MN 137 — MN 137 An Analysis of the Six Sense-Media | Saḷāyatana-vibhaṅga Sutta

English translation by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

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Text

An Analysis of the Six Sense-Media

Saḷāyatana-vibhaṅga Sutta (MN 137)

Introduction

Despite the abstract format of this discourse, it deals with an emotional topic: the source of emotions, the use of the emotions in the course of the practice, and the ideal emotional state of a person who has completed the path and is fit to teach others. In particular, this discourse counters a common misperception: that the distress that comes from having an unachieved goal is an obstacle in the practice, and that the antidote for that distress is to renounce any sense of goals. In actuality, that distress—termed “renunciation-based

distress”—has an important role in the practice: to overcome the distress that comes with a sense of loss over sensual pleasures that have not been attained, or those that have been attained in the past but now no longer exist. Renunciation-based distress serves as a reminder that the loss of sensual pleasures is not a serious matter. As for renunciation-based distress, it is overcome, not by abandoning any sense of goal, but by following the path and realizing the joy that comes when the goal is reached.

This discourse counters another misperception as well: that equanimity is the goal of the practice. In actuality, renunciation-based equanimity serves a function as part of the path of practice—as a tool for letting go of renunciation-based joy—and then it, too, is transcended by the state called “non-fashioning” (atammayatā), in which there is no act of intention, not even the intention underlying equanimity, at all.

* * *

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Sāvatthī in Jeta’s Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika’s monastery. There he addressed the monks, “Monks!”

“Yes, lord,” the monks responded to him.

The Blessed One said: “Monks, I will teach you the analysis of the six sense media. Listen, and pay close attention. I will speak.”

“Yes, lord,” the monks responded to him.

The Blessed One said: “The six internal sense-media should be known. The six external sense-media should be known. The six classes of consciousness should be known. The six classes of contact should be known. The eighteen explorations for the intellect should be known. The thirty-six emotions to which beings are attached1 should be known. With regard to them, depending on this, abandon that. There are three establishings of mindfulness that a noble one cultivates, cultivating which he is a teacher fit to instruct a group. Among master trainers, he is said to be the unexcelled trainer of people fit to be tamed. This is the summary of the analysis of the six sense-media.

“‘The six internal sense-media should be known’: Thus was it said. And in reference to what was it said? The eye-medium, the ear-medium, the nose-medium, the tongue-medium, the body-medium, the intellect-medium. ‘The six internal sense-media should be known’: Thus was it said. And in reference to this was it said.

“‘The six external sense-media should be known’: Thus was it said. And in reference to what was it said? The form-medium, the sound-medium, the aroma-medium, the flavor-medium, the tactile-sensation-medium, the idea-medium. ‘The six external sense-media should be known’: Thus was it said. And in reference to this was it said.

“‘The six classes of consciousness should be known’: Thus was it said. And in reference to what was it said? Eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, nose-consciousness,

tongue-consciousness, body-consciousness, intellect-consciousness. 'The six classes of consciousness should be known': Thus was it said. And in reference to this was it said.

"'The six classes of contact should be known': Thus was it said. And in reference to what was it said? Eye-contact, ear-contact, nose-contact, tongue-contact, body-contact, intellect-contact. 'The six classes of contact should be known': Thus was it said. And in reference to this was it said.

"'The eighteen explorations for the intellect should be known': Thus was it said. And in reference to what was it said? Seeing a form via the eye, one explores a form that can act as the basis for happiness, one explores a form that can act as the basis for unhappiness, one explores a form that can act as the basis for equanimity. Hearing a sound via the ear... Smelling an aroma via the nose... Tasting a flavor via the tongue... Touching a tactile sensation via the body... Cognizing an idea via the intellect, one explores an idea that can act as the basis for happiness, one explores an idea that can act as the basis for unhappiness, one explores an idea that can act as the basis for equanimity. The eighteen explorations for the intellect should be known': Thus was it said. And in reference to this was it said.

"'The thirty-six emotions to which beings are attached should be known': Thus was it said. And in reference to what was it said? Six kinds of house-based happiness & six kinds of renunciation-based happiness; six kinds of house-based distress & six kinds of renunciation-based distress; six kinds of house-based equanimity & six kinds of renunciation-based equanimity.

"And what are the six kinds of house-based happiness? The happiness that arises when one regards as an acquisition the acquisition of forms cognizable by the eye—agreeable, pleasing, charming, endearing, connected with worldly baits—or when one recalls the previous acquisition of such forms after they have passed, ceased, & changed: That is called house-based happiness. [Similarly with sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, & ideas.]

