



WISDOM ACADEMY

The Three Turnings of the Wheel of Dharma

JAY GARFIELD & GUY NEWLAND

Lesson 2:
First Turning: Sutta Foundations

Reading:
*The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the
Samyutta Nikāya*, translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi.
Fire Sutta (SN 35.28)

THE TEACHINGS OF THE BUDDHA

The
Connected
Discourses
of the
Buddha



A Translation of the
Samyutta Nikāya



Translated from the Pāli

by

Bhikkhu Bodhi



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Introduction

35. *Salāyatanaśaṃyutta*

The *Salāyatanaśaṃyutta* draws together a vast assortment of texts dealing with the six internal and external sense bases. Though most of these are very short, a few, especially towards the end, tend to approach the size of the shorter discourses in the *Majjhima Nikāya*. To organize such a large number of suttas into a convenient format, the *śaṃyutta* is divided into four *paññāsakas*, sets of fifty. While the first three sets of fifty actually contain roughly fifty suttas each, the fourth has ninety-three, including a single *vagga* (among four) with a full sixty suttas! This is the “Sixtyfold Repetition Series,” a compilation of sixty extremely brief suttas grouped into batches of three. If each of the

triplets were to be compressed into a single sutta, as Feer has done in Ee, we would then get a vagga of twenty suttas, the number counted by Feer. But Be and Se, followed here, count the triplets as three individual suttas, thus yielding sixty suttas, a total supported by the title of the vagga. Principally on account of this difference in the treatment of the repetition series, Ee has a total of 207 suttas while the present translation has 248; the additional difference of one obtains because Feer has combined two suttas which clearly should have been kept distinct.

On first consideration, it would seem that the six internal and external sense bases should be understood simply as the six sense faculties and their objects, with the term *āyatana*, base, having the sense of origin or source. Though many suttas lend support to this supposition, the Theravāda exegetical tradition, beginning already from the Abhidhamma period, understands the six pairs of bases as a complete scheme of classification capable of accommodating all the factors of existence mentioned in the Nikāyas. This conception of the six bases probably originated from the Sabba Sutta (35:23), in which the Buddha says that the six pairs of bases are “the all” apart from which nothing at all exists. To make the six bases capable of literally incorporating everything, the *Vibhaṅga* of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka defines the mind base (*manāyatana*) as including all classes of consciousness, and the mental phenomena base (*dhammāyatana*) as including the other three mental aggregates, subtle nonsensuous types of form, and even the unconditioned element, Nibbāna (see Vibh 70–73).

Seen from this angle, the six internal and external sense bases offer an alternative to the five aggregates as a scheme of phenomenological classification. The relationship between the two schemes might be seen as roughly analogous to that between horizontal and vertical cross-sections of an organ, with the analysis by way of the aggregates corresponding to the horizontal slice, the analysis by way of the six sense bases to the vertical slice (see Table 6). Thus, we are told, on an occasion of visual cognition, eye-consciousness arises in dependence on the eye and forms; the meeting of the three is contact; and with contact as condition there arise feeling, perception, and volition. Viewing this experience “vertically” by way of the sense bases, the eye and visible forms are each a separate base, respectively the eye base and the form base; eye-consciousness belongs to the mind

base; and eye-contact, feeling, perception, and volition are all assigned to the mental phenomena base. Then, using the scalpel of thought to cut “horizontally” across the occasion of visual cognition, we can ask what is present from the form aggregate? The eye and a visible form (and the body as the physical basis of consciousness). What from the feeling aggregate? A feeling born of eye-contact. What from the perception aggregate? A perception of a visible form. What from the aggregate of volitional formations? A volition regarding a form. And what from the consciousness aggregate? An act of eye-consciousness.

