The *aśubhā* Meditation in the Sarvāstivāda

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1. Abhidharma and meditative praxis

While it is undeniable that there developed in the *Abhidharma* tradition distinctive elements of what is comparable to the Western tradition of scholasticism, it is no exaggeration that the whole of *Abhidharma* is fundamentally concerned with meditative praxis. The following distinction among the three divisions of the Buddhist canon, pertaining to their distinctive natures as teachings directed at the spiritual practitioners at different stages, spells out this fundamental concern:

Further, there is also a difference in respect of their stages (*avasthā*). That is: in terms of the stage of the beginner (*ādikarmika*), the *Sūtra* is taught; in respect of the stage of the mastery (*kṛtaparijāya*), the *Vinaya* is taught; in respect of the stage of absolute mastery (*atikṛnta-manaskāra*), the *Abhidharma* is taught.1

As we shall see below, the three terms, *ādikarmika*, *kṛtaparijāya* and *atikṛnta-manaskāra*, refer, significantly, to the three levels of mastery in meditative praxis. Accordingly, we are justified in interpreting the above distinction thus: All the three divisions constituting the totality of the Buddhist canon are teachings meant for spiritual development, specifically, meditative attainment. And among them, Abhidharma is essentially meant for none other than the most advanced practitioners.

The importance of meditation in the Abhidharma is also underscored by the following definition of *abhidharma* in the MVŚ which directly links the two together:

The intrinsic nature of *abhidharma* from the standpoint of absolute truth (*paramārtha*) is none other than the outflow-free, pure (*anāsrava*) *prajñā*. ... For this reason, the *cintā-mayi prajñā* generated — namely, the *aśubhā*, the *ānāpānasmitā*, etc., — are also known as *abhidharma*; this is because they are able to contemplate on the aggregates individually and collectively. ...
Moreover, these requisites (sambhāra) sustain the outflow-free prajñā which [as a result] becomes more prominent; for this reason they are also known as abhidharma.²

Abhidharma, in its highest, absolute, sense, is the outflow-free prajñā which is insight into reality truly as it is. For an ordinary worldly (prthajana), however, he must first begin by developing the withoutflow/impure (sāsrava) insight which is capable of leading finally to the acquisition of this pure insight. For the Ābhidharmikas, this first step in the path of spiritual progress, properly speaking, consists of the intellectual study of Abhidharma within the context of a life conducive to spiritual development. This is called the stage of “understanding derived from (lit., made of) listening” (sruta-mayī prajñā). Next, the practitioner enters the stage of “understanding derived from reflection” (cintā-mayī-prajñā). It is important to note that here “reflection” does not refer to intellectual thinking, but is said to comprise meditative praxis such as the contemplation on the impure/loathsome (aśubhā) and mindfulness of breathing (ānāpānasmiti). This in turn leads to the final preparatory stage for the development of the withoutflow insight, called “understanding derived from cultivation” (bhāvanā-mayī prajñā) which is again, meditation on the Four Noble Truths. It is at the end of this threefold stage of preparatory effort (prayoga) that he is finally able to sail into the stage of spiritual transformation called “the path of insight” (darśana-mārga) which, once again, is meditation on the Four Noble Truths; the outflow-free prajñā, now generated for the first time, sees directly the true nature of dharmas. Through this process of meditative transformation, and necessarily through this process, also known as “direct realization” (abhisamaya), he becomes a Buddhist saint (an ārya). As a matter of fact, in the Ābhidharmika definition of abhidharma, “abhi” (‘facing’) clearly has the significance of abhisamaya, in as much as it is explained in the sense of “directly facing (i.e., directly realizing) the characteristics of dharmas”.

2. The various contexts of the application of the aśubhā

The meditation on the impure/loathsome is sometimes called aśubhabhāvanā, or very often, simply aśubhā. When we examine the meditative practices discussed in the Śūtra and the Abhidharma, we find that this meditation is very much emphasized, and is taught in numerous doctrinal contexts.
2.1. The *aśubhā* as a practice of *kāyānupasāyanā*

The *aśubhā* is often prescribed as a method of the first of the fourfold abode of mindfulness (*smṛtyupasthāna*), viz, the abode of mindfulness of the body (*kāya-smṛtyupasthāna*). The Dharmakandha-sūtra, probably the earliest Sarvastivāda canonical Abhidharma text, cites this context from the Sūtra as follows:

At one time, the Bhagavat was in Śrāvastī, residing in the Jetavana, the Ānātha-piṇḍada Park. Then the Bhagavat told the bhikṣu-samgha, “I shall expound in brief for you the cultivation of the fourfold abode of mindfulness: With regard to this body internally, a bhikṣu abides in sequential observation of the body (*kāya-anupasāyanā*). When he is accomplished in proper effort, proper awareness and proper mindfulness, covetousness (*abhidyā*) and dejection (*daurmanasya*) concerning the worldly life are eradicated. With regard to that external body, he abides in sequential observation of the body. ... covetousness and dejection concerning the worldly life are eradicated. With regard to the internal and body, ... covetousness and dejection concerning the worldly life are eradicated.” ... 

The text proceeds to provide an exegesis of the various terms, including the following:

“With regard to this body internally, he abides in sequential observation of the body”

With regard to this internal body, a bhikṣu observes and reflects, from the feet to the head, as it is placed (*yathāvasthitam*), that it is full of the various kinds of impurity and loathsomeness. That is, within this body, there exist only various [impurities] — head-hairs, body-hairs, nails, teeth, dust, taint? skin, flesh, sinews, veins, bones, bone-marrow, spleen, kidney, heart, lung, liver, gallbladder, intestines, belly (? *udarya*), fat, grease (*vasā?*), brain, diaphragm, pus, blood, bile (*pitta?*, is possibly a corruption from 脆), phlegm (*śleśmā?* 脂 possibly a corruption from 稚) tears, sweat, snot, saliva (*kheṭa*), upper stomach (*āmāśaya*), lower stomach (*pakvāśaya*), feces and urine.

The discernment (簡揃; *vicaya*), the profound discernment (極簡揃; *pravicaya*), utmost profound discernment (最極簡揃; *supravicaya*/*prama-pravicaya*), observation (解了; *upalaksana*), proper observation (等了; *samālaksana* / *samjñānā*), close
examination (近了; upaparīkṣanā), ... realization (覚明; pāṇḍitya),
operation of understanding (慧行; prajñā-cāra, insight (vipasyanā)"
— which are generated with regard to dharma-s when he is thus
reflecting on the signs of the impurity — constitutes the sequential
observation of the body internally. It is also called “the abode of
mindfulness of the body”.

“[He] abides (viharati)”: “He is endowed with this observation,
manifests it (sam-ud-ā-√car), pursues it (anu-√car), moves fully
[with it] and pursues it fully, operates it and resolves on it (解行;
*adhimukti-√car).”

“Covetousness”

This includes various species of covetousness — the greed
(rāga, samrāga) towards sensual object-domains, obstinate clinging
towards them, being internally bound to them, longing for them, etc.

“Dejection”

This refers collectively to all mental dejectedness generated by
contact which conduces to sensation of dejection. It is subsumed by
uneven (unpleasant) sensation (aśātālasātā vedanā).

“Covetousness and dejection concerning the worldly life are
eradicated”

These two dharma-s are abandoned, fully known, utterly
separated from, subdued and destroyed.12

The following is a more typical sūtra account, quoted in the Arthaviniścaya-
sūtra, as the first of the fourfold cultivation of concentration (samādhi-
bhāvanā):13

Here, O bhikṣu-s, a bhikṣu has gone to a hermitage, to the root of
a tree, or to an empty hut. He reflects on this very body, truly and
properly with understanding (samyak prajñayā), from the top of the
head above to the soles of feet below, bounded by the skin, as they
are located, as they placed (yathāvasthitam yathāprāṇiḥhitam), as full of
various kinds of impurity thus: “There are in this body, [1] head-hairs,
(small intestines); [18] upper stomach; [19] lower stomach;
sweat; [25] saliva; [27] grease (vasā); [28] synovic fluid (lasīkā), [29] marrow (majjā); [30] fat (meda); [31] bile; [32] phlegm; [33] pus; [34] blood; [35] head; [36] brain.” O bhikṣu-s, just as a man with good sight (cakṣusman) looking into a storehouse with both doors opened, filled with various types of grains, rice, sesame seeds, ... In this very same way, O bhikṣu-s, a bhikṣu reflects on this very body ... This, O bhikṣu-s, is the cultivation of samādhi which, when well practised, developed and done repeated, leads to the abandonment of sensual greed (kāma-rāga).14

Although this sūtra might not have been affiliated to the Sarvāstivāda, we see once again, that 36 parts are enumerated. Notice also that the enumeration of such items as dust and taint — not found in the Pāli list — agrees with the DSŚ enumeration.15

2.1.1. The āśubhā as pratimukhī smṛti

The beginning part of the version cited partially in the MVŚ is even closer to the Pāli version than the AVN:

A bhikṣu dwells in an aranya, or under a tree or a secluded hut. Having seated cross-legged, with the body upright, vowing properly (pranidhāya) and abiding in face-to-face mindfulness (pratimukhī smṛti) ...16

Notice that Xuan Zang understands pranidhāya as “vowing”. However, in some places, he also seems to understand it as “putting aside other (i.e., unskilful — see below) mental objects (捨異攀緣)”17

In both the Theravāda and Mahayāna traditions, in the sūtra, a bhikṣu is often described as going to a forest clearing, sitting cross-legged and gets established in “face-to-face mindfulness.” We see similar description also in Mahāyāna sūtra. For instance, the Vajracchedikā prajñāpāramitā speaks of the Buddha after returning from His alms round thus:

bhagavān ... prajñāpta evāsane paryākam ābhujya rjuṁ kāyaṁ pranidhāya pratimukhīṁ smṛtim upasthāpya ... 18 (Xuan Zang’s tr.:時, 薄伽梵 ... 於食後時敷如常座, 結跏趺坐, 端身正願, 住對面念)19.

Xuan Zang’s Chinese rendering (words underlined) of the MVŚ and Vajracchedikā sentences are identical.
The MVŚ records the various explanations on the key terms in the *sūtra* passage quoted above:

(1) "*paryaṅkam abhujya* (‘bending [the legs] crosswise’)

There are many reasons for which the Buddha is described as assuming this posture. These include (i) It is the usual deportment of the Noble Ones. All Buddha-s and their disciples in the past and future enter into *samādhi* while in this posture. (ii) This deportment is best for cultivation of the skilful mental state because it avoids the tiredness resulting from walking and standing and torpor from reclining. (iii) Other postures can also led to unskilful dharmas such as sensual desire. (v) It is most effective in leading various types of sentient beings into the True Dharma (vi) It is most capable of inspiring respect and faith men, gods, asura-s, hell beings, etc. (vii) It is with this posture alone that one can attain the supreme perfect enlightenment as a buddha; with other postures there can only be the attainment of the bodhi of the two yāna-s. (viii) It is in this posture that the Buddha subdued the Māra-s (Īśvara and the defilements). (ix) It is not found among the outsiders. (x) It is the posture most conducive to the development of samādhi.

(2) "*With the body upright* (*rjun kāyam*)

This means being seated straight up.

(3) "*Pranidhāya*" (‘putting [the body] upright’)

Xuan Zang seems here (and likewise in his translation of the *Vajracchedikā*) to take pra-ṇi-ṭ dhā to mean ‘vow’, as in pranidhāna/pranidhi in a bodhisatva's career; hence his rendering 正願, ‘properly vowing’ — "This means focusing the citta in conformity to the skilful categories [of dharma-s] (隨順善品而注心義)."

(4) "*Abiding in face-to-face mindfulness*:

What is the meaning of abiding in pratimukhī smṛti ?

(i) Mukha refers to the object of meditation, prati means gazing directly (現瞩); this smṛti causes the citta to gaze directly at the object of meditation and discern without topsy-turvisness.

(ii) Mukha refers to defilements; prati (‘opposing’) means to counteract. This smṛti counteracts the foremost defilement responsible for samsāra (i.e., greed), hence called pratimukhī smṛti."
(iii) Mukha means one’s own face; prati means towards. This mindfulness causes the citta to gaze towards one’s own face to contemplate on another object, hence called pratimukhī smṛti.

**Question:** Why does one place mindfulness on one’s own face?

**Answer:** From beginningless time, a male falls for the appearance of a female and vice versa, mostly on account of facial appearance. Hence one contemplates on one’s own face to subdue defilements. Moreover, the greedy citta of sentient beings arises mostly with the support of the eye-brows, eyes, lips, teeth, ears, nose, etc., on the face, and not other bodily parts. Hence one contemplates on one’s face to overcome sensual greed. Furthermore, the face has seven cavities through which impurities flow out incessantly; it is more effective than other bodily parts for one to generate a citta of disgust. Hence, one contemplates on one’s own face to cultivate dispassion. Furthermore, it is rare that one sees one’s own face, and one gives rise to craving [on its account]. Hence one fixes mindfulness on the face and not elsewhere, for when one does not illuminate (i.e., ‘is not reflexive’ (?: 不照) one does not see oneself. Furthermore, meditators mostly delight in examining the characteristic of the twelve āyata-ās. There are always nine different āyata-ās on the face; thus they contemplate on the face.

Some take the prefix prati to mean “against/opposing” and interpret “pratimukhīṃ smṛtiṃ upasthāpya” to mean: “abiding in opposing mindfulness” (背面念; lit.: ‘back-facing mindfulness’). The compilers do not object to it, and in fact explain this interpretation:

By the force of this mindfulness, one turns the back on pollution (samkleśa) and faces towards purification (vyavādāna), turns the back on samsāra and faces towards nirvāṇa, turns the back on procession (pravṛtti) and faces towards recession (nivṛtti), turns the back on the fivefold sensuality and faces towards the object of samādhi, turns the back on the existent-body view (sākārya-dṛṣṭi) and faces towards the liberation-gateway of emptiness (śānya-tā-vimokṣa-mukha), turns the back on Self-attachment and faces towards non-Self-ness, turns the back on the false Dharma and faces towards the True Dharma.

