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At the Sense Doors

by Ven. Pannyavaro

There are two teachings, taught by the Buddha, that need to be studied and applied by the Buddhist practitioner for enlightenment: //Orientation to the Six-Sense Doors// and //knowledge and insight into the Law of

Dependent Origination//.

You start by literally coming to your senses: seeing, hearing, tasting, touching and smelling. These are the five sense doors or sense bases: The 'sixth sense' or door is cognition or consciousness: which is the mind-base with its eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, etc. You also need to be aware of the senses internally as well as externally; that is, the organs and their sense objects: nose/smell, tongue/taste, body/tactile objects, ear/sound, mind/mind-objects or consciousness.

'Presence of mind' at the //predominant// sense-door during a sense impression is the practice. For example, being attentive at the eye-door allows you to notice the effects of the contact between the eye and the visible objects and how you are relating to them. Having an orientation to a sense door brings awareness of what is happening during a sense impression and with it the ability to monitor the associated feelings and consciousness that arise.

Meditation is not confined to a static, crossed-legged posture. This is especially true of insight (//vipassana//) meditation, which is a dynamic practice of paying close attention to what you are doing in whatever posture or situation you happen to be in. To establish meditative attention, a conscious orientation to one of the six-sense doors is necessary for getting your bearings and for being in the present moment context.

Try this Exercise in Orientating to a Sense-Door

Check! Where is your attention at this present moment? What sense impression is predominant now? Is it the eye-door as you view the page, the ear-door attracted by sounds or the touch sensations of the body's contact on the chair your sitting on. This //moment// is the time to establish the habit of being consciously present at a sense door and notice what is happening during a sense impression.

Stop now for a few minutes, choose a sense-door and be attentive to what is happening there: what feeling is present, what is the quality of that feeling, is it pleasant, unpleasant or neutral; the associated thought and particularly notice the changes. It is useful to make a habit of asking yourself //checking questions// on the practice during your daily routine: what sense door am I at?; what is happening there?; what are the associated feelings that arise?.

This strategy of being present at a sense-door ties in with the practical application and study of Dependent Origination, //Paticcasamuppada// or causality. As the meditator experiences the series of causal events, they can be intercepted at the linkage of either consciousness, sense impression and or feeling. The ability to do this gives you the potential of being free of the conditioned cycle of suffering that most people are unknowingly trapped in.

The Law of Dependent Origination is a profound subject, it is the very essence of the Buddha's Teachings. There is the famous exchange between the Buddha and his personal attendant, Ananda, when Ananda casually remarked that he thought it was an easy thing to understand. The Buddha responded by saying, "Not so Ananda, don't ever say such a thing. It's because people do not understand dependent origination, that they are not able to penetrate it, that their minds are befuddled. Just as a ball of twine becomes all tangled up and knotted, just so are beings ensnared and unable to free themselves from the wheel of existence, the conditions of suffering and states of hell and ruin".

How to untangle the tangle? (quote from the //Visuddhi Magga// -The Path of Purification)

The untangling is done by "insighting" into dependent origination through awareness //at a sense door//. What we are experiencing now is from a series of events that arose because of previous conditions and is linked as a causal chain of effects, i.e. as cyclic existence.

It is useful to have a working knowledge of the eleven links in the cycle of Dependent Origination. Even such theoretical knowledge will point you in the right direction to find out how to be free of it:

- 1 With Ignorance as a condition, Karmic Formations or Volitional Actions arise;
- 2 With Volitional Actions as a condition, Consciousness arises;
- 3 With Consciousness as a condition, Mentality/Materiality arises;
- 4 With Mentality/Materiality as a condition, The Six Sense Bases arise;
- 5 With The Six Sense Bases as a condition, Contact (sense impressions) arise;
- 6 With Sense Impressions as a condition, Feelings (//vedana//) arise;
- 7 With Feelings as a condition, Grasping arises;
- 8 With Grasping as a condition, Clinging arises;
- 9 With Clinging as a condition, Becoming arises;
- 10 With Becoming as a condition, Birth arises;
- 11 With Birth as a condition - Pain, old age, death arise, i.e. conditioned suffering.

Here is the enlightenment story of Bahiya, the wooden robed one, who was able to practice in this way. Bahiya

was originally a merchant, who when travelling at sea with all his merchandise was shipwrecked and was cast ashore naked. He found bark to cover himself, and finding an old bowl, he went searching for alms-food. The local people were impressed by his seeming austerities and his reputation grew as an ascetic. He was tested when people offered him fine robes, but knowing that they would lose faith in him if he accepted, he refused keeping up the deception. Bahiya was installed in a temple and worshipped as an Arahant (an Enlightened One). So that in time he came to believe that he was actually an enlightened being.

He lived impeccably and gained good concentration powers. Sitting in meditation one day, it is said that a deva (who was a former blood-relation) was able to persuade Bahiya that he wasn't really enlightened at all and that he should go and see the Buddha, an Arahant who could help him.

Bahiya made a long journey to where the Buddha was at Savatthi and reached the monastery just as the Buddha was about to go on the daily alms-round. Bahiya had to request the Buddha to teach him the Dharma three times, before the Buddha would teach at such an inopportune time.

The Buddha then gave these brief instructions:  
"Bahiya, you should train yourself in this way:  
With the seen, there will be //just the seen//; with the heard, there will be //just the heard//; with the sensed (touched, tasted, smelt) there will be //just the sensed//; with the cognized, there will be //just the cognized//."

When for you, Bahiya, there is merely the seen, heard, sensed and cognized, then you will not be therein. Then you, Bahiya, will be neither here nor there nor within both - this is itself the end of suffering.

Through this brief instruction, Bahiya was immediately Enlightened - through non-clinging - thus becoming an Arahant.

Not long after the Buddha had departed, Bahiya was fatally gored by a cow. The Buddha returned from his alms-round and finding Bahiya dead, arranged for his cremation and a stupa to be built for him. When asked what the destiny of Bahiya was the Buddha said, that because he had grasped the meditation subject in the teachers presence, and practised as instructed according to the Dharma, Bahiya had attained Parinibbana - final Enlightenment.

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