THE SIX SENSE BASES AND THE FETTERS

In the Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness, the characteristic elements that are involved in the most subtle and productive are explored. These notes refer to the separate elements of the Five Aggregates of Clinging in more detail: In the Form aggregate, seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and the experience of pressure, pain, pleasure, hunger, fatigue, etc. and in the other four aggregates of Feeling, Perception, Mind Conditioners and Consciousness. Here is a quote from Analayo’s “Satipatthana-The Direct Path To Realization”, on pages 16-17:

He knows the eye, he knows forms, and he knows the fetter that arises dependent on both, and he also knows how an unarisen fetter can arise, how an arisen fetter can be removed, and how a future arising of the removed fetter can be prevented. He knows the ear, he knows sounds, and he knows the fetter that arises dependent on both, and.… He knows the nose, he knows odours, and he knows the fetter that arises dependent on both, and.…

He knows the tongue, he knows flavours, and he knows the fetter that arises dependent on both, and.… He knows the body, he knows tangibles, and he knows the fetter that arises dependent on both, and.… He knows the mind, he knows mind-objects, and he knows the fetter that arises dependent on both, and he also knows how an unarisen fetter can arise, how an arisen fetter can be removed, and how a future arising of the removed fetter can be prevented.

A new term has been introduced: fetter. The Pali word for fetter is samyojana, those conditions that bind the Five Aggregates of Clinging. Here is a translation of the Samyojana Sutta by Thanissaro:

“There are these ten fetters. Which ten? Five lower fetters & five higher fetters. And which are the five lower fetters? Self-identification views, uncertainty, grasping at habits & practices, sensual desire, & ill will. These are the five lower fetters. And which are the five higher fetters? Passion for form, passion for what is formless, conceit, restlessness, & ignorance. These are the five higher fetters. And these are the ten fetters.”

During the talk on July 18, discussion focused on understanding how the Five Aggregates of Clinging operate to form a self. This part of the discourse furthers one’s understanding of how the selfing process operates from sensory stimulation to self-state organization to increase the likelihood that these phenomena can be observed without identifying with the process as “myself”. Here is what Analayo says about this process, in the above cited book, on page 217:

“According to the discourses, to develop understanding and detachment in regard to these six internal and external sense-spheres is of central importance for the progress towards awakening. An important aspect of such understanding is to undermine the misleading sense of a substantial “I” as the independent experiencer of sense objects. Awareness directed to each of these sense-spheres will reveal that subjective experience is not a compact unit, but rather a compound made up of six distinct “spheres”, each of which is dependently arisen.”

Later on in the same book, on pages 218 & 219, Analayo emphasizes the fabricating nature of the mind in regards to the unprocessed stimulation provided by the other sense bases, seeing, etc.:

“Experience, represented by the six types of consciousness, is the outcome of two determinant influences: the “objective” aspect on the one hand, that is, the in-coming sensory impressions; and the “subjective” aspect on the other hand, namely, the way in which these sense impressions are received and cognized. Supposedly objective perceptual appraisal is in reality conditioned by the subject as much as by the object. One’s experience of the world is the product of an interaction between the “subjective” influence exercised by how one perceives the world, and the “objective” influence exercised by the various phenomena of the external world. Understood in this way, the fact that the *satipatthana* instruction directs awareness to each sense organ could have deeper implications, in the sense of pointing to the need to recognize the subjective bias inherent in each process of perception. The influence of this subjective bias has a decisive effect on the first stages of perception and can lead to the arising of a fetter (*samyojana)*. Such subsequent reactions are often based on qualities and attributes assumed to belong to the perceived object. In actual fact, these qualities and attributes are often projected on the object by the perceiver.”

It is important to understand that Buddhist psychology proposes that each of the sense bases has its own consciousness interacting with the outside world. For example, the visual process consciousness involves light as a stimulus, the eyes as the “door” and seeing consciousness; the same consideration is for the other sense bases, including the mind, which requires input from the other sense bases, mind conditioners as the “door” and a consciousness (The mind base is exceptional in that input stimulation doesn’t have to be the other sense bases—instead a memory or other mental phenomenon can emerge into consciousness).

In “The Mind Illuminated” by Culadasa, he presents the bases as “sub-minds”, and this has some support from contemporary neuroscientific research. Regarding visual process, the optic nerve is stimulated and produces an ongoing stream involving an initial instinctual feeling (this instinct manifests as involuntary blinks when the surface of the eye is uncomfortable), followed by an initial perceptual process in the back of the brain that distinguishes color, edge and movement, and finally operations in the association areas of the brain that are “mind conditioners”, imposing a meaningful overlay so a person can respond to the original stimulus.

This process can be related to the Five Aggregates of Clinging concept: Light stimulates the optic nerve (*form*), an instinctual *feeling* leads to a *perceptual* process, which is elaborated by *mind conditioners*, reflected in *consciousness*. Culadasa subdivides the mental processes further, into the “thinking”, “emotional” and “narrating” sub-minds, which relate to the feeling, perceptual and mind conditioner concepts. The result of the action of the narrating sub-mind is the stream of what I call the “selfing story”. Because of craving and clinging, the streaming internal narrative is identified with as an accurate and reliable rendering of external reality and internal subjectivity, e.g. “I see the apple”.

It is very important to train attention in such a way as to recognize quickly and accurately the fabricating nature of the narrating sub-mind. We know from contemporary research that the thinking and feeling sub-minds quickly dominate the stream of internal processing, disregarding sensory input and loading memory associations into the stream; in this way, we are subjectively living in fantasy.

In Theravada Buddhism, there are recognized stages of awakening, and an important point in that progression is direct awareness of *nama-rupa*, that is, the interaction between nama (the mind’s interpretive projections) and rupa (the initial, unprocessed stimulus). However, it is also beneficial to be mindfully aware of how the mind elaborates the development of the “selfing story”, that is, further fabrications emerging from prior mental fabrications.

The goal of vipassana practice is to mindfully monitor this process, following the protocol developed earlier in the Satipatthana Sutta: *Investigating the conditions that lead to the arising of an unarisen fetter, the conditions that lead to the removal of an already arisen fetter and the conditions that prevent the future arising of an unarisen fetter*. This involves a direct observation of how feeling/perception becomes craving/clinging.

How does mindfulness of breathing practice develop this capability? Careful, persistent investigation of the beginning of the in-breath and thorough investigation of the changing nature of the in-breath, followed by the same procedure for the out-breath cultivates a precise, detailed “textural” awareness of rupa. This penetrating insight sets the conditions to immediately notice the emergence of any sort of attachment to any accompanying descriptive narrative. *Being aware of the emergence of the narrative isn’t problematic, but identifying with that emerging selfing story is problematic*. Eventually, with sufficient practice, *one develops the ability to persistently and reliably observe these transient self-state organizations with detachment, so that the mind’s operation has no more appeal than any of the other sense bases.* This insight is an integral element in the process of Awakening.

The focus of the next talks will be on identifying and cultivating the Seven Awakening Factors, mental conditions that are conducive to the detached observation just described.