When the meditator abides in this mindfulness — whether in the sense of “facing” or “opposing” — he is said to be abiding in the pratimukhī smṛti.21

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**This term is further discussed more explicitly with reference to the aśubhā meditation:**

**Question:** What is called “face-to-face mindfulness”?


These are called “face-to-face mindfulness.”22

**Question:** Why does he fix his mindfulness between the eye-brows?

**Answer:** The meditator initially produces the happiness of the noble ones with this spot as the support, and [the happiness] gradually permeates the whole body. Thus, he fixes mindfulness between the eye-brows. This is like one who experiences sensuality: the sensual pleasure initially arises at the place of the male or female organs, and gradually permeates the whole body. Likewise is the case here...

When the meditator in this way fixes his mindfulness between the eye-brows and contemplates on the corpse’s appearance as being bluish, etc., it is the contemplation on the loathsome. Herein, he is said “to abide in face-to-face mindfulness”.23

It is further explained as to why here only the aśubhā is called a “face-to-face mindfulness”, not the anvānasāṃśrī or the dhātu-bheda contemplation. Various explanations are given. (i) The other two could indeed also be so-called. (ii) The aśubhā is the first of all meditations, hence when it is so-called, the other can also be known likewise. (iii) Most meditators rely on the aśubhā, not the other two, to enter into the Noble Path. (iv) Ghoṣaka states that “all mindfulness induced by systematic mental application (yonīso manasikāra) is pratimukhī smṛti.”24 He further explains: Sensual desire is the foremost of the hindrances, when it is counteracted by the aśubhā, the other hindrances will be abandoned accordingly. The aśubhā, being thus the proximate counteraction, is called the “face-to-face mindfulness”.25
(iii) Mukha means one's own face; prati means towards. This mindfulness causes the citta to gaze towards one's own face to contemplate on another object, hence called pratimukhi smrī.

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When the meditator abides in this mindfulness — whether in the sense of "facing" or "opposing" — he is said to be abiding in the pratimukhi smrī.²¹

This term is further discussed more explicitly with reference to the aṣubhā meditation:

Question: What is called "face-to-face mindfulness"?
Answer: The meditator fixes his mindfulness between the eye-brows. He contemplates [the corpse] as [1] turning black-blue (sthaunyā); [2] becoming bloated (vāyadhīmā); or [3] putrefying (śāla); or [4] disintegrating (vapiṣṭaka); or [5] turning reddish/bloody (vipāla); or [6] being eaten [by worms, etc] (vikādita); or [7] being scattered apart (vāsīṭaka); or [8] he contemplates the white bones (tvaśāstra); or [9] chain of bones (kṣaṭā). These are called "face-to-face mindfulness."²²

Question: Why does he fix his mindfulness between the eye-brows?
Answer: The meditator initially produces the happiness of the noble ones with this spot as the support, and [the happiness] gradually permeates the whole body. Thus, he fixes mindfulness between the eye-brows. This is like one who experiences sensuality; the sensual pleasure initially arises at the place of the male or female organs, and gradually permeates the whole body. Likewise is the case here...

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Obviously, the kāyānupañña includes other forms of practice besides the āsūbhā. The DSS in this very context in fact goes on to prescribe two more practices of contemplation on the body. One is the contemplation on the different elements of the body (both internally and externally): Contemplating the body as comprising merely the six elements (dhātu-bhedā) — the four Great Elements, the space-element and the consciousness-element. The other is the contemplation on its nature as being, impermanent, unsatisfactory, empty and without any Self, and being subject to destruction. The kāyagatāsati-sutta of the Majjhimanikāya prescribes, additionally, the practices of the mindfulness of breathing, mindfulness of the postures (walking, standing, sitting and lying down) and full awareness (sampajāna) of all movements and actions.20 Moreover, the MVŚ states that the practitioner is said to have accomplished the practice of āsūbhā when finally, at the stage of absolute mastery (āikrānta-manaskāra), focusing his mind between the eyebrows, he is able to proceed from āsūbhā onto the four abodes of mindfulness sequentially from kāyānupañña to dharmānupañña.21

2.2. As the specific antidote for sensual craving

The Pāli kāyagatā-sati-sutta also prescribes the āsūbhā in the form of meditation on the different stages of decomposition of a corpse:

Moreover, O bhikkhu-s, just as a bhikkhu were to see a body thrown into the charnel ground, dead for one or two or three days, bloated (uddhamataka), turned blue-black (vinilaka), putrefying (vipubbakajjata).

He compares this same body to it: “This body too is of such a nature, such a state of being, not exempted from being thus.”22 ...

More generally, however, this form is prescribed specifically as the antidote for sensual craving.23 In the Sarvāstivāda tradition, it is one of the two “gateways for Immortality (āmṛta-dvāra)”, namely, Nirvāṇa. In the scheme of the fivefold character-rectification, it is specifically recommended for the character type in whom greed predominates (adhirāga-carita).

Tradition says that at one stage, some sixty bhīksu-s within a single day committed suicide after practicing this meditation, and it is at that stage that the Buddha began to emphasize the practice of the mindfulness of breathing.24 The Vinaya account relates a shāśa recluse named Mīgalaṃdika who at the request of some of these bhīksu meditators, went around asking who would like to be slain by him. It is stated that “fear arose in those bhikkhu-s who had not been detached (avitarāga) ... But fear did not arise in those bhikkhu-s who had been detached (vitarāga) ...”25

We know, of course, that vitarāga is an epithet of an arahant. This would imply that at least some arahat-s were among those who were slain. The Mahāsāsaka-vinaya in fact states very clearly thus:

That candala (i.e. Mīgalaṃdika) understood well the signs of those who had or had not developed disgust with regard to their bodies: “If a bhīksu, who is an ordinary worldling, generates fear when the knife is being held facing him, then he has not developed disgust with regard to the body. If I kill him, I shall acquire little merit (punya), I must seek out those who have attained the fruit of the path26 and do not generate fear.”27

This tradition seems to have contributed to the later doctrinal classification of a type of arahats called cetanā-dharman.24 They are usually explained as those of the nature of capable of ending their lives at will in the fear of losing their spiritual attainment.25 However, some Abhidhamma manuals, both early and later, have also explicitly indicated the link with the āsūbhā. The *Amṛta-raṣa-sāstra explains these arhat-s as being “weak in understanding (*mrdu-prajñā) and effort, diligent in contemplating the body as āsūba, intending (generating the will) to destroy the body themselves.”26 The *Abhidhammahrīḍya explains likewise.27 In the *Ndāyānusāra, Sanghabhadra too, states that this type of arhat-s, when abiding in their attainments, are capable of being greatly disgusted with sensual desires; and being thus disgusted they generate the volition to end their own lives. Though being weak faculties (mrdd-Indriya), in their preparatory stage they have accomplished a strong power of mindfulness, abiding mostly in the contemplation of loathsomeness. Worrying that such adverse factors as sicknesses, etc., would result in their being slack in effort and hence eventually retrogression, they generate the volition to kill themselves.28 In the Sarvāstivāda, the cetanā-dharman type is not confined to the arhat-s; it is also found among practitioners who are not yet ārya-s but have reached the sub-stages of progress known as mokṣa-bhāgija (‘pertaining to the stage conducive to emancipation’) and nirvēdhā-bhāgija (‘pertaining to the stage conducive to penetration’) — both subsumed under the preparatory stage (prayaoga) preceding the entry into the path of vision.29
Obviously, the kāyānupāśyanā includes other forms of practice besides the asūbhā. The DSS in this very context in fact goes on to describe two more practices of contemplation on the body: One is the contemplation on the different elements of the body (both internally and externally); Contemplating the body as comprising merely the six elements (dhaṭṭu-bhedā) — the four Great Elements, the space-element and the consciousness-element. The other is the contemplation on its nature as being, impermanent, unsatisfactory, empty and without any Self, and being subject to destruction. The kājakatāsati-sutta of the Majjhimanikāya prescribes, additionally, the practices of the mindfulness of breathing, mindfulness of the postures (walking, standing, sitting and lying down) and full awareness (sampajāna) of all movements and actions. Moreover, the MVŚ states that the practitioner is said to have accomplished the Practice of asūbhā when, finally, at the stage of absolute mastery (aițrānta-manaskāra), focusing his mind between the eyebrows, he is able to proceed from asūbhā onto the four abodes of mindfulness sequentially from kāyānupāśyanā to dharmānupāśyanā.

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He compares this same body to it: “This body too is of such a nature, such a state of being, not exempted from being thus.”

More generally, however, this form is prescribed specifically as the antidote for sensual craving. In the Sarvāstivāda tradition, it is one of the two “gateways for Immortality (amṛta-dvāra)”, namely, Nirvāṇa. In the scheme of the fivefold character-rectification, it is specifically recommended for the character type in whom greed predominates (adhirāga-carita).

Tradition says that at one stage, some sixty bhikṣu-s within a single day committed suicide after practicing this meditation, and it is at that stage that the Buddha began to emphasize the practice of the mindfulness of breathing. The Vinaya account relates a sham recluse named Mgalandika who at the request of some of these bhikkhu mediators, went around asking who would like to be slain by him. It is stated that “fear arose in those bhikkhu-s who had not been detached (avītarāga) … But fear did not arise in those bhikkhu-s who had been detached (vītarāga) …” We know, of course, that vītarāga is an epithet of an arahant. This would imply that at least some arahat-s were among those who were slain. The Mahāsākāra-vinaya in fact states very clearly thus:

That candāla (i.e. Mgalandika) understood well the signs of those who had or had not developed disgust with regard to their bodies: “If a bhikṣu, who is an ordinary worldlyling, generates fear when the knife is being held facing him, then he has not developed disgust with regard to the body. If I kill him, I shall acquire little merit (puṇya). I must seek out those who have attained the fruit of the path and do not generate fear.”

This tradition seems to have contributed to the later doctrinal classification of a type of arhats called cetanā-dharman. They are usually explained as those of the nature of capable of ending their lives at will in the fear of losing their spiritual attainment. However, some Abhidharma manuals, both early and later, have also explicitly indicated the link with the asūbhā. The *Amṛta-rasa-sāstra explains these arhat-s as being "weak in understanding (*mrḍu-prajñā) and effort, diligent in contemplating the body as asūbhā, intending (generating the will) to destroy the body themselves." The *Abhidharmahṛdaya explains likewise. In the *Nyāyānusāra, Sanghabhadra too, states that this type of arhat-s, when abiding in their attainments, are capable of being greatly disgusted with sensual desires; and being thus disgusted they generate the volition to end their own lives. Though being weak faculties (*mrṛv-indriya), in their preparatory stage they have accomplished a strong power of mindfulness, abiding mostly in the contemplation of losomeness. Worrying that such adverse factors as sicknesses etc., would result in their being slack in effort and hence eventually retrogression, they generate the volition to kill themselves. In the Sarvāstivāda, the cetanā-dharman type is not confined to the arhat-s; it is also found among practitioners who are not yet ārya-s but have reached the sub-stages of progress known as mokṣa-bhāgiya (‘pertaining to [the stage conducive to emancipation]’ and nirvedha-bhāgiya (‘pertaining to [the stage conducive to penetration’) — both subsumed under the preparatory stage (pravṛtya) preceding the entry into the path of vision."
2.2.1. *aśubhā* as meditation on the nine or ten stages of decomposition of a corpse

We have above (§ 2.1.1.(4)) that the MVŚ describes *aśubhā* as a contemplation of nine stages of the decomposition of a corpse: 1, turning black-blue; 2, becoming bloated; 3, putrefying; 4, disintegrating/rottening; 5, [turned] reddish; 6, being eaten (by worms); 7, being scattered apart; 8, white bones; 9 a chain of bones. This is the standard description in the Sarvāstivāda texts.

Yaśomitra, in the context of expounding the five “abodes of liberation” (vimukty-āyatanāni), cites a virtually identical list of nine (with only 3 and 4 apparently interchanged): 1, vinīlaka; 2, vipūyaka; 3, vyādhmātaka; 4, vipatūmaka; 5, vilohitaka; 6, vikhāditaka; 7, viṣiṭṭaka; 8, asthi; 9, asthi-saṅkalikā.40

The passage cited above (§2.2) from the Kāyagatāsati-sutta mentions the first three of these stages. The *Dhammasaṅgāṇi*41 enumerates 10 stages. This is adhered to in the *Vism*:

1. bloated (uddhumātaka); 2. black-blue (vinīlaka); 3. putrefying (vipubbaka); 4. disintegrating/fissured (vihchiddaka); 5. being eaten up (vikhāyitaka); 6. scattered (vikkhitaka); 7. destroyed and scattered (hatavikkhitaka); 8. reddish/bleeding (lohitaka); 9. worm-infested (pūlavaka); 10. bones (atṭhika).

The *Vimuktimārga* enumerates exactly the same 10, in the same order.43

The *Vism* states that each of these nine forms of contemplations counteracts a specific type of greed: 1 counteracts greed for shapes (saṅthāna-rāga); 2, bodily beauty (saṅravaṇṇa-rāga); 3, bodily odour originated from scents, etc (mālāgandhādivasena samutthāpitasaṅrāganḍha-rāga); 4, solidity in the body (saṅrīre ghanabhāva-rāga); 5, accumulation of the flesh in such bodily parts as the breasts, etc (mammśūpacaya-rāga); 6, grace of the limbs (aṅgacakṣaṅkalīṭa-rāga); 7, perfection of the body as an agglomeration (saṅraśanḍhātasampatti-rāga); 8, beauty produced by adornments (aṅkārajanitaśobha-rāga); 9, the notion of [the body] being “mine” (maṇatta-rāga).44

The *AKB* explains the counteractions of four forms of greed: (1) greed for colour (varṇa-rāga) is counteracted by the *aśubhā* of turning...
black-blue, etc (vinīlakādi); (2) greed for shapes (saṃsthāna-rāga), of being eaten and being scattered (vikhādita-vikṣipta); (3) greed for touch (sparśa-rāga), of bones bound by rotting [flesh] and pus (vipādumakapaṭyanibaddhāsthi); (4) greed for being served upon (upacāra-rāga), of a motionless dead body (niśceṣṭa-mrtakāya). The aśubhā in the form of a skeleton (asti-saṃkalā) can counteract all the fourfold greed since these four objects of greed are absent in it.\textsuperscript{45}

Samghabhadrā's explanations on this fourfold counteraction are more elaborate:

The four forms of greed are counteracted by resorting to two types of profound reflection (思懺, *nidhīyāna): 1, observation of the corpse internally; 2, observation on the corpse externally. One with sharp faculties resorts to the former; one with blunt faculties resorts to the latter:

One with sharp faculties first observes all around the internal body bounded by the skin, up from the toes and down from the head, making the citra become disgusted.

