

Pahāna Sutta

The Discourse on Letting Go

S 36.3/4:205 f

Theme: Overcoming the latent tendencies

Translated by Piya Tan ©2006, 2009

1 The 3 latent tendencies

1.1 THE THREE FEELINGS. The Abhidhamma has a list of seven latent tendencies (*anusaya*), which hints that the shorter list of three latent tendencies is the older set, found, for example, in the **Cūḷā Vedāla Sutta** (M 44) and the **Pahāna Sutta** (S 36.3), thus:

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|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| (1) the latent tendency to lust | (<i>rāgānusaya</i>); |
| (2) the latent tendency to aversion | (<i>paṭighānusaya</i>); and |
| (3) the latent tendency to ignorance | (<i>avijjā'anusaya</i>). |

(M 44.25-28/1:303 f) = SD 40a.9; S 36.3/4:204-206) = SD 31.1

This list of three latent tendencies is probably the oldest list found in the Suttas, as it is the shortest, and it also correlates very well with three kinds of feelings, as described here in the Pahāna Sutta (S 36.3), that this, as follows:

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|--------------------------------------|--|--------------------|
| (1) the latent tendency to lust | reinforced by <i>being attached</i> to | pleasant feelings; |
| (2) the latent tendency to aversion | reinforced by <i>rejecting</i> | painful feelings; |
| (3) the latent tendency to ignorance | reinforced by <i>ignoring</i> | neutral feelings. |
- [SS4-5]

One who has fully overcome the latent tendencies is called an arhat, who is never reborn.

If we are unawakened, we *are* the latent tendency that arises in us:

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|---|--------------------------|
| when the latent tendency of lust takes over, | we are <i>lustful</i> ; |
| when the latent tendency of hate takes over, | we are <i>hateful</i> ; |
| when the latent tendency of ignorance takes over, | we are <i>delusive</i> . |

Or, as the Commentary on the Aññātara Bhikkhu Sutta 1 (S 22.35) says: if we have a latent tendency towards a form (or any of the other five aggregates) by way of *sensual lust, hate, or delusion*, then we are described in terms of that very same latent tendency, as being “lustful, hating, deluded” (*ratto duṭṭho mūlho*) But when the latent tendency is absent, we is not reckoned so (SA 2:265). “Additionally,” says Bodhi,

we might suppose, one is reckoned not only way of the defilements, but even more prominently by way of the aggregate with which one principally identifies. One who inclines to form is reckoned a “physical” person, one who inclines to feeling a “hedonist,” one who inclines to perception an “aesthete” (or fact-gatherer?), one who inclines to volition a “man of action,” one who inclines to consciousness a thinker, etc. (S:B 1053 n47)¹

1.2 HOW A LATENT TENDENCY GROWS STRONGER. A latent tendency is a karmically potent act which is habitually reinforced so that we find it hard to resist such an action. The Commentary to the Anusaya Sutta (S 45.175) says that a latent tendency is *the defilement* itself, but is *a latent tendency* in

¹ See further *Anusaya* = SD 31.3 (1.4.2).

the sense that it has gained strength (*thama,gata'atthena*, SA 3:137).² Its Ancient Subcommentary (Porāṇa Tīkā) adds that it “has gained strength” by being firmly attached to a being’s mental continuum (*satta,santāne thīra,bhāvūpagamana,bhāvena*, SAPT:VRI 2:122). That is to say, it remains with us all life long, and shadowing us thereafter, if we do not work to weaken or remove them.

When our conscious mind intends (*ceteti*) and plans (*pakappeti*), this feeds our karmic or existential consciousness,³ which means we will be reborn in due course. However, even when we *neither* intend *nor* plan, we are still reborn—this is on account of the momentum of our latent tendencies. As such, we really have no control over ourselves, that is, unless we begin to see these latent tendencies for what they are. Only after we have accepted them as they are, can we really understand them. And in understanding them, we can more easily let them go.⁴

2 The 7 latent tendencies

A more elaborate set of seven latent tendencies are listed in the Saṅgīti Sutta,⁵ the Cha,chakka Sutta,⁶ the Anusaya Sutta,⁷ the Paṭisambhidā,magga,⁸ and the Vibhaṅga.⁹ The last two (in the Abhidhamma tradition) define the latent tendencies in practically the same way as the suttas:¹⁰

And what is the latent tendency of beings?

There are the seven latent tendencies:

- (1) the latent tendency of sensual lust;
- (2) the latent tendency of aversion;
- (3) the latent tendency of conceit;
- (4) the latent tendency of wrong view;
- (5) the latent tendency of doubt;
- (6) the latent tendency of lust for existence;
- (7) the latent tendency of ignorance.

That which in the world is pleasant and likable, there the tendency to sensual lust of beings lies latent.

That which in the world is unpleasant and unlikable, there the tendency to aversion of beings lies latent.

Thus in these two states, ignorance continuously occurs, and so too conceit, wrong view and doubt.

