

The Six Sense-bases (*Salayatana*)

Today the topic of the sermon is the Six sense-bases. It is another description of a way to gain Right View (*samma ditti*) as expounded by the most Venerable Arahant Sariputta in the Sammaditthi Sutta. He explained, “*yato kho avuso ariyasavako salayanta pajanathi...*”

“Friends, if at some point the Noble disciple understands (discerns/comprehends) the Six sense-bases, the origin, cessation and the way leading to cessation, just by this he is considered to be endowed with Right View. His view has become untwisted, flawless and straight. He is one who appreciates the Dhamma, the significance and the quality of the Dhamma. He can also be called a person who has arrived in the field of the Dhamma and the Noble Ones. A person with Right Vision and View.”

The Most Venerable Arahant Sariputta continued, “Friends, what are the Six sense-bases? What are the conditions for their origin? What dhammas will lead to their cessation? What is the way leading to their cessation?”

He himself replied thus, “Friends, the Six sense-bases are the eye sense-base (*cakkhayatanam*), ear sense-base (*sotayatanam*), nose sense-base (*ghanayatanam*), tongue sense-base (*jivhayatanam*), body sense-base (*kayayatanam*) and the mind sense-base (*manayatanam*).”

He further explained, “The origin of the Six sense-bases is conditioned by Mentality-Materiality (*nama-rupa*), their dissolution leads to the cessation of the Six sense-bases. The way leading to cessation is the Noble Eightfold Path”.

Thus the realisation of the above will enable a person to gain Right View. The reason why we have been wandering in samsara for so long can be pointed to this one fact: our ignorance of the Six sense-bases; our not understanding and not seeing their reality.

What does 'not understanding' and 'not seeing' mean?

It is very important to make it clear at this point that we should not refer to what we already know about the sense-bases. If that were so, we would be Ones with Right View; the Ones who have gone beyond the cycle of rebirths. Here when we say *salayatananca pajanati*, the phrase has a number of profound meanings attached to it. These should be seen and understood with wisdom.

In order to do so it would be helpful if we take a close look at our life at this point. We spend our entire time centred-around and reacting to triggers from the Six sense-bases. We conduct our daily activities and other tasks remaining constantly in touch with them. Therefore if we can wisely see the reality of the Six sense-bases, our samsaric journey will not be so lengthy.

So when we say '*salayatananca pajanati*' we should refrain from simply relating to what each of us know already about the Six sense-bases but go according to what the Supreme Buddha actually expounded.

One of the best expositions about the Six sense-bases is given in *Upasambhidamagga Gnanakata*, the 15th Special Wisdom of the Supreme Buddha of the 73 such qualities (*tesatta gnana*). The 15th is the *ajjhatta vavatthane pannya vatthunanatte gnanam*

Here the Supreme Buddha offered us several different perspectives as aids to our understanding of the eye, ear, tongue, nose, body.

When one says, '*salayatananca pajanati*,'

- “The eye (ear, nose, etc) comes to be where there was none and completely ceases leaving no trace of it behind (*ahutva sambhutam hutva na bhavissati*)”.
- The eye and the rest of the other sense-bases should be understood as an internal dhamma

(*ajjhattam vavattheti*).

- Each of the Six sense-bases should be understood as “a product of ignorance (*avijja sambhutam*), volition (*kamma sambhutam*), craving (*tanha sambhutam*) and nutriment (*ahara sambhutam*)”.

Knowing the main three points above, we can start our Dhamma experiment.

