

Satipaṭṭhāna (54) Sense Doors: Ears

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

hear, hearing, sounds, knot, present moment, entanglement, listening, awareness, selfing, fetter, sense experience, *sāvaka*

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We now come, in the *Satipaṭṭhāna* discourse, to the exercise on mindfulness of the senses, sense doors, and sense experience. In the explicit teachings of this discourse, which I have heard over the years, the two exercises least emphasized are the corpse meditation and this one of the six senses. It is a bit of a pity that the exercise on the six senses is not emphasized more. Being grounded in our sense experience of hearing, seeing, touching, smelling, tasting, and the clear seeing or knowing of what happens in the mind is really at the heart of classic Vipassana practice.

We are learning to stay present in the simplicity of our sense experience because that is always in the present moment. As we practice with sense experience, we come closer and closer to being able to stay present – it is a process. We come progressively closer to the

simplicity of sense experiences. At the same time, there is more and more letting go of our entanglements – the way we are caught, reactive, and spend our time thinking. There is less and less attachment as we are better able to stay with the ongoing flow of the current of sense experiences.

Insight teachers often repeat a teaching from the Buddha: in the seeing, just the seen; in the heard, just the heard; in the cognized, just the cognized; in the sense experience, just the sense experience. Just the seen, just the heard – that simplicity can be quite liberating and delightful in helping to put down our preoccupations and reactivity.

Today, the topic is hearing. Maybe because much of these teachings were composed before the written word became popular, the name for the direct disciples of the Buddha is *sāvaka*. *Sāvaka* can be translated as “the ones who hear” – the ones who heard the teachings of the Buddha directly.

I like to think that it has a deeper meaning – the ones who hear deeply, who are attentive as if they are hearing everything. The Christian order of monks called the Benedictines begins their code of conduct or rulebook with the Latin word *ascolta*, which means hear, listen.

If we can hear receptively and openly, there is a lot to be learned from listening and hearing. I like the idea that there is a 360-degree panorama of sounds. We settle back and allow the sounds to appear from wherever in the big circle that they occur. Sometimes I have a sense that my awareness is as big and expansive as the distance from where the sound originates.

That happens when my mind gets very relaxed and open. Then there is very little sense of boundaries in the mind or location for things in the mind. The sense of location tends to become expansive and open. It is delightful to feel the mind so receptive, relaxed, and open that it takes in sounds in a very spacious way.

As we become aware of hearing, we can also become aware of how we get entangled in what we hear – the knots that can be formed. There is a sound. There are the ears, maybe the eardrums, that hear. Then, there is the knot, the fetter, that gets formed between those two.

This can happen when someone is speaking to us. Someone is saying something, and we stop listening because we have grabbed onto a branch of how we feel hurt or some new fantasy or idea. We go off thinking about something that is triggered by the sounds. We are no longer listening. We have formed a knot around our thoughts.

Maybe we do not like what we hear. There is tension somewhere in the body. Maybe we like what we hear, and we want more of it, so we plot and plan for how to have more and let it continue. All kinds of judgments can arise. There are all kinds of preferences or biases. There can be ideas of self that the sounds are impinging on: “I am a victim of these sounds. I am the one who hears it.”

There is an analogy that is used. If you hold your hand flat and something comes and strikes it, the stronger the strike, the more it is going to hurt your hand. If you keep your hand open and relaxed, then things can go right through, and you are less likely to be hurt. Just let it go through. Lowering your hand is even better. Then the hurt goes right past. It does not touch or hit anything.

The equivalent of the hand in the mind is a very strong sense of self, a strong sense of me – my experience. I am the victim. It is happening to me. Why are they doing this to me? To be able to lower that concern, that tension, that preoccupation around self – me, myself, and mine – is one of the great fruits of this mindfulness practice.

As that selfing relaxes, the sounds go right through. Or we start seeing where or what the sound strikes, where

the knot exists. It becomes a mindfulness bell for us to notice that knot – to notice our reactivity, reaction, or entanglement.

If you hear anything – if the ears are hearing – then you are in the present moment. Sounds are one of those phenomena that only exist in the current flow of the present moment. Be aware of sounds and listening. To be open and receive it is to stay present, here and now.

It can be a way that we begin to recognize the forces of the mind that take us out of the present moment – the branches that we hold on to. It is not so much that we have to analyze what we are holding on to, as it is to notice and let go. Come back to this receptive awareness of listening. Learn to do this around sound. Some people find this is the laboratory in which it is easiest to learn relaxed, receptive, unentangled awareness – mindfulness. Learn it with hearing, then apply it to other things as well.

For these next 24 hours, I would encourage you to give particular attention to hearing. Find times through the day when you can sit someplace – in a park, at an open window. Just allow yourself to hear sounds. It can be like lying on the grass and looking in a very relaxed way at the clouds floating by. Settle back and take some time to just hear sounds.

If you are listening to music, choose music that is pleasant and relaxing. It may be a delight to listen to music in this way. Listen with your eyes closed. Sometimes with the eyes closed, there is less entanglement and more ability to receive what is happening.

You might also practice listening to someone speak. How simple can you hear? Can you be fully present in a hearing way so you can hear and listen to what they say without the entanglement? As you listen to them, hear from a deeper place in your heart. You are in your body and your mind as you hear the other person. You allow the words to come. Because there is no entanglement, it does not hit anything. It could resonate with some deeper connectivity, a deeper place that may be a place of love, compassion, care, and peace.

May hearing be a doorway to freedom. Thank you.