

Overcoming the 5 mental bondages (1 of 2)

Source: **(Majjhima) Ceto,khila Sutta**, how to free the mind and liberate it (M 16, SD 32.14).¹ by Piya Tan © 2017.

4.2 MENTAL BONDAGES

A “**mental bondage**” refers to the “way of the heart,” how we habitually feel about things, the things in life that attract and distract us, and divert us from personal growth and spiritual development. Psychologically, this is to have an unwholesome view of being and having. Instead of actually experiencing people and things in wholesome ways, we view them as what is to be measured (comparing self with others) and collected (numbers mattering more than the moment). In short, we do not really know how to enjoy life.

The 5 mental bondages (*cetaso vinibandha*) [3.3] are those of lust for sensual pleasures, for our own body and for external forms, indulgence in food and sleep, and aspiration for heavenly rebirth. These are **the affective aspects** of the struggle in our spiritual life, that we need love, ruth, joy and peace² in our lives for sure progress on the path of awakening [3.2.2.2]. Here, we shall examine the overcoming and prevention of these mental bondages in terms of Dharma training and awakening.

4.2.1 Overcoming lust for sensual pleasures [§20]

4.2.1.1 The Sutta’s commentary explains that “sensual pleasure” here connotes both the objects of sense-desire (*vatthu,kāma*) as well as sensual desire for them as a defilement (*kilesa,kāma*) (MA 2:69,5). The “objects of sense-desire” refers to sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches and thoughts that are the potential bases for attracting us, grasping us and so intensifying the defilements that initiated the process. It is the sensual desire here that we have to be more wary of and avoid.

An enlightening passage from **the Nibbedhika (Pariyāya) Sutta** teaches us that sensual objects are not bad in themselves; it is our intentions towards them that decides whether they are unwholesome or wholesome:

<i>Saṅkappa,rāgo purisassa kāmo</i>	The thought of lust ³ is a person’s desire: ⁴
<i>n’ete kāmā yāni citrāni loke</i>	there are no sensual pleasures in the diversely beautiful ⁵ in the world.
<i>saṅkappa,rāgo purisassa kāmo</i>	The thought of lust is a person’s desire.
<i>tiṭṭhanti citrāni tath’eva loke</i>	The diversely beautiful in the world remain just as they are.

¹ SD 32.14: <http://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/32.14-Majjhima-Cetokhila-S-m16-piya.pdf>

² These are the 4 divine abodes (*brahma,vihāra*): *mettā, karuṇā, muditā* and *upekkhā*, see **Brahma,vihara**, SD 38.5.

³ On *saṅkappa,rāga*, “thought of lust” or “lustful intention,” see SD 6.11 (2.2.2.4).

⁴ *Saṅkappa,rāgo purisassa kāmo*. Be Ce Ee Se all give the same 5-line stanza. It recurs in **Na Santi S** (S 1.34), SD 42.6 without line a. Here [§3.4] the stress is in our own thinking or intention, while in S 1.34, it is on the nature of the world. Note how line a flows into b, and line c into d. Line e points to what should be done.

⁵ “Diversely beautiful,” *citra*: see SD 6.11 (2.2.2.3).

ath'ettha dhīrā vinayanti chandan'ti So here⁶ the wise remove desire (for them).⁷
(A 6.63,3.2/3:411), SD 6.11

4.2.1.2 The reason why we are caught up in running after sensual pleasure is that we do not understand the impermanent and unsatisfactory nature of visual forms, sounds, smells, tastes and touches. When we are attracted to them, we do not realize that it is often a knee-jerk response, an instinctive reactivity, to something familiar, a past pleasant experience.

It's like we have been jilted in our first love—or imagine that we have been jilted—and now fear being jilted again or being unloved, and will have nothing to do with men or women (depending on the situation). Then, we redirect our attention—often by psychological transference or by displacement⁸—to some perceptibly self-affirming project (such as making money or religious zeal).

