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Saññojana Sutta

The Discourse on Mental Fetters | S 41.1

Theme: Citta explains the nature of the mental fetters to the monks

Translated by Piya Tan ©2009

1 Citta instructs the monks

1.1 “WALKING DHARMA.” Citta the householder is declared by the Buddha to be the foremost Dharma speaker amongst his laymen disciples (*etad-aggam dhamma, kathikānam*, A 1:26).¹ **The Saññojana Sutta** (S 41.1) is a short discourse to some monastic elders by Citta, who clarifies the nature of a mental fetter, that is, it is neither the sense-faculty nor its sense-object, but “the fetter here is the desire-or-lust that arises therein dependent on both” (*yañ ca tattha tad ubhayam paṭicca uppajjati chanda, rāgo tam tattha saṃyojanam*) [2; §10].

The discourse’s highlight is the parable of the black ox and the white ox, which also appears in **the (Saṃyojana) Koṭṭhita Sutta** (S 35.232), where Sāriputta uses it to instruct Mahā Koṭṭhita. Sāriputta adds that if this were not the case—that it is neither the sense-faculty nor the sense-object that is the fetter, but the desire that arises on their account—it would be impossible for there to be the holy life for the destruction of suffering.² Although Citta’s instruction is brief, it is to the point, and the perplexed monks understood his instruction, and show their appreciation, by alluding him to someone we might nickname as “Walking Dharma.” [§11]

1.2 ANALYSIS OF SENSUAL DESIRE. Citta’s teaching is a familiar one. In fact, it appears in **the Nibbedhika Pariyāya** (A 6.63) in greater detail. The Sutta analyzes sensual desire by way of *definition, diversity (of manifestation), result, cessation and the way to its cessation* (like an extended “noble truth” formula). The Sutta defines sensual desires as our attraction to the sense-objects, highlighted in these two remarkable lines of the sutta’s only verse:

The thought of passion is a person’s sensuality:
What is beautiful in the world remain as they are. (A 6.63,3/3:416), SD 6.11

The Sutta goes on to say that the sensuality or attraction arises through contact, that is, sense-stimulus. The diversity of sensuality is that it arises on account of our desire for any of the five physical sense-objects. The result of having sensual desires is rebirth in some state depending on our merit. The cessation of sensual desires is effected by practising the noble eightfold path.³

2 The fetters

The “fetters” (*saṃyojana*) mentioned in **the Saññojana Sutta** (S 41.1)⁴ and also in **the (Saṃyojana) Koṭṭhita Sutta** (S 35.232)⁵ are not the well known “10 mental fetters” (*dasa saṃyojana*)⁶ in connection

¹ On Citta the householder, see further **Gilāna Dassana S** (S 41.10/4:303 f), SD 16.16 (1). This discourse recounts his last moments, when he admonishes the devas and his relatives.

² S 35.232.5/4:163 (SD 28.4).

³ A 6.63.3-4/3:410-412 (SD 6.11).

⁴ S 41.1.10/4:283 (SD 32.11).

⁵ S 35.232.5/4:163 (SD 28.4).

⁶ **The 10 fetters** (*dasa saṃyojana*) are: (1) self-identity view (*sakkāya, diṭṭhi*), (2) spiritual doubt (*vicikicchā*), (3) attachment to rituals and vows (*sīla-b, bata, parāmāsa*), (4) sensual lust (*kāma, rāga*), (5) aversion (*paṭigha*), (6) greed for form existence (*rūpa, rāga*), (7) greed for formless existence (*arūpa, rāga*), (8) conceit (*māna*), (9) restlessness (*uddhacca*), (10) ignorance (*avijjā*) (S 5:61; A 5:13; Vbh 377). In some places, no 5 (*kāma, rāga*) is replaced by ill will (*vyāpāda*). The first 5 are the lower fetters (*orambhāgiya*), and the rest, the higher fetters (*uddhambhāgiya*). The abandonment of the lower 5 fetters makes one a non-returner (*opapātika* or *anāgāmī*) (see **Ānāpānasati S**, M 118.10 @ SD 7.13).

with sainthood (streamwinning, etc),⁷ but that of the Abhidhamma tradition. As this set (also of “10 fetters”) is not a systematized set, it is likely to be an older set, but preserved in the Abhidhamma.

This older set of 10 fetters is the one referred to in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, in its section on “the contemplation of dharmas” (*dharmānupassanā*), under the topic of “the 6 sense-bases” (*saḷāyatana*). The related passages run thus:

Again, bhikshus, a monk dwells observing dharmas [phenomena] in the dharmas in respect to **the 6 internal and 6 external sense-bases**.⁸

Bhikshus, how does a monk dwell observing dharmas in the dharmas in respect of the six internal and external sense-bases?