TABLE 6

An Occasion of Visual Cognition in Terms
of the Aggregates and Sense Bases

Aggregates	Visual Cognition	Sense Bases
form	<i>eye</i> <i>form</i>	eye base form base
consciousness	<i>eye-consciousness</i>	mind base
(volitional formations)	<i>eye-contact</i>	mental phenomena base
feeling	<i>feeling born of eye-contact</i>	mental phenomena base
perception	<i>perception of form</i>	mental phenomena base
volitional formations	<i>volition regarding form</i>	mental phenomena base

Note: Contact (*phassa*) is classified in the aggregate of volitional formations in the Abhidhamma and the commentaries, though in the Nikāyas it is not explicitly assigned a place among the five aggregates.

Strangely, though some connection between the aggregates and sense bases, as just sketched, is already suggested in at least two suttas (35:93, 121), the Nikāyas do not explicitly correlate the two schemes. Conscious correlation begins only with the Abhidhamma Piṭaka, especially in the opening sections of the *Dhātukathā*, which reflects the attempt of the early Buddhist community to merge the more pragmatic schemes of the suttas into a single all-inclusive system that assigned to every element a precisely defined place.

Nevertheless, though this treatment of the sense bases stems from an early period, the Nikāyas themselves usually present the six pairs of sense bases not as a complete phenomenological scheme but as starting points for the genesis of cognition. Often, because of their role in mediating between consciousness and its objects, the internal bases are spoken of as the “bases for contact” (*phassāyatana*). If this interpretation is adopted, then mind (*mano*), the base for the arising of mind-consciousness (*manoviññāna*), probably denotes the passive flow of mind from which active cognition emerges, and *dhammā* the nonsensuous objects of consciousness apprehended by introspection, imagination, and reflection.

As with the aggregates, so with the sense bases, concern with their classification and interactions is governed not by an interest in theoretical completeness but by the practical exigencies of the Buddha’s path aimed at liberation from suffering. The sense bases are critically important because it is through them that suffering arises (35:106). Even more, it is said that the holy life is lived under the Buddha for the full understanding of suffering, and if others should ask what is the suffering that should be fully understood, the correct answer is that the eye and forms, the ear and sounds, etc., and all phenomena derived from them, are the suffering that should be fully understood (35:81, 152).

The main pragmatic concern with the sense bases is the eradication of clinging, for like the aggregates the sense bases serve as the soil where clinging takes root and thrives. Because clinging originates from ignorance and craving, and because ignorance sustains clinging by weaving its web of the triple delusion—permanence, happiness, and self—we find in the *Saḷāyatana-saṃyutta* almost all the familiar templates used in the *Khandha-saṃyutta*; often, in fact, these templates are here applied twice to generate parallel suttas for the internal and external sense bases. Thus, to dispel ignorance and generate true knowledge, we repeatedly hear the same melodies, in a slightly different key, reminding us that the sense bases and their derivatives are impermanent, suffering, and nonself; that we must discern the gratification, danger, and escape in regard to the sense bases; that we should abandon desire and lust for the sense bases.

However, despite large areas of convergence between the two *saṃyuttas*, the *Saḷāyatana-saṃyutta* introduces several new per-

spectives that bear on the sense bases but have no exact parallels in relation to the aggregates. Thus the *saṃyutta* includes a long chain of twenty suttas which expose the flaws in conditioned existence, summed up under the caption “the all.” All, it is said, is subject to birth, aging, sickness, death, and so forth, and the all is nothing other than the sense bases and the mental processes arising from them (35:33–42). Several suttas in this chapter identify the six sense bases with the world, because the world (*loka*) is whatever disintegrates (*lujjati*), and because in the Noble One’s Discipline the world is understood as “that in the world by which one is a perceiver and conceiver of the world” (35:82, 84, 116). In one sutta the question is raised why the world is said to be empty (*suñña*), and the answer given is because the six bases are empty of a self and of what belongs to self (35:85). No parallels to these discourses are found in the *Khandhasaṃyutta*. This *saṃyutta* also describes the six internal sense bases as “old kamma” (35:146), which could not be said so plainly about the aggregates, for they comprise both kammically active and resultant phases of experience. We further find here that greater stress is placed on “conceiving” (*mañña*), the distorted cognitions influenced by craving, conceit, and views, with several discourses devoted to the methods of contemplation for uprooting all conceivings (35:30–32, 90–91). The entire *saṃyutta* ends with a masterly discourse in which the Buddha urges the monks to uproot conceiving in all its guises (35:248).