For one intending to subdue greed for colour, he should be focused and mindful (anu-śī śmṛ) of the changing colours within the body — pus, blood, fat, semen, saliva, snot, marrow, brain, feces, urine, etc., He should also be mindful of the changing colours on the skin of the internal body caused by diseases — yellow, white, blue, black like clouds and smokes, motley, dark, blurred and unclean. When as a result great disgust is generated in the mind, he is able to subdue the greed that takes colour as cognitive objects. By observing above that this body, being as such, is not the basis (adhiṣṭhāna) of desired colours, he can become detached from all [colours].

For one intending to subdue greed for shapes, he should individually observe that the bodily parts of the internal body are made of an aggregation, arrangement and combination of 36 things, headhairs, body-hairs, etc., apart from these, there exist no shapes as hairs, etc., Through resolve (adhimokṣa), he further dissects the body into two or more parts, scattered on the ground, eaten by birds and animals which compete with one another, bones and flesh dropping in random, bodily parts being torn apart. When as a result great disgust is generated in the mind, he is able to subdue the greed that takes shapes as cognitive objects.
For one intending to subdue greed for pleasant contact, he should remove the skin and flesh through resolve and contemplate on only the bones as being coarse like broken tiles. ...

For one intending to subdue greed for being served (honour), he should, through resolve, contemplate on the internal body, as if he is at sleep, drunk, has fainted or suffering from epilepsy (apasmāra), being unable to mobilize the limbs, as if when one is old and sick — whether such a time has or has not actually arrived, one's body is entangled with such things. He further contemplates the activities within the body as being without freedom; all are generated in dependence on conditions; there is not the slightest bodily part that can serve as the support-base for the departure of serving (honouring) — they are falsely clung on to as the agent of honouring. There is definitely the act of honouring; but by “honouring”, what is supposed to signify is that: with certain bodily parts as conditions, there can definitely be the actions of departure of dancing, singing and comedy or sad shows, etc. He contemplates that such actions are completely without any definite nature; they are like the tunes generated from a flute, all being like magical shows. When as a result great disgust is generated in the mind, he is able to subdue the greed that takes honour as cognitive object.

This is how a sharp-faculty beginner, by observing the internal body with the understanding derived from reflection, comes to overcome the fourfold greed, rendering them unable to arise.

In the case of a blunt-faculty, his faculties being blunt, the intense defilements are difficult to subdue without the help of external conditions (prāyuṣa). He must therefore first observe an external corpse with clarity, and then gradually subdue the defilements within his own mind. That is, when at the beginning he intends to observe an external corpse, he first generates a thought of kindness and go to the charnel ground (śivapathi). As the Bhagavat has said, “A beginner practitioner seeking the means for promptly destroying sensual greed should generate a thought of kindness and visit the charnel ground, practising contemplation diligently. ...” Having reached there, he should practise the aśabhā in accordance with the sūtra on the fourfold charnel-ground practice (see below), contemplating on the signs of an external corpse and then comparing them to his internal body: “Those signs being thus, the same should also be the case with this [body].” Through this means, he is gradually able to make his thought generate profound disgust towards the internal body as well, and thus able to counteract the aforesaid fourfold greed, as he comes to see the intrinsic nature within the body.46

The sūtra that Sanghabhadra refers to above seems to correspond to the Kāyagatāsati-sūtra. This, as does the Mahāsati-pathāna-sūtra, also describes the following nine forms of a corpse thrown into the charnel ground (śivāhikāya chaddātām):

1. a corpse bloated, turning black-blue, putrefying;
2. a corpse being eaten by crows, etc.;
3. a chain of bones with flesh and blood, connected by sinews (aṭṭhika-saṃkhaliṣṭaṃ samamālaḥhitam nāhārasambandham);
4. a chain of fleshless bones smeared with blood, connected by sinews (aṭṭhika-saṃkhaliṣṭaṃ nimmamālaḥhitam nāhārasambandham);
5. a chain of fleshless and bloodless bones, connected by sinews (aṭṭhika-saṃkhaliṣṭaṃ apagatāmālaḥhitam nāhārasambandham);
6. disconnected bones scattered in various directions (aṭṭhikāni apagatasambandhāni dīśāvidāsū vikhiṭāni);
7. bones bleached white, like the colour of shells (aṭṭhikāni setāni saṅkhavaṇṇāpanihāni);
8. bones heaped up (aṭṭhikāni pūṇjakajātāni);
9. bones more than a year old, rotten and crumbled (aṭṭhikāni terovassikāni pūtīni cuṇṇajātāni)48

However, although nine stages are distinguishable, the northern tradition explicitly groups them into four sets, regarded as respectively the counteractions of the fourfold greed (for colour, shape, contact and being served upon). We have already seen above, the Sarvāstivāda grouping given in the AKB. According to Sanghabhadra,49 it is somewhat different:

I, greed for colour — contemplation on the corpse turning black-blue and becoming reddish;
II, greed for shape — being eaten and being scattered;
III, greed for contact — on its rotting and on the bones;
IV, greed for being served upon — being bloated and putrefying.

(like in AKB, contemplation on the skeleton is said to be able to counteract all four types of greed).

The Yogācāra grouping again differs slightly. The description in the Śrāvakabhūmi of Yogācārabhūmi-tāstra is as follows:
For one intending to subdue greed for pleasant contact, he should remove the skin and flesh through resolve and contemplate on only the bones as being coarse like broken tiles. …

For one intending to subdue greed for being served (honour), he should, through resolve, contemplate on the internal body, as if he is at sleep, drunk, has fainted or suffering from epilepsy (apasmāra), being unable to mobilize the limbs, as if when one is old and sick — whether such a time has or has not actually arrived, one’s body is entangled with such things. He further contemplates the activities within the body as being without freedom; all are generated in dependence on conditions; there is not the slightest bodily part that can serve as the support-base for the departure of serving/honouring — they are falsely clung to as the agent of honouring. There is definitely the act of honouring; but by “honouring”, what is supposed to signify is that: with certain bodily parts as conditions, there can definitely be the actions of departure of dancing, singing and comedy or sad shows, etc. He contemplates that such actions are completely without any definite nature; they are like the tunes generated from a flute, all being like magical shows. When as a result great disgust is generated in the mind, he is able to subdue the greed that takes honour as cognitive object. 

This is how a sharp-faculty beginner, by observing the internal body with the understanding derived from reflection, comes to overcome the fourfold greed, rendering them unable to arise.

In the case of a blunt-faculty, his faculties being blunt, the intense defilements are difficult to subdue without the help of external conditions (prāryāta). He must therefore first observe an external corpse with clarity, and then gradually subdue the defilements within his own mind. That is, when at the beginning he intends to observe an external corpse, he first generates a thought of kindness and go to the charnel ground (śivapathikā). As the Bhagavat has said, “A beginner practitioner seeking the means for promptly destroying sensual greed should generate a thought of kindness and visit the charnel ground, practising contemplation diligently.” Having reached there, he should practise the aśabhā in accordance with the sūtra on the fourfold charnel-ground practice (see below), contemplating on the signs of an external corpse and then comparing them to his internal body: “Those signs being thus, the same should also be the case with this [body].” Through this means, he is gradually able to make his thought generate profound disgust towards the internal body as well, and thus able to counteract the aforesaid fourfold greed, as he comes to see the intrinsic nature within the body.}

The sūtra that Sanghabhadra refers to above seems to correspond to the Kāyogatāsati-sutta. This, as does the Mahāsaṅkhāra-sūtra, also describes the following nine forms of a corpse thrown into the charnel ground (sivahikāya chaddātaṁ):

1. a corpse bloated, turning black-blue, putrefying;
2. a corpse being eaten by crows, etc.;
3. a chain of bones with flesh and blood, connected by sinews (atīhika-saṃkalikā samamsalahitam naḥārūsambhāram);
4. a chain of fleshless bones smeared with blood, connected by sinews (atīhika-saṃkalikā nimmamsalahitamnaḥārūsambhāram);
5. a chain of fleshless and bloodless bones, connected by sinews (atīhikāni apagatatamsabhānī disāvidāsāvakṣitītītī);
6. disconnected bones scattered in various directions (atīhikāni setā santhavanāpanibhānī);
7. bones bleached white, like the colour of shells (atīhikāni puñjakajātānī);
8. bones heaped up (atīhikāni pūjjakajātānī);
9. bones more than a year old, rotten and crumbled (atīhikāni terovassikāni pūtthini cūṇajātānī).

However, although nine stages are distinguishable, the northern tradition explicitly groups them into four sets, regarded as respectively the counteractions of the fourfold greed (for colour, shape, contact and being served upon). We have already seen above, the Sarvāstivāda grouping given in the AKB: According to Sanghabhadra, it is somewhat different:

I. greed for colour — contemplation on the corpse turning black-blue and becoming reddish;
II. greed for shape — being eaten and being scattered;
III. greed for contact — on its rotting and on the bones;
IV. greed for being served upon — being bloated and putrefying.

(Like in AKB, contemplation on the skeleton is said to be able to counteract all four types of greed).

The Yogācāra grouping again differs slightly. The description in the Śrāvakabhūmi of Yogācārabhūmi-sūtra is as follows:
... he purifies the citta from sexual greed conjoined with the fourfold greed — greed for colour, greed for shape, greed for contact, greed for being served upon.

Therein, [I.] when he reflects (manasikaroṭi) on [a corpse] becoming black-blue, or putrefying or rotting or bloated, or being eaten, he purifies his citta from the greed for colour.

[II.] when he reflects on its becoming reddish (covered by blood), he purifies his citta from the greed for shape.

[III.] when he reflects on its bones or the bone-chain or the skeleton (asthi-śamkalikā), he purifies his citta from the greed for contact.

[IV.] when he reflects on its being scattered, he purifies his citta from the greed for being served upon.

In this way, he purifies the citta from sexual greed.50

Like the Theravāda Kāyagatāsati-sutta and Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna-sutta, the Śāriputrābhidharma likewise, in the context of kāyānupaśyanā, besides the anupaśyanā of the various impure parts of the body, also prescribes various other forms of contemplation, including the ānāpānasamrīti, mindfulness of postures, contemplation on the elements, the different stages of decomposition of a corpse, etc.51 The latter comes under the internal-cum-external anupaśyanā of the body:

1. A bhikṣu sees a corpse thrown into the charnel ground, [dead] for one day [or two days] or three days.
2. He sees such a corpse being bloated and turning black-blue.
3. He sees such a corpse being eaten by animals.
4. He sees the corpse whose bones are connected, [the body] being reddish, putrefying, with foul pus and blood.
5. He sees the corpse whose bones are connected, with sinews and veins not yet severed, covered by blood and skin.
6. He sees the corpse whose bones are connected, already without blood and flesh but with sinews and veins not yet severed.
7. He sees the corpse whose bones have decayed but not yet removed from their original location.
8. He sees the corpse whose bones have been broken and far removed from their original locations; the foot-bones, thigh-bones, hand-bones, back-bones, hip-bones, ... scattered in various places.
9. He sees the corpse whose bones, after the lapse of a long time, having become white like shells and bluish like dove, rotten and crumbled.

10. He sees the corpse lying on a heap of fire; its head-hairs, body-hairs, skin, blood, flesh, sinews, veins, bones and marrow [etc.], are consumed by fire and gradually dissipate completely. “He contemplates thus: ‘these dharma-s do not go and abide in the east, south, west, north, or in the four intermediary or upper and lower directions. These dharma-s arise not having been, and vanish after having arisen (*abhūtvā bhavanti | bhūtvā pratigacchanti | 52).’”

It can be observed that this description varies somewhat from the aforementioned nine- or ten-stage accounts. Moreover, if we discount the first stage whose description is repeated as a part of the next two stages, the number of stages or forms then reduce to nine.