- First it would be helpful if we establish why the sense-bases (*ayatana* - literal meaning: establishment) are so termed. These bases are capable of multiplying and producing more just as a government-body can make a ruling to collect multiple taxes (*ayadanatto ayatanatto*) or a goldmine that has the capacity to yield further ore in abundance (*akaratto ayatanatto*). Similarly the eye sense-base (ear, nose etc) has the ability to produce many more formations of consciousness (*citta*) and mental concomitants (*cetasika*).
- The Supreme Buddha showed that the sense-bases are of the dhamma of 'coming into being where there was none and completely ceasing leaving no trace behind'. This point calls for special attention here. For example, we may be thinking that our sense-bases, eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind, are continuously present whether we are sitting, standing, walking and lying down-in all four postures. But when we say '*salayatananca pajanati*' it should not reflect this customary way of our thinking.
- Therefore when we say 'the eye' we should understand of it being an internal dhamma and one that arises where there was none and ceases without trace. In the *Abhidhamma Pitaka*, *Dhamma Sanganiya*, the *ayatana* are clearly explained and mentions that the eye cannot be seen nor portrayed - *anidassana*. The Supreme Buddha has said that we have never seen nor will ever be able to see the 'eye' (*chakku*), now or in the future.
- Despite this clear advice, we still hold onto the notion that not only can we see our own eyes, we can also see other people's eyes. It is this mis-guided way of thinking that leads us to develop craving towards the sense-bases and hold onto the view of a self. The sooner we understand the *anidassana* quality of our sense-bases, the sooner we will be able to eradicate craving and free ourselves from the many rounds of births and deaths; the cycles of samsara.
- If we continue with our Dhamma experiment, we know that the eye, ear, nose, tongue and body - are the Material forms of sense-bases produced by volition (*kammaja rupa*).

Another point to know is that they do the work of a controlling principle or faculty (*indriya*).

Here we can remind ourselves that there are other dhammas that also do the work of the faculties: In the Mentality (*nama*) group these are the faculties of Faith (*saddha*), Effort (*viriya*), Mindfulness (*sati*), Concentration (*samadhi*) and Wisdom (*panna*).

In the Materiality (*rupa*) group they are the faculties of the eye (*cakkhu indriya*), ear (*sota indriya*), nose (*ghana indriya*), tongue (*jivha indriya*), body (*kaya indriya*), femininity (*stri indriya*), masculinity (*purisha indriya*) and life (*jivita indriya*). These also do the work of the faculties.

The term 'eye faculty' is used because where vision is concerned, it is the eye that has sole authority - the Ruler. The mind cannot make any demands nor the visual object itself. Neither consciousness nor mental concomitants have any powers. The eye faculty alone dictates terms. Nothing visual can get sent to the mind without going through the eye faculty. Similarly for hearing; the ear faculty is chief. The rest of the sense-faculties also have their respective domains (*kshestra*) where they wield power.

To continue with our experiment: we are going to look for our eye. A wise person can decipher matters by experimentation or by using similes. You are familiar with the teaching of “when eye and the form are present, eye consciousness arises; when the ear and sounds are present, ear

consciousness arises” (*cakkhun ca paticca rupe ca...*) and so on. This principle will never change. Never will 'eye and form produce body consciousness' or any other consciousness but eye consciousness.

We are trying to locate our eye here. If we were to take a pin or a needle and carefully touch the eye ball, will we not feel a slight painful feeling? We immediately know that it is a bodily feeling that we felt. We did not get an eye consciousness but what was produced instead was body consciousness. An unpleasant bodily feeling was produced. This experiment demonstrates that what we thought was our eye, was actually the body consciousness. So where is the eye?

If we repeat the above experiment with the tongue (touch the tongue with a needle), again what we will feel is the painful body consciousness arising. We know that it was not the tongue consciousness because that does not feel pain; only the body consciousness can feel pain. We did not taste the pin or the needle; so we know that tongue consciousness was not present. We cannot find our tongue this way. The pink coloured organ in our mouth that we thought was doing the job of tasting appears to be generating body consciousness after all. Not tongue consciousness.

Similarly all the sense-bases can be put to the test like this. We will not find the sense-bases this way. Only the body sense-base will be found.

That is why the Supreme Buddha said, “the sense-bases are of the dhamma of coming into being where there was none and completely ceasing leaving no trace behind”. If we do not fully grasp this fact and continue to maintain our belief that we have eyes, ears, a nose etc that are continuously functioning in all four postures then even if we keep on repeating (chanting), 'the eye is impermanent, the ear is impermanent, the nose is impermanent' all our life, impermanence will remain a theoretical Truth.

'The eye is impermanent' is the answer that we obtained after carrying out our experiment earlier.

The fact that the eye 'comes into being where there was none and ceases to exist leaving no trace of it behind' illustrates its impermanence. Similarly for the ear, nose, tongue and body – the internal-Material sense-bases. This is also true for the Mentality sense-base (*manayathana*) but it may be easier if you can fathom this truth with the Material sense-bases first. The realisation of the impermanence of the Mentality sense-base will naturally follow.

