Sense Contact - The Six Sense Spheres

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Tonight's talk is on the six sense spheres.

You may remember that in the final section of the Satipatthana Sutta, the section on Dhammas, the Buddha asks us to contemplate various of his teachings. He starts with the hindrances, then the khandas or aggregates, which we looked at last night. Next, he lists the six sense spheres.

All of these direct our attention to the origin and nature of suffering and offer us means of escape, but each in their own unique way.

The teaching on the hindrances asks us to get to know the moment-to-moment experience of the forces that disturb our peace of mind. We become familiar with their physical and mental expression. The more deeply we know them, the less they dominate us. Our bodies may vibrate with their energy, we perceive how they are tempting us, but we can make an independent decision about how to act. At times, we may decide to use the energetic pathways they stimulate—for example, to use aversion to invigorate assertiveness when we're feeling threatened, or use desire to enthuse us to accomplish something beneficial. At other times it's a question of letting go of their energy moment after moment until this episode of the hindrance burns itself out.

This first of the Dhammas listed in the Satipatthana Sutta shows us a very immediate and dynamic method of freeing ourselves from suffering. The teaching of the hindrances can be likened to skills training for a spiritual warrior.

By contrast, I think of the next teaching as a more composed enterprise, such as a scientific expedition. This is the teaching on the khandas, the five aggregates of clinging. We're not being threatened by a hindrance here, but we're deliberately bringing ourselves into the zone of their influence in order to get a feel for what binds us to suffering. We let attention dwell on our bodies, for example, to experience how we get drawn into anxieties as the tendency to think of this as "my body" comes to mind. One moment the breath is registered as simply a physical sensation. The next moment we've added a lorryload of meaning to this, all tethered to thoughts of me and mine. Similarly for all the other khandas—we experience their allure and then the pain of entrapment. And we say to ourselves, "I'm not going to get caught like that again." Thus, the study of the khandas strengthens the wisdom we need to avoid new entanglements with dukkha.

The teaching on the six sense spheres also has the nature of scientific inquiry. This time, the focus is not just on how we tend to get trapped, which is what we're studying in the khandas, but equally on finding

the moment-to-moment pathway to freedom. The sense spheres direct our attention to the boundary between our internal subjective world and the external objective world. Resting attention here, we can experience the draw towards clinging and dukkha and the possibility of freedom and release. This is the choice on offer to us at each moment of sense contact. The better we get at recognizing these pathways, the more easily we choose the pathway to freedom.

As with the teaching on the hindrances, this teaching on the sense spheres offers us a very dynamic, immediate tool for moment-to-moment release from suffering. In the case of the hindrances, we've been caught in a thick bramble of dukkha and we're fighting our way clear. In the case of the sense spheres, we're brushing up against a thicket and finding out how to steer clear. We're releasing ourselves from the delusion that lets us get caught in the first place.

The spheres are made up of the five physical senses: sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch. These can all be described as doorways connecting us to the external world of visible objects, sounds, flavours, aromas, and tactile sensations. Normally when we say "sixth sense" we mean an intuition or gut feeling, something outside of the normal sensory realm. But in Buddhism, the sixth sense is the doorway to the ordinary experiences of thought, memory, and emotion. The sixth sense sphere comprises the conscious mind and the sense object that the mind perceives.

This is how the Buddha advises us to contemplate the sense spheres: "How does one contemplate Dhammas in terms of the six sense spheres? One knows the eye and forms, and the fetter that arises dependent on both. One knows the ears and sounds, and the fetter that arises dependent on both." And so on for all the six senses.

We'll come to the fetter in a moment, but first let's look at the guidance to know the eye and visible objects, the ear and sounds. This may sound pretty straightforward, but in fact it points us towards quite a mysterious aspect of life, one which has puzzled scientists and sages for centuries. Normally, we would only be aware of the forms, sounds, and so forth. We see a cat, we hear a bell. But when we're being mindful of the sense spheres, we also know we are seeing and hearing. This makes us more aware of sense contact as the interface between our inner and outer worlds. It helps break down the illusion of separation.