2.3. The context of the contemplation on loathsomeness of food

In the Aṅguttara-nikāya, the “ideation on the loathsomeness with regard to food” (āhāre paṭikkūla-saññā) is given as one of the 10 ideations.54 (See also § 2.4 below). The Vism expounds it as an individual object of practice (kammatṭhāna).55

In the Sarvāstivāda, the aśubhā is also prescribed as a practice to counteract indulgence in taking delicious food. The SgPS prescribes it as one of the fivefold “ideations which bring liberation to maturity”56 (成熟解脫; *vimukti-paripācanīyā samjñā). These are: 1, ideation of being impermanent; 2, ideation of the impermanent being unsatisfactory; 3, ideation of the unsatisfactory being without a Self; 4, ideation of the loathsomeness of food; 5, ideation of death. (See also the 10 ideations in § 2.5). The 4th ideation is described thus:

With regard to rice, he should generate the resolve (adhimokṣa) of a bloated corpse; with regard to porridge with added vegetables, of thin feces; with regard to fresh butter (生酥; nava-nīta) and curd, of human brain and marrow; with regard to ghee (熟酥; sarpis), oil, [etc.], human grease; with regard to groats (saktu), bone pieces; with regard to biscuits, human skin; with regard to salt, broken teeth; with regard to vegetables born from stems, skull (kapāla) joined with hairs; with regard to juices, pus and blood.57
It can be seen that this Sarvāstivāda version explicitly applies the asubhā (using elements of both the 36-part reflection and the that on a corpse) in the ideation of loathsomeness of food. This makes the MVŚ feel necessary to distinguish the two contemplations — although both equally have loathsomeness (prātikālya) as their mode of activity (ākāra), the two can be distinguished: the former is an ideation of the loathsomeness of rūpa; the latter, of taste. According to some: the former counteracts sensual greed; the latter, greed for food.59

In the *Śāriputrābhidharma*, on the ideation of the impurity of ‘lump’ (i.e., material) food (kavalikārāhāra), it is said thus:

A bhikṣu takes lump food as if eating a son’s flesh; he practices the asubhā ideation.60

The Sangīti-sutta of the Dīgha-nikāya also enumerates five vinuṭti-paripācānīya saññā. But the list differs in the last two items which are given as pañāna-saññā and virāga-saññā.61

2.4. The context of the eight-fold liberations (vimokṣa) and spheres of conquest (abhibhva-āyatana)

The doctrine of the eightfold liberations is found in both the Theravāda as well as the Sarvāstivāda texts.62 “Liberation” here does not refer to the attainment of Nibbāna/Nirvāṇa. Buddhaghosa explains it as “resolving/inclining towards” (adhimuccana); and this is in the sense of (I) “being properly liberated from opposing states” (paṭcanīka-dhammehi suṭṭhu vimuccananaṭṭho) and (II) “properly inclining towards the cognitive object by virtue of delight” (ārammaṇe ca abhirati-vasena suṭṭhu adhimuccananaṭṭho).63 This Theravāda explanation essentially agrees with that in the *Śāriputrābhidharma*: “The citta faces towards it, holds it as supreme, is inclined towards it, is liberated in respect of it.”64 The Sarvāstivāda explains it as “liberation from all that hinders”.65 It is also in the sense of “turning one’s back on” (vaimukhyārtho hi vimokṣarthaḥ): the first two turn the back on the citta that is greedy for matter; the third, on that of the asubhā; the fourth to seventh, each on that of the preceding lower stage (bhūmi); the eight, on all citta-s taking cognitive objects.66

The Mahāsakuludāyi-sutta merely enumerates them, without any elaboration: (1) possessing matter, one sees matter (rūpi rūpāni passati);
(2) internally without any ideation of matter, one sees matter externally (ajjhattam arūpasaññī bahiddhā rūpāni passati); (3) one becomes resolved exclusively “it is beautiful” (subhan t’eva adhimutto hoti); (4) as a result of transcending ideation of matter in everyway, of the vanishing of ideation of the resistant, and of not applying the mind to ideation of diversity, [resolving] “space is infinite”, one fully attains and dwells in the sphere of infinity of space (sabbaso rūpasaññānam samatikkamā | pañighasaññānam athaṅgamā | nānattasaññānam amanasikārā | ananto ākāso ti ākāsānañcāyatanam upasampajja viharati); (5) transcending the sphere of the infinity of space in everyway, [resolving] “consciousness is infinite”, one fully attains and dwells in the sphere of infinity of consciousness (sabbaso ākāsānañcāyatanam samatikkamma anantam viññānan ti viññāṇānañcāyatanam upasampajja viharati); (6) transcending the sphere of infinity of consciousness in everyway, [resolving] “there is nothing”, one fully attains and dwells in the sphere of nothingness (sabbaso viññāṇānañcāyatanam samatikkamma nañthi kiñcīti akiñcaññāyatanam upasampajja viharati); (7) transcending the sphere of nothingness in everyway, one fully attains and dwells in the sphere of neither ideation nor non-ideation (sabbaso akiñcaññāyatanam samatikkamma neva saññānañcāyatanam upasampajja viharati); (8) transcending the sphere of neither ideation nor non-ideation in everyway, one fully attains and dwells in the cessation of ideation and sensation (sabbaso neva saññānañcāyatanam samatikkamma saññāvedayitanirodham upasampajja viharati).

The first three of this eight are of special interest for our discussion. (See also below) According to the commentary, matter in the first liberation refers to jhāna pertaining to the fine-material sphere (rūpa-jhāna), generated through the power of a kasīna with regard to one’s hairs, etc.; and “possessing matter” means that the meditator possesses that matter.

The Atthasalini offers a more elaborate commentary on the first liberation:

“Possessing matter” — Matter is the fine-material jhāna (rūpayjhānam) generated internally with regard to the hairs etc. For, internally, when doing the preliminary exercise of blue, one does it with regard to the hairs or the bile or the pupil of the eye. When doing the preliminary exercise of yellow, one does it with regard to the fat, the skin, or the yellow region of the eyes. When doing the preliminary exercise of red, one does it with regard to the flesh, the blood, the tongue, the palms
of the hands and feet or the red region of the eyes. When doing the preliminary exercise of white, one does it with regard to the bones, the teeth, the nails or the white region of the eyes. This is said with reference to one who has thus done the preliminary exercise and endowed with the arisen jhāna.

“One sees matter” — Externally too, one sees through the jhāna-eye (jhāna-cakkhu), matters of the kasīṇa, blue, etc.

With this sentence, the obtainment of jhāna with regard to the kasīṇa comprising internal and external bases is shown.

From this, it is clear that the first liberation concerns a contemplation on one’s own bodily parts. The meditator has not been freed from ideations of these internal matters. Samghabhadra also interprets the first liberation by referring to the statement on the second liberation:

What is the meaning intended in the sūtra statement, “Possessing ideation of matter, one sees matters”? The profound meaning in this sūtra cannot be truly (yathābhūtam) comprehended by those who have not abolished matter. Nevertheless, according to the explanation passed down by the ancient ārya-s, “rūpī” means “(one who) has not been able to subdue ideations which take internal matters as cognitive objects”. How do we know that this is the case? From the contrast in the statement concerning the second liberation, i.e., concerning the second liberation, it says: “Internally without ideation of matter, one sees matters externally.” From this, we know that in the first liberation, one has not abolished ideation of matter internally.

The Pāli commentaries explain that for the second liberation, one attains jhāna by doing the preliminary exercise on external (kasīṇa) objects. However, no notion of loathsomeness is anywhere explicitly referred to in these first two liberations.

In fact, in the related doctrinal categories called the eight spheres of conquest (abhibhāyatana; Skt: abhibhv-āyatana), the Pāli texts describe the first two as follows: (1) Internally possessing ideation of matter (ajjhattam rūpasanī), one sees matter externally, limited, beautiful (suvanna) or ugly (dubbanna). Conquering them, one comes to have such an ideation: “I know, I see.” (2) Internally possessing ideation of matter, one sees matter externally, immeasurable, beautiful or ugly. Conquering them, one comes to have such an ideation: “I know, I see.”
As C.A.F. Rhys Davids rightly observes: judging by the Atthasālīni (190), “rupi” in the first liberation is equivalent to “ajhattam rupasāññī” in the description (of the first two) spheres of conquest. Noticeably, in all the first four spheres of conquest, the matter that the meditator sees are described as being “beautiful or ugly”. The Atthasālīni explains that “beautiful or ugly” means pure (parisuddha) or impure (aparisuddha). Accordingly, there is no connection made with the asubhā meditation.

The Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma texts also describe the first four spheres of conquest in similar terms. For instance, the Prakaraṇa-pāda (likewise, the AKB) states:

 Internally possessing ideation, one sees matter externally as being limited, beautiful or ugly. Conquering these matters, one knows, conquering them one sees — one comes to possess such an ideation. This is the first sphere of conquest.

However, at the same time, the northern Abhidharma texts also explicitly connect the first two liberations with the asubhā. The AKB states that “the [first three liberations] have as cognitive objects, as the case applies, disagreeable and agreeable material abodes (rupāyatana) pertaining to the spheres of sensuality. On this, Yasomitra comments:

“As the case applies” — the cognitive objects of the [first] two are the disagreeable matter, black-blue, etc. The cognitive object of the third is the agreeable [matter].

This had in fact consistently been the Sarvāstivāda explanation since the earliest canonical Abhidhrama texts. Thus, the SgPS explains the first three liberations as follows:

1. “Possessing matter, one sees matters” (rupi rupāṇi paśyati) — Internally, with regard to the various ideations of matter, one has not been freed (vagata), freed in each case (prativagata); has not subdued, subdued in every case; has not ceased, not destroyed. As a result ... one contemplates on matter externally, through the power of resolve (adhimokṣa), as being black-blue, bloated, rotten, scattered, eaten, turning reddish, bones or skeleton. ...

2. “Internally without ideation of matter, one sees matters externally (adhyātman arūpasamjñi bahirdhā rupāṇi paśyati)” — Internally, with regard to the various ideations of matter, one has been freed

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3. "Realizing the pure liberation through the body, one, having accomplished it, abides [in it] (subhaṃ vinokṣam kāyenā sākṣātkrupopasampadye viharati)"—What is the preparation (prayoga) of this pure liberation? Through what expedience does one enter into this meditative attainment of pure liberation? The beginner, at the beginning of the contemplation, grasps the mark of a green (niśa) tree—green trunk, green branches, green leaves. Having grasped these various green marks, through the force of resolve (adhimoksavāsena) he applies his thought and ideates, reflects, determines and resolves (vibhante, adhi-√muc) that this colour is of a particular green mark. ... [In this process,] his thought is scattered, flowing over various marks and cannot focus on a single object-domain. He is thus not yet able to stabilize the citta and enter into the meditative attainment of the pure liberation. To concentrate ... he fixes mindfulness on a single green mark. Reflecting that it is a green, not a non-green mark, vigorously ... until he [is] able to make the citta stay continuously for a long time. With this preparation, practicing repeatedly with vigour, ... his citta comes to abide, fully abide (सम-√स्थ) and closely abide (स्थिति: sūpa-√sthā), continuously in a single direction, focusing mindfulness on a single object, reflecting on the green mark, without a second, without reversion. One then realizes and enters into the meditative attainment of the pure liberation.80

In the above exposition, the connection between the asubhā and the first two liberations is abundantly clear.81 The third, in contrast, develops the ideation of the beautiful by contemplating on a given primary colour. As regards the eight spheres of conquest, since the Sarvāstivāda correlates the first four with the first two liberations, and the succeeding four with third liberation; it is also clear that the first four spheres involve the asubhā.82 (See also below, § 4.)

2.5. The context of the 10 ideations (samjñā)

The asubhā is also prescribed among the set of 10 ideations. There are various lists in both the southern and northern traditions, differing somewhat in content; but all equally stress that the 10 ideations lead ultimately to Nirvāṇa. The Aṅguttara (२, 105) enumerates the following: asubha, āloka, āhāra, sabbaloke anabhīratā, anicca, anicce dūkha, dūkke anatta, pahāna, virāga, nirodha.83 It can be seen that the asubha-saṅkāra heads the list. The emphasis on the asubhā is even more conspicuous in the corresponding list of the Chinese Ekottara-āgama which enumerates several stages of the asubhā as among the ideations: 1, white bones; 2, turning black-blue; 3, bloated; 4, indigestion of what is eaten; 5, turning) reddish (血想); 6, being eaten; 7, being impertinent; 8, greed for food (貪食); 9, death; 10, all pertaining to the world being non-delightable.84

The MVŚ enumerates the following: 1, being impertinent; 2, the impertinent is unsatisfactory (antiye dūkha); 3, the unsatisfactory being without a Self (dūkke anātman); 4, death; 5, asubhā; 6, loathsomeness of food; 7, all pertaining to the world being non-delightable; 8, abandonment (prahāna); 9, detachment (virāga); 10, cessation (nirvāṇa).85

The compilers remark that these 10, no more and no less, are prescribed by the Buddha as precisely the requisite medicines for all sentient beings. Some other explanations given by other masters are as follows:86

(I) 1–4 are intended by the Buddha to highlight the noble path; 5–7, its preparatory effort (prayoga); 8–10, its fruits.

(II) 5–7 highlight samatha; 1–4, vipaśyanā; 5–7, fruits of samatha and vipaśyanā.

(III) 1–3 highlight the entering into “Perfection Without the Raw” (samayakta-niyāna = samayakta-niyāma),87 i.e. darśana-mārga; 5–6, transcendence of the attachment to the sensuality sphere (kāma-dhātu) — there are sensual greed and greed for solid food in the sensuality sphere, and one addicted to them cannot transcend his attachment to this sphere; 7, transcendence of the attachment to the fine-materiality sphere (rūpa-dhātu) — among all forms of samsaric existence, the sensation of joy (prīti) and bliss (sukha) excel in the fine-materiality sphere and bliss of prāśrādhī (prāśrādhī) excels in the fourth dhyāna, and one clinging to them cannot transcend attachment to the fine-materiality sphere; 4, transcendence of the attachment to the non-materiality sphere — the life span in this sphere is very long, and one who consciously strives to retain it cannot transcend attachment to this sphere; 8–10, the fruits of their paths.
2.6. The context of the fivefold "meditative attainment of vision" (darśana-samāpatti)

The aṣubhā is also an integral part of the practice leading to the "fivefold meditative attainment of vision". The MVŚ cites the sūtra as teaching these fivefold attainment as follows:

I. A bhikṣu observes truly that his own body is filled with the 36 types of impurity: head-hair, body-hairs etc. (Whole list, as in §2.1, is given)

II. Having observed thus, he further excludes skin, flesh, etc., and observes only the bones in which consciousness moves.

