

# Salāyatana, Vedanā, Phassa: Six Senses, Contact, Feeling

Bhante Bodhidhamma · DhammaBytes · 12:37

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*Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā-sambuddhassa* — homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-awakened one.

Last time we tackled this *nāma-rūpa*, the body-mind complex. And we said something about *āyatana*, I think. So I just want to do the next three links, because that completes the part of the dependent origination that we don't actually have control of. It's automatic.

Once you've got a body and mind, you have these senses, and there are six senses. So there's the five that we know of and the mind itself. When Buddhism talks about the mind itself, it uses a special word, *mana*. And it's really talking about that bit where whatever stimuli are coming in through the senses, somehow it's being put on a screen and it's being collected. But it also refers to the stuff that comes up in the mind itself as memory and emotion.

So the idea is that the senses themselves have not only a base on the retina, and we know also in the brain, but also in the mind itself, which is separate from the brain. And this word *āyatana* is a sphere, so you can't have one sphere interrupting with another. So you can't hear through your eyes. Now I know there's such a thing as synesthesia where people smell numbers and stuff like that. But that's happening elsewhere. Actually on the sense base you can only see through the eye, full stop. And this word *āyatana* is a sphere of experience. So people who are blind simply don't have the sphere of experience of colours and sights. And it's an important word because when he's describing Nibbāna, just as an aside, he uses the word *āyatana*. It's a sphere, a sphere of experience.

And they talk about the inner and outer. So the outer part is the actual object. And the inner part is the sense base. So there's an object and a sense base which, as you know, arise on the retina or at the eardrum. But it's still based upon the object from outside. So, in this sense, Theravada is a sort of qualified realism. It doesn't deny that things outside us exist. But what it says is we can only know what we know through our physical and psychological processes. So it's a sort of, you could almost call it a qualified idealism as well, that all you can know is what your consciousness knows, and it can only know what it receives through the senses. So you can't know things in themselves, you can only know the attributes of something. And that's quoted straight from the Majjhima Nikāya: Each of the five faculties owns a different sphere and none of them partake of the spheres of another. And they have mind as their support. Without the mind, the ideal is easy. Simple as that.

So then we have this next step on dependent origination which is the contact. So this is the point, the Buddha here is describing the point where we come to know something. So the body and mind and the five senses are the instruments with which the contact is made. And for this contact to happen there has to be an object. It has to be a sense base and there has to be consciousness. Now this consciousness, this *viññāna*, remember is the same consciousness that we get in the five *khandhas*, the five heaps, which is that basic act of cognition.

And it's obviously a very complex thing because it not only picks up say of this chair — it not only picks up the colors and the shape of the chair but it also understands what it is the chair so there's other things going on in the mind which eventually lets you know that a chair is there and it's to be sat upon. And that's all part of that process. But it begins at a very simple base of the photons hitting the eye.

And when they talk about that, when the scriptures talk about that at the actual five sense basis, that's where the mind contacts matter and it only knows it, it would seem, in these four ways: earth, water, fire and wind. I always get the sequence wrong. So earth is the sense of pressure, of weight, things like that. Water is congealing magnetism — it's what draws together, it's what keeps, it's what turns wheat into dough. Sometimes in the breath you can feel it — you feel like an elasticity and that's the water element. Fire is heat, of course, and here remember that photons would be considered a fire element. And wind is movement.

So picking up on those qualities, the mind then forms a concrete picture in the mind of what it is. So we know that, don't we? It's amazing how all that's happening at the eardrum is this tapping. It really is, it's just a tapping and yet it's taken in and it turns into a sound. It's quite remarkable.

And then when we get that, I should have also mentioned that of course when it comes to emotions, that's a physical contact. Emotions manifest in the body as feelings, as this contact. And at some point there's a definition of what we're experiencing as either pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. At that point it becomes *vedanā* — feeling.

So what *vedanā* is, is a perception of the hedonistic value of what you're experiencing, whether it's pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. So it doesn't change what you're actually experiencing, it's just your perception of it, an internal decision as to whether it's pleasant or unpleasant. And you can't stop living in that dualistic world. So the world is always going to be experienced either as pleasant or unpleasant. And even when we say neutral, when you really go into the neutral, the neutral feelings, you find it splits one way or the other into pleasant and unpleasant. So you can't go beyond that. That is given. That's a given. And it gives it a feeling coloration to what we're actually experiencing.

So let's take for instance in the sitting you might get pain in the knee. As that sensation comes into consciousness we begin to realise it's pain. So pain is a feeling that we are now experiencing as unpleasant. It's an unpleasant feeling. Now forgetting the next stage, which is usually a reaction or resistance to it, let's just go straight into it, supposing it's not a pain that you have any problem with.

So now as you bury your attention into the pain, it's as though you flip, it's as though you go from a barrier of whether it's likeable or unlikable into just pure feeling, pure sensation. And at this point, you begin to experience pain as sensation and you can deconstruct it. You can say, oh, there's a bit of pressure there, there's a bit of heat there. And at that point, your attention, your consciousness has come right slap bang up against matter.

And in your meditation, you can play around with that. You can, at one minute, perceive it as pressure, as pressure and heat. And next minute, by just pulling back off, you can see this clicking in as pain. And just to be able to play around with that sometimes.

Like an itch. An itch is a sort of funny thing because it's neither pleasant nor unpleasant unless you scratch it. But as you go into it, it's quite, you go beyond the idea of an itch into these very sharp little pointy sensations.

So, remember that the whole idea of splitting up our, or of experiencing our, what we experience in this way, in this sort of deconstructed way, is to undermine the idea that this is a self, that this is some body. And what we begin to realize is it's just this process that happens in time. And once it's perceived and gone, that's it. It's finished. The process begins again. And there's nobody there. You don't need somebody to create pain in the knee. You can just bang it on a chair and the pain will arise. And pleasant feelings arise, unpleasant feelings arise, in meditation especially, and you haven't called for them, they just arise themselves.

And it's that sense of not being in control of these things that mirror back to us that maybe this isn't me, not me, not mine. So that brings us really to the point of dependent origination, which is a given. And that's also, remember, when we say it's a given, it's also something which is the product of the past. It's a product of what's happened in the past. So there's your *kamma* coming in in this present moment.

Now, not entirely dependent, because as you know, your eye base, the retina, is dependent on your genetics. You can't say that's my personal *kamma*, because that's been brought up through generations. If you haven't got good eyesight like me, you're just stuck with it. That's not because in the past life I was poking somebody's eyes out. So this whole thing becomes quite complicated. But in a sense, to complicate it is sometimes to miss the point. Because what liberates us is seeing these three characteristics. So when we see the impermanence of it, we see it as a process. And when we see it as not me, not mine, because we're distanced from it, because it's become an object of attention, that's what liberates us. That's what liberates us.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you be liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.