

Satipaṭṭhāna (56) Sense Doors: Thoughts

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

knots, leaf, natural phenomena, judgments, freedom, factors, awakening, *mano*, Morocco, arise, residency, observe, entanglement

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This week we are talking about the Buddha's instructions for how to practice with the sense doors.

The instruction is to be aware of each door and of the object that sense door takes in. For the eyes, the objects are sight objects. For hearing, they are sounds. For the tongue, they are tastes. For the nose, they're smells, and for the body, they are tactile experiences. For the mind, the object is thinking.

The word for mind here is *mano*, which is closely associated with the thinking part of the mind. It is one of the six senses. The mind produces thoughts that are registered or known by the *mano* – the part of the mind that recognizes there is thinking.

In addition to that, there is mindful knowing. This is not just being vaguely aware that thoughts going on. The knowing of mindfulness is a clear, definitive: “Oh, this is thinking. This is just thinking.” You do not necessarily have to say those words to yourself. There is a way in which we step back, turn around, look thinking directly in the eye, and say: “I see you, thinking. This is thinking.” Then we observe it.

I think the image of being a naturalist of thinking conveys the idea that thinking is a natural phenomenon, and we observe thinking, but do not necessarily define or identify ourselves with the thoughts. It is a fascinating and wonderful thing to allow a thought to arise without placing ourselves in the thought.

Some people live in their thoughts. Their whole identity – their sense of “am-ness” (I am, I exist) – has taken up residency in the middle of thinking. For them it is inconceivable to think about not thinking: Who would I be if I was not thinking? It is almost as if they feel lost if they are not living in their thoughts.

We do not have to live in our thoughts. We do not have to take up residency in our thoughts. We can allow thoughts to be just phenomena that arise. That is no different than going outside for a walk, and a leaf blows off a tree and floats down next to you. You do not take

the tree as you. You do not define the leaf as you. You do not define yourself by the leaf. You do not necessarily get involved with wanting to take the leaf home, or decide that you are a great leaf selector and you need to let everyone know what a great capacity you have for selecting leaves from the sidewalk. You do not get involved. A leaf just falls and it is nice.

In the same way, when thinking, we can have the same relationship to thoughts. We take up residency not in the thinking of thoughts but in the awareness of them, the knowing of them. That is a little bit tricky because knowing them could be seen as a thought itself. We are talking about a different level of thinking – a different kind of thinking: the very simple thought that knows, “Oh, that is thinking; that is just a thought.” That knowing is also natural phenomena – natural phenomena that support freedom and disentanglement.

This whole thing about the sense doors is quite fascinating. The more we are able to be present at the point of sense contact, the more we can recognize the knot, the entanglement, the bias, the leaning into or pulling back. We start seeing our biases, our prejudices, our desires – all the influences we add on top of sense contact. We are seldom innocent observers. We often have preferences – wanting and not wanting. They can be very, very subtle.

I have told this story before. When I was a teenager, I went to Morocco. When I was there, the men wore *djellaba* – vertically striped gowns. After being in Morocco for some time, I had a funny feeling that my mind was lighter and clearer – it felt a little different.

As I tried to understand what was going on, I came to the conclusion that in the United States, I pegged people – I did not just see people. I had a judgment about people because I recognized something about them. That one was a jock. That was some kind of businessman, or this or that. I had little judgments about them. The judgments were not exactly conscious, but they were there.

In Morocco, where all the men were wearing *djellaba*, I had no context for understanding anything about them, about their professions, what they did, their politics, and so on. So my mind was lighter from not making any extra judgments.

To not live in ordinary thinking, but to live in awareness – the awareness in which thoughts arise – and to be able to see the entanglements, the knots. In fact, thinking is a big part of our knots and entanglements. When I see something, I do not automatically get entangled with that, but I do have a thought about it. It is the thought in which I get caught. Thinking is the knot around what I am seeing.

To be able to settle back and observe thinking. To be aware of thinking. To be quiet enough, still enough, open enough, present enough to see the birth of a thought. To see a thought appear. There it is. It is just a thought. Are you entangled with it? Do you chase it? Do you then have a follow-up thought, then another follow-up thought? Or do you allow the thought to just be there like a single leaf that is falling from the sky? Just a thought.

The kind of freedom that comes from seeing and not being involved in thoughts gives us the freedom to then choose what we think. There are things to think about. Some of the things to think about are goodwill, kindness, friendliness, supporting others, and appreciating people. I think that it is all too easy, for all kinds of reasons, for people to have a negativity bias and a predisposition to see what is wrong and what is not right. If we can choose what we are thinking about, maybe we can choose appropriate ways to appreciate people and see their beauty and wonderfulness. We can choose to think about how to support people and be friendly to them.

This may seem like a lot of extra work and maybe a little artificial, but it might be better than the alternative. If you are watching your mind carefully, choose the best alternative. Do not choose the option that is detrimental

to you – thinking critical, judgmental, harsh, unkind thoughts. It is not healthy.

So, thinking, thoughts – *mano*. This level of practice is where we are tuning in to the knots. We can also begin to see the conditions for how we get knotted – the desires that arise, the aversions that are there, and the frustrations and stresses we are living under. These stresses are the conditions that make it more likely for us to get knotted up. Knowing those conditions, then we can adjust the conditions, so it is easier to know how to let go of the knots. We do not necessarily have to let go of our thoughts. We let go of being involved and caught in them.

This is a wonderful thing, to let go of knots – to dissolve or untie the knots in the mind. One of the reasons it is wonderful is that knots take up a lot of space in the mind, a lot of energy, a lot of bandwidth. When that bandwidth is not preoccupied with the knots, then there is more room and open space for the factors of awakening: natural phenomena that are great treasures within us.

These are called the Seven Factors of Awakening. They are the next exercise in the *Satipaṭṭhāna* text. It goes from the Six Sense Bases to the Seven Factors of Awakening. We make a transition to looking at what leads to liberation and freedom.

First, we get the hang of the aspects that keep us from being free – the hindrances, the aggregates, and the fetters, the knots. We know what they are. They are the things that keep us from being free. As we release them and free ourselves from them, new energy and new states can arise that are onward leading towards freedom.

This is one of the great rewards of doing mindfulness practice. When we get to that point in practice, we start flowing in the beautiful Seven Factors of Awakening: mindfulness, investigation, energy, joy, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity.

That will be the topic for two weeks. Thank you.