This is the latent tendency to beings.¹¹ (Pm §587/123; Vbh §816/341; cf S 45.175)

² *Kāma,rāgānusayo ti thāma,gat'atthena kāma,rāgōva anusayo kāma,rāgānusayo.*

³ “Existential consciousness” is a modern generic term for what is commonly known in the texts as “being-to-be-born” or gandharva (*gandhabba*) (M 1:266, 2:157; *tatrūpagata,satto*, “the being that has arrived there,” MA 2:310), and in Comys as “rebirth consciousness” (*paṭisandhi,citta*, DA 2:430; MA 4:174; SA 1:184, 2:31), and “life-continuum” (*bhavaṅga*, DA 1:194, 2:594; MA 1:262, 2:77, 229, 352, 366; SA 1:184, 224, 2:358, 3:4, 54, 97, 3:191). In contrast, there is “cognitive consciousness,” which is operative during life itself, ie, in sense-experiencing. See Nagara S (S 12.65) = SD 14.2 Intro (2) & *Vīññāṇa* = SD 17.8a(6).

⁴ See further *Anusaya* = SD 31.3 (1.4.1).

⁵ D 33.2.3(12)/3:254, 282.

⁶ M 148.28/3:285.

⁷ A 7.11-12/4:8 f.

⁸ Pm §587/123.

⁹ Vbh §816/341, §949/383.

¹⁰ See Madhu,piṇḍika S (M 18.8/1:110) = SD 6.14 Introd (5).

¹¹ *Katamo ca sattānaṃ anusayo? Sattānusayā: kāmarāgānusayo, paṭighānusayo, mānānusayo, diṭṭhānusayo, vicikicchā'nusayo, bhavarāgānusayo, avijjā'nusayo. Yaṃ loke piyarūpaṃ sātārūpaṃ, ettha sattānaṃ kāmarāgānusayo [rāgānusayo, Vbh] anuseti. Yaṃ loke appiyarūpaṃ asātārūpaṃ ettha sattānaṃ paṭighānusayo anuseti. Iti imesu dvīsu dhammesu avijjā'nupatitā, tadekaṭṭho māno ca diṭṭhi ca vicikicchā ca daṭṭhabbā. Ayaṃ sattānaṃ anusayo.*

Now, the ten fetters (*dasa saṃyojanā*), are closely related to these seven latent tendencies. Let us first look at the list of the ten fetters, namely:¹²

(1) self-identity view	(<i>sakkāya, diṭṭhī</i>), ¹³	
(2) spiritual doubt	(<i>vicikicchā</i>),	
(3) attachment to rituals and vows	(<i>sīla-b, bata, parāmāsa</i>), ¹⁴	
(4) sensual lust	(<i>kāma, rāga</i>),	
(5) repulsion	(<i>paṭigha</i>),	
(6) greed for form existence	(<i>rūpa, rāga</i>),	
(7) greed for formless existence	(<i>arūpa, rāga</i>),	
(8) conceit	(<i>māna</i>),	
(9) restlessness	(<i>uddhacca</i>),	
(10) ignorance	(<i>avijjā</i>).	(S 5:61; A 5:13; Vbh 377)

The Mahā Mālunkya,puttaSutta (M 64) gives a list of five latent tendencies, which are there called the five “lower fetters” (*orambhāgiya saṃyojana*).¹⁵ These five latent tendencies are:

(1) The latent tendency of self-identity	(<i>sakkāya, diṭṭhānusaya</i>),
(2) The latent tendency of doubt	(<i>vicikicchānusaya</i>),
(3) The latent tendency of attachment to rituals and vows	(<i>sīla-b, bata, parāmāsānusaya</i>),
(4) The latent tendency of sense-lust	(<i>kāma, rāgānusaya</i>),
(5) The latent tendency of ill will	(<i>vyāpādānusaya</i>).
	(M 64.3/1:432 f) = SD 21.10

These latent tendencies are called “lower fetters” because they bind us to the sense-world. They are in fact identical with *the first five of the ten fetters* listed above.

The higher fetters (*uddham, bhāgiya saṃyojana*) are 6-10 of the ten fetters. They hold us back in the form world or formless world, so that we are still stuck in samsara. Four of the higher fetters are found in the set of seven fetters above. Fetters 6-7 become *the latent tendency of lust for existence*. Only restlessness seems to be left out, but this is usually included in *the latent tendency of doubt*. The arhat has overcome all these ten fetters.¹⁵

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¹² On the 10 fetters & sainthood, see **Kiṭṭa, giri S** (M 70) = SD 11.1 (5.1).

¹³ See **Antā S** (S 22.103) = SD 14.1.

¹⁴ See **Kukkura, vatika S** (M 57/1:387-392) = SD 23.11.

¹⁵ See further **Anusaya** = SD 31.3 (1.2).

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S 36.3/4:205 f

3 Bhikshus, there are these three kinds of feelings. What are the three?
Pleasant feeling, painful feeling, neutral feeling.