Another characteristic of the sense-bases given by the Supreme Buddha is that 'they cannot be seen nor portrayed'. If we take the same stance of not referring back to what we already know from before and go according to the Supreme Buddha's other exhortation that 'the sense-bases come into being where there was none and cease to exist leaving no trace of them behind', how should we view these in light of each other?

Here the Supreme Buddha has offered further explanation, “Monks, I will tell you about new *kamma* and old *kamma*”: The eye, ear, tongue, nose, body and mind are old kamma and any thinking, doing, speaking that we do are new kamma. It is clear then that our old kamma are incapable of producing new kamma and will always remain imperceptible to us. The old kamma however are our life and have become our life (*attabhava pariyapanna*) but we cannot think, do or speak about them.

To explain, suppose there is a young child of about five or six years of age. He also has internal organs in his body, heart, kidneys and so on. Is he aware of the presence of these organs in his body? Does he think, 'this is how my kidneys look like; this is how a cross-section of my heart looks like'? Does he even know that the organs are impermanent? No. He does not know any of these things. But despite his innocence all the complicated functions of these organs are being carried out. Entwined with the child's life, the organs do their work but the child does not think, act or speak about them because at this stage of his life he is unaware of their existence. His organs are the result of old kamma and they are helping him to live but the child has no knowledge of them; he is unable to make an assessment of them whether good or bad.

Now when the child becomes older he may learn through a book, a video or other media that this is how a human heart looks like, the kidneys are bean-shaped and so on. Before the child learnt this, the work of those organs had continued; his current knowledge and the functioning of the organs have nothing to do with each other.

The organs are the results of his old kamma ; they remain unrevealed and help to continue life but cannot make the child speak, think or act. Through ignorance, when thinking, speaking and acting, for example: 'I learnt about my organs, this is how my organs look like' - new kamma are generated.

The day that the organs die, the mental imagery (*nimiti*) that the child had built up will come forth with the potency to create new organs to prolong his samsaric existence.

The example above also illustrates the situation with the eye, ear, nose etc. Our eye (sense-base) was present even when we did not know what to call it. The eye will always remain unrevealed; not just the eye but all the other sense-bases. With our ignorance, however, we have gone in front of a mirror and have seen 'my eyes', 'my ears' 'my nose' and have built up huge amounts of mental images (*nimiti*). The new knowledge that we have acquired through seeing in the mirror or other's eyes or photographic images, are new kamma. It also the case with the other sense-bases. This 'knowledge' or new kamma (*sankhara*) has the potential to create new eyes in the samsaric journey. What the Supreme Buddha referred to as the 'eye' is the one that is our life, which will always remain unbeknown to us.

It is clear then that when we say the 'eye' it is not the physical form.

This is how we are considering the statement that the eye is an internal dhamma (*ajjhatam vavattheti*). What we see externally in the mirror or on the faces of others should not be taken as the sense-base. When we say '*salayatananca pajanati*' all of the above should be included.

What is the correct way to understand the eye? The eye (*cakkhu*) should be understood interlinked with Seeing.

If at anytime, if a form is seen, understand it to mean that the eye has arisen. When the form can no longer be seen, then understand that the eye has ceased. Similarly, when tasting is there the tongue has arisen. The taste was not experienced by a tongue which was already there. The tongue arose when the taste arose and vice-versa. They help each other. The moment we felt the taste, that was the origin of the tongue. We can only know that the internal sense-base has arisen when the external sense-base is felt. Likewise, we can only know the cessation of the internal sense-base when the external sense-base is no longer felt.

Now it is clear that we cannot find eyes, ears, nose, tongue or body that are present throughout, in all four postures. They come into being when conditions dictate and cease when they are no longer present.

When we advert our mind towards the eye, the eye is born. A form is seen. If the mind is turned away from the eye, the eye ceases to exist and a new sense-base, it could be the body sense-base in the case of the pin or the needle experiment, is born. Similarly with the tongue and tasting. If the mind is not adverted towards the tongue no taste can be detected. Only the body sense-base is present instead.

It is a capacity of the mind to give rise to the sense-bases. That is why they are termed *karmaja rupa*. They originate according to the conditions prevailing at the time.

Therefore when we say '*salayatananca pajanati*' we understand that the eye (ear, nose, etc) comes to be where there was none and completely ceases leaving no trace of it behind, it is an internal dhamma and cannot be seen nor portrayed.

