the mind becomes collected.<sup>23</sup>

In the Fruits of the Ascetic Life (*Sāmaññaphala Sutta*, DN 2), this sequence is triggered when the mendicant sees (*samanupassati*) that the hindrances are

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<sup>18</sup> Despite acknowledging that *pītisambojjhaṅga* refers to *nirāmisā pīti*, he considers this need not be *jhānic*. He also contests generally that *jhāna* is attained by cultivating the awakening factors despite the overlap shown here (Anālayo 2006: 234 n. 17; 2017a: 133).

<sup>19</sup> Dhp 373–74: *suññāgāraṇī paviṭṭhassa, santacittassa bhikkhuno. / amānusī rati hoti, sammā dhammaṇī vipassato. / yato yato sammasati, khandhānaṇī udāyabbayaṇī. / labhati pītipāmojjaṇī, amatam tam vijānatam.*

<sup>20</sup> Dhp-a iv 110: *pītipāmojjan ti evam khandhānaṇī udāyabbayaṇī sammasanto dhammapīṭīṇī dhammapāmojjaṇī ca labhati.*

<sup>21</sup> I cannot know if this was Anālayo’s reasoning, but while it may seem logical to infer that a joy arising from insight, such as contemplating the impermanence of the *khandhas*, contributes to awakening and is thus an awakening factor, even in that case I do not see why this would weaken the association between the awakening factor of joy and the label ‘spiritual’—and therefore *jhānic*. Anālayo seems to rely on a preconception that *jhāna* happens from and only from ‘*samatha* meditation’ and cannot be triggered by insight, a preconception Arbel (2017; 2015: 179–206) challenges.

<sup>22</sup> The gladness formula appears at: DN i 73, DN i 182, DN i 207, DN i 250, DN iii 242, DN iii 279, MN i 37, MN i 283, SN iv 78, SN iv 351, SN v 156, SN v 398, AN i 243, AN iii 21, AN iii 284, AN v 329, AN v 333. In some of these discourses it appears multiple times.

<sup>23</sup> DN i 73: *pamuditassa pīti jāyati, pītimanassa kāyo passambhati, passaddhakāyo sukhaṇī vedeti, sukhoṇī cittāṇī samādhiyati.*

absent in them<sup>24</sup>—in other words, that their mind is quite skilful. The gladness formula, which appears in Chinese texts as well and may even be more emphasised there (Sujato 2012: 321), strengthens further the connections we have seen. First, it is virtually identical to a segment of the awakening factors: joy → relaxation → collectedness. So much so that, in a presentation of this teaching Rupert Gethin (2001: 168ff) termed ‘the *bojjhaṅga* process formula’, pleasure (*sukha*) pops up between relaxation (*passaddhi*) and collectedness (*saṃādhi*) and thus gets included in the unfolding of the awakening factors.<sup>25</sup> Secondly, the gladness formula is also the central segment of transcendental dependent arising (*lokuttara pāṭiccasamuppāda*), also called the ‘spiral path’,<sup>26</sup> where faith (*saddhā*) bridges the *lokiya* chain of dependent arising and the gladness sequence, which continues to liberation.<sup>27</sup> To sum up: the gladness formula is where most models of progress to awakening overlap.<sup>28</sup>

As for non-formulaic appearances of *pīti*, for carnal joy I have only found two examples. The first is the *Lakkhana Sutta*, which speaks of layman’s joy (*gihissa pīti*) when illustrating the prosperous life of a king who has many children.<sup>29</sup> The second is in the opening poem of the *Āṭṭhakavagga*, the *Kāma Sutta*, where it portrays the joy of succeeding at getting sense pleasures.<sup>30</sup> While neither of these use the term ‘carnal’ (*sāmisa*), they clearly match descriptions

<sup>24</sup> DN i 73: *tass’ime pañca nīvaraṇe pahine attani samanupassato pāmojjam jāyati, pamuditassa pīti jāyati, pītimanassa kāyo passambhati, passaddhakāyo sukham vedeti, sukhino cittam saṃādhiyati. so vivicca’ eva kāmehi, vivicca akusalehi dhammehi savitakkam savicāram vivekajam pītisukham paṭhamam jhānam upasampajja viharati.*

<sup>25</sup> E.g., SN v 68.

<sup>26</sup> On the spiral path, see Bodhi (1980), Attwood (2013) and Jones (2019).

<sup>27</sup> For a good survey of all the variants of this sequence, see Attwood (2013: 6–13).

<sup>28</sup> Peter Harvey (2018: 3–4) explains the gladness formula as ‘what later came to be called access (*upacāra*) concentration’, following the commentary to the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*—Sv i 217. This view relies a lot on that particular context, where the process of the gladness formula is followed by the process of *jhāna*, a phenomenon exclusive to the *sīlakkhandha vagga* (DN 2, 9, 10 & 13). I argue that these two processes rather cover the same ground. Yet texts can only be sequential, they cannot say several things simultaneously, so if equivalent formulas meet in one text they will inevitably stand in succession, leading to interpretations like the one followed by Harvey. But I see no reason why the *jhāna* formula, instead of describing something happening after the gladness formula, in temporal succession, could not just be explaining it further. Lance Cousins (2022: 33), who takes the same view as Harvey, says the gladness formula is absent ‘in some (or all?) other recensions’ of this text, but provides no references.

<sup>29</sup> DN iii 162.

<sup>30</sup> Sn 772.

of carnal joy—and also of domestic happiness (*gehasita somanassa*), which is relevant for the third section. More common are instances that refer to an ‘ethical’, skilful joy: *pīti* felt in an encounter with a Buddha<sup>31</sup> or the community of mendicants,<sup>32</sup> upon hearing the word *sambuddha*,<sup>33</sup> or in connection to faith directed at Gotama;<sup>34</sup> *pītisomanassa* felt by gods listening to the praise of Sāriputta<sup>35</sup> and by a Koliyan man reflecting on how the Buddha’s words helped his wife give birth;<sup>36</sup> and *pītipāmojja* arising in Channa when he is reassured of his capacity to grasp the teachings,<sup>37</sup> arising in a mind with faith, ethics, learning, generosity, and wisdom,<sup>38</sup> or arising through mindfully observing the bundles of clinging (*upādānakkhandha*) arise and pass away.<sup>39</sup> *Pītipāmojja* is also used to describe an affective state that the Buddha instructs disciples to dwell in when, upon review (*paccavekkhamāno*), they know (*jānāti*) that there are no unskilful qualities in their mind regarding sense experience,<sup>40</sup> that an act they have done is not harmful but skilful,<sup>41</sup> or other examples of knowing that the mind is skilful.<sup>42</sup>

All examples in the paragraph above show a skilful, ethical *pīti* which is not called spiritual (*nirāmisā*), and yet it is certainly not carnal (*sāmisā*). This is probably because they mostly do not portray meditation, whereas it

<sup>31</sup> Sn 692, MN ii 45.

<sup>32</sup> MN iii 258, SN i 71, SN i 126.

<sup>33</sup> Sn 1000.

<sup>34</sup> Sn 1149.

<sup>35</sup> SN i 146.

<sup>36</sup> Ud 16.

<sup>37</sup> SN iii 134.

<sup>38</sup> AN iii 181.

<sup>39</sup> Dhp 373–74.

<sup>40</sup> MN iii 294: *sace pana, Sāriputta, bhikkhu paccavekkhamāno evam jānāti 'yena cāhaṇī maggena gāmaṇī piṇḍāya pāvīsiṁ (...) natthi me tattha cakkhuviññeyyesu rūpesu chando vā rāgo vā doso vā moho vā paṭighāṭa vāpi cetaso' ti, tena, Sāriputta, bhikkhunā ten' eva pītipāmojena vihātabbaṇī ahorattānusikkhinā kusalesu dhammesu.*

<sup>41</sup> MN i 417: *sace pana tvam, Rāhula, paccavekkhamāno evam jāneyyāsi 'yam kho aham idam kāyena kammanī akāsiṇī idam me kāyakammanī nevattabyābādhāyapi samvattati, na parabyābādhāyapi samvattati, na ubhayabyābādhāyapi samvattati, kusalaṇī idam kāyakammanī sukhudrayam sukhavipākan' ti, ten' eva tvam, Rāhula, pītipāmojena vihareyyāsi ahorattānusikkhi kusalesu dhammesu.*

<sup>42</sup> MN i 98 (reflecting on one’s relationship to views), AN iii 307 & iv 321 (being mindful of death).

is in meditative settings that ‘carnal’ and ‘spiritual’ tend to be contrasted.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, they strengthen a canonical overall image of *pīti* as a mainly positive, pleasant quality. Essentially, *pīti* describes a religious sentiment: in both formulaic and non-formulaic instances, it tends to arise in connection to something skilful and religiously significant, be that a person, an action, or a mind state.