The cat isn't just out there. I am seeing it. I've let it into my mind where it can generate all kinds of thoughts and feelings about cats. I might not want to think any of these thoughts, but I can't help it now that the cat's got in.

I sensed this one time as I was meditating and became aware of a bird singing. It was a blackbird. You know the way they whistle a tune and after a pause, a different one. I noticed how my mood lightened each time I heard the notes and how eagerly I was anticipating the next trill during the pauses. Suddenly the thought occurred to me: Where is the bird?

Is he in here or out there? Intellectually, of course, I knew the bird was outside of me. But I'd suddenly realised the key role I was playing in our interaction. It was my ears and my brain that were doing all their magical processing work to detect the sound and register it in my mind. So it seemed we were both co-creators of the sound.

This gave me a graphic illustration of the Buddha's teaching on the sense spheres and how attending carefully to our sense data can break down the illusion of there being a "me" who is in here, in control of my world, and totally separate from the world out there. On top of that, it seemed the bird was determining my moods and thoughts. When he chose to sing, I would feel glad. When he chose to pause, I would start getting a bit anxious. So from the emotional point of view, he was in charge, not me.

Both of these insights gave me tiny glimpses of the Buddha's teaching on anattā—that the sense of ourselves as permanent, substantial, and in control of our lives is an illusion. Listening mindfully to that bird song had taught me that there wasn't any clear dividing line between myself and the blackbird.

I had a similar experience one time, gazing at a Buddha rūpa. I was alone in the meditation hall, and for a while I was seeing the rūpa in quite an ordinary way. Then suddenly, though I was still gazing at the image, my attention was drawn to the "me" who was gazing. Again I sensed the very active part I was playing in the process of seeing. Though the rūpa was out there, it needed my attention to create the image that my consciousness was registering.

I sensed my attention as creative, a form of goodwill. By choosing to attend to the Buddha rūpa, I was bringing this image into being for myself. At that moment I couldn't tell whether the image was really out there or whether my attention was actually creating the image and just imagining it to be out there. I realised that my subjective experience of the world could not be separated from what I normally thought of as the objective world out there.

Curiously, I had experienced this insight as a child, wondering if other people really existed when I wasn't looking at them. I spent a while peeping through keyholes, wondering if I could catch them magically coming into existence so as to perform for me. But after a while I realised that I could never catch them out that way. The moment I had seen them, it was already too late for my experiment.

In Zen, the puzzle is captured in the story of two monks who are looking at a flag waving in the breeze and arguing about whether it is the flag or the wind that is moving. The teacher intervenes, saying, "Neither the flag nor the wind are moving. It is only your minds that are moving."

The conundrum has been debated in Western philosophy since it was posed by George Berkeley and is expressed in the question: If a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it, does it make a sound? The question has puzzled physicists as well. A conversation between Albert Einstein and Niels Bohr is recorded where Einstein asked Bohr whether the moon exists when no one is looking at it. Bohr replied that no matter how hard he tried, he could not prove that it did exist.

Einstein and Bohr's interest in the question would have been stirred by a recent peculiar finding in quantum physics, termed the observer effect. It applies to small subatomic particles that are the building blocks of our physical reality—electrons and protons, for example. If you try to describe any of these according to its quantum equation, what you find is that it has the potential to be almost anywhere in the universe. The act of observation changes all that. It forces the particle to show up somewhere or other.

This was first detected for electrons, those tiny particles that flow in every electrical current. If you try to pin down an electron and detect whether it goes through one specific place or another, it will behave as you expect and go through one pathway or the other. But if you don't switch on your detectors so you don't know which pathway it went through, it will behave as if it has simultaneously gone through both.

Weird as this sounds, the phenomenon underlies your cell phone and remote control and almost every device you use nowadays. Basically, quantum mechanics describes what Einstein called a very spooky world. Matter can be anywhere and everywhere at once. It can penetrate through solid barriers. Particles make instantaneous communication with one another even over vast distances. And the observer effect, taken literally, implies that subjective observation may actually be playing a huge role in determining the physical state of the world.

