

The Connection of the Nibbāna with the Six Sense Bases

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Abstract—A being is the working of the six sense bases. The sense bases are the eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body and the mind. Buddhism describes what these sense bases are and how they work. These sense bases can be related to many of the philosophical and psychological teachings of the Buddha. One of the most important teachings of the Buddha is the Four Noble Truths. Buddhism explains that one who needs to attain *Nibbāna* must understand and realize these Four Noble Truths. These noble truths have a direct connection with the sense bases. The ultimate goal of Buddhism is *Nibbāna*. But there is no place or a special world called the “*Nibbāna*”. This paper describes that the noble truths can be identified within one’s own sense bases. The noble truth of suffering occurs within the functioning of the sense bases and the cause of suffering, “craving” operates inside the senses bases and the cessation of suffering, or *Nibbāna* is also experienced in the Sense Bases. Relevant material will be drawn for this paper directly from the *Pāli* canonical sources. The major finding is that the first three noble truths can be experienced through the six sense bases. The conclusion derived from the study is that the sense bases have direct relevance to *Nibbāna*, which is not to be conceived as another place or another dimension, but phenomena that can be experienced through one’s own sense bases, and that the other noble truths are also to be experienced in relation to one’s own sense bases.

Keywords—Buddhism, four noble truths, sense bases, Nibbāna.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE Buddha introduced the noble truths that he discovered in the following terms:

“Bhikkhus, there are these Four Noble Truths. What four? The noble truth of suffering, the noble truth of the origin of suffering, the noble truth of the cessation of suffering, the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering” [1].

The Four Noble Truths are one of the most important and key teachings of the Buddha. These truths were not known to the world until the Buddha revealed them. The Four Noble Truths are universal truths. The ascetic *Siddhāratha* understood these noble truths by just sitting under a tree and doing meditation; analyzing his own mind and body. His research was not an external research, but an internal one.

We can make suggestions how he understood these Four Noble Truths. When he was searching within himself, first he looked at the current situation. As in the ‘*Gotama Sutta*’ of the *Samyutta Nikaya*, the *Bodhisatta Gotama* was thinking about the cause of suffering. He at first saw the existence of suffering, and realized the noble truth of suffering. With his understanding he went on to explain what he conceived as the

truth of suffering, as understood by noble ones, thus:

“And what, monks, is the noble truth of suffering?

Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, death is suffering, sorrow, lamentation, pain, sadness and distress are suffering, being attached to unloved ones is suffering; being separated from loved ones is suffering; not getting what one wants is suffering; in short, the five aggregates of grasping are suffering” [2].

This is the first noble truth. Then the Buddha explains in detail about these sufferings. When we analyze the above statement of the Buddha it is clear that the suffering is happens in the Six Sense Bases. According to *Dhamma*, and as we can clearly see, there are the following Six Sense Bases in the constitution of a being. They are: 1) The Eye, 2) The Ear, 3) The Nose, 4) The Tongue, 5) The Body, 6) The Mind. A brief description to the Six Sense Bases is as follows.

A. Eye

There is what is called the “eye” in the world. That looks like a blue lotus petal and is surrounded by black eyelashes and varied with dark and light circles. The eye [sensitivity as meant] here is to be found in the place in the middle of the black circle surrounded by the white circle in that [feature of the] eye with its accessories where there appears the image of the bodies of those who stand in front of it. It pervades the eye’s seven layers like oil sprinkled on seven layers of cotton. It is assisted by the four primary elements whose [respective] functions are upholding, cohering, maturing, and moving, as a warrior prince is by four nurses whose functions are holding, bathing, dressing, and fanning. It is consolidated by temperature, consciousness, and nutriment; it is maintained by life; it is furnished with colour, odour, flavour, etc; it is the size of a mere louse’s head; and it duly serves both as physical basis and as door for eye-consciousness, and the rest [of the consciousness of the cognitive series. And this is said by the General of the *Dhamma*:

“The sensitivity with which he sees a visible object is small and it is subtle, too, no bigger, than a louse’s head” [3].