If we wisely understand the sense-bases in the above manner, we will relinquish our four postures.

The number of mental images (*nimiti*) that we hold of our eyes, ears, nose, tongue and body represent the measure of our misguided-conviction that we are living with them.

One day we will come to understand that 'when I remember my eye, I am actually remembering my mind. Similarly, with the rest of the sense-bases, all the while I am remembering my mind, dealing with my mind. The other sense-bases simply arise in their respective domains, operate and cease without a trace; the idea that they are continually present is a misconception of my mind.' Then we will advance to the next level of wise-understanding.

We will come to realise that we are Clinging (*upadana*) to all the sense-bases, the five aggregates, the entire world. It is the mind sense-base that we are engaging with all the time. We remember ourself and see ourself but all of it is done using the mind. If we try to remember our eye, are we not contacting the mind? It is a mental image (*nimitta*). One cannot 'remember' an eye that is present now, remembering is a function of the mind, the function of the eye is seeing. One has to develop one's understanding to this level.

Furthermore, if we do not understand the impermanent nature of the Six sense-bases, that they come to be where there were none and cease leaving no trace behind, and unwisely believe in the 'continued presence of the six sense-bases' in all four postures, then we must be prepared for the outcome of further decay, death and suffering. If that is our stance it will condition Contact (*phassa*); followed by Feeling (*vedana*), Craving (*tanha*), Clinging (*upadana*), Becoming (*bhava*), Birth (*jati*), decay, death, (*jara, marana*) sorrow, lamentation (*dukkha, domanassa*) and so on. Instead we should understand that the Six sense-bases are *dukkha* and *dukkha* is present in the Six sense-bases. All of this must be understood when we say '*salayatananca pajanati*'.

What is the origin of the Six sense-bases? Mentality-Materiality conditions the Six sense-bases (*nama-rupa paccaya salayatana*).

Dear devotees, when the re-birth consciousness (*patisandhi vinnana*) enters a mother's womb, the body, made up of the four great elements (*satara maha bhuta*) becomes endowed with consciousness, thus being termed Mentality-Materiality (*nama rupa*). This follows the need for food (*ahara*) and the Six sense-bases are thus formed.

What is the cessation of the Six sense-bases?

The cessation of Mentality-Materiality leads to the cessation of the Six sense-bases (*nama rupa nirodho salayatana nirodho*). If consciousness did not associate with Materiality and if the body did not become endowed with consciousness, the cessation of the Six sense-bases would have ensued.

The Path leading to the cessation of the Six sense-bases is the Noble Eightfold Path. Therefore Right View here can be seen as 'the eye is conditioned; Ignorance is the factor that conditions the eye. Ignorant of what? Not knowing the reality of the eye gives rise to the eye.'

Craving, Clinging and Becoming are also causal factors of the eye. We craved to see certain types of forms, so we produced various kamma which lead to the formation of the eye (*kammaja rupa*). The eye can also be altered by kamma. Hence one must understand the eye as being formed by kamma.

Furthermore in line with dependant origination, the eye should be understood as coming into being according to causes and conditions and ceasing when they are no longer present. If we begin to think in this way and adjust our life accordingly, we need not suffer in samsara for very long.

The Most Venerable Arahant Sariputta thus expounded this deep Dhamma, in a concise form, yet expanding it in so many directions and also including the internal dhammas and the *Dhamma pariyaya* that prevails.

So this was how he explained '*salayatananca pajanati, salayatana samudayanca pajanati,*

*salayatana*nirodhanca *pajanati* for our benefit. This is how the origin, cessation and the conditioned nature of the Six sense-bases should be understood and that itself is the Way leading to the cessation of the Six sense-bases. One should resolve energetically to practice this in daily life.

There are even deeper meanings to the Six sense-bases than were discussed here. For now it is enough to know that such profundity exists. Do not stop at the stage where we think we 'know' the eye and that we 'know' it is impermanent. Investigate fully according to the Dhamma, what is the eye, how is it impermanent and for what purpose did the Supreme Buddha expound this Dhamma giving the sense-bases such an expansive meaning, until you see for yourself these truths in your life. Try to bring this seeing close to your life, make it your own practical experience and use this knowledge to eradicate defilements and put an end to suffering. May this sermon be of help to all.

Translation by Doreen Perera based on the Samma Ditti Sinhala book available [here](#)