## 2. Intensity, body and soul

Here I address two points of interpretation about the nature of *pīti*: first, whether it is intense and agitating, and secondly, whether it is mental or physical. (There is a third point about whether *pīti* is linked to anticipating something or to experiencing it either in the present or in review. I address this point in the next section because it relates to classifying *pīti* as a *vedanā* or a *saṅkhāra*.)

As for the first issue, I believe the discourses paint a picture of joy as something more uplifting than agitating—let us remember Khitaka’s poetic reference to the lightness of cotton, as well as examples from the previous section such as encountering a Buddha or being reassured of one’s capacity to grasp the teachings. Yet many scholars say *pīti* is intrinsically or mainly intense and even agitating, often in a comparison with *sukha*, which is viewed as calmer (Guenther 1974: 51ff; Anālayo 2015: 61; Cousins 1973: 122; Griffiths 1983: 60; Harvey 2018: 7; Payutto 2017: 1066). Since this difference in intensity is not explicit in the *jhāna* formulas or in mindfulness of breathing, where does the idea come from? It could be explained, on the one hand, because of joy’s location in the awakening factors—between energy (*viriya*) and relaxation (*passaddhi*)—and on the other, due to how the concept of *pīti* evolved in Pali literature.

According to the *Aggi Sutta* (SN 46.53),<sup>44</sup> joy is an energising awakening factor: the meditator should cultivate it when their energy is low in order to add vitality. But in both this model and the gladness formula joy flows into

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<sup>43</sup> There can be ambiguity sometimes, as in the example of observing arising and passing away in the *khandhas*, which one could argue is a meditative exercise. Anālayo uses it to argue that the joy awakening factor need not be *jhānic*, as I have discussed earlier in this section.

<sup>44</sup> SN v 113.

calm—because, say the commentaries, one has no distress when one is joyful.<sup>45</sup> So joy is also calm inducing; it is distress that seems to bring up agitation. What might influence the aforementioned common scholarly view? If joy leads to relaxation (*passaddhi*), joy must be more agitated than relaxation itself or whatever follows it, which is often *sukha*. One reasons: therefore, *sukha* must be calmer; and in turn, this feeds the image of *pīti* as agitating. Cousins (1973: 120–22), who takes this perspective himself, grounds it in two things: the expression *cetaso uppilāvita(tta)* or ‘mental excitement’, and the commentarial view that *pīti* is the delight at attaining the desired object while *sukha* is the experiencing of its flavour. But a difference in intensity does not follow from this commentarial distinction—which I tackle in the next section. As for ‘mental excitement’, the expression appears in three early texts, mostly referring to the elation that may arise from being praised.<sup>46</sup> The one time that mental excitement explicitly refers to *pīti* and to a context of formal meditation is a passage from the *Brahmajāla Sutta* (DN 1) that discusses how each *jhāna* is coarse compared to the next:<sup>47</sup> the joyful mind (*pītigataṁ cetaso*) of the second *jhāna* is described as *uppilāvitatta*. Since this is a comparison in a meditative context we could be speaking of very subtle differences, which then get magnified. Moreover, that the passage calls out joy in particular rather than mentioning the second *jhāna* as a whole, and that joy falls away in the third *jhāna* while pleasure stays on, may lead to regarding the latter as calmer than the former—at least it must be more capable of calm, have more ‘quiet range’.

On top of this, the *Visuddhimagga* presents a gradation of joy in intensity and pervasiveness whose lowest of five levels already makes body hairs rise, albeit moderately, while the next one is compared to lightning flashes.<sup>48</sup> Lance Cousins (1973: 130 n. 46) observed that this presentation is not found (nor anticipated, I would add) in the discourses, and is exclusively Theravādin<sup>49</sup>—although the Sarvāstivādins also acknowledge a gradation in

<sup>45</sup> Sv i 217: *pītimanassa kāyo passambhati ti pītisampayuttacittassa puggalassa nāmakāyo passambhati, vigatadaratho hoti.*

<sup>46</sup> DN i 3, MN i 140, Ud 37. In these instances, it is connected to the terms *ānanda* and *somanassa*, certainly close to *pīti*, as I address later on in the dissertation. The expression also appears at Mil 183.

<sup>47</sup> DN i 37: *yad eva tattha pītigataṁ cetaso uppilāvitattam, etenetam olārikam akkhāyati.*

<sup>48</sup> Vism 143 (IV 94–99).

<sup>49</sup> See Cousins (1973: 120–22) for an overview of the commentarial view on *pīti*.

that they mention a joy in approaching the first *dhyāna* which is unlike that of *dhyāna* (La Vallée Poussin 1923: 180, n. 1). Compared to the canonical data gathered up until this point, the Theravādin ‘five joys’ shade towards the excited side of the spectrum. I find the term ‘uplifting’ more fitting for the early conception of *pīti*—it even connects to literal meanings of *upplavati*, to float or rise up (Cone 2001: 497; Rhys Davids and Stede 1966: 152). Such uplift can of course get intense and shade into exhilaration, and Theravāda exegesis seems to have developed along those lines: it came to associate joy mostly with the intense segment of the whole range, but there is little indication that the *suttas* did the same. I am not saying the exegetical view departs drastically from what we find in the discourses, but its emphasis is not so evident in them either, so it does not seem justified to project the later conception back onto the discourses.

The Theravādin ‘five joys’ also relate to the second issue of interpretation, for they are very bodily. Certainly in the *jhānas* the meditator feels *pīti* (and *sukha*) with the whole body,<sup>50</sup> though it arises from mental contact. The Theravādin view has led Peter Harvey (2018: 8) to emphasise the physicality of *pīti* versus the mental nature of *sukha*. Here we can identify a shift of emphasis in how joy is presented, since I would argue that the early discourses actually stress the mental nature of *pīti*. We shift from speaking of joy as a mental brightening to a bodily energy that can be agitated. The gladness formula says: ‘when there is joy in the mind, the body relaxes.’ Several examples from the previous section showed that often joy arises from a skilful mind, even from the practitioner’s knowledge of that. These things do not mean that joy cannot have a physical counterpart,<sup>51</sup> but that it is born of mental contact and the mental aspect is emphasised.

The gladness formula describes a mind-body feedback loop of increasing calm and well-being, and I take *pīti* to be on the mental side and *sukha* on the bodily side. Some commentaries identify this *sukha* as both mental and bodily,<sup>52</sup> others as only mental,<sup>53</sup> but mostly they de-emphasise bodily experience by interpreting *kāya* in its sense of collection or group (Cone 2001: 670) as the

<sup>50</sup> DN i 73.

<sup>51</sup> Indeed, in *jhāna* the meditator suffuses the body with both joy and pleasure, as seen in the stock *jhāna* formula above, see also Th 382.

<sup>52</sup> Sv i 217: *sukham* *vedetī* *ti* *kāyikam* *pi* *cetasikam* *pi* *sukham* *vedayati*.

<sup>53</sup> Ps i 174: *passaddhakāyo* *sukhan* *ti* *evam* *vūpasantakāyadaratho* *cetasikam* *sukham* *paṭisamvedetī*.

mental *khandhas* (*nāmakāya*)<sup>54</sup> or, in another context, as the ‘body of in-breath and out-breath’.<sup>55</sup> This may be due to the exegetical idea that *jhāna* does not admit sensory awareness.<sup>56</sup> But I would apply the following philosophical razor: when a phenomenology of meditation says that a mental quality affects the body, the body just means the body, even if only a *subtle* or *perceived* body—or to use a term by Harvey (2018: 6), the ‘experienced body’. While discussing this in more depth would be a distraction, we can summarise that the Buddhist textual tradition tries to account for the *embodied* nature of meditative experience but without giving the impression that it arises from stimulating the sense of touch, which is the specific meaning of *kāya* in the abhidharma.<sup>57</sup> What is clear is that, in the Pali discourses, *pīti* arises from mental contact and there is no evident emphasis on its bodily manifestation, at least not in comparison with *sukha*.