The eye is where the external visible objects are captured and the mental factors are being born and activate. All the other parts of the eye help this sensitive eye to work properly and give room to get all the visible data and processes further.

B. The Ear

“The *ear* [sensitivity] is to be found inside the [feature of the] ear-hole with its accessories in the place that is shaped like a finger-stall and surrounded by fine brown hairs. It is assisted by the elements in the way aforesaid.

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It is consolidated by temperature, consciousness, and nutriment; it is maintained by life; it is equipped with colour, etc.; and it duly serves both as physical basis and as door for ear-consciousness, and the rest” [3].

The “ear sensitivity” is the place where the sounds are being captured and make the ear consciousness and all other mental factors related to the ear.

C. The Nose

“The *nose* [sensitivity] is to be found inside the [feature of the] nose-hole with its accessories in the place shaped like a goat’s hoof. It has assistance, consolidation and maintenance in the way aforesaid; and it duly serves both as physical basis and as door for nose-consciousness, and the rest” [3].

The “nose sensitivity” is the place where odor is being captured and makes the nose consciousness and all other mental factors related to the nose.

D. The Tongue

“The *tongue* [sensitivity] is to be found in the middle of the [feature of the] tongue with its accessories in the place shaped like a lotus petal tip. It has assistance, consolidation and maintenance in the way aforesaid; and it duly serves both as physical basis and as door for tongue-consciousness, and the rest” [3].

The “tongue sensitivity” is the place where taste is being captured and makes the tongue consciousness and all other mental factors related to the tongue.

E. The Body

“The *body* [sensitivity] is to be found everywhere, like a liquid that soaks a layer of cotton, in this physical body where there is matter that is clung to.²³ It has assistance, consolidation and maintenance in the way aforesaid too; and it duly serves both as physical basis and as door for body-consciousness, and the rest” [3, p. 445].

The “Body sensitivity” is all over the body except hair, body hair, nails, and dead skin. It means even in the eye, in the ear, in the nose, in the tongue there is body sensitivity. Practically, we experience many kinds of feelings such as heat, pressure, itchiness etc. in those places. According to this statement, it is clear that this is the largest sensitivity in a being.

F. The Mind

The mind does not have an anatomical explanation. The mind and the mental factors work in the heart or in the “heart basis” or the “*hadayavattu rūpa*”. There is a description for that.

“The heart-basis has the characteristic of being the (material) support for the mind-element and for the mind-consciousness-element. Its function is to observe them. It is manifested as the carrying of them. It is to be found in dependence on the blood, of the kind described in the treatise on mindfulness of the body (VIII.111), inside the heart. It is assisted by the primaries with their functions of upholding, etc.; it is consolidated by temperature,

consciousness, and nutriment; it is maintained by life; and it serves as physical basis for the mind-element and mind-consciousness element, and for the states associated with them” [3, p. 447].

The working of these Six Sense-bases is called as a “Being”. As shown in the *Samiddhi Sattapañhā Sutta*, a being is defined as:

- “Venerable Sir, It is said “a being, a being”. In what way, venerable sir, might there be a being or the description of a being?
- Where there is the eye, Samiddhi, where there are forms, eye-consciousness, things to be cognized by eye-consciousness, there a being exists or the description of a being.
- Where there is the ear, where there are sounds, ear-consciousness, things to be cognized by the ear-consciousness, there a being exists or the description of a being.
- Where there is tongue, where there are tastes, tongue-consciousness, things to be cognized by the tongue-consciousness, there a being exists or the description of a being.
- Where there is the body, where there are tactile body objects, body-consciousness, things to be cognized by the body-consciousness, there a being exists or the description of a being.
- Where there is the mind, where there are mental phenomena, mind-consciousness, things to be cognized by the mind-consciousness, there a being exists or the description of a being” [4].

The Buddhist way of defining a being is shown above. In this way anyone can understand what or who a being is. It is not just a life but it is a functioning life. If there is one sense base and corresponding object or more, resulting in sense impression and consciousness, in those circumstances we can say there is a being. In addition, it is not just a collection of material things that can be referred to as a ‘being’, there should be consciousness too. A dead animal still has the five sense bases and the objects related to them, but as there is no consciousness, we cannot say it is a being; rather we say in such circumstances: ‘It WAS a being’.

