

The 24 elements¹

We are each body and mind. We know we have a body: we can see it, hear it, smell it, taste it, and feel it. We know all this because we have a mind. The reality is that it is the mind that sees, hears, smells, tastes and touches. However, the mind can itself recall or conjure up any of these 5 sense-experiences: this is called thought. As such, we actually have **6 senses**:²

the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind.

The body, that is, our 5 physical senses, cannot exist on their own. We can only experience them through our mind. The experience of each of these 5 senses is called “**consciousness**.” So, we have

eye-consciousness,
ear-consciousness,
nose-consciousness,
tongue-consciousness,
body-consciousness, and
mind-consciousness.

These are the 6 consciousnesses.³

Through each of the “internal” sense-bases or sense-faculties (the eye, ear nose, tongue, body, and mind), the mind experiences the world as sense-consciousness. Each of these 6 consciousnesses only arise when we direct our mind to that particular “external” sense-base or sense-object, that is, sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, or thought.

This directed mind is known as “attention.” Wherever we direct our attention, there arises consciousness.⁴

When we attend to a sight,	there is eye-contact or visual stimulation, or simply, seeing.
When we attend to a sound,	there is ear-contact or aural stimulation, or simply, hearing.
When we attend to a smell,	there is nose-contact or smell stimulation, or simply, smelling.
When we attend to a taste,	there is tongue-contact or taste-stimulation, or simply, tasting.
When we attend to a touch,	there is body-contact or bodily stimulation, or simply, touching.
When we attend to a thought,	there is mind-contact or mental stimulation, or simply, thinking.

When there is sense-contact or sense-stimulus, there is **feeling**. So we have

eye-based feeling,	arising from a sight;
ear-based feeling,	arising from a sound;
nose-based feeling,	arising from a smell;
tongue-based feeling,	arising from a taste;
body-based feeling,	arising from a touch;
mind-based feeling,	arising from a thought. ⁵

Then there is **perception**, how we recognize the tone of a feeling, mostly dependent on our past experience of that feeling. So, in this way,

we perceive a sight as being	pleasant, unpleasant or neutral;
we perceive a sound as being	pleasant, unpleasant or neutral;

¹ The “24 elements” are aspects of our total experience, that is, 6 sense-faculties, 6 sense-objects, 6 sense-consciousnesses, and 6 sense-based feelings. This is a very basic introduction to Buddhist Psychology.

² On the 6 senses (*saḥ-āyatana*), see **Ṣaḥ-āyatana Vibhaṅga S** (M 137/3:216-222), [SD 29.5](#).

³ On consciousness, see **Viññāṇa**, [SD 17.8a](#).

⁴ On attention, see **Nandi-k,khaya S 1-4** (S 35.156-159/4:142 f), [SD 12.7+](#) [SD 12.8](#) & SD 93.1+2.

⁵ On feeling, see **Vedanā**, [SD 17.3](#).

we perceive a smell as being	pleasant, unpleasant or neutral;
we perceive a taste as being	pleasant, unpleasant or neutral;
we perceive a touch as being	pleasant, unpleasant or neutral;
we perceive a thought as being	pleasant, unpleasant or neutral.

If we perceive any such experience as being pleasant, and desire it, lust arises.
If we perceive any such experience as being unpleasant, and dislike it, ill will arises.
If we fail to notice any such experience as being neutral, ignorance arises.
This is how bad karma arises through the 3 doors of body, speech and mind.

Yet, we can still enjoy our experiences, whether they are pleasant, unpleasant or neutral.
When we perceive any sense-experience as being *pleasant*, we regard it as impermanent.
When we perceive any sense-experience as being *unpleasant*, we regard it as impermanent.
When we perceive any sense-experience as being *neutral*, we regard it as impermanent.

Lust, ill will and ignorance are called “**latent tendencies**,” because they lie dormant in our unconscious, accumulating through our misperceptions of the sense-experiences.⁶ They control our lives, and we do not even know it. However, we may notice their grosser forms as **the 3 unwholesome roots**, that is, greed, hate and delusion, on a preconscious level.⁷

Before we act, speak or think, we should note as follows:

if we are motivated by <i>greed</i> ,	then the action is bad or unwholesome;
if we are motivated by <i>hate</i> ,	then the action is bad or unwholesome;
if we are motivated by <i>delusion</i> ,	then the action is bad or unwholesome.

We have moments before we act; crucial moments, when we can still hold back such a bad or unwholesome action. When we do this, it is called “**sense-restraint**.”⁸ This is a good or wholesome karma. In fact, this is how we keep the 5 precepts of not killing, not stealing, not committing sexual misconduct, not lying, and not getting drunk or drugged.⁹

Greed, hate, and delusion are like powerful currents in a great flood. Our body is a ship with a crew of 5 (called Eye, Ear, Nose, Tongue, and Body), and the captain is the Mind. None of the flood-waters in all the oceans can get into the ship if the crew work to keep things ship-shape, and the captain guides the ship away from dangerous waters, and steers skillfully through bad weather.

A whole ocean of water cannot sink a ship, unless the water gets into the ship. In the same way, none of the bad we see in the world can drown us, unless we allow it to arise inside us. The world out there is what it is. Our perception makes it good or bad. If we react with greed, hate or delusion, then we become greedy, hateful and deluded.¹⁰

The world remains the same. We do not need to change the world; we need to change ourselves. Indeed, we are the world.¹¹

What we see	creates our world of sights.
What we hear	creates our world of sounds.
What we smell	creates our world of smells.

⁶ On latent tendencies, see *Anusaya*, [SD 31.3](#).

⁷ On the 3 unwholesome roots, see *Mūla S* (A 3.69/1:201-205), [SD 18.2](#); (*Kamma*) *Nidāna S* (A 3.33) @ [SD 4.14 \(1.5\)](#).

⁸ On sense-restraint, see *Nimitta & anuvyañjana*, [SD 19.14](#).

⁹ On the 5 precepts, *Veḷu, dvāreyya S* (S 55.7), [SD 1.5 \(2\)](#); *Sīlānussati*, [SD 15.11 \(2.2\)](#); [SD 21.6 \(1.2\)](#); [SD 37.8 \(2.2\)](#).

¹⁰ See *Nibbedhika Pariyāya Sutta* (A 6.63, 3.3+3.4), [SD 6.11](#).

¹¹ On our senses as the world, see *Sabba S* (S 35.23), [SD 7.1](#).

What we taste	creates our world of tastes.
What we touch	creates our world of feelings.
What we think	creates our world of thoughts.

Hence, we are our own creators. As such, we can work our own spiritual destiny. If not, who else can?¹²

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¹² See Dhammapada 160.