"And what are the six kinds of renunciation-based happiness? The happiness that arises when—experiencing the inconstancy of those very forms, their change, fading, & cessation—one sees with right discernment as it has come to be that all forms, both before and now, are inconstant, stressful, subject to change: That is called renunciation-based happiness. [Similarly with sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, & ideas.]

"And what are the six kinds of house-based distress? The distress that arises when one regards as a non-acquisition the non-acquisition of forms cognizable by the eye—agreeable, pleasing, charming, endearing, connected with worldly baits—or when one recalls the previous non-acquisition of such forms after they have passed, ceased, & changed: That is called house-based distress. [Similarly with sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, & ideas.]

“And what are the six kinds of renunciation-based distress? The distress coming from the longing that arises in one who is filled with longing for the unexcelled liberations when—experiencing the inconstancy of those very forms, their change, fading, & cessation—he sees with right discernment as it has come to be that all forms, both before and now, are inconstant, stressful, subject to change and he is filled with this longing: ‘O when will I enter & remain in the dimension2 that the noble ones now enter & remain in?’ This is called renunciation-based distress. [Similarly with sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, & ideas.]

“And what are the six kinds of house-based equanimity? The equanimity that arises when a foolish, deluded person—a run-of-the-mill, untaught person who has not conquered his limitations or the results of action3 & who is blind to danger4—sees a form with the eye. Such equanimity does not go beyond the form, which is why it is called house-based equanimity. [Similarly with sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, & ideas.]

“And what are the six kinds of renunciation-based equanimity? The equanimity that arises when—experiencing the inconstancy of those very forms, their change, fading, & cessation—one sees with right discernment as it has come to be that all forms, both before and now, are inconstant, stressful, subject to change: This equanimity goes beyond form, which is why it is called renunciation-based equanimity. [Similarly with sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, & ideas.]

“‘The thirty-six emotions to which beings are attached should be known’: Thus was it said. And in reference to this was it said.

“‘With regard to them, depending on this, abandon that’: Thus was it said. And in reference to what was it said?

“Here, by depending & relying on the six kinds of renunciation-based happiness, abandon & transcend the six kinds of house-based happiness. Such is their abandoning, such is their transcending. By depending & relying on the six kinds of renunciation-based distress, abandon & transcend the six kinds of house-based distress. Such is their abandoning, such is their transcending. By depending & relying on the six kinds of renunciation-based equanimity, abandon & transcend the six kinds of house-based equanimity. Such is their abandoning, such their transcending.

“By depending & relying on the six kinds of renunciation-based happiness, abandon & transcend the six kinds of renunciation-based distress. Such is their abandoning, such is their transcending. By depending & relying on the six kinds of renunciation-based equanimity, abandon & transcend the six kinds of renunciation-based happiness. Such is their abandoning, such their transcending.

“There is equanimity coming from multiplicity, dependent on multiplicity; and there is equanimity coming from singleness, dependent on singleness.

“And what is equanimity coming from multiplicity, dependent on multiplicity? There is equanimity with regard to forms, equanimity with regard to sounds… smells… tastes… tactile sensations [& ideas: this word appears in one of the recensions]. This is equanimity coming from multiplicity, dependent on multiplicity.

“And what is equanimity coming from singleness, dependent on singleness? There is equanimity dependent on the dimension of the infinitude of space, equanimity dependent on the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness… dependent on the dimension of nothingness… dependent on the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception. This is equanimity coming from singleness, dependent on singleness.

“By depending & relying on equanimity coming from singleness, dependent on singleness, abandon & transcend equanimity coming from multiplicity, dependent on multiplicity. Such is its abandoning, such its transcending.

“By depending & relying on non-fashioning,5 abandon & transcend the equanimity coming from singleness, dependent on singleness. Such is its abandoning, such its transcending.

“‘Depending on this, abandon that’: Thus was it said. And in reference to this was it said.

“‘There are three establishings of mindfulness that a noble one cultivates, cultivating which he is a teacher fit to instruct a group’: Thus was it said. And in reference to what was it said?

“There is the case where the Teacher—out of sympathy, seeking their well-being—teaches the Dhamma to his disciples: ‘This is for your well-being, this is for your happiness.’ His disciples do not listen or lend ear or apply their minds to gnosis. Turning aside, they stray from the Teacher’s message. In this case the Tathāgata is not satisfied nor is he sensitive to satisfaction, yet he remains untroubled, mindful, & alert. This is the first establishing of mindfulness that a noble one cultivates, cultivating which he is a teacher fit to instruct a group.