A being is a complex of Six Fold-Base and it is working. This is clearly shown in the above *Sutta*. What is most important is the working of each consciousness, of each sense base. As mentioned before, even though there is eye and the forms, if there is no eye-consciousness, the eye is not working; so there we cannot say there is a being. This idea is again described in the same *Sutta*.

- “Where there is no eye, Samiddhi, where there are no forms, no eye-consciousness, no things to be cognized by eye-consciousness, there a being does not exist nor any description of a being.
- Where there is no ear, where there are no sounds, no ear-consciousness, no things to be cognized by the ear-consciousness, there a being does not exist nor any description of a being.
- Where there is no nose, where there are no odours, no

nose-consciousness, no things to be cognized by the ear-consciousness, there a being does not exist nor any description of a being.

- Where there is no tongue, where there are no tastes, no tongue-consciousness, no things to be cognized by the tongue-consciousness, there a being does not exist nor any description of a being.
- Where there is no body, where there are no tactile body objects, no body-consciousness, things to be cognized by the body-consciousness, there a being does not exist nor any description of a being.
- Where there is no mind, where there are no mental phenomena, no mind-consciousness, things to be cognized by the mind-consciousness, there a being does not exist nor any description of a being” [4].

This gives a clear idea or a conclusion that a being is not other than the Six Sense Bases and the workings of them. If there are these Six Sense Bases and their activities, there is a being. If the Six Sense Bases are not there, no activities will take place, and consequently there will be no being.

The Four Noble Truths are connected directly with a living being. The First Noble Truth can be explained through the Sense Bases of a being. The suffering of birth is the birth of sense bases. Aging is the aging of the sense bases. Death is the death of the sense bases. Body pain or pain in the mind is also connected with the sense bases. Being attached to unloved ones is connected with the sense bases, because without the sense bases dislike towards external sense cannot occur. Likewise, being separated from loved ones is also connected with sense bases. Not getting what one wants means the sense bases do not get what the bases yearn for. The suffering of the five aggregates of grasping is happening in the sense bases. This means all the suffering is inside the sense bases.

With regard to the cause of suffering the Buddha explains:

“And what, monks, is the noble truth of the Origin of suffering? It is that craving which gives rise to rebirth, bound up with pleasure and lust, finding fresh delight now here, now there: that is the sensual craving, craving for existence, and craving for non-existence” [2, p. 346].

The cause of suffering is craving. Sensual craving is to have pleasure using the sense bases. Craving for existence is the craving to acquire the sense bases again and again in repeated lives. Craving for non-existence is the wrong view that there is no next life. It means one thinks that only the sense bases are working in the present and there is no next life so they misuse the sense bases, trying to gratify them to the maximum.

Explaining the causal origin of craving, the Buddha shows that wherever in the world there is anything agreeable and pleasurable, there craving arises and establishes itself.

“And what is there in the world that is agreeable and pleasurable? The eye in the world is agreeable and pleasurable. The ear..., the nose..., the tongue..., the body..., the mind in the world is agreeable and pleasurable and there this craving arises and establishes itself. Sights, sound, smells, tastes, tangibles, mind-objects in the world are agreeable and pleasurable and there this craving arises and establishes itself”.

“Eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, nose-consciousness, tongue-consciousness, body-consciousness, mind-consciousness in the world are agreeable and pleasurable and there this craving arises and establishes itself”.

“Eye-contact... mind-contact in the world are agreeable and pleasurable and there this craving arises and establishes itself”.

“Feelings born of eye-contact... mind-contact in the world are agreeable and pleasurable and there this craving arises and establishes itself”.

“The perception of sight... of mind-objects in the world are agreeable and pleasurable and there this craving arises and establishes itself”.

“Volition in regard to the sight... mind-objects in the world is agreeable and pleasurable and there this craving arises and establishes itself”.