Here, bhikshus, a monk

- (1) understands the eye and understands forms,⁹
and he understands whatever fetter that arises dependent on both,
and he understands the arising of an unarisen fetter,
and he understands the letting go of an arisen fetter,
and he understands the further non-arising fetter that he has given up. (M 10.40/1:61), SD 13.3

Then the same is said of (2) the ear and sounds, (3) the nose and smells, (4) the tongue and tastes, (5) the body and touches, and (6) the mind and mind-objects. In fact, this is exactly what the teaching of the Saññojana Sutta refers to. [§10]

These 10 fetters (*saṃyojana*) listed in the Abhidhamma are as follows:

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|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| (1) sensual desire | (<i>kāma-c, chanda</i>), |
| (2) repulsion | (<i>paṭigha</i>), |
| (3) conceit | (<i>māna</i>), |
| (4) views | (<i>ditthi</i>), |
| (5) spiritual doubt | (<i>vicikicchā</i>), |
| (6) desire for existence | (<i>bhava, rāga</i>), |
| (7) clinging to rituals and vows | (<i>sīla-b, bata parāmasa</i>), |
| (8) envy | (<i>issā</i>), |
| (9) avarice | (<i>macchhariya</i>), and |
| (10) ignorance | (<i>avijjā</i>). (Vbh 969/17; Dhs 1113/197, 1469/247; DA 3:784) ¹⁰ |

It is likely that this set of ten fetters—which we can call “the Abhidhamma ten fetters”—refers to that which must be broken by the arhat. In due course, as the stages of sainthood evolved to include the streamwinner, and so on, the list became more standardized into the better known set of ten fetters.¹¹

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⁷ See **Ānāpānasati S** (M 118.9-12/3:80) nn, SD 7.13.

⁸ *Chasu ajjhattika, bhāhiresu āyatanesu*, lit “in the six internal and external sense-bases.” See Intro (3.7e).

⁹ *Rūpe* (acc pl of *rūpa* in this specific sense): “eye-objects, visible forms, shapes.”

¹⁰ *Kāma, rāga, saṃyojanam paṭigha, māna, ditthi, vicikicchā, sīla-b, bata, parāmāsa, bhava, rāga, issā, macchhariya, avijjā, saṃyojananti dasa, vidham saṃyojanam uppajjati, tañ ca yāthā, vasa, rasa, lakkhaṇa, vasena pajānāti* (DA 3:784).

¹¹ See **Kiṭṭa, giri S** (M 70/1:473-481), SD 11.1 Intro (5). On the 8 types of saints, see **Aṭṭha, puggala S 1** (A 8.59/-4:292), SD 15.10a(1); see also **Udakūpama S** (A 7.15/4:11-13), SD 28.6. On training (*sikkhā*), see **Sīla Samādhi Paññā**, SD 21.6 (4). On the fetters’ relationship to latent tendencies (*anusaya*), see **Anusaya**, SD 31.3 (1.2).

The Discourse on Mental Fetters

S 41.1

1 [281] At one time a number of elder monks were staying in a hog-plum [wild mango] grove¹² in Macchika,saṇḍa.¹³

The monks discuss the nature of the mental fetters

2 Now at that time, that number of elders had returned from their almsround, after their meal, they assembled in the circle of pavilions¹⁴ and were sitting together when this conversation arose:

“Avuso [Friends], ‘the fetter’ (*saṃyojana*), or ‘the thing that fetters’ (*saṃyojanīya dhammā*)—are these things different in meaning and different in phrasing, or are they one in meaning but different in phrasing?”

3 Thereupon some elder monks answered thus:

“Avuso, ‘the fetter’ or ‘the thing that fetters’—these things are different in meaning and different in phrasing, too.”

Some elder monks answered thus:

“Avuso, ‘the fetter’ or ‘the thing that fetters’—these things are one in meaning but different in phrasing.”

Citta the houselord in Miga,pathaka

4 Now at that time, Citta the houselord had arrived in Miga,pathaka¹⁵ on some business. [282]

5 Then Citta the houselord heard that a number of elders had returned from their almsround, after their meal, they assembled in the circle of pavilions and were sitting together when this conversation arose:

“Avuso, ‘the fetter’ or ‘the thing that fetters’—are these things different in meaning and different in phrasing, or are they one in meaning but different in phrasing?”

Thereupon some elder monks answered thus:

“Avuso, ‘the fetter’ or ‘the thing that fetters’—these things are different in meaning and different in phrasing, too.”

Some elder monks answered thus:

“Avuso, ‘the fetter’ or ‘the thing that fetters’—these things are one in meaning but different in phrasing.”

¹² “In a wild mango grove,” *ambāṭaka, vane*. According to DP, *ambāṭaka* (Skt *āmrātaka*; cf *amlavātaka*, *āmravātaka*), the hog-plum tree (*Spondias mangifera*) and its fruit; CPD: the hog-plum, wild mango. Its Indian name is prob “ambatekai,” the Indian hog-plum, Malay “buah kedondong,” and its fruit is sour and crisp.

¹³ Be *macchikā,saṇḍa*, lit “fishers’ clump,” a grove belonging to Citta. Hence, he is sometimes known as Macchika,saṇḍika, “the one from Macchika,saṇḍa (A 1:16, 3:451).