4.2.1.3 Sensual pleasures—which include the emotions attending them (basically the 4 biases of *lust, hate, delusion and fear*) [4.1.4.1]—are **conditioned states**. They are our hedonic responses to how we perceive other people in terms of the 5 physical experiences of others [4.2.2.3]. There is no “person” that we are attracted to, or lust after, or fall in love with, or who does not requite our advances, or who jilts us. They are merely conditions that we see or seek, and they are perceived as being unsatisfactory. There is no person—neither “I” or the “other”—to be blamed. If any is to be blamed, it is the conditions (*paccaya*).

4.2.2 Overcoming lust for the body [§21]

4.2.2.1 Our body comprises the 5 physical senses and the mind. These **6 senses** (*saḷ-āyatana*) and their respective sense-objects (*dhamma*) are only unwholesome when we root them in lust, hate or delusion. If we simply notice them as they arise and fall away, then, we really enjoy them in the sense that we feel the joy and peace of reality that they are impermanent, and we cannot even try to hold them back. Just let them come, let them go; see their nature of rising and falling—the *truth* is in their impermanence, the *beauty* is in the fact that we actually see this ourselves.

4.2.2.2 When we are attached to our body, we begin to imagine it, in part or as a whole—our form, feeling, perception, formations or consciousness⁹—to be actually enduring or permanent, imagining that “This is *mine!*” (craving), “This I *am!*” (conceit), and “This is *my self!*” (self-view).¹⁰ These are the 3 pernicious self-views.¹¹ As unawakened beings, we are more likely to be attracted and attached to our **body**, that is, our 5 physical senses: the eye, ear, nose, tongue or body.

In other words, we see ourselves only in part, not as a whole: we only see ourselves as how we look, or how we sound, or how we smell, or how we taste (in the sense of pleasure as well as indulging in food), or how we feel (to the touch). When we indulge in such sensual attachments, failing to appreciate their true nature of being impermanent and unsatisfying, we sink into a subhuman level of violently seeking

⁶ “So here the wise” (*ath'ettha dhīrā'ti atha etesu ārammaṇesu paṇḍitā chanda,rāgaṃ vinayanti*, “here then the wise removes lust and desire in the sense-objects,” SA 1:63). In other words, “here” refers to our minds.

⁷ On this verse's significance, see SD 6.11 (2.2.2.1).

⁸ On transference and the defence mechanism of displacement, see SD 17.8c (8.4.1.1).

⁹ These are the 5 aggregates (*pañca-k,khandha*): see SD 17, esp SD 17.1a.

¹⁰ Respectively see **I: The nature of identity**, SD 19.1; **Me: The nature of conceit**, SD 19.2a; **Mine: The nature of craving**, SD 19.3.

¹¹ See SD 19.11 (1.1).

them (asura), or craving for them (animal), or being addicted to them (preta), or simply suffering on account of them (hell-beings).

4.2.2.3 It helps to constantly reflect the true nature of our **human body**, as taught in the **Sāmañña-phala Sutta** (D 2), thus:

“This body of mine is form
composed of the 4 great elements,¹² born from mother and father.
He understands thus:
It is nourished with rice and porridge,
subject to inconstancy, rubbing, pressing, dissolution, and dispersion.¹³
And this consciousness of mine lies attached here, bound up here.”¹⁴ (D 2,85.2), SD 8.10

When we habitually see our body in this way, we understand that what we see as its life, youth or health are all limited in time. From the day we are born, we start to decay—we give nice-sounding words to those preferable stages: infancy, childhood, youth, adulthood; then, the words are not so inviting: middle age, maturity, senility, second childhood. Buddhaghosa, in his **Visuddhi, magga**, mentions these “10 stages of life,” lasting roughly 10 years each, that is, those of the tender decade, the sport decade, the beauty decade, the strength decade, the understanding decade, the decline decade, the stooping decade, the bent decade, the dotage decade, and the prone decade.¹⁵

4.2.2.4 Despite our body (with our mind) being fleeting and frail, it is our only vehicle for awakening. We start by understanding and accepting the impermanent and imperfect nature of our **physical body**. We let it go so that we do not, at least for a time, have to process any of the 5 physical sense-data. Then, we can turn all our attention to examining the nature of the mind.