### 3. You say *vedanā*, I say *sankhāra*

Let us move on to how systematic Buddhist thought conceived of joy (*pīti*), beginning with the Theravādins. The *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* classifies joy in the bundle of conditioning factors (*sankhārakkhandha*),<sup>58</sup> as do the *Abhidhammattha Saṅgaha*<sup>59</sup> and, implicitly, the *Vibhaṅga*.<sup>60</sup> Buddhaghosa treats joy as a *sankhāra* and defines it as ‘the satisfaction of obtaining a desirable object’.<sup>61</sup> He distinguishes it from *sukha* using the following simile: a tired person in the desert would feel *pīti* upon seeing a pond, whereas *sukha* would be the satisfaction of actually drinking from it. This simile, cited by virtually every scholar discussing *pīti*, may have shaped the Theravādin conception of *pīti*, or at least the scholarly understanding of it. Karunadasa (2010: 133) writes:

<sup>54</sup> Sv i 217: *pītimanassa kāyo passambhatī ti pītisampayuttacittassa puggalassa nāmakāyo passambhati, vigatadaratho hoti.*

<sup>55</sup> Spk i 187: *passaddhakāyo ti catutthajjhānenā assāsapassāsakāyassa passaddhattā passaddhakāyo.*

<sup>56</sup> Also to not suggest *jhāna* can be achieved by regularly stimulating the body.

<sup>57</sup> Some discussion of this embodiment can be found in Anālayo (2014: 47) and Harvey (2018: 14).

<sup>58</sup> Dhs 17.

<sup>59</sup> See Bodhi and Narāda (2016, 57 (I 18–20)).

<sup>60</sup> Vibh 257 explains *pīti* as *pāmojja* and without mentioning feeling, which it does when explaining *sukha*.

<sup>61</sup> Vism 145 (IV 100): *ittihārammaṇapāṭīlābhātuṭṭhi pīti (...) sankhārakkhandhasangahitā pīti.* As I argue in the next section, this hardly differs from the canonical definition of ‘domestic happiness’ (*gehasita somanassa*)—a *vedanā*.

Pīti is a conative factor included in the aggregate of mental formations. Sukha is a variety of feeling and is therefore included in the aggregate of feeling. What the Theravādins mean by pīti is not pleasant feeling but pleasurable interest or zest. It is a conative factor dissociated from any hedonic content.

I find his ‘dissociated from any hedonic content’ incoherent with characterising joy as *pleasurable* interest or zest, but besides that, he reads Buddhaghosa’s definition of joy as ‘delight that *results in* attaining a desired object’ (my emphasis).<sup>62</sup> There seems to be no grammatical justification for his rendering, making me wonder if it is rather influenced by Buddhaghosa’s imagery, which suggests anticipation. Similarly, Gunaratana (1980: 82) speaks of *pīti* as ‘not hedonic but directive’ and includes it in the *sankhārakkhandha*, pointing out how Shwe Zan Aung (1910: 243) explains it as interest in an object felt desirable. And Bucknell (1993: 381) too treats *pīti* as ‘a conative factor (placed under *saṅkhāra-khandha* in the Abhidhamma classification)’. All this reflects the Theravāda abhidhamma understanding but is not much evident in the discourses, as surveyed in the previous section. In the discourses, *pīti* is clearly a hedonic factor related to the present or reviewed experience of a desired object, not the anticipation of it—the conative or directive element that seems to support considering it a *saṅkhāra* is just not there.

In contrast to the Theravādins, the Sarvāstivāda-Vaibhāṣika school considers joy (*prīti*) to be a *vedanā* and treats it as a synonym of happiness (*saumanasya*). Occasionally, they even have a *prītīndriya* instead of *somanassīndriya* (Dhammadjoti 2009a: 96). Their view is found in Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* (from here onwards, AKB).<sup>63</sup> The equation seems to be so self-evident for the Vaibhāṣika that they are shocked when questioned: ‘What else would it [*prīti*] be?’ (*kim anyat bhavatu*).<sup>64</sup> It is less clear what opinion Vasubandhu himself holds, or who is his interlocutor holding the view that joy is *not* pleasant mental feeling, if not an account of Theravādins. According to P’ou Kouang and Fa Bao, it is the Sthaviras.<sup>65</sup> Louis de la Vallée Poussin (1923: vol. V, 159) assigns it to the Sautrāntikas, a view followed by Gethin (2001: 155).

<sup>62</sup> He cites the Pali slightly different (*ittihārammaṇapatiṭilābhe tuṭṭhi pīti*), although I think this makes no difference.

<sup>63</sup> See La Vallée Poussin (1923: vol. II, 114; vol. V, 147, 151).

<sup>64</sup> AKB 440.14 (La Vallée Poussin 1923: vol. V, 159).

<sup>65</sup> See footnote 3 in La Vallée Poussin.

On their part, the Yogācārins did not consider *prīti* a separate dharma, so they must have understood it as pleasant mental feeling (*saumanasya*)—are there other candidates? Xuanzang assigns *sukha* (樂) and *somanassa* (喜) to the first two *dhyānas* (Li 2023: 704). Yogācārins thus agree with the Sarvāstivādins. Interestingly, in a passage of Asaṅga's *Abhidharmasamuccaya*, Pradhan's Sanskrit reconstruction has *saumanasya* while Walpola Rāhula argued that *prīti* suits the context best because it mentions *dhyāna* (Bon-Weibb and Rāhula 2001: 108). In a footnote, Rāhula comments that 'Prīti is a member of *dhyāna* but not of [sic] *saumanasya*'. One could wonder if Rāhula was influenced by the Theravāda take on this. Lastly, the *Tattvasiddhi-śāstra*, whose school affiliation is disputed, names *prīti* as a dharma separate from *vedanā* like the Theravādins (Lin 2015: 82).

In recounting the Buddhist disagreement on joy, the AKB may contain the clue as to why different schools put joy in different baskets. It could be that the various positions relate to each school's attempt to make sense of *jhāna*/*dhyāna*. All, except the Dārśṭāntikas, need to interpret *dhyānic sukha* as not bodily, since they hold that sensory awareness does not happen in *dhyāna*.<sup>66</sup> Since *dhyānic sukha* cannot mean bodily pleasant feeling, now two factors compete for the position of mental pleasant feeling—*sukha* and *prīti*—and only one can get the job. The Vaibhāśikas give it to *prīti* and relocate *sukha* to the relaxation (*praśrabdhi*) department.<sup>67</sup> Another view in the AKB, from an unnamed school, chooses *sukha* over *prīti*, and then argues that the latter is not *vedanā*. So the reason both this unidentified school and the Theravādins regard joy as a separate dharma could well be that they take *sukha* to mean *somanassa/saumanasya* in the *dhyānas*.<sup>68</sup> Vasubandhu spells this out: if *prīti* is other than *sukha*, then it must also be other than *saumanasya*.<sup>69</sup> Joy becomes the victim of the previous doctrinal commitment that sensory awareness does not happen in *dhyāna*. Lacking such a commitment, the Dārśṭāntikas remain the only ones who take *dhyānic sukha* to be bodily.<sup>70</sup> Strangely, though, they argue that for the first three *dhyānas* there is no mental pleasure whatsoever,

<sup>66</sup> AKB 438.24 (La Vallée Poussin 1923: vol. V, 150ff).

<sup>67</sup> AKB 438.21–26.

<sup>68</sup> Vibh 257: *tattha katamāṇi sukham? yam cetasikam sātāṇi cetasikam sukham cetosamphassajam sātāṇi sukham vedayitam cetosamphassajā sātā sukhā vedanā: idam vuccati sukham.*

<sup>69</sup> AKB 440.14–16 (La Vallée Poussin 1923: vol. V, 159).

<sup>70</sup> AKB 439.01–07 (La Vallée Poussin 1923: vol. V, 151ff).

but only bodily pleasure. I wonder if this is why La Vallée Poussin sees the Dārśṭāntikas—often identified with the Sautrāntikas<sup>71</sup>—as holding that *prīti* is not *saumanasya*. Because, on the other hand, they could see it as *saumanasya* if they wanted to, whereas other schools *cannot* unless they shuffle other dharmas around.