Quantum physics describes a world which no one truly knows how to interpret. Most mainstream scientists ignore the deeper questions and follow Dirac's injunction to "shut up and calculate"—and perhaps I should also follow their lead and leave off trying to explain that spooky quantum world. But it is a big draw for me, and as the teaching on the six sense spheres directs our attention to that mysterious interface between subjectivity and objectivity, which has also been thrown up by quantum physics, I couldn't resist the temptation. I hope that drawing your attention to the mystery might entice you to rest attention at sense contact and let curiosity and wonder maintain your meditation on this so common aspect of life that we so easily skip over.

However, let's go back to the teaching on the sense spheres. The Buddha taught that four things are needed in order to make sense contact. Two are part of the external world: the sense object itself—the sound, the aroma, the visible form—and the medium that enables this to be sensed. For example, we need light to see a visible object; we won't see in the dark. The other components needed for sense contact are internal. We need our sensory apparatus—our eyes, ears, and so forth. Finally, we need attention.

This was what had struck me so forcibly when I looked at the Buddha Rupa. I realised my attention was a central and necessary part of the image I was seeing.

Thus, the sense spheres form that link between our internal world and the external world. The Buddha doesn't comment on the question of whether consciousness affects the external world. His focus is not on philosophy, but on the possibility of freeing ourselves from dukkha. But he certainly wants us to link the external and the internal. He doesn't want us to think in terms of cats and blackbirds and Buddha Rupas as objects out there. He wants us to experience how our attention and sense organs combine with these to

bring about sense contact. He wants us to experience the meeting point of the internal and external world.

Sometimes the use of the passive voice in our noting words can help here. Instead of saying "hearing, hearing" as we listen to birdsong, we can say "sound being heard." This is a more awkward phrase, but it helps us to take in the subjectivity of our experience. It directs attention to the all-important but ever-so-quiet knowing aspect of our experience. Our fascination with the external world of sounds and sights might fade for a while as we get drawn toward the mystery of consciousness itself.

To deepen our understanding of the internal factors underlying sense contact, let's go back to the wheel of dependent origination. The sense spheres form the midsection of the wheel, and it's the first half of the wheel that describes our subjective role in sense contact.

It all starts with avijja, our misunderstanding about what leads to happiness and what leads to suffering. Avijja, ignorance, forms the breeding ground for unwholesome sankaras. Sankaras are the habits of mind which push us into and through our lives. In order to exercise their driving power, they need to become conscious. The third link in the wheel lets us become conscious of the sankara rooted in ignorance.

For consciousness to manifest in the world, we need both body and mind. Our bodies are part of the physical world of matter; our minds inhabit the world of thought and imagination. The pair are termed nama-rupa and form the fourth link in the wheel. Thus our sankara habit drives our body as well as our mind. If we are habitually angry, our jaws and teeth may be clenched most of the time. If we worry habitually, our forehead will probably develop creases from frowning.

The sankara now needs to decide which of our senses to work through. So now we're up to the six sense spheres again. The next link in the wheel is their internal subjective component, the six sense doors. The sankara can find its way through any of these. A sankara of ill-will can listen morosely to a conversation, waiting for something to disagree with. A sankara of greed can look through our eyes, searching for something to devour.

Then the sense doors link up with the external world, and this meeting place of the sankara with the world forms the sixth link in the wheel: sense contact. A new bit of sense data impacts on our psycho-physical system. It could be a sound, it could be a sight, it could be a thought.

We usually think of thoughts and emotions as part of our internal world, but they can also be objective. When greed finds its way into consciousness, the thought of ice cream can make us run to the fridge. When goodwill is established, that same thought can stir happy memories, joy, and gratitude. When ill-will plants itself in consciousness and we sense the emotion of anger, it's easy to add the second arrow and hate ourselves for being angry. When compassion implants itself, the emotion of anger becomes something to care for tenderly. So thoughts and emotions can act as objects for whatever is appearing through the sense door.

The teaching on the sense spheres directs our attention to this crucial midsection of the wheel of

dependent origination, where our sankara based in ignorance has found its way from our inner subjective world to the outer objective world. If we are not careful, a whole new pathway for dukkha opens up. But if we are mindful, then we have the opportunity to let that sankara fizzle its energy away, trying to get us to react while we steadfastly refuse.