“The craving for sights... mind-objects in the world is agreeable and pleasurable and there this craving arises and establishes itself”.

“Thinking of sights... mind-objects in the world is agreeable and pleasurable and there this craving arises and establishes itself”.

“Pondering on sights... mind-objects in the world is agreeable and pleasurable and there this craving arises and establishes itself” [2, p. 347].

These are the places where craving arises and gets established. It is precisely clear that craving arises and gets established in the sense bases; the way they operate is also unobvious.

Suffering is the problem to be solved. The cause of suffering explains why suffering is there. There must be a solution to the problem. If the cause is removed, suffering will not come to be. This is the cessation of suffering:

“And what, monks, is the noble truth of the cessation of Suffering? It is the complete fading-away and extinction of craving, its forsaking and abandonment, liberation from it, detachment from it” [2, p. 346].

Cessation of suffering is the extinction, the abandonment, discarding of and detachment and liberation from craving. When one is free from all craving, one becomes free of all suffering. It means he has gained *Nibbāna*. It is the noble fruit that a wise person is capable of attaining. The nature of *Nibbāna* is described in the teaching as follows:

“This is peaceful, this is sublime; that is, the stilling of all activities, the relinquishment of acquisitions, the destruction of craving, dispassion, *nibbāna*”.

“This is peaceful; this is sublime, that is, the stilling of all activities, the relinquishment of acquisitions, the destruction of craving, cessation, *nibbāna*” [5].

Nibbāna has been generally explained in the above terms. Accordingly, *Nibbāna* is “the destruction of craving”. *Nibbāna* is the cessation of suffering. This is the third noble truth. Craving, as explained earlier, is tied up with the sense bases. Explaining the arising of craving and its cessation, it is said:

“Eye-contact... mind-contact in the world is agreeable and pleasurable and there this craving arises and

establishes itself”.

“Feelings born of eye-contact... mind-contact in the world are agreeable and pleasurable, and there this craving comes to be abandoned, there its cessation comes about”.

“The perception of sight... of mind-objects in the world, are agreeable and pleasurable, and there this craving come to be abandoned, there its cessation comes about”.

“Volition in regard to the sight... mind-objects in the world is agreeable and pleasurable, and there this craving comes to be abandoned, there its cessation comes about”.

“The craving for sights... mind-objects in the world is agreeable and pleasurable, and there this craving comes to be abandoned, there its cessation comes about”.

“Thinking of sights.... mind-objects in the world is agreeable and pleasurable, and there this craving comes to be abandoned, there its cessation comes about”.

“Pondering on sights.... mind-objects in the world is agreeable and pleasurable, and there this craving comes to be abandoned, there its cessation comes about” [2, p. 347].

From these statements, it becomes very clear that the cessation of craving happens inside the sense bases and their operations. Craving related to all the sense bases and their activities is abandoned, and the cessation of craving comes to be. The destruction of craving” is *Nibbāna*; clearly *Nibbāna* is within the sense bases. *Nibbāna* is not a separate world. It is not another place. It is not a transcendental realm to which someone goes. It is not a physical gain. It cannot be measured. *Nibbāna* is just the destruction of craving that happens inside the sense bases.

Whenever one becomes capable of overcoming all craving, one is called an “*Arahant*”. An *Arahant* still has the six sense bases, but the craving is not there. He only has the five aggregates (*pancakkhandha*), but not the five aggregates of grasping (*pancaupādanakkhandha*). Craving and ignorance are no longer working in the sense bases. An *Arahant* also sees, hears, etc.; however, as craving is not there, there is no volition that makes *kamma*. The gathering of *kamma* is no longer happening. The mind is calm. The sense bases do not grasp at anything. *Arahants* neither become attached to worldly things nor develop an aversion or conflict towards them. They have equanimous minds. All the defilements are destroyed and overcome. Defilements, craving or ignorance will never again arise in that mind. Therefore the *Arahant* experiences the *Nibbāna* here and now. This is referred to as “*Sopādisesa Nibbāna*”.