To summarise, there were broadly two understandings of joy (*pīti*) among early Buddhist interpreters: those who thought of it as a *vedanā* (Sarvāstivāda-Vaibhāṣika, Yogācāra and possibly Dārśṭāntika) and those who saw it as a *saṅkhāra* (Theravāda, unidentified school). It is a plausible hypothesis that their view ultimately stems from how they conceived of *jhāna/dhyāna*, which required them to (re)interpret *jhāna/dhyāna* factors accordingly. For there seems to be no other apparent benefit to classifying joy as a *saṅkhāra* than solving these technical problems of interpretation. Even Buddhaghosa's definition of joy, cited at the beginning of this section, could easily be read as describing a *vedanā*. Yet since this was not an option for Theravādins, they may have needed to introduce a distinction—the element of anticipation—to justify considering it a *saṅkhāra*.

The status of joy has attracted little interest from scholars of early Buddhism, who tend to simply follow the Theravāda tradition.<sup>72</sup> Keren Arbel (2017: 59) argues that Buddhaghosa's understanding of *pīti* as a *saṅkhāra* fits the early discourses given its mental nature. But this is not enough justification, for it does not rule out mental feelings. In contrast, Tse-Fu Kuan (2005: 302) agrees with the Sarvāstivādins and others that *pīti* should be classified as a feeling, and Robert Buswell (2018: 78) suggests seeing it as a form of spiritual feeling (*nirāmisā vedanā*).<sup>73</sup> However, Kuan adds, the early discourses do not support the Sarvāstivāda view that joy refers to the faculty of happiness (*somanassindriya*). Perhaps Kuan wants to be cautious here, but if joy is a feeling, can it be anything other than pleasant mental feeling? Joy is clearly of a pleasant hedonic tone and, in terms of origin, mental—and is that not the definition of the pleasant feeling known as the faculty of happiness?

This is called the faculty of happiness: mental pleasure and

<sup>71</sup> On the relationship between these two school names, see Dhammadhoti (2016: 230–33).

<sup>72</sup> Bucknell (1993: 381), Cousins (1973: 120ff), Guenther (1974: 51–57), Gunaratana (1980: 82). Guenther mentions the different interpretation of *prīti* and *sukha* in the AKB, but does not go beyond that.

<sup>73</sup> See also Meyers (2012: 275).

comfort, the pleasant and agreeable feeling born from mental contact.<sup>74</sup>

Anything that is experienced bodily or mentally as pleasant or agreeable is pleasant feeling.<sup>75</sup>

Joy (*pīti*) falls within these definitions. Even if we understood it as a subtype of pleasant mental feeling, it functions similarly and inhabits similar spaces as does happiness (*somanassa*). In the following section, I continue where Kuan stopped and offer some arguments for why accepting at least a rough equivalence between *pīti* and *somanassa* makes more sense than not doing so, while supporting the thesis of *pīti* as *vedanā* more broadly.

#### 4. Come joy or come happiness

Here I explain why I think it reasonable to regard *pīti* in the early discourses as a *vedanā*,<sup>76</sup> roughly synonymous with *somanassa*. To begin with, carnal joy (*sāmisā pīti*) and domestic happiness (*gehasita domanassa*)—which is a *vedanā*—are defined very similarly. Let us remember carnal joy:

What are the five strands of sense desire? Forms known by the eye that are desired, pleasing, arousing ... tactile sensations known by the body that are desired, pleasing, arousing. These are the five strands of sense desire. The joy that arises conditioned by the five strands of sense desire is called carnal joy.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>74</sup> SN v 209: *katamañ ca bhikkhave somanassindriyam? yam kho bhikkhave cetasikam sukham cetasikam sātam manosamphassajam sukham sātam vedayitam, idam vuccati bhikkhave somanassindriyam.*

<sup>75</sup> MN i 302: *yam kho, āvuso Visākha, kāyikam vā cetasikam vā sukham sātam vedayitam ayam sukhā vedanā.*

<sup>76</sup> On the notion of *vedanā* in the *suttas*, see Heim (2021) and Font (2023: chpt. 1). In the latter, I defend that something belongs to this category when its hedonic aspect dominates; it does not depend on whether something is a physical or mental sensation, a mood or even a thought, nor on its intensity or duration.

<sup>77</sup> SN iv 235: *katamā ca, bhikkhave, sāmisā pīti? pañc' ime, bhikkhave, kāmaguṇā. katame pañca? cakkhuvīññeyyā rūpā iṭṭhā kantā manāpā piyarūpā kāmūpasamhitā rajañyā ... pe ... kāyaviññeyyā phoṭṭhabbā iṭṭhā kantā manāpā piyarūpā kāmūpasamhitā rajañyā. ime kho, bhikkhave, pañca kāmaguṇā. yā kho, bhikkhave, ime pañca kāmaguṇe paticca uppajjati pīti, ayam vuccati, bhikkhave, sāmisā pīti.*

Now let us compare it with domestic happiness:

Happiness arises for one who considers it a gain to obtain forms known by the eye that are desired, pleasing, connected to worldly matter ... phenomena known by the mind that are desired, pleasing, connected to worldly matter; or for one who recalls those previously obtained that have gone, ceased, changed. Such a happiness is called domestic happiness.<sup>78</sup>

Both passages use almost the same adjectives (*ittha*, *kanta*, *manāpa*) to denote the objects' desirable and pleasing nature. I would argue they describe the same sort of pleasant feeling that arises from the valued acquisition or consumption of sense experience.<sup>79</sup> In other words, both 'domestic' and 'carnal' describe feelings conditioned by an unskilful perception. A linguistic point hiding in the *Nirāmisa Sutta* supports this: carnal joy, pleasure and equanimity are described using the phrase *ime pañca kāmaguṇe paṭicca uppajjati* ('conditioned by the five strands of sense desire there arises ...'), which is also used for joy in the *Subha Sutta* (MN 99).<sup>80</sup> I would argue that the language and structure of this phrase logically require a *vedanā*. In fact, all other thirteen occurrences of this phrase in the *suttas* are followed by a *vedanā*.<sup>81</sup>

Moving on to the skilful, in the Fruits of the Ascetic Life (DN 2), right before one realises that the hindrances are absent, the discourse compares the hindrances to being ill or in servitude, and abandoning them to recovering one's health or gaining freedom, among other similes.<sup>82</sup> It then relates how the healthy or freed person, thinking of

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<sup>78</sup> MN iii 217: *cakkhuviññeyyānam rūpānam itthānam kantānam manāpānam manorāmānam lokāmisapaṭisamāyuttānam paṭilābhām vā paṭilābhato samanupassato pubbe vā paṭiladdhapubbam atītañ niruddham vīparinātañ samanussarato uppajjati somanassam.*

<sup>79</sup> We have also encountered this feeling under the alternative name of 'layman's joy' (*gihissa pīti*, DN iii 162), a lexical midpoint between *gehasita somanassa* and *sāmisa pīti*. *Ghi*, layman or householder, is related to Sanskrit *gr̥ha* and Pali *geha* meaning house, from where we get *gehasita*. It is usually contrasted with *pabbajita*, ascetic, whereas *gehasita* pairs with *nekkhammasita* (Cone 2010: 53; Rhys Davids and Stede 1966: 250).

<sup>80</sup> MN ii 203.

<sup>81</sup> MN i 85, MN i 92, MN i 398, MN i 454, MN ii 43, MN iii 233, SN iv 225, AN iv 415, plus the other occurrences in the *Nirāmisa Sutta* itself (SN iv 235).

<sup>82</sup> The similes begin at D i 72.

their newfound desirable condition, would obtain gladness (*labhetha pāmojjam*) and happiness (*adhigaccheyya somanassam*). Like a trailer of the full movie that is about to screen, starring the gladness formula and the *jhānas*, this is a partly overlapping description where *somanassa*, instead of *pīti*, follows *pāmojja*.