III. Having done as before, he observes only the bones in which consciousness moves, abiding in this and the next life.

IV. Having done as before, he observes that consciousness does not abide in this life, but only in the next life.

V. Having done as before, he observes that consciousness abides in neither this nor the next life.

According to the MVŚ compilers, these attainments have non-greed (alobha) as their intrinsic nature, since they contemplate on the aṣubhā in order to counteract greed. Two dissenting views are also mentioned: some masters regard prajñā as the intrinsic nature inasmuch as these are contemplations of things truly as they are (yatābhāttām). Others hold that the intrinsic nature is equipoise (samādhi), since they are said to be meditative attainments.88

"Vision (darśana)" is explained as referring to the eyes; as a result of the eyes seeing the impurities, the five meditative attainments are successively generated. There is a hierarchy of the attainments with respect to the spiritual status of the attainers. The first 2 can be acquired by both an ordinary worldling (prthagjana) and an ārya; third, by a stream-enterer and a once-returner; fourth, a non-returner; fifth, an arhat. Those of the Buddha are said to be unsurpassed (anuttara) because they are capable of subduing all cognitive objects: The śrāvaka-s and pratyekabuddha-s cannot collectively subdue all material abodes (rūpāyatana) as being impure; Aniruddha cannot observe that the rūpa-s of the fairies are impure; none, excepting the Buddha, is capable of observing the Buddha’s body as being impure.89

The *Śāriputrābhidharma cites the Samprasadaniya-sūtra (正信經) by name as enumerating the same five meditative attainments.90

The Pāli Sampasadaniya-sutta enumerates four such meditative attainments as among the unsurpassabilities (anuttariya) in the Buddha’s teaching of the Dhamma. The description therein are very similar, though not identical; but IV above is noticeably absent. In this sūtra, the consciousness is given as the consciousness-stream (vinññāna-sota).91

3. The three levels of mastery

The meditator may be (i) a beginner (āḍikarmika), (ii) one who has mastered the practice (krta-parījata) or (iii) one who has gone beyond mental application (atikranta-manaskāra), i.e., an absolute master.92 The above description of the meditator placing mindfulness between the eyebrows (§2.1.1) pertains to the highest level.93 The following account in the AKB concerns the aṣubhā practice with the skeleton as object — the particular form of practice conceded by the Sarvāstivāda as capable of counteracting all the fourfold greed. (supra, §2.2.1)

(i) Beginner level

The meditator first fixes his thought on a part of his body, either the toes, or the fore-head, etc. Having made his thought abide on it, he then, with the power of resolve, visualizes that the skin and flesh rot away, progressively seeing the whole body reduced to a skeleton. Next he extends the visualization, doing the same on a second individual, in this way gradually those in a monastery, a village, a whole country, and so on up to seeing the whole earth bounded by the sea being filled with skeletons. In order to enhance his power of
(IV) 1 highlights the direct/proximate antidote (pratipakṣa) for the hindrance of conceit with regard to the conditioning forces (samskāra); 2, the hindrance of laziness; 3, the hindrance of Self-view; 5, the hindrance of the greed for form; 6, the hindrance of indulgence in good food; 7, the hindrance of greed for delightful things in the world; 4, the hindrance of being inflated on account of being alive; 8, the hindrance of the non-virtuous (adharma); 9, the hindrance of attachment (業: abhinivesa); 10, the hindrance of the support-basis.

2.6. The context of the fivefold “meditative attainment of vision” (dārśana-samāpatti)

The așubhā is also an integral part of the practice leading to the “fivefold meditative attainment of vision”. The MVŚ cites the sūtra as teaching these fivefold attainment as follows:

I. A bhiksu observes truly that his own body is filled with the 36 types of impurity: head-hair, body-hairs etc. (Whole list, as in §2.1, is given)

II. Having observed thus, he further excludes skin, flesh, etc., and observes only the bones in which consciousness moves.

III. Having done as before, he observes only the bones in which consciousness moves, abiding in this and the next life.

IV. Having done as before, he observes that consciousness does not abide in this life, but only in the next life.

V. Having done as before, he observes that consciousness abides in neither this nor the next life.

According to the MVŚ compilers, these attainments have non-greed (alobha) as their intrinsic nature, since they contemplate on the așubhā in order to counteract greed. Two dissenting views are also mentioned: some masters regard prajñā as the intrinsic nature inasmuch as these are contemplations of things truly as they are (yathābhātataṁ). Others hold that the intrinsic nature is equipoise (samādhi), since they are said to be meditative attainments.88

“Vision (dārśana)” is explained as referring to the eyes; as a result of the eyes seeing the impurities, the five meditative attainments are successively generated. There is a hierarchy of the attainments with respect to the spiritual status of the attainers. The first 2 can be acquired by both an ordinary worldling (prathajjana) and an ārya; third, by a stream-enterant and a once-returner; fourth, a non-returner; fifth, an arhat. Those of the Buddha are said to be unsurpassed (anuttara) because they are capable of subduing all cognitive objects: The śrāvaka-s and pratyekekabuddha-s cannot collectively subdue all material abodes (rūpāvatana) as being impure; Aniruddha cannot observe that the rūpa-s of the fairies are impure; none, excepting the Buddha, is capable of observing the Buddha’s body as being impure.89

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visualization, he then reduces the scope, gradually back to seeing just his own skeleton. Up to this point, he is said to be beginner in the asubhā meditation.

(ii) The level of having mastered

To further advance his power of resolve in the practice of mentally reducing, he now leaves out the foot-bones and applies his thought to the remaining parts, progressively reducing in this way, leaving more and more parts out, until he finally visualizes one half of the skull. He has now mastered the operation of reducing in the asubhā meditation and is said to have mastered the practice.

(iii) The level of absolute mastery — going beyond manaskāra

He now advances further: He leaves out even the half of the skull and holds his mindfulness between his eyebrows. When he can do this, he is said to have gone beyond mental application and becomes an absolute master.  

Besides the division into the three levels, the MVŚ also distinguishes among practitioners of different dispositions: who (a) delight in brevity, (b) delight in details, and (c) delight in details and brevity.

(a) One who delights in brevity

He first goes to the cemetery (拝間; śmaśāna) and observes the sign/mark (nimitta), black-blue, etc in a corpse. Having properly grasped the sign, he goes aside and (mentally) observes it again. If his thought is still dispersed and the sign is unclear, he must go back to the cemetery, again observing and properly grasping that sign. He repeats the process until his thought is concentrated and the mental sign is clear. Thereupon, he quickly returns to his dwelling place, washes his feet and sits cross-legged, making himself mentally fit for overcoming the hindrances to meditation. Recollecting the sign that he has grasped previously, he now, through the power of resolve, transfers it onto his own body, starting from the stage of black-blue to that of skeleton (9 stages as we have seen above). In the skeleton, he first observes the foot-bones, ankle-bones, shinbones, ... (moving upwards), neck-bone, chin-bone, and finally, the skull. Having observed these impure signs (*asubha-nimitta) through resolve, he now fixes mindfulness between the eyebrows,
abiding in tranquility (堪熱而住). He then turns this mindfulness into the sequential observation of the body (kāyānupasyanā), and successively into that of dharma-s (dharmaṇupasyanā). This is the full accomplishment of the asubhā of one who delights in brevity.

(b) One who delights in details
He does as in (a) up to fixing his mindfulness between the eyebrows. Having kept still for a little while, he further turns the mindfulness first to the observation of skull, next the teeth-bones, successively up to finally the foot-bones. Having thus observed his own bones through resolve, he proceeds to observe the bones externally as being by the side of his own bones, gradually filling up a bed, a room, a monastery, ... a country, up to the entire earth bounded by the ocean — to as far as his mental vision can reach — everywhere filled with bones. Next, he gradually reduces his visualization, until he sees only his own skeleton. In it, he further removes the foot-bones, etc., successively until he finally sees his skull. Having thus observed the asubha signs through resolve, he fixes mindfulness between the eyebrows and abides in tranquility. He further turns this mindfulness into the sequential observation of the body, and successfully into that of dharma-s. This is the full accomplishment of the asubhā of one who delights in details.

(c) One who delights in details and brevity
He does as in (b) up to seeing the entire earth bounded by the ocean to be everywhere filled with bones. He then gradually reduces the visualization, successively until he finally sees (only) the skull. Fixing his mindfulness between the eyebrows and keeping still for a little while, he repeats the detailed and brief visualizations as before until he has acquired full mastery, and fixes mindfulness between the eyebrows, abiding in tranquility. Next, he turns this mindfulness into the sequential observation of the body, and successively, into that of dharma-s. This is the full accomplishment of the asubhā of one who delights in details and brevity.

This repeated visualization in details and brevity is practiced so that it can be clear to practitioner that his thought has gained sovereignty. It is in fact only one who has acquired freedom over the objectdomain who can contemplate in this way in details and brevity.
The meditator (yogācāra) reflects thus: “From beginningless time in samsāra, my thought has been distorted by defilements, taking what is impure as being pure. I must now observe the impure truly as it is.” In order to acquire full mastery in the contemplation, he thus repeatedly visualizes in both details and brevity.95

As to the three levels of mastery, several opinions are recorded in the MVŚ. The following is the first, apparently belonging to the compilers.96

I. One who delights in brevity

The beginner stage starts from his going to the cemetery to contemplate on the signs of a corpse turning black-blue, etc., up to his shifting, through resolve, to his own body, visualizing it as turning black-blue etc., successively up to being a skeleton.

The mastery stage starts from visualizing the foot-bones of the skeleton, successively up to the skull; and then further excluding half of it and contemplating on only a half, and finally excluding one part of this and contemplating on just one part of it.

The absolute mastery stage starts when he, after the above contemplation of the signs of the aśubha, focuses his mindfulness between the eyebrows, abiding in tranquility, and then further turns this mindfulness into kāyānupaśyanā, successively up to dharmānupaśyanā.

II. One who delights in details

The beginner stage starts from his going to the cemetery to contemplate on the signs of a corpse turning black-blue, etc., up to his gradually reducing the visualization to finally visualizing only his own skeleton.

The mastery stage starts when he then further excludes the footbones, successively up to visualizing the skull; and then further excluding half of this and contemplating on only a half, and finally excluding one part of this and contemplating on just one part of it.

The absolute mastery stage starts when he, after the above contemplation of the signs of the aśubha, focuses his mindfulness between the eyebrows, abiding in tranquility, etc.
III. One who delights in both details and brevity

The beginner stage starts from his going to the cemetery to contemplate on the signs of a corpse turning black-blue, etc., up to his repeatedly expanding and reducing the visualizations, contemplating as before, to finally further reducing the visualization up to contemplating on just his own skeleton.

The mastery stage starts when he then further excludes the foot-bones, successively up to visualizing the skull; and then further excluding half of this and contemplating on only a half, and finally excluding one part of this and contemplating on just one part of it.

The absolute mastery stage starts when he, after achieving mastery, focuses his mindfulness between the eyebrows, abiding in tranquility, etc.

4. From the impure to the pure

4.1. Positive experience at the accomplishment of the āsubhā

It is stated in both the Theravāda and northern sources alike, that in the very practice of the āsubhā itself — when the practitioner has succeeded — there arises not just a sense of disenchantment of the impure, but also a positive experience of relief and great joy. It is for this reason that the āsubhā can lead — and often described specifically as a main practice leading — to the attainment of the first dhyāna wherein there are rapture, joy, happiness and one-pointed-ness of mind. In fact, to be able to transcend the ordinary mental state of the sensuality sphere characterized by sensuality and non-unification of the mind, one must transcend craving, and at the same time, one’s mind must be sufficiently positive — calm, joyful and peaceful. And this is achieved by the practice of the āsubhā. If the practice necessarily results in a negative state of depression, then it is unimaginable that it can lead to the attainment of the first dhyāna. In fact, if we consider from the perspective of the eight liberations, the implication is that the āsubhā can even lead to the attainment of the second dhyāna (second liberation). The Theravāda Atthasālīni describes the arising of great joy in this context thus:

Although this cognitive object is loathsome, he sees the profit thus: "Through this path, I shall be emancipated from old-age-and-death". It is on account of this very [vision] and of the removal of the oppression

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of the hindrances that rapture and mental ease arise. It is like [rapture arising] with regard to the heap of foulness, in one who sees the profit in throwing away the [withered] flowers, thinking, “Now, I shall get much payment.” It is also like [that in a sick person who has been relieved from the suffering of the sickness, when vomiting and purging.]

Samghabhadrā tells us that the practitioners dwelling in the hermitages (aranyu) describe the ultimate stage of accomplishment of the asubhā as follows:

Those dwelling in the hermitages state thus: At the time of [the stage absolute mastery] of this contemplation, there arises a sign of ultimate [accomplishment]. That is, a sign of purity/beauty manifests all of a sudden (耽溺現前). On account of this, breathing may become reduced, or a non-delighting thought may arise; because he is aware that he has reached the ultimate stage of the cultivation, and because when the sign of purity arises, his thought is disturbed. This is like the case of one who repeats the recitation of what he has already fully memorized.

What is particularly interesting is the mention that a sign of purity arises to the accomplished meditator on the subhā. Among other things, this means that provided the asubhā is practiced properly and successfully, meditation on the impure and loathsome does not end up with a negative state of depression.

4.2. The “pure liberation” succeeding the asubhā

We have seen (§ 2.4) that in the context of the eight liberations, the third, as opposed to the first two, is a visualization of the pure or beautiful (subha). In the doctrine of the eight spheres of conquest too, the first four involve visualization of the impure, and the succeeding four are visualizations of the pure. In respect of the attainment of dhyāna, the first two liberations belong to the first two dhyāna-s, and the third belongs to the fourth dhyāna. The MVS explains why the third dhyāna does not constitute a liberation:

The third, “pure liberation”, is taught for the purpose of “turning one’s back on” (i.e., liberating) the thought of impurity. This is not designated with regard to the lower stages (bhāmi) because in them, on account of being overridden by the contemplation on the impure, there is no extensiveness and clarity. In the third dhyāna, although the first two impure liberations are absent, there is the confusion by excellent happiness (sukha), and thus no extensiveness and clarity. It [too] therefore is not [so] designated.

Elsewhere, the same text offers a few more reasons:

In the first three dhyāna-s, there is disturbance on account of the presence of reasoning (vicāra), investigation (prāti), happiness (sukha) and the in- and out-breathing; hence there is no pure liberation ... [designated].

Moreover, the third dhyāna is too far away from the sensuality sphere, and it is not the most excellent among the dhyāna-s; hence no liberation ...

Moreover, in the third dhyāna, there is the sensation of happiness which is the most excellent in samsaric existence, and this can make the practitioner become attached and confused; hence no liberation ...

In brief, it is in the fourth dhyāna, the most excellent of all dhyāna-s, that the “pure liberation” is to be cultivated. For, therein, all disturbances and agitation have come to cease; Vitarka, etc., have ceased — in particular, even the highest form of mundane happiness is transcended — breathing too has ceased. But why should one further cultivate this “pure liberation” to liberate the thought from the ideation of the impure? The MVS offers the following rationale:

[1] The practitioner intends to test as to whether he has fully acquired the skillful roots. He reflects that this is the case only if no defilement is generated even when he contemplates on the pure.

