**Understanding the Fetters**

**Or How What Is Seen Becomes A Self**

The primary goal of Buddhist concepts and practices is to deconstruct the belief that there is an enduring/autonomous self. This third category for contemplation within the Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness, describes different and complementary ways to accomplish this goal. The Pali term for this category is *salayatana* (sahl-ah-yah-tah-nah), the *six sense bases*. The salayatana are conceptually divided into two perspectives: internal sense organ and external sense object. For example, the eye is the sense organ, and what is seen is the sense object. All human experience is mediated by the actions of the sixth ayatana: the mind (sense organ) and mental phenomena (sense objects). All of our self-experience emerges from the dynamic interactions between the first five Sense Bases and the sixth Sense Base, the mind. Mindfulness practices investigate these interactions to discover the fetters that bind the two perspectives into what we all experience as “myself and the world”.

The previous category in the Fourth Foundation, Mindfulness of the Five Aggregates, provides a more generalized process for deconstructing the self: Form, Feeling, Perception, Mind Conditioning Factors, and Consciousness. The contemplative category being reviewed here focuses on form (visual, auditory, gustatory, olfactory and “tangibles”—somatosensory stimuli), the first of the five aggregates, as interpreted and fabricated into a self by Feeling, Perception and Mind Conditioning Factors.

Here is the section from the Four Foundations of Mindfulness Discourse that refers to how the various avenues of sensory stimulation are interpreted:

[SENSE-SPHERES]

“Again, monks, in regard to *dhammas* he abides contemplating *dhammas* in terms of the six internal and external sense-spheres. And how does he in regard to *dhammas* abide contemplating *dhammas* in terms of the six internal and external sense-spheres? “Here 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 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 nose, he knows odours, 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 tongue, he knows flavours, 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 body, he knows tangibles, 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 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.

[REFRAIN]

“In this way, in regard to *dhammas* he abides contemplating *dhammas* internally … externally … internally and externally. He abides contemplating the nature of arising…of passing away…of both arising and passing away in *dhammas*. Mindfulness that ‘there are *dhammas*‘ is established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and continuous mindfulness. And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. “That is how in regard to *dhammas* he abides contemplating *dhammas* in terms of the six internal and external sense-spheres.

This talk reviews how the fetters operate. We can consider a fetter as a binding function of the extremely complex variety of neural interactions in the brain that is experienced subjectively as “myself and the world”. Contemporary research indicates that there are different areas of the brain that are dedicated to processing each of the internal sense-spheres. The parts of the brain associated with emotional and cognitive processes are strongly connected and interactive with the dedicated sensory processing sections. For example, light stimulates the visual processing functions situated in the back of the brain, and this is the physical *Seeing* sense organ. At the same time, other areas of the brain are imposing meaning on the sensory data, and the combined effect of this emotional and cognitive processes creates the “selfing” experience, the mental self object.

It is well-known among researchers that sensory stimulation keeps changing, interpreted by pre-existing memory based assumptions. A person’s brain jumps to conclusions about the world in an ongoing way. Buddhist psychology calls this dynamic process *papanca* (pah-pahn-chah), *proliferation that fabricates a self*, while contemporary psychology calls it *confirmation bias*. We can consider this biasing as characterizing a fetter, when the mind identifies what is being fabricated as “myself” interacting with “the world”.

*Fetters* are mentioned repeatedly in this part of the discourse and represent a key topic for contemplation to promote Awakening. The Pali word for fetter is *samyojana* (sahm-yoh-jah-nah), which describes how craving and clinging “fetters” the process of Awakening through attachment to the belief that there is a self that is controlling how the world is interpreted and acted within. It is closely associated with *samsara* (sahm-sah-rah), the principle of *the inevitability of rebirth*. Because the mind is not sufficiently alert, insightful, and detached, a personality keeps being repeated and reinvigorated, binding sense organ and sense object, either from one life to another, or from one moment of self-experience to another.

It is important to realize that there are no “objects”, externally or internally—there are stimulating factors such as light, sound, odor, flavor, pressure, temperature, etc., and the mind conditioning factors create a subjective experience of both the external and external objects through the distinguishing process of *perception*, one of the Five Aggregates, and the interactions between *feelings*, *perceptions*, and the memories that are “stored” as *mind conditioning factors*, reflected in *consciousness*.

In our culture, an example of a fetter is a rope that binds your legs together, significantly limiting movement. Here is a quote with a different simile about fetters from “Satipatthana—The Direct Path to Realization”, by Analayo, on page 219:

Although a fetter arises in dependence on sense and object, the binding force of such a fetter should not be attributed to the senses or objects per se. The discourses illustrate this with the example of two bulls, bound together by a yoke. Just as their bondage is not caused by either of the bulls, but by the yoke, so too the fetter should not be imputed to either its inner or its outer conditions (for example eye and forms), but to the binding force of desire.