Although the aggregates and sense bases jointly serve as the domain of craving and wrong views, a difference in emphasis can be discerned in the way the two *saṃyuttas* connect these two defilements to their respective domains. The *Khandhasaṃyutta* consistently treats the aggregates as the objective referent of identity view (*sakkāyadiṭṭhi*), the views that seek to give substance to the idea of a self. When the *puthujjana* or “worldling” fashions a view about his or her identity, he or she always does so in relation to the five aggregates. We do not find any parallel text expressing identity view in terms of the sense bases. This difference in emphasis is understandable when we realize that the scheme of the aggregates spans a wider spectrum of categories than the sense bases themselves and therefore offers the worldling more variety to choose from when attempting to give substance to the notion of “my self.” This, it must be stressed,

indicates a difference in emphasis, not a fundamental doctrinal difference, for the sense bases can be grasped upon with the notions “This is mine, this I am, this is my self” just as tenaciously as the aggregates can. Thus we even find a series of three suttas which state that contemplating the sense bases as impermanent, suffering, and nonself leads respectively to the abandoning of wrong view, identity view, and view of self (35:165–67). However, as a general rule, the sense bases are not taken up for a thematic exposition of identity view in the way the five aggregates are, which is certainly significant. We see too that the entire *Diṭṭhisamyutta*, on the diversity of views, traces all these views to a misapprehension of the aggregates, not of the sense bases.

In relation to the sense bases the interest in views recedes into the background, and a new theme takes centre stage: the need to control and master the senses. It is the sense faculties that give us access to the agreeable and disagreeable phenomena of the world, and it is our spontaneous, impulsive responses to these phenomena that sow the seeds of so much suffering. Within the untrained mind lust, hatred, and delusion, the three roots of evil, are always lying latent, and with delusion obscuring the true nature of things, agreeable objects are bound to provoke lust and greed, disagreeable objects hatred and aversion. These spontaneous reactions flood the mind and bid for our consent. If we are not careful we may rush ahead in pursuit of immediate gratification, oblivious to the fact that the fruit of sensual enjoyment is misery (see 35:94–98).

To inculcate sense restraint, the *Salāyatanaṅga* makes constant use of two formulas. One is the stock description of sense restraint (*indriyaṅvara*) usually embedded in the sequence on the gradual training, common in the *Dīgha Nikāya* (e.g., at I 70) and the *Majjhima Nikāya* (e.g., at I 180–81). This formula enjoins the practice of sense restraint to keep the “evil unwholesome states of covetousness and displeasure” from invading the mind. In the present chapter it occurs at 35:120, 127, 239, 240, and elsewhere. The second formula posits a contrast between one who is “intent upon a pleasing form and repelled by a displeasing form” and one who is not swayed by these pairs of opposites. The latter has set up mindfulness of the body, dwells with a measureless mind, and understands the “liberation of mind, liberation by wisdom” where the evil states of lust and

aversion cease without remainder. This formula is found at 35:132, 243, 244, and 247. Though no explicit doctrinal allocations are made for these two formulas, it seems the first is prescribed in general for a bhikkhu in the initial stages of training, while the second describes the sense restraint of the trainee (*sekha*), one at a minimal level of stream-enterer, perhaps too the natural sense restraint of the arahant.

The practice of sense restraint is necessary in the Buddhist training, not only to avoid the mental distress provoked here and now by attachment and aversion, but for a reason more deeply connected to the ultimate aim of the Dhamma. The doctrine of dependent origination reveals that craving is the propelling cause of suffering, and craving springs up with feeling as its proximate cause. Feeling occurs in the six sense bases, as pleasant, painful, and neutral feeling, and through our unwholesome responses to these feelings we nourish the craving that holds us in bondage. To gain full deliverance from suffering, craving must be contained and eradicated, and thus the restraint of the senses becomes an integral part of the discipline aimed at the removal of craving.