[2] His mind has been depressed or sunken while practicing the contemplation on the impure. On account of this, there is no progress in respect of the acquisition of the skillful dharma-s. To progress further, he takes up the contemplation on the pure. This is like the case of one who has been repeatedly contemplating on the loathsome nature of a corpse in the cemetery. His thought has become sunken, and to progress in the cultivation of the skillful, he needs to make his thought joyful by gaining sight of beautiful scenery in the parks or pleasant things in town.

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[3] Having practiced the contemplation on the impure for a long time, his thought has become attached (to the practice), and he cannot progress in cultivating the skillful. He must now leave aside such contemplation and practice the “pure liberation”.

[4] He wants to prove to himself that his thought has gained stability and he will not regress: If even when his thought takes a pure cognitive object no defilement is generated, how much less still when it takes objects of a different (i.e., impure) type?

[5] He wants to show that all is not capable of cultivating the “pure liberation”; only those reborn in the human world, after falling from among the gods who have excellent resolve and delight in the pure, are capable of doing so.

By way of illustrating the last point, the MVŚ goes on to relate the following story: A bhikṣu came to the Buddha, requesting to be provided with good-quality lodging. He demanded that the room must be thoroughly cleaned; incense must be burnt and flowers scattered, the mattress and pillow must be soft, etc; otherwise he would not accept the lodging. The Buddha instructed Ananda to comply with all these demands. That bhikṣu got up in the middle of the night and generated the “pure liberation”, and on this basis, also the other liberations; having exhausted the outflows he attained arhat-hood. He then further applied effort to develop psychic powers with which he flew away early in the morning. The Buddha explained to Ananda that that bhikṣu had come from among the gods who had excellent resolve and delight in the pure. Were he not given the good quality and beautiful lodging, he would not have been able to cultivate the “pure liberation” and finally attain arhat-hood.101

The above rationale, together with the story, serves to highlight the Abhidharma recognition that, the “pure liberation” can serve as an important practice — at least for certain type of beings — for spiritual progress towards arhat-hood. In general, for those who take up the practice of the asubhā, the contemplation on the pure can have tremendous psycho-spiritual significance. This practice is also one of the important demonstrations102 that Buddhist methods of spiritual cultivation are not necessarily one-sidedly “negative”, negating the human sense of the aesthetic altogether.103

In this connection, the *Dharmatrāta-dhīyāna-sūtra, which expounds the meditation tradition of the Sarvāstivāda yoga-cāra-s, contains an interesting account of the asubhā. This text describes progress of meditative praxis in four stages: (i) retrogression (hāna-bhāgīya), (ii) staying (sthiti-bhāgīya), (iii) higher distinction (viśeṣa-bhāgīya) and (iv) penetration (nirvedha-bhāgīya). Each stage is discussed under two sections: (a) preparatory path (方便道, prayoga-mārga) and (b) path of distinctive progress (勝進道, uttara/viśeṣa-mārga). The discussion on the asubhā, however, is somewhat abbreviated compared to that on the anāpānasārī. Under the preparatory path of the stage of higher distinction, the practice of the asubhā is described as being followed by that of the “pure liberation” — even though this section is wholly devoted to the asubhā, and not at all in the context of the eight liberation:

The contemplation of the impure counteracts,
The ideation of the pure with regard to the body.
Not seeking this, one removes sensual greed,
Reflecting and cultivating disenchantment.
There is further the pure (ṣubha) counteraction
Which does not make the ideation of disenchantment.
This is the expediency of the “pure liberation”.
[With it] the wise opens his wisdom-eye:
That is, in the object of the impure [contemplation],
The white bones, light [is visualized] to issue.
From this, successively, wonderful gem-trees,
Of blue, yellow, red or white colours,
And likewise branches, leaves and flowers,
[And also] excellent garments, pearl-necklaces (muktā-hāra) of various wonderful colours
— This is the sign of the “pure liberation” expediency.
Adornments manifest themselves
All over the impure body.
In steps increasing progressively,105
[With] wisdom-lamps lit by samādhi
Coming out from the one body,
Tall, broad and all pervasive.
Likewise are the adornments
Issuing from all other bodies.
This is an expediency [of] the asubhā,
— The “pure liberation”.106
[3] Having practiced the contemplation on the impure for a long time, his thought has become attached (to the practice), and he cannot progress in cultivating the skillful. He must now leave aside such contemplation and practice the “pure liberation”.

[4] He wants to prove to himself that his thought has gained stability and he will not retrogress: If even when his thought takes a pure cognitive object no defilement is generated, how much less still when it takes objects of a different (i.e., impure) type?

[5] He wants to show that all is not capable of cultivating the “pure liberation”: only those reborn in the human world, after falling from among the gods who have excellent resolve and delight in the pure, are capable of doing so.

By way of illustrating the last point, the MVŚ goes on to relate the following story: A bhikṣu came to the Buddha, requesting to be provided with good-quality lodging. He demanded that the room must be thoroughly cleaned; incense must be burnt and flowers scattered, the mattress and pillow must be soft, etc; otherwise he would not accept the lodging. The Buddha instructed Ananda to comply with all these demands. That bhikṣu got up in the middle of the night and generated the “pure liberation”, and on this basis, also the other liberations; having exhausted the outflows he attained arhat-hood. He then further applied effort to develop psychic powers with which he flew away early in the morning. The Buddha explained to Ananda that that bhikṣu had come from among the gods who had excellent resolve and delight in the pure. Were he not given the good quality and beautiful lodging, he would not have been able to cultivate the “pure liberation” and finally attain arhat-hood.101

The above rationale, together with the story, serves to highlight the Abhidharma recognition that, the “pure liberation” can serve as an important practice — at least for certain type of beings — for spiritual progress towards arhat-hood. In general, for those who take up the practice of the asubhā, the contemplation on the pure can have tremendous psycho-spiritual significance. This practice is also one of the important demonstrations102 that Buddhist methods of spiritual cultivation are not necessarily one-sidedly “negative”, negating the human sense of the aesthetic altogether.103

In this connection, the *Dharmaratā-dhyāna-sūtra, which expounds the meditation tradition of the Sarvāstivāda yogyācāra-s, contains an interesting account of the asubhā. This text describes progress of meditative praxis in four stages: (i) retrogression (hāna-bhāgīya), (ii) staying (sthitī-bhāgīya), (iii) higher distinction (viśeṣa-bhāgīya) and (iv) penetration (niśvedha-bhāgīya).104 Each stage is discussed under two sections: (a) preparatory path (方便道, prayoga-mārga) and (b) path of distinctive progress (勝進道, uttara/viśeṣa-mārga). The discussion on the asubhā, however, is somewhat abbreviated compared to that on the ānāpānasamādhi. Under the preparatory path of the stage of higher distinction, the practice of the asubhā is described as being followed by that of the “pure liberation” — even though this section is wholly devoted to the asubhā, and not all in the context of the eight liberation:

The contemplation of the impure counteracts,
The ideation of the pure with regard to the body.
Not seeking this, one removes sensual greed,
Reflecting and cultivating disenchantment.
There is further the pure (śubha) counteraction
Which does not make the ideation of disenchantment.
This is the expediency of the “pure liberation”.
[With it] the wise opens his wisdom-eye:
That is, in the object of the impure [contemplation],
The white bones, light [is visualized] to issue.
From this, successively, wonderful gem-trees,
Of blue, yellow, red or white colours,
And likewise branches, leaves and flowers,
[And also] excellent garments, pearl-necklaces (mukti-hāra) of various wonderful colours
— This is the sign of the “pure liberation” expediency.
Adornments manifest themselves
All over the impure body.
In steps increasing progressively,105
[With] wisdom-lamps lit by samādhī
Coming out from the one body,
Tall, broad and all pervasive.
Likewise are the adornments
Issuing from all other bodies.
This is an expediency [of] the asubhā.
— The “pure liberation”.106
Similar descriptions of the contemplation of the pure, as necessarily following that of the impure, is also found in some other dhyāna texts translated by Kumārajīva. They further speak, in a similar manner, of the positive signs at the accomplishment of the aśubhā. The following description is from the *Dhyāna-samādhi-sūtra (坐禅三昧経):

When, [at the last stage of the aśubhā practice,] one attains dhyāna (禅定), three signs appear: [1] the body is at ease, soft and light; [2] light issues from the white bones, of the colour of white shells; [3] the citta is able to abide in quiescence. This is the contemplation of the pure.

At this time, he has acquired the citta pertaining to the fine-materiality sphere. ... When the citta has acquired this [dhyāna-]dharma and the body is in the sensuality sphere, its four Great Elements are extremely soft and pleasant, the [body’s] colours are lustrous, bright and agreeable — this is ease (the first sign). The second [sign] is that in the sign of the white bones of the previous contemplation of the bones, light [now] shines forth everywhere, exclusively white. The third [sign] is that his citta abides in one place. This is called the contemplation on the pure ... The above three signs are known only by [the meditator] himself, and not visible to others.¹⁰⁷

In the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-upadeśa, although the contemplation on the impure and that on the pure are discussed within the context of the eight liberations,¹⁰⁸ eight spheres of conquests and ten spheres of totality (krismāyatana),¹⁰⁹ it nonetheless also treats the contemplation on the pure as subsumable under the aśubhā, and describes the former as the continuation of the latter practice by visualizing light emitting from the white bones, pervading everywhere. It likewise states that this “pure liberation” results in the meditator’s experience of rapture and happiness within his whole body:

The contemplation on the impure is twofold: 1. impure, 2. pure. In the contemplation on the impure, there are two liberations and four spheres of conquest. In the contemplation on the pure, there are one liberation, four spheres of conquests and eight spheres of totality. ...

Further, the practitioner first contemplates his body as impure, and, he focuses within his thought all the internal and external impurities pertaining to the bodily dharma-s. At that time, disgust (nirveda) arises, and greed, hatred and ignorance become thinned. Thereupon, he is startled and realizes: “I must have been without eyes; this being thus, how could I become attached?“

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He then concentrates his thought to contemplate on reality, so as not to repeat the same mistake. His thought having been tamed (調柔, *dānta), he visualizes that the skin, flesh, blood, marrow and [all other] impurities are removed from his body, and only white bones remain. He focuses the thought on the skeleton. When the thought is scattered, he makes it concentrate again.

As a result of having concentrated his thought profoundly, he sees light issuing from the white bones, like [the colour of] a shell or conch, capable of illuminating internal and external things. This is the initial gateway of the “pure liberation”. He then visualizes that the skeleton is dissipated, and only the light from the bones is visible, and grasps the sign of the pure (淨潔; śubha) outside.

Further, he grasps these signs and focuses his thought on the pure: precious things like diamond (vajra), pearl, gold and silver; or pure earth; or pure water; or smoke-free and fuel-free pure fire; or dust-free pure wind; blue colours;¹¹⁰ yellow colours like campaka flowers; red colours like red lotuses; white colours like snows; etc., — accordingly as these various colours, each has pure radiance. At the time, the practitioner experiences rapture and happiness which pervade the whole body. This is called the “pure liberation”. As it takes pure cognitive objects, it is called “pure liberation”; as the experience of rapture and happiness pervades the whole body, it is said that [the practitioner] “realizes through the body” (*kāyena sākṣātkaroti). It is called a “liberation” because, when this mental happiness is acquired, one turns one’s back on the fivefold sensuality and does not delight in them anymore.¹¹¹

5. Is the aśubhā of the nature of an erroneous illusion?

From the above discussions, it should be abundantly clear that resolve (adhimukti/adhimokṣa), conceived as a specific mental force which enables the mind to be completely resolved and determined with regard to a particular state or mode of being of a phenomenon, is indispensable for any meditative practice involving visualization. This is particularly the case with the aśubhā. Another term of importance in the Abhidharma system of meditative praxis is “mental application” (manaskāra/ manasikāra). This term, as used in the context of meditation, however, is not necessarily confined to the specifically Abhidharma notion of its being one of the ten universal thought-concomitants (mahābhūmikadharm). In the meditative context here, it is to be understood as having
the sense of “meditative reflection”, as in: “one reflects properly (yoniśo manaskaroti)”. In the Sūtra, it is sometimes used in an even more general sense of “paying attention”, as when the Buddha says: “O bhikṣu-s, I shall teach you a doctrine ... So, listen, and pay attention well and properly (dharmaṃ vo bhikṣavo deśavisyāmi | ... tāc chrṇuta sādhu ca suṣṭhu ca manasikuruta)”. However, it would seem that, even in this context too, the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma treat mental application (as much as resolve) as that specified as a universal thoughtconcomitant. Thus, the MVŚ states, in the usual Abhidharmic manner, that “[the āsūbhā] is the non-greed conjoined with visualization (假想; saṃjñā), adhimukti and manaskāra (adhimukti-manaskāra) ...” 112

Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma distinguishes three types of mental application:113

I. Mental application to intrinsic characteristic (svalakṣana-manaskāra) — e.g., that which reflects: “rupa has the characteristic of deterioration and resistance (rupaṇa)”.

II. Mental application to common characteristic (sāmānyalakṣana-manaskāra) — that which is conjoined with the sixteen modes of understanding (ākāra) subsumed under the Four Noble Truths.

III. Mental application of resolve (adhimukti-manaskāra) — This is mental application that proceeds from adhimukti, on account of which one's mind becomes totally resolved, determined and convinced, with regard to a particular state of a given phenomenon that one has intended to experience.

I and II are called mental application to the real” (tattva-manaskāra) because they reflect on the real states of things. This is in contrast to III which is so specifically labeled because it makes the mind resolved and become convinced of a particular state which is other than the real or actual state/mode of a phenomena under investigation. It is of the nature of a constructive imagination, and is the sine qua non for the visualization in the āsūbhā, the four immeasurables (apramāna), the spheres of conquest, the spheres of totality, etc.