The *Mūlapariyāya Sutta* of *Majjhima Nikāya*, shows how an *Arahant*’s mind works.

“*Bhikkhus*, a *bhikkhu* who is an *Arahant* with taints destroyed, who has lived the holy life, done what had to be done, laid down the burden, reached the true goal, destroyed the fetters of being, and is completely liberated through final knowledge, directly knows earth as earth. Having directly known earth as earth, he does not conceive [himself as] earth, he does not conceive [himself as] from earth. He does not

conceive [himself apart] from earth, he does not conceive earth to be 'mine,' he does not delight in earth. Why is that? Because he has fully understood it, I say.”

He directly knows water as water..., fire as fire..., air as air..., beings as beings..., gods as gods..., *Pajāpati* as *Pajāpati*..., *Brahmā* as *Brahmā*..., the gods of Streaming Radiance as the gods of Streaming Radiance..., the gods of Refulgent Glory as the gods of Refulgent Glory..., the gods of Great Fruit as the gods of Great Fruit..., the Overlord as the Overlord..., the base of infinite space as the base of infinite..., the base of infinite consciousness as the base infinite consciousness..., base of nothingness as the base of nothingness..., the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception as the neither-perception-nor-non-perception..., the seen as the seen..., the heard as the heard..., the sensed as the sensed..., the cognized as the cognized..., unity as unity..., diversity as diversity..., all as all...

He directly knows *nibbāna* as *nibbāna*. Having directly known *nibbāna* as *nibbāna* he does not conceive [himself as] *nibbāna*, he does not conceive [himself] in *nibbāna*, he does not conceive [himself apart] from *nibbāna*, he does not conceive *nibbāna* to be 'mine,' he does not delights in *nibbāna*. Why is that? Because he has fully understood it, I say.” “Because he is free from lust through the destruction of lust” “Because he is free from hate through the destruction of hate” “Because he is free from delusion through the destruction of delusion” [6].

The above is a description of the mind of the *Arahant*. The *Arahant* knows all the twenty four phenomena as they are, but he does not grasp them. He does not have wrong views about them. He does not think they are mine, or I am them. This is because he has fully understood them, and is free from lust, free from hate, free from delusion. He has understood the sense bases, and has wiped off the craving from the sense bases.

What is remarkable is that the *Arahant* sees *Nibbāna* too. Yet he does not seek delight even in *Nibbāna*. *Arahants* have fully abandoned craving and ignorance from the sense bases.

There is also another aspect of *nibbāna*. It is called “*Anupādisesa Nibbāna*”. This refers to the death of an *Arahant*. After the death of an *Arahant*, there is nothing left. The working of all sense bases ceases. There is no *kamma* to connect to another life. The energy of the mind is over. That *Arahant* is now nowhere to be seen or heard. The world has ended for them. There is no place to which the *Arahant* goes after his death. This is called “*Anupādisesa Nibbāna*”. This stage is described by the Buddha as:

“There is that dimension, monks, where there is neither earth, nor water, nor fire, nor wind; neither dimension of the infinitude of space, nor dimension of the infinitude of consciousness, nor dimension of nothingness, nor dimension of neither perception nor non-perception; neither this world, nor the next world, nor sun, nor moon. And there, I say, there is neither coming, nor going, nor staying; neither passing away nor arising: unestablished, unevolving, without support [mental object]. This, just this, is the end of stress” [7].

In this stage there is nothing. This means there are no sense bases or objects for the sense bases. No activities of the sense bases. Nothing remains. This is the end of the sense bases and their activities. This is the ultimate stage. This is *Nibbāna*.

Considering all these facts, three conclusions can be made.

1. *Nibbāna* is not a place to be born or another dimension. It is in one's own Sense Bases.
2. The Noble truth of Suffering and the cause of the suffering should be understood through the sense bases.
3. *Nibbāna* experiences from one's own Sense Bases.

In this point of view, the clear fact is the suffering arises in the Sense Bases. The cause of the suffering, the craving, emerges in the Sense Bases. The cessation of the suffering, or the *Nibbāna*, is also experienced in the Sense Bases.

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