

Satipaṭṭhāna (53) Sense Doors: Eyes

April 5, 2022

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

eyes, relaxed, sense, exercise, mindfulness, mind, noticing, sense doors, aware, object, awareness, gaze, sight, strain, fixation, perception, knot, fetter

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Today, we come to the next exercise in the discourse on the establishment of awareness. Sometimes this is called the six sense spheres. It tells us to be mindful at each of the sense doors. The six sense doors are the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body (and its tactile abilities to know and to feel), and mind. With the mind, it is as if we have an organ of perception that recognizes that we are thinking or that we feel emotions – the activities of the mind. The organ of perception is considered one of the six senses.

The text begins with a very simple statement and builds on that. It says that one knows there are sight objects – things that we can see. We also know that there is the eye. This simple statement is the beginning of a specific emphasis of mindfulness that is very much centered in the present moment and in the direct experience of the senses. It is not about spinning into the future or remembering the past, but rather, staying right here in the moment. If you are hearing, you might hear this bell. If you are seeing, you are seeing what is in front of you in the moment. So the exercise begins with sight.

Many years ago, I went to the Zen monastery at Tassajara. While there, I noticed something unusual about seeing: I could look at a tree, and I saw the tree. I was also aware of myself looking – I was aware of the eyes engaged in the process of looking. Then I noticed that in between – what felt like in between – were my ideas of the tree. It was almost as if I was painting the concept “tree” *on top* of the tree. The concept was accurate enough that, ordinarily, I would have not thought twice about whether there was anything more than seeing that tree. But I became acutely aware that there was an act of conceiving – an act of interpretation and projection – onto the tree.

There is the object of sight, the eyes that see, and something in between. This could be our judgments, our stories, or our ideas about what is there. It could be our bias that we project onto something. We do not see things directly as they are. We often see them through the filter of something.

In mindfulness practice, it is possible to become aware of this filter – this thing that is in between. We begin by learning to appreciate a simple moment of sense awareness. One of the sense stores is seeing. It is a wonderful exercise – a wonderful capacity – to learn how to look with quiet, relaxed eyes and without agendas. Without the wanting mind looking for something, or the scared mind looking for danger and how to be safe. Instead, very calm, quiet eyes gaze in a relaxed way.

I believe in the ancient Buddhist world, they sometimes had the idea that, rather than light coming into the eyes, somehow the eyes go out to touch the external object – to grab the object. Certainly, when I am intensely wanting, afraid or curious about something, I can almost feel my head going forward and my eyes opening more. It's as if my eyeballs are popping out a little bit to see – what's that? Or I might be straining, trying to really look at something carefully and minutely – trying to make sense of it. I can feel the strain in my eyes.

One of the wonderful ways to practice mindfulness – to have a reference point – is to learn how to let awareness of seeing be calm and easeful. Generally, with relaxed, easy eyesight, which doesn't have to be conscious even, the eyes are moving around slightly. The eyes are not held fixed. Fixed eyes strain and get tired. But relaxed eyes float in the eye sockets. They are glancing a little bit here and there. Focusing on a particular object, the eyes might look at the perimeter and the different parts of it. The eyes roam around.

Allowing the eyes to roam gently can release a lot of stress and fixation in the mind. Because when the eyes roam, it is more difficult for the mind to stay fixated on its preoccupation. The more fixated we are on our inner concerns or thoughts, the more the eyes tend to be held tight. They do not have that floating feeling.

One of the ways to practice this mindfulness of seeing is to settle back and allow sights to come to you. Do not go looking for anything. See, but do not look – the difference is that looking is an active, intentional act: to look for something. If someone says, “look over there,” then you look. People do not say, “See over there.” If they say, “What do you see?”, it is not necessarily a request to go looking. But if your eyes are looking in that direction, see what comes to your eyes – what comes into awareness.

A way to cultivate mindfulness is to develop it at each of the six sense doors. Begin to appreciate a relaxed, quiet way of receiving the sensations at each sense door. Today, try that with seeing. Just this alone is a wonderful exercise. If you are fortunate enough to be a passenger in a car (for me, a bus or a train is even better), just let your eyes gaze out on the countryside and the scenery around you as you are driving. Let the eyes simply float, look, and relax. Do not hold on to anything. Keep the eyes soft. When I was a teenager, I used to get very calm looking out of train windows – just seeing things going by. That can be very nice.

In this exercise on the six sense doors, the practice is to know the object that we are seeing – to know we are seeing something – and to know the eyes, and to be able to see in a relaxed way. But then also to notice one of the things that is in between. Specifically, this exercise is about noticing the knot. This is sometimes translated into English as a “fetter.” But I think the Pali word is better rendered as the “knot.” “Fetter” can imply that we are fettered – we are hindered by something (which is true). “Knot” means we are knotted up or entangled in it. I personally prefer the language of entanglement – being knotted up in something.

When I have some problem with my computer, and my eyesight is knotted up – entangled in trying to figure out what is going on here – I am looking, and my eyes are not relaxed. Rather than just gazing at the issue and letting a quiet inner exploration figure it out, I might be entangled and caught in the issue.

It is possible to become aware that there is the object we see, there are the eyes that are seeing, and then there is what is in between. Some of you might have more of a sense that the knot is in the mind – behind the eyes. But between the two, or in addition to the two, there is the way we are knotted up. These things are entangled with each other so that the way that we are looking is not relaxed and easeful. Instead, we are looking in a way that is caught, preoccupied, or concerned with what we are looking at. This becomes stressful for the eyes. They become locked, and they get tight and tired. They have lost the relaxed way of being.

One of the reasons to cultivate mindfulness of seeing is to learn and develop the capacity for this relaxed gaze, so that we become more sensitive to the knots when they occur. This is not an incidental exercise that the Buddha gave us. But rather, it is another perspective from which we can become aware of all the ways we get attached. Every attachment is an attachment at some particular sense door. As we become aware of each of the different sense doors, this awareness is a different angle for becoming aware of attachment itself.

Sometimes it is what we see; sometimes what we hear, taste, smell, or touch, and then the mind door is a big one. This particular exercise in *satipaṭṭhāna* very carefully and repeatedly goes through each of these six sense doors and talks about knowing the sense door and knowing the object. This first exercise is about knowing sight objects, knowing the eye that is seeing, and knowing the knot that is between them.

More than that, this teaching is also about knowing the manner in which that knot arises, seeing it appear, and then letting go of it. Seeing the appearance of a knot, when it first occurs, is an amazing vantage point where it is easier to let go. So – relaxed seeing, noticing how the eyes get locked in and knotted up, but noticing that just as it occurs, and then letting it go.

Today, as you go about your day over the next 24 hours, you might give special attention to seeing. See if you can learn greater ways of looking in a calm and relaxed way, where the eyes can look at things and even study them. But do it in a very relaxed, receptive mode. As you get the hang of that, maybe then you can start noticing when the eyes are *not* that way – when they are locked or straining. That is the knot. Maybe you can let go of it.

That is the introduction to the topic for this week: mindfulness at the six sense doors. Thank you.