In the MVŚ, there are four opinions concerning the relationship between these three mental applications and the arising of the Noble Path, of which the compilers endorses the first: (i) Immediately after any of the three, the Noble Path can arise, and conversely. This conforms to the sūtra statement: “He develops the enlightenment-factor, mindfulness,
together with the \textit{aśubhā} (\textit{aśubhā-sahagataḥ smṛtibodhyāngam bhāvayati}); “together (\textit{saha})” meaning “immediately after (\textit{anantaram})”.  
(iii) Immediately after any of two types, the Noble Path can arise — excepting that to intrinsic characteristic. Immediately after the Noble Path, all three can arise. (iii) It is only after the \textit{sāmānyalakṣaṇa-manaskāra} that the Noble Path can arise. Immediately after the Noble Path, all three can arise. This does not contradict the above-mentioned \textit{sūtra}, because it says so on the basis of successive causation: \textit{adhimukti-manaskāra} induces \textit{sāmānyalakṣaṇa-manaskāra} which in turn induces the Noble Path. (iv) Immediately after \textit{sāmānyalakṣaṇa-manaskāra}, the Noble Path arises; and conversely.\textsuperscript{114}

It is clear that for the Sarvāstivāda, a meditation, such as the \textit{aśubhā}, which operates by virtue of a mental application of resolve, can lead to the attainment of spiritual fruition. In any case, although it is not a mental application to the real, it nonetheless is not an “illusion” in the ordinary sense — characterized by topsy-turvi-ness (\textit{viparyāsa}). An experience of the so-called “reality” is relative from the Buddhist point of view. The experience of a particular type of reality is that with which our consciousness is correlated at the corresponding level of insight. From this perspective, the genuine spiritual experiences in an \textit{adhimukti-manaskāra} meditation could (at least for an advanced meditator) be understood as one correlating to an even higher level of reality than that which is normally experienced by an unenlightened worldling in a non-concentrated (\textit{asamāhīta}) state of consciousness.

The conception of reality in the Mahāyāna Yogācāra particularly developed along this line of thinking. As a matter of fact, one of the major proofs for its central doctrine of “cognition-only” (\textit{vijñaptimātra}) is precisely based on the meditative experience of the \textit{aśubhā}. Asaṅga’s \textit{*Mahāyāna-saṃgraha} argues thus:

\begin{quote}
Through this scriptural authority (\textit{āgama}), the logical reasoning (\textit{yukti}) has also been shown. For, whatever knowable-image (\textit{shes ba'i gzugs brnyan; *jñeya-pratibimba}) — [a corpse] turning blackblue, etc., — that is seen, is none other than [one's own] \textit{citta} that is seen; it is not a distinct object (\textit{don gzhan; arthāntara}, black-blue, etc. By means of this logical reasoning, the \textit{bodhisattva} is able to infer, with regard to all cognitions (\textit{nam par rig pa; vijñapti} — i.e., all phenomenal existents),\textsuperscript{115} the fact of mere-cognition. ... By means
\end{quote}
of this reference, the fact of mere-cognition can be inferred by the bodhisattva even when he has not attained the knowledge of reality (de kho na shes pa; *tattva-jñāna).\textsuperscript{116}

A stanza in this text (in the Chinese, but not the Tibetan version) shows, once again, how important this meditative experience through resolve is, as a support of their doctrine of vijñaptimātra:

With regard to a given thing, the yogaścāra-s
Each generates a different resolve (adhimukti);
[Yet] each is able to accomplish what is [desired] to be seen.
It is thus known that the object grasped (grāhya) is nothing but mere-cognition.\textsuperscript{117}

At any rate, the Sarvāstivādins are quite articulate in their arguments that the meditative experience in the aśubhā is not an upside-down understanding in the ordinary sense. Whatever is upside-down is unskillful in nature and leads to defilements; but the aśubhā is morally skillful, being of the nature of non-greed, and in fact leads to spiritual attainment. Although it cannot actually abandon defilements (not being a mental application on the reals and not bearing on the totality of things), it is efficacious in their suppression.\textsuperscript{118} Moreover, what is seen in the aśubhā has a relative reality — not absolutely unreal — since it is ultimately based on some bodily parts that have been seen. In fact, for the Sarvāstivāda, no imagination or visualization is at all possible unless it is ultimately based on some reals. These standpoints are underscored in the following discussion in the MVŚ:

**Question:** The contemplation that the room is filled with bones, etc., — what does this aśubhā take as its cognitive objects?

**According to some:** It takes the bones, etc., in one’s own body as cognitive objects.

**According to others:** It has the bones, etc., that have been seen in a charnel ground.

**Another opinion:** It takes the matter, space-elements, in the room as its objects.

**Comment (of the compilers):** It should be explained thus: This is a visualization; there is no fault in the non-greed, conjoined with resolve and mental application, taking whatever cognitive object that it pleases.
KL DHAMMAJOTI: The aśubhā Meditation in the Sarvāstivāda

Question: This visualizes all that is non-skeleton, etc., as skeleton, etc., — is this not topsy-turvy (vīparītā)?

Answer: Even though it is not [an experience] of things truly as they are (yathābhūta), it is nevertheless not topsy-turvy for the following reasons: [i] it is skilful; [ii] it is brought about through proper mental application (yoniṣo maṇḍakṣāra); [iii] it has the skilful root, non-greed, as its intrinsic nature; [iv] it constitutes the preparatory practice (prayoga) for bringing about the Noble Path; [v] it can suppress defilements; [vi] it effects a desirable fruit (iṣṭa-phala).

According to some: This aśubhā is also said to be topsy-turvy, since it visualizes what are not impure as impure.

Question: If so, why is it not unskillful?

Answer: What is said to be unskillful is on account of two reasons: (1) topsy-turvy in respect of cognitive objects; (2) topsy-turvy in respect of intrinsic nature. This aśubhā is topsy-turvy in respect of cognitive objects, not in respect of intrinsic nature; hence it is not unskillful.

Moreover, what is said to be unskillful is on account of two reasons: (1) topsy-turvy in respect of cognitive objects; (2) topsy-turvy in respect of intention (āśaya). This aśubhā is topsy-turvy in respect of cognitive objects, not in respect of intention; hence it is not unskillful.

The following explanations by Saṃghabhadra may serve to further clarify some of the points briefly mentioned in the above discussion. In particular, Saṃghabhadra stresses that the aśubhā is not topsy-turvy because the visualization is done intentionally and with full awareness of its purpose. Moreover its practice actually yields a spiritually profitable outcome; it is a spiritually efficacious skill in means (巧方便; *upāya-kauśalya / kauśalya — an interesting usage by a non-Mahāyāna Abhidharmika), rather than an unskillful act:

In general, there are two types of aśubhā meditation, one relies on the reals belonging to oneself, the other relies on adhimukti. (i) The first type is the case where, by virtue of the understanding (prajñā) conjoined with mental application, one examines, truly as they are, the impurities of the internal bodily parts within oneself. ... Because it is conjoined with a mental application to intrinsic nature, it cannot result in the absolute abandonment of defilements. (ii) The type relying on adhimukti is the case where, by virtue of adhimukti, one visualizes the various

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impurities. This does not come under erroneous mental application, as it is opposed to the nature of defilements. In fact, what is erroneous/upside-down cannot accomplish what one has intended. This [type of contemplation] can subdue defilements according to one's intention. How is it erroneous?

It might be argued thus: Its object does not consist entirely of bones, and it is taken as being entirely bones — is this not upside-down? But this argument is not admissible, since this is a comprehension accordingly as the case actually is. That is: one who cognizes a man with regard to a post does not comprehend thus: “I am now seeing the appearance of a man with regard to the post.” — this is then upside-down. In this case, the meditator thinks thus: “Although the objects are not entirely bones, for the sake of subduing defilements, I should see them all as bones through adhimukti. Since he is comprehending accordingly as they actually are, in accordance with his intention, and is thus able to subdue the defilements, how can it be topsyturvy? The power of this contemplation can suppress the defilements rendering them incapable of manifestation for the time being — since it has such power of a skill in means, how can it be unskillful?

6. Concluding remarks

According to both the northern and Theravāda traditions, the practice of the asubhā had produced some undesirable effect on some monks who as a result committed suicide. This tradition notwithstanding, the survey above shows that the asubhā had continuously and consistently been emphasized in the general Buddhist tradition, and elaborately developed both doctrinally and as a system of meditative praxis. In this connection, the doctrine of a type of advanced practitioners, including arhat-s, called cetanā-dharman, is noteworthy. We have pointed out above that this doctrine is connected with the tradition concerning the asubhā. It suggests that among the ancient practitioners, there was (and will always be) a particular psychological type in whom the feeling of intense disgust generated from the asubhā could trigger off the thought of suicide. It is not the asubhā itself that was to be blamed for whatever negative effect it might induce. Seen from this perspective, we can understand why the ancient practitioners and the theoreticians seemed not only not to have shunned the meditation as undesirable, but also in fact continued to uphold its importance, prescribing it in various forms and numerous contexts.
It is taught that the *aśubhā*, though indispensably relying on *adhimokṣa* for its profound visualization, is not a case of cognitive error (topsy-turviness) which necessarily generates defilements and unsatisfactoriness. This is because it is practiced with a positive spiritual intention and proper awareness. Moreover it is skillful in nature, having as it does the skillful root, non-greed, as its intrinsic nature. Although it does not abandon defilements directly, it nonetheless suppresses them. It serves as a preparatory cultivation for not only the attainment of the first two *dhyāna*-s, but also of higher spiritual progress in general. Samghabhadra highlights the fact that such an experience, skillful in nature, based on awareness, and spiritually positively efficacious, can hardly be regarded as an illusion or being topsy-turvy in the ordinary sense.

The doctrine of the eight liberations and spheres of conquest, in which the *aśubhā* is followed by the practice of contemplation on the pure/beautiful is interesting. For one thing, it shows the profound wisdom and experience of the tradition of Buddhist meditation which prescribes the latter as a psychologically counteractive practice for, and transcendence of, the former which has been preoccupied with the experience of disgust. At the same time, both traditions agree in stating that the *aśubhā* itself (even without the counteraction of the *śubha* meditation), at its final stage of accomplishment, actually results in a positive state of ease, joy and calm. It is in fact for this reason that the *aśubhā* can serve as an important preparation for the entry into the first two *dhyāna*-s. According to Samghabhadra, it is a common assertion by the hermitage meditators that at that moment, “a sign of the beautiful” manifests spontaneously. It is probably this tradition of ancient *yogācāra*-s that came to prescribe the meditation on the pure — even outside the context of the eight liberations and spheres of conquest — at the last stage of the *aśubhā* contemplating on the white bones. It proceeds to be a visualization on a very grand and majestic scale: Light is visualized to emanate from the white bones, pervading everywhere, and with it is the manifestation of a host of signs of beauty, purity and adornment. The contemplation on the pure/beautiful has now become an integral part (no more just a counteraction) of the *aśubhā*; the contemplation on the impure and loathsome leads to the profound spiritual vision of the pure and beautiful.
DDS = *Dharmatrāṭa-dhyāna-sūtra 達摩多羅禪經 T15, no. 618.
DSŚ = Dharma-skandha-śāstra 阿毘達磨法藏足論 T26, no. 1537.
MVŚ = Abhidharma-mahāvibhāṣā 大毗婆沙論 T27, no. 1545.
Ny = *Nyāyānusāra 碧正理論 T29, no. 1562.
SgPŚ = Śāntiparīyāya-śāstra T26, no. 1536.
ŚrBh = Śrāvakabhūmi, the Second Chapter, revised Sanskrit Text and Japanese Translation. Śrāvakabūmi Study group, The Institute for Comprehensive Studies of Buddhism, Taishō University (Tokyo, 2007).
The fourfold samādhī-bhāvanā are: 1. that which conduces to the abandonment of greed (rāga-prahāna); 2. that which conduces to “happy dwelling in the present life”; 3. that which conduces to the obtaining of knowledge and vision (jñānadāraśana-pratilambha); 4. that which conduces to the obtaining of wisdom (prajñā-pratilambha).