The various Buddhist schools number and describe the fetters differently, due to historical and cultural influences. In the context of this review, I am using the system described in the above quoted book by Analayo. Here is the relevant quote, from pp. 219-220; I have inserted bold font to list the fetters:

In the discourses there is considerable variation in the usage of the term “fetter”, which suggests that to speak of “fetters” does not always necessarily refer to a fixed set but may sometimes include whatever falls under the same principle, in the sense of fettering and causing bondage. The most common presentation of “fetters” in the discourses lists altogether ten types: **belief in a substantial and permanent self, doubt, dogmatic clinging to particular rules and observances, sensual desire, aversion, craving for fine-material existence, craving for immaterial existence, conceit, restlessness, and ignorance**. The eradication of these ten fetters takes place with the different stages of realization. Since all these ten fetters might not necessarily manifest in the context of actual *satipatthana* practice, and since the term “fetter” has a certain breadth of meaning in the discourses, during contemplation of the sense-spheres awareness can be directed in particular to the fettering force of desire and aversion in regard to whatever is experienced.

A particular formatted approach is repeated throughout the Satipatthana Sutta that focuses on various categories among the Four Foundations, and directs mindfulness and detached renunciation in this way that specifies the way fetters can be investigated skillfully: “Here 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.” This formulaic analysis is repeated for all the Sense Bases.

This also involves focusing attention on the role that feelings, perceptions and mind conditioning factors play in the creation of the self-object fabrication: “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.”

This process of deconstructing the self is realized through the refrain, which is repeated throughout the Satipatthana Sutta:

“In this way, in regard to *dhammas* he abides contemplating *dhammas* internally … externally … internally and externally. He abides contemplating the nature of arising…of passing away…of both arising and passing away in *dhammas*. Mindfulness that ‘there are *dhammas*‘ is established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and continuous mindfulness. And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. “That is how in regard to *dhammas* he abides contemplating *dhammas* in terms of the six internal and external sense-spheres.”

*Dhammas* are *mental phenomena*, which are the primary focus for contemplation in the Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness. Investigating mental phenomena represents the sixth Sense Base.

My studies and practice suggest to me that the fetters are easily and quickly wiped away, as in the case of using an eraser to wipe away the word “fetter” from a whiteboard. What happens, I believe, is that the potency of craving and clinging that creates a fetter gradually fades away as the application of the Noble Eightfold Path matures, like what happens when the ink in a printer starts to run out and the printing on the page fades away gradually. Regarding the similes of the yoked oxen or two legs bound together, the yoke and rope dissolve and can no longer control behaviors.

This function of fading away is called *viraga* (vih-rah-gah) in Pali and is translated as *dispassion*. At some point in the process of dissolving the potency of the fetters, the cumulative effect of “selfing” is so diminished that consciousness simply loses interest in attachment to the belief that there is a *sense organ* or *sense object*, which supports the conditions fruitful for Awakening.

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| Here is a quote from the Numerical Discourses that describes this quality of detached, equanimous attention, from the Book of Twos, regarding the fetters:  1“There are, mendicants, these two things. What two? Seeing things that are prone to being fettered as gratifying, and seeing things that are prone to being fettered as boring. When you keep seeing things that are prone to being fettered as gratifying, you don’t give up greed, hate, and delusion. When these are not given up, you’re not freed from rebirth, old age, and death, from sorrow, lamentation, pain, sadness, and distress. You’re not freed from suffering, I say. |
| 2When you keep seeing things that are prone to being fettered as boring, you give up greed, hate, and delusion. When these are given up, you’re freed from rebirth, old age, and death, from sorrow, lamentation, pain, sadness, and distress. You’re freed from suffering, I say. These are the two things.” Translated by Sujato |

The full realization of Awakening in the Theravada tradition has four stages or levels, each involving a direct experience of Nirvana, awareness that has dissolved any subject/object duality, that is “empty” regarding a self. Here are the stages:

1: Stream entry, sotapanna (so-*tah*-pahn-yah) in Pali. At this first experience, the dissolved fetters are

1. The belief in an enduring/autonomous self
2. Attachment to rites or rituals, including fixation on harmful social norms
3. Any doubt about the validity of the teachings, and clarity about unnecessary institutional add-ons

2: Once Returner, sakadagamin (sah-kah-*dah*-gah-min) in Pali. This second experience reduces the fetters of

1. Sense desire, except for basic needs such as nutrition, etc.
2. Aversion/Ill-will, except for a rational and reasonable need to reduce pain to prolong health

3: Non-Returner, anagami (ah-*nah-gah*-mee) in Pali. The third Awakening dissolves the fetters of

1. Sense desire
2. Aversion/Ill-will

4: Arahant (*ahr*-hant), which is defined as someone who has fully Awakened under the influence of a Buddha, represents the dissolution of the “higher fetters”, which are

1. Attachment to the jhanas (*jah*-nahs) in the realm of form
2. Attachment to the jhanas (*jah*-nahs) in the formless realm
3. Conceit, mana (*mah*-nah) in Pali. This represents the dissolving of any sense of being better, worse, or different in any way from others
4. Restlessness, uddhacca (ooh-*dah*-chah) in Pali. This is not simply the absence of agitation or anxiety, but represents the dissolution of any instability due to greed, hatred, or ignorance
5. Ignorance, avijja (ah-*vee*-jah) in Pali. This represents the ultimate realization of completing the Four Noble Truths. Some commentaries describe a completion of the Noble Eightfold Path—the Noble Tenfold Path—which is transformation of Right Understanding matures into Right Knowledge, and Right Intention into Right Liberation.

The Mahayana traditions acknowledge the fetters, but different schools within the tradition describe them differently and don’t describe the “higher fetters” as such. The key point of this contemplation is to deconstruct or dissolve the craving and clinging that binds the five aggregates, and then experiencing liberation.