There is also a cognitive side to the teaching on sense restraint. Craving and other defilements arise and flourish because the mind seizes upon the “signs” (*nimitta*) and “features” (*anubyañjana*) of sensory objects and uses them as raw material for creating imaginative constructs, to which it clings as a basis for security. This process, called mental proliferation (*papañca*), is effectively synonymous with conceiving (*maññanā*). These constructs, created under the influence of the defilements, serve in turn as springboards for still stronger and more tenacious defilements, thus sustaining a vicious cycle. To break this cycle, what is needed as a preliminary step is to restrain the senses, which involves stopping at the bare sensum, without plastering it over with layers of meaning whose origins are purely subjective. Hence the Buddha’s instructions to the bhikkhu Māluṅkyaputta, “In the seen there will be merely the seen,” and the beautiful poem the bhikkhu composes to convey his understanding of this maxim (35:95; see too 35:94).

This aspect of sense restraint receives special emphasis in the last two vaggas of the Saḷāyatanaṣaṃyutta, which stand out by reason of their startling imagery and extended similes. Here the

six sense faculties are spoken of as an ocean, the sense objects as their current, and the faring along the spiritual path as a voyage in which we are exposed to dangers that we can only surmount by sense restraint (35:228). Again, agreeable sense objects are like baited hooks cast out by Māra; one who swallows them comes under Māra's control; one who resists them escapes unharmed (35:230). It is better, we are told, to have our sense faculties lacerated by sharp instruments, hot and glowing, than to become infatuated with attractive sense objects; for such infatuation can lead to rebirth in the lower realms (35:235). Our existential condition is depicted by the parable of a man pursued by four vipers, five murderous enemies, and an assassin, his only means to safety a handmade raft (35:238). A bhikkhu in training should draw his senses inward as a tortoise draws its limbs into its shell, for Māra is like a hungry jackal trying to get a grip on him (35:240). The six senses are like six animals each drawn to their natural habitat, which must be tied by the rope of sense restraint and bound to the strong post of body-directed mindfulness (35:247). The *saṃyutta* ends with a parable about the magical bonds of the asura-king Vepacitti and sounds a decisive call to eliminate all modes of conceiving rooted in craving and wrong views (35:248).

28 (6) *Burning*

On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling at Gayā, at Gayā's Head, together with a thousand bhikkhus. There the Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus thus:¹³

"Bhikkhus, all is burning. And what, bhikkhus, is the all that is burning? The eye is burning, forms are burning, eye-consciousness is burning, eye-contact is burning, and whatever feeling arises with eye-contact as condition—whether pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant—that too is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of lust, with the fire of hatred, with the fire of delusion; burning with birth, aging, and death; with sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair, I say.

"The ear is burning ... [20] ... The mind is burning ... and whatever feeling arises with mind-contact as condition—whether pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant—that too is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of lust, with the fire of hatred, with the fire of delusion; burning with birth, aging, and death; with sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair, I say.

"Seeing thus, bhikkhus, the instructed noble disciple experiences revulsion towards the eye, towards forms, towards eye-consciousness, towards eye-contact, towards whatever feeling arises with eye-contact as condition—whether pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant; experiences revulsion towards the ear ... towards the mind ... towards whatever feeling arises with mind-contact as condition.... Experiencing revulsion, he becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion [his mind] is liberated. When it is liberated there comes the knowledge: 'It's liberated.' He understands: 'Destroyed is birth, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more for this state of being.'"

This is what the Blessed One said. Elated, those bhikkhus delighted in the Blessed One's statement. And while this discourse was being spoken, the minds of the thousand bhikkhus were liberated from the taints by nonclinging.