The passage is quoted from AVN, 23–25: iha bhikṣavo bhikṣur aranyagato vā vṛkṣamūlagato vā śūnyāgāragato vā | imam eva kāyaṃ ārdhvaṃ yāvatpādatalādadhāḥ keśamastakāt
vatakaryantaṃ yathāvasthitam yathāprakāryādyāsucerc
yathābhūtam samyak prajñāyā pratyaveksate | santi asmin kāye keśā romāṇi nakhā dantā
rajo malam tvak maṃsaman asthi snāyu śirā vykkā hrdayam pitā klomakaṃ antrāṇī
antargūṇaṃ āmāsayaṃ pavāsaya udarāṃ yakt prūṣaṃ aṣrū svadā khedaḥ simhānaka
vasa laśikā mojjā medah pittaṃ ślesmāpiyaṃ sūrāntaṃ mastaṃkatam mastaṅkalūgam iti
pūrṇaṃ nāṇāprakāryādyāsucerc yathābhūtam pratyaveksate | tadyathā bhikṣava ubhayato
dvāravinirmukmatā kośṭhāgarāṃ paripūrṇaṃ nāṇāprakāryaṃ sasyajātasya dhārayat
ilasārayapamudgayaṃvijayannāṣāṃ | tac cakṣumāṃ puruṣo vyavolokaṃ jānāyād imāni
śakadhiyānta | imāni haladhānyāṇī ' evam eva bhikṣavo bhikṣur imam eva kāyam
yathāvasthitam yathāprakārayitaṃ yathā pratyaveksate | evaṃ bhikṣavaḥ samādhībhavānā
āśevita bhāvita bahulikāt kāmarāgaprabhānāya samvartate | Cf. also Majjhima-nikāya,
ī, 89 and 90 f; Digha, ii, Mahāsattipatākhiṇa-sutta, 293 f; Vism, 8.42 ff.
15 Also cf. notes 7 and 10.
16 MVŚ. 204a–b. 如契經說: 有諸苾芔, 居阿離若, 或在樹下, 或在靜室, 結加趺坐。端
身正願, 住對面念, 乃至廣説。 Cf. Majjhima-nikāya, iii, 89: idha bhikkhave bhikkhu
araṇṇāgata vā rukkhamūlagata vā suñīgaγāragata vā nisidati pallaṅkam abhujitvā uṣṭaṁ
kāyaṁ pāniḍhāya pariṅkākaṁ satim upāṭṭhapetvā ... 17 E.g., SgPŚ, T26, 407b: 結加趺坐, 端直其身, 拣異攀緣, 住對面念。
19 T7, no. 220, 980a.
20 MVŚ, 204a–c.
21 MVŚ, 204c.
22 Jñānaprasthāna-śāstra, 926c; MVŚ, 205a.
23 MVŚ, 205a.
24 MVŚ, 205a.
25 MVŚ, 205a–b.
26 Majjhima, iii, 89 ff.
27 MVŚ, 205b.
28 Majjhima, iii, 91: puna ca param bhikkhave bhikkhu seyyathāpi passeyya sarīram
sivāhikāyaṃ chadātāṃ, ekāhamatāṃ vā dvīhamatāṃ vā tihamatāṃ vā uddhumnataṃ
vinīlakam vipubbakajatam | so imam eva kāyam upasamharatā | E.g., Majjhima, i, 424; asubhaṃ rāhula bhāvanam bhāvethi | asubhaṃ hi te rāhula
bhāvanam bhāvayato yo rāgo so pahiṣṭati | E.g., Somyuktāgama, T2, 207b; Vinaya, iii, 69 f, Mahāvibhaṅga,
pāṛṣjikā III: te ca bhante bhikkhu ... anekākāravākāram asubhābhāvanānañjogam anuyuttā viharantī,
... te bhikkhū sthānā kāyaṃ aṭṭhānā harāṣyānā jhācchāntā attānā āśītā ājīvita
voroṣeṇi anāmaṇīṃ pa jīvita voropenti | sādhu bhante bhagava anāmaṇī pariṣṭhiyaṃ ācikkhato yathāyām bhikkhu-saṃgho anāmaṇī
saṁhaheyyā ti | bhagava bhikkhu āmantesi | āyam iha kho bhikkhave anāpānasati-
samādhi bhāvito bhāvita so ceto pāpiyato ca | Also cf. other Vinaya accounts preserved in Chinese: Mahāśāsaka-vinaya, T22, 7c;
Dharmagupta-vinaya, T22, 576b; Mahāsāṃghika-vinaya T22, 254c; Sarvāstivāda-
vinaya, T23, 8a–b; etc.
30 Also cf. notes 7 and 10.
Vinaya, iii, 69.

得道果. It is of course still debatable as to whether “fruit of the path” necessarily means arhat-hood. But the implication is strong when this narration is considered together with the Pāli version which speaks of the viññāga.

T22. No. 1421, 7b.

The six types of arhat-are: (1) parihāsa-dharman — those susceptible to retrogression. (2) cetanā-dharman. (3) anurakṣāya-dharman — those capable of preserving their spiritual attainment by constantly guarding against the loss of what they have attained. (4) šhitākampya — those who remain stable in their stage of attainment, with neither progress nor retrogression. (5) právedda-dharman — those capable of penetrating the state of the akopya-dharman arhat which they can attain quickly. (6) akopya-dharman — those of an unshakable nature; they are the highest type, not susceptible to retrogression. (MVŚ, 319c; etc.)

E. g., MVŚ, 320b.

The six types of arhat-s are: (1) pari|hāsa-dharman — those susceptible to retrogression. (2) cetanā-dharman. (3) anurakṣāya-dharman — those capable of preserving their spiritual attainment by constantly guarding against the loss of what they have attained. (4) šhitākampya — those who remain stable in their stage of attainment, with neither progress nor retrogression. (5) právedda-dharman — those capable of penetrating the state of the akopya-dharman arhat which they can attain quickly. (6) akopya-dharman — those of an unshakable nature; they are the highest type, not susceptible to retrogression. (MVŚ, 319c; etc.)
manasikaroti tadā varṇarāāgac cittam viśodhayati | yadda punar vilohitakam manasikaroti
tadā saṃsthānāragac cittam viśodhayati | yadda punar asthi va śaṅkalikām vāsthiśaṅkalikām
vā manasikaroti tadā sparśaṅgarāc cittam viśodhayati | yadda vikṣipatākam manasikaroti
tadopacāraraṅgarāc cittam viśodhayati | evam sa maithunāragac cittam viśodhayati ||

51 T28, no. 1548, 613a–614b.
52 此法本無而生，已生還滅。
53 T28, no. 1548, 614a–b.
54 The Dasuttara-sutta (Dīgha, iii, 289, 291) enumerates it under (nine and ten) things to
be produced (nava dhamma uppādetabbā, dasa dhamma uppādetabbā).
55 Vism, 341 ff.
56 SgPŚ, 423c–424a: “Why are these five called ‘ideations which bring liberation to
maturity’? Vimukti-s are threefold: citta-vimukti, prajñā-vimukti, asaṃskṛta-vimukti.
These five ideations generate the asaṃskṛta vimukti-s which have not yet been
generated, develop, consolidate and expand those which have been generated.
As a result, the asaṃskṛta vimukti-s come to be swiftly realized. For this reason, they
are called ideations which bring liberation to maturity’.”
57 SgPŚ, 423c.
58 In the Sarvāstivāda, a “mode of activity” is the mode in which a mental factor
understands its cognitive object; it is the thought-concomitant, prajñā.
59 MVŚ, 838a.
60 T28, 638a.
61 Dīgha, iii, 243.
62 In the Theravāda: Mahānīlā-sutta, Dīgha, ii, 70 f; Mahāparinibbāna-sutta,
Dīgha, ii, 111 f; Mahāsakuludāyi-sutta, Majjhima, ii, 12 f; Atthasālinī, 190; etc.
In the Sarvāstivāda, references are numerous, especially in the Abhidharma texts:
Dirghāgama, T1490c, 489b; Madhyamāgama, T1, 582a, 694a f; SgPŚ, T26, 443a-b,
Prokaraṇa-pāda, T26, 712c–712a; MVŚ, 434b–c; *Sāriputrabhidharma, T28,
639c–642a; *Amṛtarasa-śāstra, T28, 976a; etc.
63 Atthasālinī, 190. The *Sāriputrabhidharma’s explanation (T28, 639c640a) is close to
this: 心向彼，尊上懷，傾同彼；以彼解脫。
64 T28, 640a: 何謂得解脫？心，句句，尊上彼，傾句彼，以彼為解脫。是名解脫。
65 MVŚ, 727a.
66 AKB, 455.
67 MVŚ, 434b–c. Other explanations are also cited therein.
68 Majjhima, ii, 12 f.
69 Pañcasūdāna, iii, 255: ettha ajjhatoṃ keśādisu niṣakasiṇādīvasena uppāditam
(rūpajñāhāmaṃ) rūpaṃ tad assa atthi ti rāpi|
Atthasālinī, 190 f.
70 Loc. cit. ajjhatoṃ nīlā-parikammam karonto kese vā pitte vā akkhitaśrakaya vā karoti
pitakaparikammam karonto medde vā chaviyā vā akkhīnaṃ pitakaśthāne vā karoti
lohitaparikammam karonto manse vā lohite vā jivhāya vā hathatalapādātesu vā
akkhīnaṃ rathaśthāne vā karoti | odātaparikammam karonto aththimhi vā dante vā nakhe
vā akkhīnaṃ setakaśthāne vā karoti evam parikammam katvā uppannajñāhānasamaññānaṃ
sandhāy etēm vuttaṁ | rūpāni passati ti | bhādhaṁ pī ṇilakasiañādi-rūpāni jhāna-cakkhunā
passati | iminā ajhhatabahiḍhā-vatthukesu kasiṁsu jhānapatiñābhō dassito |

72 Ny, 722b-c.
73 Papancaśūlani, 256; Athasālini, 191.
74 Mahāparinibbāna-sutta, Dīgha, Mahāsakuludāyī-sutta, Majjhima, ii, 13 f; Dhammasaṅgataṁ, 223 f; Athasālini, 187 ff; etc.
76 T26, no. 1542, 713a: नैं नैं नैं नैं नैं नैं नैं नैं नैं नैं नैं नैं नैं नैं नैं नैं नैं नैं नैं नैं नैं नैं नैं नैं नैं नैं नैं नैं नैं नैं नैं नैं नैं नैं नैं नैं नैं नैं नैं
77 AKB, 456: कामवासाम etām rūpāyatanam ālambanam manojoṇam ca yathāyogam. The spheres of conquest, though similar to the liberations, are distinguished from the latter: In the latter, one is only liberated in the sense of being able to turn one’s back on the objects. In the former, one conquers the objects and attains mastery over them — One can resolve on the object as one wishes, and no defilement will arise with regard to the object. (AKB, 457: etbhīsv alāmbanābhīdhavananam yatheccham adhimokṣāt klesānupādāc ca.)
78 Vy, 689.
79 See the remarks in the Pāli-English Dictionary (PTS) on the fluctuating connotation of this term as a colour.
80 SaPS, T26. 443a-c.
81 Also cf. AKB, 455: prathamau dvau vimokṣayā aśubhā svabhāvau
82 Also see MVŚ, 873b; AKB, 457.
84 T2, no. 125, 780a: 其有修行十想者，便盡有漏，獲神通證，漸至涅槃。云何為十？所謂：白骨想、青瘀想、漿想、食不消想、血想、嚼想、有常無常想、食食想、死想，一切世間不可樂想。However, in this sūtra itself different sets of 10 are given — cf. 780a, 789b.
85 MVŚ, 836c. The *Amratarasa-śāstra (T28, no. 1553, 975b) gives exactly the same items, except that the order of items 4, 5, 6 and 7 are different. It likewise states that “one who constantly recollects on these 10 saṁjñā-s makes an end to duṣkha.”
86 MVŚ, 837a-c. I have here given only a few selected explanations.
88 MVŚ, 206c: “It has, as its intrinsic nature, the skilful root (kusala-mūla), non-greed. According to the meditators (修定者), it has understanding (prajñā) as its intrinsic nature (this view is shared by the author of the *Dharmarātā-dhyāna-sūtra — T15, 316b: 修禪所起慧，不濁觀一智.) … According to other masters, it has disgust (厭; *nirveda) as its intrinsic nature.”
MVŚ, 208a–c.

T28, 636c–637a.

Dīgha, iii, 104 f.

AKB, 338; MVŚ, 205a–206c.

MVŚ, 205b.

AKB, 338.

MVŚ, 205b–c. Other reasons for the repeated contemplations in details and brevity are also given (205c).

MVŚ, 206a–c. Four other views on the distinction among the three stages are given.

Athasālinī, 199 f: paṭikkāle pi c'etasmin ārammane addhā imāya patipadāya jatānaranamā patićcissāmī ti evam ānisamśadassāvitāya ceva nīvaraṇa-santāpappahāṇena ca pīti somanassam uppajjati, bhun dāni vetanaṃ labhiśāmī ti ānisamśadassāvino papphacchādākassa gūtharāsimhi viya upasanta vyādhiśukkhassa rogino vamanāvirecanappavattiyāṃ viya ca

Ny, 672a.

MVŚ, 434c.

AKB, 456: “Why is there no liberation [designated] in the third dhyāna? Because of the absence of greed for matter pertaining to the stage of the second dhyāna [wherein bodily consciousness is absent], and because of being agitated by the highest of all happiness.” (kāśmīr na tūye dhīyāne vimokṣaḥ | dvītyadhyānabhūmika-varṇaraṅgābhāvāt sukhamanḍeṇijitavāc ca)

MVŚ, 436b–c.

Other examples include the meditations called the four immeasurables: loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity. Cf. Saṃyutta, v, 119: “I say, bhikkhus, that the liberation of the mind in the form of loving-kindness (mettā-cetovimutti) has the beautiful as culmination (subha-paramā).” The positive 12-link conditionality expounded in the upanisā-sutta of the Saṃyutta-nikāya — starting from the experience of suffering to faith to joy, etc., moving upwards to final emancipation — is yet another important demonstration.

MVŚ, 436b–c.

Cf. Vism, 88; *Vimuktimārga, T32, 417c.

階級夫第上. Or: “There are stairs going up progressively” (?)

T15, 316b–c. Yin Shun is of the opinion that such descriptions suggest mutual influence between the Sarvāstivādin Śrāvakayāna yogācāra-s and the tranic yogācāra-s emerging around the same period. They may also suggest the common source of the two meditation traditions which later came to develop separately. See Yin Shun, A Study of the Śāstras and Ācāryas: With Special Reference to the Sarvāstivāda School (Taipei, 1968), 629 ff.

T15, no. 614, 272a. See also, 禪秘要法論, T15, no. 613, 244b ff; 思維略要法, T15, no. 617, 298c–299a.

Vimokṣa is rendered here by its gloss 背捨 (vaimukhya).

For an account of the 10 kṛtsnāyatana-s, see AKB, 457; etc.

Blue colours like 金精山. The Chinese term here is unclear to me.
There is some ambiguity here as to whether *adhimukti-manaskāra* is to be read as a coordinate (*dvanda*) or a determinative (*tadpurusa*) compound. Another possible translation would be: “This is a visualization; [it is] the non-greed, conjoined with resolve and mental application ...” See also below, for a fuller quote of this passage.

The *Mahāyāna-samgraha* classifies all phenomenal existents as being equally cognitions (*vijñapti*).

Text quoted from G. Nagao, ed., *THEG PA CHEN PO BSDUS PA*, 62–64; included in his *Mahāyana-samgraha* — *Japanese translation and Annotation* (Tokyo, 1982), Vol. one: Lung ’dis rigs pa yang bstan pa yin no | ‘di liar sms mnyam pa bzhag pa na shes bya’i gzugs brnyan rnam par bsgos pa la sogs pa gang dang gang mthong ba de dang de nnyid sms mthong ba ste , rnam par bsgos pa la sogs pa don gzhon med do | ‘rigs pa ’dis byang chub sms dpa’ rnam par rig pa thams cad la rnam par rig pa tsam nyyid du rjes su dpag par bya bar 'os so | ... rjes su dpag pa ’dis byang chub sms dpa’ de kho na shes pas ma sad pas kyang rnam par rig pa tsam du rjes su dpag par bya’o |