It helps to become curious about how our moods and emotions seem to colour the world. If we're in a flaming temper, we won't hear the bees buzzing in the same way as we would if we were in good humour. In fact, we probably won't hear them at all, or any nature sounds, because of the storm of rage going on in our minds.

Last night I described my own striking example of this. I was doing some walking meditation on retreat, being quite happy, until someone came in and started walking near me. I could have sworn the room went dark. Because I was being mindful, I could see that the darkening was internal and that my mood had suddenly gone from good humour to bad humour. But I still had to look out the window to be sure the weather hadn't changed. I hadn't ever noticed before that my mood could literally colour the visual scene in front of me. This gave me a striking example of how our sankaras affect our perception of the world.

We can see this too when we're feeling dull or lethargic. All our sense data is blurred. We'll only vaguely be aware of what's around us, hardly noticing any sounds or sights. But then if we hear our name called, we're suddenly alert and hear and see everything in detail. It was the same data falling on our ears and eyes, but experienced differently because of the sankaras of dullness and alertness.

This also underlies the way people can describe the same situation very differently. Say a husband and wife go to talk to a financial advisor about getting a loan for an extension. The husband really wants the loan, but his wife is not so keen about getting into debt. When they talk about it afterwards, it's very likely that the wife will remember all the dangers mentioned but will be vague about any encouraging remarks, while the husband will have picked up all the encouragement and skimmed over the warnings. Again, it's the same input data, but being perceived differently because of their different sankaras.

If we follow the Buddha's advice to see both the sense object and the sense door, we'd be much better at discerning how our subjective stance is colouring the situation. We get into the habit of asking ourselves: How am I looking? Am I looking at this with suspicion or with friendliness? How am I listening? Am I looking for errors in what's being said? Am I eager to agree with it all?

When our sankara, rooted in ignorance, makes contact with the world through any of the sense doors, the wheel has turned halfway around, and unless we are mindful, it will easily complete the full cycle to cause dukkha.

To prevent this, let's return to the advice of the Buddha regarding the sense spheres: "One knows the eye and forms and the fetter that arises dependent on both. One knows the ears and sounds and the fetter that arises dependent on both." And so on for all six senses. Fetter means that which ties us to suffering, to the

endless round of birth and death. So here he is encapsulating all of the links from sense contact onwards which spin us into dukkha.

To recap the final links of the wheel: Our system responds to each sense contact by classifying it as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. This is the link of feelings. Unless we're being mindful, we react to our feelings with desire, aversion, or ignoring. This is the start of the trouble. We desire more of the pleasant, we want to get rid of what is unpleasant, and we ignore whatever is neutral.

To accomplish these three outcomes, our system then generates a sense of self. Thoughts of "me" and "mine" start to emerge, gathering all our motivation towards our new goal. This is the link of clinging. In our gardening analogy, the weed has blossomed; it is fully formed and has the stamp of identity.

The next thing it needs to do is sow some seeds. This is the link of becoming, where we decide to speak or act or scheme to fulfil our desires. We are now exercising our will to change something in the world. This is crucial to our future happiness because sankara seeds sown at this point are likely to emerge again at the second link of the wheel, getting a new cycle going in the future. That's why this step is termed becoming. Basically, we create the habits which tie us to suffering by acting on our desires and aversions and ignoring what doesn't seem relevant to our agenda.

As a result, we get the next step: the start of some new activity, termed birth. This is the penultimate step in the wheel of dependent origination. Once we've decided to fulfil a desire for food, we get ourselves over to the cupboard to have a snack. Every step on the journey, every move of our arm to open the cupboard and then the biscuit tin, requires an act of will. The wheel is spinning through hundreds, perhaps thousands of cycles. Each of these sows another seed for the sankara of greed. So the new activity we've just started—the link of birth in the wheel—allows the sankara to reproduce itself a hundred or a thousandfold. In our gardening analogy, the weed has grown into a bramble thicket and is overrunning the garden. Each flower head scatters seeds into the wind for future turns of the wheel.