Another example of *pīti* and *somanassa* as interchangeable or equivalent is as follows:

Realising the transiency of forms, their change, fading, and ceasing, for one who truly sees with perfect wisdom that all forms, both before and now, are transient, unsatisfactory, and subject to change, happiness arises.<sup>83</sup>

This defines renunciant happiness (*nekhammasita somanassa*). But in the Dhammapada this insight is connected to the arising of *pīti* and *pāmojja* instead of *somanassa*:

Because of thoroughly knowing  
the rise and fall of the bundles,  
they acquire joy and gladness  
—they know this as the deathless.<sup>84</sup>

While one passage uses the template of the six sense fields (*salāyatana*) and the other that of the bundles (*khandha*), it does not seem the insights differ really—and crucially, they are both ‘insight’ exercises. It seems the terminology ‘carnal/spiritual’ and ‘domestic/renunciant’ are themselves more or less equivalent and interchangeable, as Anālayo (2009: 84; 2013: §VII.5) and Boisvert (1995: 74–76) have observed. The *Cūlavedalla Sutta* (MN 44) supports this. There, Dhammadinnā presents three feelings that are not conditioned by the habitual tendencies (*anusaya*) and should be cultivated. She identifies the skilful pleasant feeling as the first *jhāna*—that is, *spiritual*

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<sup>83</sup> MN iii 217: *rūpānam tv eva aniccatam viditvā vipariṇāmavirāganirodham, pubbe c' eva rūpā etarahi ca sabbe te rūpā anicca dukkhā vipariṇāmadhammā ti evametam yathābhūtam sammappaññāya passato uppajjati somanassam.*

<sup>84</sup> Dhp 374: *yato yato sammasati / khandhānam udayabbayam; / labhati pītipāmojjam / amataṁ tam vijānataṁ*.

joy and pleasure (*nirāmisā pīti* and *nirāmisa sukha*)<sup>85</sup>—whereas the skilful unpleasant feeling is explained with a passage that elsewhere<sup>86</sup> refers to renunciant unhappiness (*gehasita domanassa*):

‘When will I enter and dwell in those spheres in which the noble ones enter and dwell now?’ For one who establishes such a yearning for the unsurpassed liberations, unhappiness arises conditioned by it.<sup>87</sup>

Lastly, Dhammadinnā’s skilful neutral feeling is the fourth *jhāna*—that is, spiritual equanimity (*nirāmisā upekkhā*).<sup>88</sup> As we can see, she switches back and forth smoothly from one terminology to the other, even though it is clear that certain terms settled into particular contexts.<sup>89</sup> On the basis of this and the previous equation of carnal joy and domestic happiness, it is hardly a leap to consider that spiritual joy (*nirāmisā pīti*) may more or less correspond to renunciant happiness (*nekhammasita somanassa*). Perhaps the latter stresses the cognitive dimension and the former its felt aspect, but these need not be too different anyway: insight into the nature and drawbacks of sense desire is linked to renunciant happiness and helps settle the mind into *jhāna*, which is a spiritual pleasant feeling—see the examples of the *Tapussa* and *Nibbānasukha suttas* in the next section. In short, in both their skilful and unskilful strands, it

<sup>85</sup> *Nirāmisā pīti* is defined as the first and second *jhānas*, and *nirāmisa sukha* as the first three *jhānas*. SN iv 236: *idha, bhikkhave, bhikkhu vivicceva kāmehi vivicca akusalehi dhammehi savitakkam savicāraṃ vivekajam pītisukham paṭhamam jhānam upasampajja viharati. (...) dutiyam jhānam upasampajja viharati. ayam vuccati, bhikkhave, nirāmisā pīti. (...) idha, bhikkhave, bhikkhu vivicceva kāmehi vivicca akusalehi dhammehi savitakkam savicāraṃ vivekajam pītisukham paṭhamam jhānam upasampajja viharati. (...) dutiyam jhānam upasampajja viharati. (...) tatiyam jhānam upasampajja viharati. idam vuccati, bhikkhave, nirāmisam sukham.*

<sup>86</sup> MN iii 219.

<sup>87</sup> MN i 303–04: ‘*kudāssu nāmāham tadāyatanaṃ upasampajja viharissāmi yadariyā etarahi āyatanaṃ upasampajja viharanti*’ *ti iti anuttaresu vimokkhesu pihaṃ upaṭṭhāpayato uppajjati pihāppaccayā domanassam*. The only difference with the passage at MN iii 218 is the odd spelling *pihāppaccayā/pihapaccayā*.

<sup>88</sup> SN iv 237: *idha, bhikkhave, bhikkhu sukhassa ca pahānā, dukkhassa ca pahānā, pubbeva somanassadomanassānam atthaṅgamā, adukkhamasukham upekkhāsatipārisuddhiṃ catuttham jhānam upasampajja viharati. ayam vuccati, bhikkhave, nirāmisā upekkhā.*

<sup>89</sup> Keren Arbel has linked renunciant unhappiness to the second and third *jhānas*. However, as contended by Anālayo (2016: 276), this is a dubious claim. An argument he does not bring up is how the *Pīti Sutta* (at AN iii 207) says the joy of seclusion, i.e. the first *jhāna*, is devoid of pain and sadness connected to the skilful.

seems reasonable to consider that happiness (*somanassa*) and joy (*pīti*) inhabit the same ‘space’ and have the same experiential referent, or almost.

Indirectly, these correspondences support the plausibility of reading joy as a feeling in the Pali *suttas*. Treating joy as a feeling is further suggested by two ‘variables’ of joy: the analysis into carnal and spiritual itself, and whether it is accompanied by thinking (*vitakka*) and reflection (*vicāra*). The latter is a subclassification of spiritual joy, which, as seen in the first section, means *jhānic*/awakening-factor joy. While some could argue this is a mark of *samādhi* in general,<sup>90</sup> to me it seems to qualify the felt, affective dimension of experience specifically. In Sakka’s Questions (*Sakkapañha Sutta*, DN 21), the Buddha sifts happiness (*somanassa*), unhappiness (*domanassa*) and equanimity (*upekkhā*) each into two piles: those types that should not be developed and those that should be. Among the latter, the Buddha declares that those without thinking and reflection are better.<sup>91</sup> Then the text moves on to other phenomena—some of them, like bodily and verbal conduct (*kāyasamācāra*, *vacīsamācāra*), quite identifiable with the bundle of *saṅkhāra*—but to none does it apply the distinction of ‘with or without thinking and reflection’.

Regarding the analysis into carnal and spiritual, as far as I know nowhere do the Pali *suttas* apply it to other categories like *saññā* or *saṅkhāra*, but only to *vedanā*.<sup>92</sup> ‘Carnal’ and ‘spiritual’ show up, famously, under the contemplation of feelings (*vedanānupassanā*) in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (MN 10),<sup>93</sup> as well as in two discourses of the *Vedanā Samyutta*.<sup>94</sup> The *Nirāmisa Sutta* (SN 36.31), which is one of them, applies that analysis to liberation (*vimokkha*) as well—and liberation is not a *vedanā*. But we must note this is the single one occurrence in the whole of the early discourses of such an idea.<sup>95</sup>

However, beyond quantitative arguments, this evidence is not without

<sup>90</sup> DN iii 219, SN iv 360, SN v 111, AN iv 299.

<sup>91</sup> DN ii 278.

<sup>92</sup> Morrison (2001: 107) says other elements are applied the label *āmisa*. These are listed in AN i 92–94 as follows (in order): *dāna*, *yāga*, *cāga*, *pariccāga*, *bhoga*, *sambhoga*, *saṃvibhāga*, *saṅgha*, *anuggaha*, *anukampā*, *santhāra*, *paṭisanthāra*, *esanā*, *pariyesanā*, *pariyetṭhi*, *pūjā*, *ātitheyya*, *iddhi*, *vuddhi*, *ratana*, *sannicaya*, *vepulla*. The contrasting label for those items, though, is *dhamma*, not *nirāmisa*.

<sup>93</sup> MN i 59.

<sup>94</sup> *Agāra Sutta* (SN iv 219) and *Nirāmisa Sutta* (SN v 235).

