

Satipaṭṭhāna (55) Sense Doors: Body

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There is a delightful teaching in Buddhism that it is possible to become omniscient. But this is not what you might think. It is possible to know something about everything. This omniscience is that it is not worth clinging to anything. So now we know something about everything. It is a certain kind of omniscience.

To continue with the theme of omniscience in human experience, all human experience – no matter how sophisticated and complex – has a common denominator. We know experience through one of the six sense doors. The ancient analogy from the time of the Buddha was that of a walled city with only one gate. A guard could stand at the gate and watch everyone coming and going. The guard could then decide who could come in and who could go out. If there were six

gates, there might be six guards who were doing the same thing.

We have six doors – six gates. All experiences we process, take in, and use to understand our life enter through these six doors or gates. They are the eyes, the ears, the nose, the tongue, the tactile body, and the mind, the door from which we observe or know what is happening in the mind. We take in sense data – experiences – from these doors or gates, and then process it. We do something with it. Sometimes we build whole universes with it.

There is a story from the Chinese Zen tradition of an artist who painted very realistic paintings. He was painting a tiger up close, involved in the details. At some point, he stepped back a few feet to look at it. It was so realistic that he became frightened and ran away.

Our mind constructs stories, ideas, memories, predictions of the future, meaning, elaborations, creativity, poems, and songs. Our mind creates all kinds of things. We can live in that inner world and get lost in it.

But in Buddhist practice, what we are trying to do is to live at the sense doors – to be mindful of things as they appear, as they occur in the present moment, at each of

the sense doors. If we do that, we know something about everything. We know the common denominator. Everything that happens is built on what comes in through the sense doors.

If we can be there and, at that point, see what the reactivity is – the clinging, the resistance, and how we relate to it – it gives us a wonderful vantage point from which to live a wise life. We do not get caught up in entanglements and reactivity. We do not build universes of tigers that frighten us.

In some ways, our life is always beginning over again. So to bring ourselves into the realm of the sense doors and really be present for it, we are there at the start. Always starting in the present, starting over again and again. To be able to get right there and see it.

In these teachings on the six sense doors and our entanglement with them, we are near the end of a long series of practices from the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. This is not a beginner's practice. This is something we can only begin to do when we have gotten quiet enough, still enough, and focused. When mindfulness is strong enough, we can really stay there and see it.

The advantage of doing so is like this story. We have a garden with vegetable beds. I am responsible for it right

now because my wife is away – she’s usually the gardener. One of the flower beds is overgrown, mostly with oat grass – some kind of tall grass – and all kinds of other weeds that are about a foot and a half tall. They are packed into the flowerbed. The bed must be very fertile because the weeds are bursting forth. It is overwhelming how full of weeds it is.

We have another vegetable bed with some onions and lettuce. There are almost no weeds at all in that bed. The lettuce and onions are growing nicely, and there is space between them. There, if a little weed arises, I can see it coming up out of the soil, and I am not overwhelmed by that. I can come over and pull it out, so it does not grow into a big weed and crowd out what we are trying to grow there.

It is the same way with our minds. If you have not weeded your mind for decades, it can be crowded and overgrown with all kinds of weeds. It takes a while to relax, settle, and calm down to the point that you can start seeing the beginning of a weed – the beginning of an entanglement. If you see it at the beginning – at the first arising – you can let go of it. You can pull it out by the roots and put it in the compost pile.

As practice deepens and we have the ability to be much more present, we begin to trust being present more than

we trust thinking, predicting, planning, remembering, reviewing, having conversations, or having fantasies. We trust being in the present moment. Things become clear enough. Our flowerbeds become clear enough. We can see the beginning of a weed – the beginning of a reaction – arising. That is a powerful place to be. If we can see it arise, then it is easy to let go of it or not participate in it – to let it be. It is possible to let it be, let it go, and know that we are not going to pick it up again.

The instructions for this particular part of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* are to know the sense door. Today, we are talking about the body – knowing the tactile body. Know the sensations of it, the touch, the object of the tactile experience. Know the arising of an entanglement. Know letting it go, and know that you are not going to pick it up again.

That is the exercise in this part of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* – to be able to be present for a sense experience and to see the beginning of attachment – the beginning of clinging and reactivity – and be able to put it down. If you can't put it down, it is powerful to just let it be. Do not pick it up. Do not get involved. Then, know that you are not going to get involved again – at least this time around.

This beautiful, wonderful place of freedom allows us to be amused, delighted, or relieved when we see attachment, clinging, or entanglement arise. We know we are not going to get entangled in the entanglement. We are not going to react to the reactivity. But rather, we are going to see the beauty – the wonderfulness – of being aware of its arising, “There it is!” For some people, this can be amusing and delightful. It can give birth to a lot of faith and confidence. “Oh, here I am starting to get annoyed. I am starting to be frustrated. There it is. Here is me wanting it to be different. Here is me wanting it to stay forever. There’s that little bit of clinging going on.” We see: “Oh. Wow! There’s the clinging.”

There is a kind of joy in knowing we are not going to get involved – knowing there is freedom and space around it. This is a very different relationship to clinging and reactivity than “Oh. No! This is terrible. I shouldn’t be doing this.”

So, the sense doors. Today I talked about the tactile sense door – things that touch our body. These can be physical things outside but also touch inside the body. There is a kind of sensate experience the body can reveal.

Today, I encourage you to spend more time with mindfulness of the body. Discover the delight of being grounded in your body. But more importantly for this exercise, see how you are entangled in judgments, expectations, and disappointments about the body. See how you compare your body to other bodies, to how you were before, or to how you might be in the future. See all the ways that you can get entangled. See if you can notice entanglement with such clarity that you feel delighted or amused. Or maybe you can feel relieved that you see it. See if you can find a different way of relating to the bad news of being reactive and entangled.

Clear mindfulness brings a different way of relating. Mindfulness of the body is a way of becoming friends with your body, a way to stop the reactivity. Tomorrow, we will have the last talk on the sense doors – on the sense door of the mind. Thank you.