We notice that **the mind**, too, is impermanent, changing, becoming other. We can notice this reality in our breath, too, even more clearly so. The breath, after all, is the interaction between the body and the mind. When we faithfully watch the rise and fall of the breath, and how it becomes peaceful and blissful, it becomes the door to inner calm and clarity. We are then free of all desires and defilements on attachment to passing fancies. We enjoy the joyful and liberating experience of true reality.

4.2.3 Overcoming lust for form [§22]

4.2.3.1 Even when we have learned to accept our body as it is, and are not attracted to it, we may, on the other hand, be attracted to external forms, especially the bodies of others. What we miss or see as missing from our body, we try to look for it in others. Here again, we see others as only in parts: the physical structure that we lust for—the eye, ear, nose, tongue or body.

¹² The 4 great (or primary) elements (*mahā, bhūtā*): earth, water, fire, wind, ie, essentially, solid and resistance, liquid and cohesiveness, heat and decay, and air and movement (D 1:214; Vism 11.27; Abhs 154): **Rūpa**, SD 17.2a.

¹³ See **Vammika S** (M 23,4/1:144), SD 28.13 for parable of the anthill (representing the body).

¹⁴ **D 2,85/1:76** (×2) = **M 109,9/2:17**; **M 23,4/1:144**, **74,9/500**; **S 35.105/4:83** = **A 9.15,2/4:386**; **S 55.21/5:369 f**; **Nigrodha, miga J 12/1:146**. Cf Divy 180: *śātana, patana, vikiraṇa, vidhvaṃsanā, dharmatā*. See **Dīgha, nakha S** (M 74.9/1:500), SD 16.1 tr & nn. This statement means that consciousness here (in a physical being) is dependent on the physical body. RD points out that this and other passages disprove the idea that the (same) consciousness (*viñ-ñāṇa*) transmigrates. For holding such a view, Sāti was severely rebuked by the Buddha (M 38). A new re-linking consciousness (*paṭisandhi*) arises at conception, dependent on the old one (see Vism 17.164 ff).

¹⁵ Vism 20.51 & SD 48.1 (5/3/1/2).

When we objectify people in this way, we also start measuring them. To “measure” means to compare self with others, and one with another, and to be drawn to what we see as lacking in us, and to reject what we see as not attractive or preventing us from our quest for pleasure.

We see a person, an experience or a thing as an object of pleasure, we want to have it. When we already have it, we want more, we seek new ones, and so we collect such objects. This becomes our unending *samsaric* quest—like the mythical Sisyphus pushing his rock uphill, it rolls down, and he runs after it downhill, and pushes it uphill again, *ad infinitum*. He seems to enjoy it! We are caught in this *samsaric* cycle either because we think we enjoy running after the rock (it gives us a false sense of achievement) or we are tired of the rock, and so we look for a new one to push uphill and run downhill after.

4.2.3.2 We can imagine forms (*rūpa*) here as a catchword for all our physical sense-experiences, all the physical sense-objects we see as attractive or not. Remember the quote from **the Nibbedhika Pariyāya Sutta** (A 6.63), where the Buddha states that things out there do not have any sensual quality: we perceive such a quality in them [4.2.1.1]. A “form,” then, is an external sense-object onto which we project our lust, hate, delusion or fear.

The mind behind the projecting only sees parts of wholes, those parts that attract us, and we reject the rest. A relationship that is based on such partial or “biased” love clearly will not work. It does not help to only love a person’s eyes, or ears, or nose, or tongue, or body-parts (muscles, bones, etc). The problem with parts is that they cannot function on their own; even their existence depends on other parts. In other words, theirs is a conditioned existence: they change, they are unsatisfactory, they do not exist in themselves.

If we lust for only a part of a person, when that part changes or begins to appear different from our expectations, then, we lose interest. We are not really in *love*, but in lust (treating people as objects and body-parts). We need to accept people completely and unconditionally—this is **lovingkindness**, the basis of a wholesome relationship with others.¹⁶

R930 Inspirations 571
Piya Tan ©2025

¹⁶ Further on lovingkindness in relationship, see SD 38.4 (7).