<sup>95</sup> The next and only other canonical instance of it is in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, dating from the Common Era (von Hinüber 1996: 59–60).

problems. While, according to the *Nirāmisa Sutta*, joy, pleasure, and equanimity are carnal (*sāmisa*) when they derive from the five strands of sense desire, spiritual (*nirāmisa*) when in *jhāna*, and beyond-spiritual (*nirāmisa* *nirāmisatara*) when they spring from the self-review of a liberated mind, liberation does not follow this symmetry. Carnal liberation (*sāmisa vimokkha*) is liberation connected to form, spiritual liberation (*nirāmisa vimokkha*) is connected to the formless, and beyond-spiritual liberation (*nirāmisa* *nirāmisatara vimokkha*) arises in the self-review of a liberated mind. The first we can easily understand as *jhāna*, as liberation *from* the carnal; but the second introduces the formless, which is a new element; and the notion of a liberation that arises upon the self-review of a liberated mind is slightly odd. In the other cases, ‘beyond-spiritual’ refers to feelings that arise from recognising that the mind is liberated. But this does not work in the case of liberation: can one get even more awakened? ... by simply reviewing that one already is?<sup>96</sup> Also, as expected, carnal liberation does not use the phrase *ime pañca kāmaguṇe paṭicca uppajjati* (‘conditioned by the five strands of sense desire there arises ...’), which I have argued must be followed by a feeling. It seems reasonable to consider that the terms carnal (*sāmisa*) and spiritual (*nirāmisa*) originally referred to feelings. In correlating feelings with liberation states, the terms extended to *vimokkha*, and in so doing its meaning had to adapt, with somewhat confusing results. But these only foreground the symmetry between *sukha* and *upekkhā* and *pīti*.

Another challenge lies in how the *Nirāmisa Sutta* defines carnal pleasure (*sāmisa sukha*) as ‘the pleasure and happiness that arise conditioned by the five strands of sense desire’. In including happiness (*somanassa*) within carnal pleasure, this passage seems to say that carnal joy (*sāmisā pīti*) is something different.<sup>97</sup> It could also be acknowledging *pīti* as a subtype of pleasant mental feeling, more specific than the generic *somanassa*. But given how *sukha* sometimes means pleasant bodily feeling alone (as *sukhindriya*) and sometimes

<sup>96</sup> The Chinese parallel to the *Nirāmisa Sutta* (SĀ 483) assigns these three labels differently, especially ‘beyond-spiritual’, which it uses to denote something superior to whatever it has deemed ‘spiritual’: if spiritual pleasure corresponds to the second *jhāna*, beyond-spiritual pleasure is the third; if spiritual equanimity means the third *jhāna*, beyond-spiritual equanimity means the fourth. It lacks the notion of the self-review of a liberated mind, and beyond-spiritual liberation is simply the cessation of desire, hatred, and delusion (Choong 2000: 128).

<sup>97</sup> SN v 237: *yā kho bhikkhave ime pañca kāmaguṇe paṭicca uppajjati pīti, ayañ vuccati bhikkhave sāmisā pīti ... yam kho bhikkhave ime pañca kāmaguṇe paṭicca uppajjati sukham̄ somanassam̄, idam̄ vuccati bhikkhave sāmisam̄ sukham̄.*

pleasant feeling generally (as *sukhā vedanā*, encompassing both *sukhindriya* and *somanassindriya*), it is not surprising to find both terms here. This may be due to reciter habits, since this description of the type of pleasure that should not be pursued is a stock passage that happens elsewhere in the canon without *pīti* lurking around, as in the *Araṇavibhaṅga Sutta* (MN 139).<sup>98</sup> The compilers or reciters could have kept *somanassa* in a common, memorised formula although this particular context did not need it. Curiously, the Chinese parallel to the *Araṇavibhaṅga Sutta* contains this formula with the characters for *pīti* (喜) and *sukha* (樂),<sup>99</sup> which is not strange considering the Sarvāstivāda leanings of the *Madhyama Āgama* (Anālayo 2017b)—remember that Sarvāstivādins see *priti* as a synonym of *saumanasya*. In isolation, this second challenge could weaken my theory, but we need to take it together with the previous evidence that points to an overlap (to say the least) between *pīti* and *somanassa* and between the terminologies ‘carnal/spiritual’ and ‘domestic/renunciant’.

## 5. In a pleasant tone

Despite the diversity of practices found in the Pali *suttas*, most (if not all) eventually lead to the same place: a wholesome positive feeling. The experience of something that feels good but is unrelated to defilement, cognitive or affective, seems to be what pushes forward the rolling dharma wheel, mirroring the Buddha’s own spiritual journey upon experiencing the first *jhāna*, under the rose apple tree. Evidence of this, gathered in this paper so far, sometimes uses happiness (*somanassa*)—insight into the impermanence and unsatisfactoriness of sensory experience—and others joy (*pīti*)—insight into the impermanence of the *khandhas*, the *jhānas*, mindfulness of breathing, the awakening factors, and the gladness formula. The latter, besides arising from the absence of the hindrances as mentioned under section 1, can also arise from lack of remorse (*avippaṭisāra*) due to good conduct,<sup>100</sup> restraint of the senses (*indriya saṃvara*),<sup>101</sup> visceral attention (*yoniso manasikāra*),<sup>102</sup> dwelling vigilantly (*appamatta*) in

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<sup>98</sup> MN iii 233.

<sup>99</sup> T i 0702c04.

<sup>100</sup> AN v 1–7, AN v 311–17.

<sup>101</sup> SN iv 78.

<sup>102</sup> DN iii 288.

solitude,<sup>103</sup> experiencing ‘the point of the teaching’<sup>104</sup> (*atthapatiśamvedin*, *dhammapatiśamvedin*),<sup>105</sup> the practice of the recollections,<sup>106</sup> and meditation on rejoicing (*muditā*).<sup>107</sup> To all this we can add how both *satipaṭṭhāna*<sup>108</sup> and the *brahmavihāras*<sup>109</sup> lead to a pleasant dwelling and should be cultivated with joy and pleasure.

The Discourse on the Cooks (*Sūda Sutta*, SN 47.8)<sup>110</sup> illustrates well how successful *satipaṭṭhāna* practice leads to a positive affective state of ‘*sukhavihāra*’:<sup>111</sup> just as a cook who prepares dishes for the king must ensure the king enjoys them and must adjust the recipes to the king’s liking, the meditator must ensure the mind finds comfort and pleasure, adjusting the meditation to that end.<sup>112</sup> The simile emphasises a meditative hedonic dimension. We find another interesting perspective in the Discourse to Tapussa (*Tapussa Sutta*,

<sup>103</sup> SN v 399.

<sup>104</sup> The meaning here seems to be to experience the benefit or goal (*attha*) of the teaching (*dhamma*), the truth (*dhamma*) it points to, namely, a liberated mind—one without lust, aversion and delusion—which, according to AN iii 357, is visible here and now (*sañditthiko*) by discerning whether those three forces are present in oneself or not.

<sup>105</sup> DN iii 241, DN iii 279, AN iii 22. Inspiration can arise from hearing, teaching, reciting or reflecting on the teachings, as well as by properly attending to a sign of collectedness (*samādhinimitta*).

<sup>106</sup> AN iii 285, AN v 329–34, SN i 203, Th 382.

<sup>107</sup> AN i 243.

<sup>108</sup> SN v 150 (and its parallel SĀ 616 at T ii 172b23), SN v 156.

<sup>109</sup> AN iv 300.

<sup>110</sup> SN v 150 and SĀ 616 at T ii 172b23.

<sup>111</sup> The expression *sukhavihāra* features in the stock definition of the third *jhāna* (DN i 75); it is an epithet of all four *jhānas* (DN iii 113, DN iii 223, MN i 33, MN i 41, MN i 354, MN iii 11, MN iii 97, SN ii 278, AN ii 23, AN ii 36, AN ii 88, AN iii 114, AN iii 131, AN iii 262, and a few more in AN); it appears related to mindfulness of breathing (SN v 326, AN v 328)—including in Chinese parallels (Dhammadajoti 2008: 1); and to meditation more generally (SN ii 239, SN iii 169, AN iii 212). But we also find it in not overtly meditative usages (MN i 23, AN iv 363, MN i 459, MN iii 153).

