Working Through the Fetters

The primary goal of Buddhist concepts and practices is to deconstruct the belief that there is an enduring/autonomous self. In this third category for contemplation within the Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness, which describes different and complementary ways to accomplish this goal. Here is the section 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.

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. It is well-known that the emotional and cognitive processes, which associate incoming stimulation with prior experience, override new stimulation—we jump to conclusions about the world. Buddhist psychology calls this process papanca (pah-pahn-chah), proliferation of a self, while contemporary psychology calls the process confirmation bias. We can consider this process as characterizing a fetter.

The previous category in the Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness provides a more generalized process for deconstructing the self, Mindfulness of the Five Aggregates: 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 five spheres, as interpreted and fabricated into a self by Feeling, Perception and Mind Conditioning Factors.

*Fetters* are mentioned repeatedly in this category and represent a key topic for contemplation to promote Awakening. The Pali word for fetter is samyojana (sahm-yo-jah-nah), which describes how craving and clinging hinders the process of Awakening—in our culture, an example of a fetter is a rope that binds your leg, preventing movement. Here is a quote 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 Buddhist analytical system that is involved here describes an external “sense object”, relative to the internal “mental object”. In both cases, it is important to realize that there are no “objects”, externally or internally—there are stimulating factors, light, sound, odor, flavor, pressure, temperature, etc.—mind conditioning factors create both the external and external objects through the distinguishing process of perception, which systematically excludes stimuli other than a particular part of the stream of stimulation, and this particular part emerges depending on the interactions between feelings, perceptions, and the memories that are “stored” in the mind conditioning factors, then reactivated through, for example, confirmation bias.

The various Buddhist schools number and describe the fetters differently, due to historical 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 directs mindfulness and detached renunciation in this way: “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 focusing on the visual process can be misleading, however, through disregarding 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.

“…contemplating *dhammas* internally … externally … internally and externally.” is a phrase that involves conflicting interpretations. One can infer superficially that there are “external objects”, but that understanding exhibits ignorance regarding the essentially undifferentiated reality of the world before the mind creates the “external object”. It seems to me that this is a flaw in the conceptual structure of the Satipatthana Sutta, and should be disregarded, considered to be a cultural addition that does not support the process of Awakening.

“…contemplating the nature of arising…of passing away…of both arising and passing away in *dhammas*.” is a fundamental part of the satipatthana process, which emphasizes the value of observing the transitory and impersonal nature of how the self is created and maintained. This furthers the process of deconstruction. This supports the next phrase in the discourse: “Mindfulness that ‘there are *dhammas*‘ is established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and continuous mindfulness.” The knowledge indicated here is “bare” of craving and clinging. This awareness leads to a mind that “…abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world.”

My studies and practice suggest to me that the fetters are not 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 fades away, like what happens when the ink in a printer starts to run out and the printing on the page fades away gradually. 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 lets go of attachment to the belief that there is an enduring/autonomous self, at which point Awakening occurs.

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.