“And further, there is the case where the Teacher—out of sympathy, seeking their well-being—teaches the Dhamma to his disciples: ‘This is for your well-being, this is for your happiness.’ Some of his disciples do not listen or lend ear or apply their minds to gnosis. Turning aside, they stray from the Teacher’s message. But some of his disciples listen, lend ear, & apply their minds to gnosis. They do not turn aside or stray from the Teacher’s message. In this case the Tathāgata is not satisfied nor is he sensitive to satisfaction; at the same time he is not dissatisfied nor is he sensitive to dissatisfaction. Free from both satisfaction & dissatisfaction, he remains equanimous, mindful, & alert. This is the second establishing of mindfulness….

“And further, there is the case where the Teacher—out of sympathy, seeking their well-being—teaches the Dhamma to his disciples: ‘This is for your well-being, this is for your happiness.’ His disciples listen, lend ear, & apply their minds to gnosis. They do not turn aside or stray from the Teacher’s message. In this case the Tathāgata is satisfied and

is sensitive to satisfaction, yet he remains untroubled, mindful, & alert. This is the third establishing of mindfulness that a noble one cultivates, cultivating which he is a teacher fit to instruct a group.

"'There are three establishings of mindfulness that a noble one cultivates, cultivating which he is a teacher fit to instruct a group': Thus was it said. And in reference to this was it said.

"'Among master trainers, he is said to be the unexcelled trainer of people fit to be tamed': Thus was it said. And in reference to what was it said?

"Steered by the elephant trainer, the elephant to be tamed runs in only one direction: east, west, north, or south. Steered by the horse trainer, the horse to be tamed runs in only one direction: east, west, north, or south. Steered by the ox trainer, the ox to be tamed runs in only one direction: east, west, north, or south.

"But steered by the Tathāgata—worthy & rightly self-awakened—the person to be tamed fans out in eight directions.

"Possessed of form, he/she sees forms. This is the first direction.

"Not percipient of form internally, he/she sees forms externally. This is the second direction.

"He/she is intent only on the beautiful. This is the third direction.

"With the complete transcending of perceptions of (physical) form, with the disappearance of perceptions of resistance, and not attending to perceptions of multiplicity, (perceiving,) 'Infinite space,' he/she enters and remains in the dimension of the infinitude of space. This is the fourth direction.

"With the complete transcending of the dimension of the infinitude of space, (perceiving,) 'Infinite consciousness,' he/she enters and remains in the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness. This is the fifth direction.

"With the complete transcending of the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness, (perceiving,) 'There is nothing,' he/she enters and remains in the dimension of nothingness. This is the sixth direction.

"With the complete transcending of the dimension of nothingness, he/she enters and remains in the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception. This is the seventh direction.

"With the complete transcending of the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception, he/she enters and remains in the cessation of perception and feeling. This is the eighth direction.

“Steered by the Tathāgata—worthy & rightly self-awakened—the person to be tamed fans out in eight directions.

“‘Among master trainers, he [the Tathāgata] is said to be the unexcelled trainer of people fit to be tamed’: Thus was it said. And in reference to this was it said.”

That is what the Blessed One said. Gratified, the monks delighted in the Blessed One’s words.

Notes

1. Satta-pada. The question in translating this compound is whether satta means “living being” or “attached to.” In this translation, I have opted for both.

2. See SN 35:114 and Ud 8:1.

3. A person who “has not conquered his limitations or the results of action”: this passage seems related to the passage in AN 3:101, which defines a person of limited mind, prey to the results of past bad actions, as one who is “undeveloped in contemplating the body, undeveloped in virtue, undeveloped in concentration, and undeveloped in discernment; restricted, small-hearted, dwelling with suffering.” As AN 3:101 points out, such a person suffers more intensely from the results of past unskillful actions than does one whose awareness is unrestricted. SN 42:8 recommends the practice of the four sublime attitudes as a way of developing an unrestricted awareness that weakens the results of past unskillful actions.

4. A person who is “blind to danger” is one who does not see the drawbacks of sensual pleasure or attachment to the body. For such a person, moments of equanimity are usually a dull spot in the midst of the quest for sensual pleasure. This is why such moments do not go beyond the sensory stimulus that generated them.

5. Atammayatā. Literally, “not-made-of-that-ness.” See the introductions to sections II/B and III/G in The Wings to awakening.

Publisher references (not part of the sutta)

See also: DN 12; DN 21; SN 35:204; SN 56:11; AN 3:61; AN 4:94; AN 4:113; AN 4:159; AN 4:170; AN 9:41; AN 10:71