<sup>112</sup> A related scholarly debate, which would distract us from our aim now, is to what extent the outcome of *satipaṭṭhāna* is *jhāna*. This discourse (*Sūda Sutta*, SN 47.8) mentions abandoning defilements, both part of *satipaṭṭhāna* and the starting point of *jhāna*—MN i 181, MN i 270, MN iii 136, EĀ 12.1 (Sujato 2012: 294). Right mindfulness—the four *satipaṭṭhānas*—and right collectedness—often the four *jhānas*—appear in that order on the noble eightfold path. For different views on this, and on whether the four *jhānas* are the original definition of *sammā samādhi*, see among others Anālayo (2019a; 2021: 118–37), Kuan (2001: 179–81), Arbel (2017: 88), Gethin (2019: 182), Sujato (2012: 182), and a response to Sujato (Anālayo 2019c: 2342).

AN 9.41)<sup>113</sup> and the Discourse on Nirvanic Pleasure (*Nibbānasukha Sutta*, AN 9.34).<sup>114</sup> In these two texts, the inadequacy of the sensory domain—and of each subsequent state one reaches—is compared to feeling pain; and tasting a superior state to feeling happy. I believe this is more than just a metaphor. The notion of seeing the drawbacks of pursuing sensory pleasures reminds us of renunciant happiness (*nekhammasita somanassa*), presented as an insight:

Realising the transiency of forms, their change, fading, and ceasing, for one who truly sees with perfect wisdom that all forms, both before and now, are transient, unsatisfactory, and subject to change, happiness arises.<sup>115</sup>

In the *Tapussa Sutta*, the insightful seeing of drawbacks in sensory experience matures instead into the first *jhāna*, not coincidentally labelled ‘the pleasure of renunciation’ (*nekhammasukha*),<sup>116</sup> marked by spiritual joy and pleasure (*nirāmisā pīti* and *nirāmisa sukha*). We have all this overlapping terminology with overlapping definitions: spiritual joy, spiritual pleasure, renunciant pleasure, renunciant happiness. And we have its centrality in early Buddhist soteriology. All main models of progress studied here describe a hedonic curve that, leaving behind carnal pleasures, leads to (a skilful) pleasantness, just as the Analysis of the Six Spheres (*Salāyatana vibhaṅga Sutta*, MN 137)<sup>117</sup> instructs the mendicant to move from domestic happiness to renunciant happiness. (The hedonic curve later mellows into neutral feeling or equanimity.) The language differs depending on the case and context, and terms may not be used with the technical precision one might expect from later systematic Buddhist thought. Yet the general message of how spiritual progress is meant to feel, according to the discourses, is clear and fairly consistent.

None of this is to paint the way to awakening as a bed of roses. Mendicants face—and are meant to face—difficult, unpleasant experiences which

<sup>113</sup> AN iv 439.

<sup>114</sup> AN iv 415. I translate ‘nirvanic pleasure’ idiomatically, but the Pali is best read as ‘nirvana is pleasure’.

<sup>115</sup> MN iii 217: *rūpānam tv eva aniccataṁ vidityā vipariṇāmavirāganirodhaṁ, pubbe c’ eva rūpā etarahi ca sabbe te rūpā anicca dukkhā vipariṇāmadhammā ti evametam yathābhūtam sammappāññāya passato uppajjati somanassam.*

<sup>116</sup> MN i 454, MN iii 233.

<sup>117</sup> MN iii 220.

are part of the path too.<sup>118</sup> My argument is that a very central strand, at least, in the Pali *suttas* presents progress as involving an affective-hedonic transformation towards pleasantness. There is of course soteriological value in unpleasant meditation objects and reflections,<sup>119</sup> which one text calls ‘the unpleasant path’ (*dukkhā patipadā*).<sup>120</sup> Exercises like contemplating corpses or the unattractive (*asubha*) use the affective pull of unpleasant *vedanā*—to turn away from it—in order to counter unskilful qualities such as craving (*taṇhā*) and bring about valued ones like renunciation (*nekkhamma*). But as they do that, they eventually lead to positive affective states; the feeling evolves.<sup>121</sup> Similarly, recognising that the experience of *dukkha* triggers search (*pariyesanā*)<sup>122</sup> and urgency (*saṃvega*), early Buddhists devised systematic reflections on what Liang and Morseth (2021) have called ‘aesthetically unpleasing existential truths’. Again, these difficult experiences are said to evolve towards faith (*saddhā*) and the spiral path, which includes the gladness formula—and therefore joy.<sup>123</sup> Fear (*bhāya*) plays a key role in early Buddhist soteriology as well (Brekke 2005, chpt. 5), and Shulman (2019: 101–10, 125–26) has noted how, in various narratives of the Buddha’s awakening, after *overcoming* fear come *saṃādhi* and *jhāna*. Thus, often, ‘negative’ or unpleasant affective states in the path are framed within a progression that includes positive ones later on.

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<sup>118</sup> Staying alone in the forest is not easy. SN 9.9 (SN i 202) portrays a mendicant feeling lonely and defeated, who is then reassured by a deity and gains a sense of urgency (*saṃvega*).

<sup>119</sup> For a related contemporary reflection, see Obeyesekere (1985).

<sup>120</sup> AN 4.163 (AN ii 151) mentions the perceptions of the unattractive in the body, of the disagreeable in food, of non-delight in the whole world, of impermanence in all conditioned things, and of death. AN 7.49 (AN iv 47) breaks down the last one into three: the perception of impermanence, of suffering in what is impermanent, and of not-self in what is suffering. The same list is found in a Chinese text (T i 11c26). On this topic, see Dessein (2014), Shaw (2016: 130), Kong (2019) and Dhammadajoti (2009b).

<sup>121</sup> Anālayo (2017a, 54ff), Giustarini (2011, 109, n. 33), and Dhammadajoti (2009b, 275, 279), who mentions the *Atthasālinī* image of feeling better after vomiting—I wonder if we should take it as illustrating this—and explains how the Sarvāstivāda expanded this exercise into a visualisation and experience of the body as fantastically beautiful.

<sup>122</sup> AN 4.255 at AN ii 247.

<sup>123</sup> On the spiral path, see n. 26.

## 6. That old feeling

In this last section I look at *pīti* in its religious context, which helps explain the use of the term *pīti* and why it seems to be specific to accounts and formulas of spiritual progress, whereas *somanassa* features less frequently in those but shows up in generic explanations of feeling. I argue that, against the popular image of Buddhism and Brahmanism as confronted,<sup>124</sup> and despite differences in doctrinal and metaphysical teachings, early Buddhism has affective continuities with Brahmanism.

The old Vedic religion places great emphasis on prosperity, both in this life and in the world of the ancestors (Witzel 2003, 84), and sexuality and offspring often connect and symbolise both things. In this way, Vedic religion affirms sensual pleasure. Crucial is the central role of ritual as a means to achieve prosperity. During a ritual, the priest consumes the sacred drink *soma*, a mind-altering substance that induces intense pleasure (*ānanda*).<sup>125</sup> *Soma* not only leads to the goal of prosperity symbolised by sex and offspring, but is itself compared to semen, and so *soma*-induced ecstasy mirrors sex-induced ecstasy.

Then, in the late Vedic period, a soteriology emerges and offspring is replaced as a religious good with knowledge of the Self (*ātman*).<sup>126</sup> But while the goal shifts, the idea of pleasure and its sexual connotations linger on. The blissful union of two persons is now the blissful union with the absolute; the organ connected with that religiously significant pleasure is now the mind instead of the penis; the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* articulates the equation of *ānanda* and mind with reference to sexual desire (Olivelle 2012: 89). As Patrick Olivelle (2012: 77–78) puts it, there is an ‘explicit and unambiguous connection between *ānanda* as orgasmic rapture and *ānanda* as the experience of *brahman/ātman*’. Religious practice is still often pleasurable (Wynne 2007: 98, 112), but chronologically, this Vedic religious pleasure has shifted from something more carnal to something more ‘spiritual’.

In contrast, for Jains it is physical pain that has soteriological value and helps effect liberation. While their goal may be described in terms of pleasure or bliss,<sup>127</sup> or at least as a state where pain is blocked, the

<sup>124</sup> For a survey of scholarly views on the Buddhist–Brahmin relationship, see Walser (2018: 98–106).

<sup>125</sup> Some explanation of the drink and its ritual can be found in Witzel (2003: 74) and Galewicz (2020: 37).