4 Bhikshus,

the latent tendency of lust	should be abandoned in regard to	pleasant feeling;
the latent tendency of aversion	should be abandoned in regard to	painful feeling;
the latent tendency of ignorance	should be abandoned in regard to	neutral feeling. ¹⁶

5 Bhikshus, when a monk

has abandoned the latent tendency of lust in regard to	pleasant feeling;
has abandoned the latent tendency of aversion in regard to	painful feeling;
has abandoned the latent tendency of ignorance in regard to	neutral feeling—

then, bhikshus. he is called a monk without any latent tendency,¹⁷ one who sees rightly. He has cut off craving, undone the fetters,¹⁸ and fully penetrating conceit, he has made an end of suffering.”

6 *Sukham vedayamānassa
vedanam appajānato
so rāgānusayo hoti
anissaraṇa,dassino.*

For one feeling pleasure,
because of not understanding feeling,
he has the latent tendency of lust
of one who sees no escape.

7 *Dukkham vedayamānassa
vedanam appajānato
paṭighānusayo hoti
anissaraṇa,dassino.*

For one feeling pain,
because of not understanding feeling,
he has the latent tendency of aversion
of one who sees no escape.

8 *Adukkham-asukham santam
bhūri,paññena desitam
tañ cāpi abhinandati
n'eva dukkhā pamuccati*

When there is neutral feeling—
as taught by the One of Vast Wisdom—
if he delights in that, too,
he will surely never be free from suffering.

9 *Yato ca bhikkhu ātāpī
sampajaññam na riñcati
tato so vedanā sabbā
parijānāti paṇḍito.*

So long as a monk is zealous and
does not neglect full awareness,
that much, regarding all feelings,
he understands—he is wise.¹⁹

¹⁶ Of these 3 feelings, see Intro (1.1).

¹⁷ A latent tendency (*anusaya*) is a karmically potent act which is habitually reinforced so that we find it hard to resist such an action. See *Anusaya* = SD 31.3.

¹⁸ The 10 fetters (*dasa saṃyojana*) are: (1) self-identity view (*sakkāya,ditṭhi*), (2) persistent doubt (*vicikicchā*), (3) attachment to rituals and vows (*sīla-b,bata,parāmāsa*), (4) sensual lust (*kāma,rāga*), (5) repulsion (*paṭigha*), (6) greed for form existence (*rūpa,rāga*), (7) greed for formless existence (*arūpa,rāga*), (8) conceit (*māna*), (9) restlessness (or remorse) (*uddhacca*), (10) ignorance (*avijjā*) (S 5:61; A 5:13; Vbh 377). In some places, no 5 (*kāma,rāga*) is replaced by illwill (*vyāpāda*). The first 5 are the lower fetters (*orambhāgiya*), and the rest, the higher fetters (*ud-dhambhāgiya*). The abandonment of the lower 5 fetters makes one a non-returner (*opapātika* or *anāgāmi*) (see *Ānā-pānasati* S, M 118.10 = 7.13). This verse technically refers to the non-returner, but here is spoken of an arhat, one who has broken all 10 fetters: see *Laṭukikopama* S (M 66.17/1:454) = SD 28.11.

¹⁹ This is a linear tr; an idiomatic tr would be: “So long as a monk is zealous and | does not neglect full awareness, | that much he is wise | in understanding all feelings.”

- 10 *So vedanā pariññāya
diṭṭhe dhamme anāsavo
kāyassa bheda dhammaṭṭho
saṅkhyam nōpeti vedagū'ti*
- He, having fully understood feelings,
is here and now influx-free,²⁰
with the body's break-up, he stands in the Dharma—
the true knower cannot be reckoned.

— evarū —

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²⁰ “Mental influxes,” *āsava*. The term *āsava* (lit “in-and-out-flow”) comes from *ā-savati* “flows towards or inwards” (ie either “into” or “out” towards the observer). It has been variously translated as taints (“deadly taints,” RD), corruptions, cankers, intoxicants, biases, depravity, misery, evil (influence), or simply left untr. The Abhidhamma lists 4 *āsavas*: the mental influx (1) of sense-desire (*kām'āsava*), (2) of (desire for eternal) existence (*bhav'āsava*), (3) of views (*diṭṭh'āsava*), (4) of ignorance (*avijjāsava*) (D 16.1.12/2:82, 16.2.4/2:91, Pm 1.442, 561, Dhs §§1096-1100, Vbh §937). These 4 are also known as “floods” (*ogha*) and “yokes” (*yoga*). *The influx of existence* is the attachment and desire for the realm of form and of formlessness, and as such, is the craving for the dhyanas, on account of *the false views* of eternalism and annihilationism. As such, *the influx of view* is subsumed under the influx of existence (MA 1:67). The list of 3 influxes (omitting that of views) is probably older and is found more frequently in the suttas (D 3:216, 33.1.10(20); M 1:55, 3:41; A 3.59, 67, 6.63). Those “without influxes” (*anāsava*) are the arhats. See BDict: āsava.