Then comes the final link: dukkha. We've eaten the packet of biscuits, and now our teeth are all gummed up with crumbs. We feel a bit sick as well as guilty and out of sorts. The weighing scales looms over us like an enemy. The pleasure is all gone and only the hangover remains.

In the teaching on the sense spheres, the Buddha is asking us to avoid all the hassle of the second half of the wheel by anchoring our attention at the point of sense contact, knowing that our habitual reactions will fetter us to dukkha. Desire for pleasure will fetter us to the biscuit tin or the next rung on the ladder of success and fame. Or it might prompt us to flatter somebody so they will like us, fettering us into an unhealthy relationship.

Aversion also ends up attaching us to what we dislike. This can be hard to believe, but if there's somebody you really don't want to meet, you'll probably spend your whole day looking out in case they're coming. A friend once gave the example of going out into a garden and only seeing the clematis that needed pruning

and tidying, unable to appreciate the beauty of the rest of the garden—her attention fettered to the overgrown clematis.

Once, I took an acute dislike to someone at a meeting. For an hour or more, my mind was tracking them, noticing when they came in and out of the room. I found myself eavesdropping on what they were saying when they were nearby, instead of listening to the conversation in my own group. Effectively, I was yoked to that person.

How do neutral sensations and thought fetter us? It's not that we get hooked on the sight of a grey pavement or the background whisper of wind, but we get hooked on the interpretation—"this isn't relevant"—and the habit of looking for something that will feed our sense of self. So the habit of ignoring the neutral fetters us to the spicy aspects of our sense contacts, running after pleasure and vainly trying to run away from displeasure.

The more often we experience and reflect upon experience to see how our habitual reactions fetter us to dukkha, the more willing we will be to follow the Buddha's advice: to maintain mindfulness at sense contact and the resultant feeling of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral, watching out for the danger and pulling ourselves back from the brink again and again.

His advice to know both the internal and external aspects of sense contact is a great help. If we are conscious only of the object—the birdsong, for example—we will easily be drawn outwards into thoughts about birds and miss our habitual reaction driving these thoughts. But if we bring attention to the subjective hearing of the birdsong, our attention is already internal, and we may catch the pleasure and be much more sensitive to the first signs of desire, aversion, or ignoring.

The Buddha stresses that the fetter is separate from our senses and what they perceive. He gives the analogy of two oxen tied together with a yoke. The bondage is not due to either of the oxen, but to the yoke. So when we see something, the fetter is not due to our eyes or to whatever we see, but to the binding power of desire.

This is also important. We can easily get into blaming the situation: "If only there wasn't so much noise, I could be mindful." Or blaming ourselves: "If only I could keep my eyes shut, I wouldn't be so distracted." But neither the noise nor our eyes cause dukkha. We can relax with all our senses open to the world, with its myriad of sights and sounds and smells. It's only the third component—the stirrings of desire, aversion, or the way we shy away from reality in an effort to ignore it—that causes the trouble. The oxen are harmless. It's only the yoke that binds us to dukkha.

As we bring attention to the sense spheres, we learn to recognise the subtle manifestation of reactivity before this sets us off into actions and reactions. Eye movements can be helpful in this regard.

I had an example of this when I was on pilgrimage in India with Bhante and others. For a few days I felt really nauseous following a dose of Delhi belly. Whenever I tried to focus on a menu, my eyes would

wince and hop away from the page. Then came a long car journey where I got locked into a stupor. After checking into our new lodgings, the others set off for a meal. I tagged along, my mind still in its dull stupor. I only woke up, so to speak, when I found my eyes darting eagerly over the menu. To my amazement, I realised I had recovered. I recognised the force moving my eyes around the menu as greed. Comparing that to the ways my eyes had previously been hopping away from the menu, I saw in retrospect a subtle hostility, as if the menu was an enemy threatening me.

I often notice greed at this very early stage when I'm eating mindfully. My eyes often rest on something neutral while I'm chewing a mouthful of food, but as I get ready to swallow, my eyes start darting all over my plate, eyeing up the next mouthful. If I notice this, I can uproot this new manifestation of greed before it makes trouble for me.