<sup>126</sup> Bṛh-Up 4.4.22, cited in Olivelle (2003: 276).

<sup>127</sup> US 23.83, US 32.2 (see Jaini 1977: 155; 1979: 104; Colette 2003: 115; Dundas 2002: 104).

same cannot be said about their way towards liberation: by inflicting pain on themselves, Jains would speed up the burning of past deeds and precipitate liberation, thus conforming to an instrumental model of (religious) pain<sup>128</sup> which early Buddhists strongly criticise. In this sense, early Buddhists are closer to mainstream Brahmanism, and to an extent the heterodox and unaffiliated wanderers, *paribbājakas*, who often have Brahmanic influence, and whom Buddhists recognise as practising on a similar wavelength.<sup>129</sup>

There were Vedic strands of asceticism too that granted liberating power to painful experiences, but against Bronkhorst, Alexander Wynne (2007: 98, 112) has argued that while there may have been Brahmanic ascetics, the mainstream meditative tradition was not painful. Cezary Galewicz (2020: 39) shows that ascetic elements can be found already in early Vedic hymns and, like Wynne, sees it as a tradition outside the mainstream *soma* sacrifice. Given the lively circulation of ideas and practices in the Indian period around the Buddha's life, Vedic and non-Vedic ascetics surely cross-pollinated; but in comparison, the Brahmanic traditions clearly ascribed less of a role to painful feelings than did Jainism, and they had a positive discourse around pleasure that Jains (and Ājivakas) lacked.

A key to the affinity between early Buddhists and Brahmins lies in the parallelism between *pīti* and *ānanda*. Brahmanic *ānanda* bridges sexual and meditative bliss—the Upaniṣads openly compare the two. While early Buddhist texts do not, in them *pīti* still bridges those two kinds of pleasure. Like *ānanda*, *pīti* has specific romantic connotations that a term like *somanassa* lacks (Cousins 1973: 121), and it refers to mental joy, just like *ānanda* came to denote the joy of erotic union rather than its physical pleasure. When the *Brahmajāla Sutta* (DN 1) speaks of an excited mind, in one place it uses *ānanda* and in the other *pīti*—and the commentary understands that ‘*ānanda*’ as *pīti*.<sup>130</sup> Moreover,

<sup>128</sup> Self-inflicted pain is a widely known religious phenomenon. The belief that one will avoid future suffering by experiencing it now, or a symbolic link between pain and ideals of compassion and harmlessness, can lessen one's perception of pain and give it meaning. Furthermore, the stimulus overload that is intense pain can alter the sense of self, which would fit Jain ideas of liberation as isolating the *jīva*. See Salim (2020: 511), Dundas (2002: 166), Fuller (2008: 133–37) and Glucklich (2001: 42–44, 52ff, 60, 99).

<sup>129</sup> Sujato (2012: 179) remarks how the early discourses attribute Buddhist attainments to these wanderers very generously.

<sup>130</sup> DN i 3 (Sv i 53), DN i 37.

both terms tend to be preceded by words from the root *√mod*—Sanskrit: *moda*, *pramud*/*pramoda* (Olivelle 2012: 78ff; van Buitenen 1979: 29); Pali: *pāmojja*. The continuity is clear. From a purely affective-hedonic stance, the experience of union with *ātman*/*brahman* has resemblances with Buddhist forms of spiritual pleasure as described in *jhāna* or the gladness formula. In fact, when the *Yoga Sūtra* lists *samādhi* factors, in spite of Buddhist influence it retains the ‘native’ terminology of *ānanda* instead of *pīti*.

We should note it is only in the Yajurvedic Brāhmaṇas and Upaniṣads where we find *brahman* defined as pleasure (*ānanda*) (Olivelle 2012: 87, 99; van Buitenen 1979: 30–32), and scholars generally agree these are precisely the Brahmanical teachings most likely to have interacted with early Buddhism.<sup>131</sup> In examining parallels between the Upaniṣadic contemplation of *upāsana* and Buddhist *satipaṭṭhāna*, Sujato (2012: 156, 160) notes certain meditation objects are common to both, like bliss, and that the *satipaṭṭhānas* of *vedanā* and *citta* correlate to *brahman*’s attributes of *ānanda* and *cit*.

We can make yet another observation here. The early Buddhist hedonic training, in commanding to replace carnal with spiritual pleasure, or lay with renunciant happiness, essentially mirrors the Vedic history regarding positive religious affect—namely, that it came to replace a more sensual pleasure with a more spiritual one. In the centrality it gives to pleasure on the path, it seems to me early Buddhism is influenced by a Brahmanical trend, and since Buddhist spiritual pleasure is not as sexualised—the only remnant being the term *pīti*—it represents a further step in Indian religion’s movement to decouple religious pleasure from sensual and ordinary ones. It makes more sense to understand early Buddhism in light of this history than vis-à-vis non-Vedic asceticism, which swaps sensual pleasure for self-inflicted pain.

Now we can answer the main question of this section: why have two words (*pīti* and *somanassa*) if, as I have been arguing, they are basically synonyms? Because *pīti* belongs to a lineage of celebrating meditative pleasure in comparison and reference to sensuality. While *pīti* is often paired with generic words and quasi-synonyms, acknowledging a certain non-specialness, at the

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<sup>131</sup> See, for example, Wynne’s (2010: 206–09) defense that the *Yājñavalkyakāṇḍa* circulated around Magadha as an independent work before being incorporated into the Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, against Bronkhorst’s famous challenge to the scholarly consensus.

same time its special presence in models of spiritual progress sends a message *somanassa* would not. *Somanassa* is rather used generically, when presenting models of *vedanā* and displaying all options, as in ‘things can feel *dukkha*, *sukha*, *domanassa*, *somanassa*, *upekkhā* ...’ Spiritual seekers may have picked up on the undertones of *pīti* and its affinity with Brahmanical practice. Perhaps this is why Brahmins and *paribbājakas* were drawn to the Buddhists, and why Jains thought Buddhists were indulgent, given to pleasures. Using *pīti* rather than *sukha* alone, or *somanassa*, clarifies how the early Buddhist path feels *precisely because of* the historical religious context.

## Conclusions

I have argued it is reasonable to read joy (*pīti*) as a pleasant mental feeling, a *vedanā*, in the early (Pali) discourses. Here is the main evidence summarised: we find *pīti* in the *vedanā* contemplation of mindfulness of breathing and in the *Vedanā Samyutta*; we have *sukha*, *pīti*, and *upekkhā* as carnal and spiritual, which is *vedanā* language, as is the phrase ‘ime pañca kāmaguṇe ...’ used to describe carnal *pīti*; *pīti* and *somanassa* are often associated, defined very similarly, and sometimes replace each other, both in their skilful and unskilful strands. All this is worth contrasting with gladness (*pāmojja*), another related term but about which these lines could not have been written, despite Theravādins equating it with *pīti*.<sup>132</sup>

Most exegetical schools saw *pīti* as *somanassa*, a view which I have argued can be seen, implicitly, in the canonical discourses. I have suggested that Theravādins classified it as a *saṅkhāra* to solve the problem of interpreting *jhāna* factors when sensory awareness is off the table. Scholarly reliance on the Theravādin account alone downplays the hedonic aspect of *pīti* and its centrality in a conversation early Buddhists had with other schools regarding how the path to liberation feels. Yet when we read *pīti* as a synonym of *somanassa*, we see more easily how many formulas and accounts of progress to liberation involve a similar—if not the same—positive affective state, and how they share an underlying hedonic curve to awakening. Moreover, projecting Theravādin understandings onto the Pali *suttas* hinders seeing how its conception of *pīti* evolved towards the physical and intense sides of the spectrum.

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<sup>132</sup> Dhs 20-21, Vibh 257.

## ABBREVIATIONS

I follow the abbreviation and citation methods of the Critical Pali Dictionary, except I do not indicate line numbers. When I use discourse numbers, these follow the 6<sup>th</sup> Council edition, which is my main source for Pali texts, as available on SuttaCentral or the Digital Pali Reader, comparing it with the Pali Text Society's edition. To *Visuddhimagga* references, I add between parenthesis the chapter and paragraph number of Bhikkhu Nāṇamoli's English translation.

AKB: *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, digital edition by Dan Lusthaus and Paul Hackett, from 2020.

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