Once I notice my eyes popping and darting, I have a choice. I can relax and be mindful of the food in my mouth and the feeling of swallowing. Mindfulness has uprooted greed. The wheel has turned as far as eye contact and the resultant feeling of pleasure and whatever little manifestations of greed managed to get my eyes darting all over the plate. But at that point, mindfulness intervened and the wheel didn't get to turn its full cycle to dukkha. If I hadn't been mindful of those little eye movements, I would have gobbled my dinner, only vaguely aware of what I was tasting, and feeling entirely unsatisfied, would have gone back for second helpings if I could get away with it.

We can also learn to discern unskillful sankhara from the way we are listening. On one retreat there was a lot of noise from the kitchen. The teacher noticed that while everyone else complained of the noise, I said it didn't trouble me. I thought it was my superior mindfulness practice, but the teacher knew better. He suggested I really listen carefully to sounds during my next meditation.

As it happened, it was evening and the kitchen was quiet, but a big storm blew up outside and the wind was beating furiously against the house. As I listened, I became aware of tiny wincing reactions in my face at every loud gust. I focused attention on the reaction and felt a fleeting pain before each wince. Then, as I focused on the pain, I became aware that a thought darted through my mind as the pain ran through my face. To my amazement, the thought was, "I didn't hear that," and a lovely feeling of delight followed.

For a while it was incredibly confusing. My ears were hearing the blasts of wind, but my mind was happily denying this. After a while my mind started to believe my ears instead of its thoughts, and I had to trade the delightful state of denial for a mind that was made nervous and unhappy by the howling wind and rattling windows. I was amazed at the power of denial to create a different reality to the one which is actually presenting. Needless to say, I was horribly upset by the noises in the kitchen next day.

Although this was a painful wake-up call for me, I was also glad to be more in touch with reality. I felt stronger, more mature, better able to look after myself, and had no wish to go back to my cosy state of denial.

Thus, keeping our attention at sense contact lets us see the danger and avoid getting fettered.

It can be quite enjoyable, like playing a game with reality. Our old habits are doing their best to get that yoke around our necks, but we keep dodging and ducking. Every now and then, of course, we will get caught.

Suppose we notice we've been lost in a haze of worries as we walk through a park. We need to make a very determined effort to rouse ourselves from this. We will easily be pulled back into autopilot, as our mind will be alive with worrisome thoughts—a million little hooks all trying to drag us back into the haze. The wheel has the momentum of desire, attachment, and becoming behind it now. It has managed to give birth to lots of worries and to the emotion of anxiety.

Remember our gardening analogy. The weed has grown into a thicket and sown lots of seeds. The gardener needs to chop away at the edges before he can get to the core and uproot it. We need to fortify ourselves with a chop, chop, chop at each new shoot by reminding ourselves of the Dhamma and how necessary it is for us to counter the habitual tendency to live life in the future or past. We draw ourselves into the present by paying attention to the sights and sounds around us and the feeling of anxiety within.

So we're back at sense contact again, and here we can chop away at the thicket, letting each wish to react fizzle itself out. Eventually we will come to the root of the problem—some pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral feeling that we were reacting to. It can be quite a challenge to hold attention steady here. Every fibre in our being wants to react. But if we hold our ground, we'll see through the compulsion and grow a little wiser as well. Thus, in our future work with the sense spheres, we'll be better equipped to resist the yoke that ties us to dukkha.

In summary then, the teaching on the six sense spheres draws our attention to the link between our inner subjective world and what we normally think of as the outer objective world. Instead of focusing only on the outer world, this teaching draws our attention inwards to detect also the way we are looking at things. We discover that our underlying moods and emotions colour our perceptions of the objective world. In a very real sense, we recognise that there is no clear separation between the inner and outer worlds.

Holding attention on the sense spheres, we notice the first stirrings of desire for what attracts us, aversion to what repels us, and the delusion prompting us to ignore what registers as neutral. Thus we resist the reactivity which sets the latter part of the wheel in motion. We are resisting the temptation towards new illusions of me and mine. We are learning to immerse ourselves in the world without clinging. We are practising the art of freedom.

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