¹⁴ *Maṇḍala,māla*, *vl ~māla*: D 1,1.3/1:2,8, 1.4/1:2,28, 2,10/1:50,10, 11.14/1:50,11, 16,13/2:159,23+30; S 41.1/-4:281,14, 282,3+18, 56.30/5:436,22; A 6.28/3:320,5, 6.60/392,24; Sn 3.7/104,26, 105,11; U 3.9/31,4+9 *kareri,maṇḍala,māle*; Nm 2:374; Miln 16, 23. Comy says that it is a “circle of pavilions” (or “circular enclosure,” UA:M 495), ie a covering of grass and leaves to keep out the rain, or a bower of creepers such as the *atimuttaka* (Skt *ati,mukta*, *Dalbergia ujjensis* or *Gaertnera racemosa*), etc (UA 202 f). DPL: “A circular house with a peaked roof; a pavilion.” It should be noted that such a *maṇḍala* is a circle. *Mālā* means “garland, circular ring (of things).” See Puṇṇ’ovāda S (M 145), SD 20.15 (1.6), where the context seems to support “a circle of pavilions.” However, I think the Saññojana S (S 41.1,1/4:281) context here and similar suttas are the forest, while the Puṇṇ’ovāda S comy is that of a built structure.

¹⁵ Lit “Deer’s path.” Comy says this is his own “revenue village” (*bhoga,gāma*), located behind Ambāṭak’ārāma (wild mango park) (SA 3:91).

Citta meets the monks

6 Then Citta the houselord approached the elder monks, saluted them, and then sat down at one side.

7 Sitting thus at one side, Citta the houselord said this to the elder monks:

“I have heard, bhante, that a number of elders had returned from their almsround, after their meal, they assembled in the circle of pavilions and were sitting together when this conversation arose:

‘Avuso, “the fetter” or “the thing that fetters”—are these things different in meaning and different in phrasing, or are they one in meaning but different in phrasing?’

Thereupon some elder monks answered thus:

‘Avuso, “the fetter” or “the thing that fetters”—these things are different in meaning and different in phrasing, too.’

Some elder monks answered thus:

‘Avuso, “the fetter” or “the thing that fetters”—these things are one in meaning but different in phrasing.’”

“Yes, houselord.”

8a “Bhante, ‘the fetter’ or ‘the thing that fetters’—these things are different in meaning and different in phrasing, too.”

The parable of the black ox and the white ox

8b Now, bhante, I will give you a parable. For, some of the wise here understand the meaning of what is said by way of a parable.¹⁶

9 Suppose, bhante, a black ox and a white ox were yoked together by a single harness or yoke.¹⁷ Would one be speaking rightly if one were to say,

‘The black ox is the fetter of the white ox; [283] the white ox is the fetter of the black ox?’”

“No, houselord. The black ox is not the fetter of the white ox; the white ox is not the fetter of the black ox. The fetter here is *the single harness or yoke that binds them together*.”

Desire is the fetter

10 “Even so, bhante:

the eye is not the fetter of forms nor are forms the fetter of the eye. The fetter here is the desire-or-lust that arises therein dependent on both.

The ear is not the fetter of sounds nor are sounds the fetter of the ear. The fetter here is the desire-or-lust that arises therein dependent on both.

The nose is not the fetter of smells nor are smells the fetter of the nose. The fetter here is the desire-or-lust that arises therein dependent on both.

The tongue is not the fetter of tastes nor are tastes the fetter of the tongue. The fetter here is the desire-or-lust that arises therein dependent on both.

The body is not the fetter of touches nor are touches the fetter of the body. The fetter here is the desire-or-lust that arises therein dependent on both.

The mind is not the fetter of mind-objects nor are mind-objects the fetter of the mind. The fetter here is the desire-or-lust that arises therein dependent on both.”

11 “It is a gain, houselord, it is well gained by you, houselord, in that you have the wisdom eye that ranges into¹⁸ the profound Buddha word!”¹⁹

¹⁶ *Tena hi bhante upamaṃ vo karissāmi. Upamāya p’idh’ekacce viññū purisā bhāsītassa atthaṃ ājānanti: S 41.-1.8/4:282. Cf Tena hi rājañña upaman te...: D 23.9/2:324; Ten’āvuso [Tena h’āvuso] upaman te karissāmi...: M 24.-14/1:148, 43.22/1:295, 76.52/1:523 (Tena hi sandaka upaman te...), 127.16/3:151 (Tena āvuso kaccāna upaman te ...); S 12.67.25/2:114.*

¹⁷ This whole parable as at (**Saṃyojana**) **Koṭṭhita S** (S 35.232.5/4:163), SD 28.4, which adds that if this were not the case, it would be impossible for there to be the holy life for the destruction of suffering.

¹⁸ *Kamati*, Comy glosses as *vahati pavattati*: *vahati* lit means “to be a vehicle of,” ie, he bears or transports (the Dharma); also “he works, is able, has the power” (A 1:282); *pavattati*, “he proceeds, moves on” (SA 3:91). Cf Comy

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ad Sn 177, where *kāmaṃānaṃ* = *caṅkamantaṃ*, “walking” (SnA 215), = *pavisamānaṃ*, “entering” (SnA 216). We could surmise that the appreciative monks here are alluding that Citta is the “walking Dharma.”

¹⁹ *Lābhā te, gaha,pati, suladdham te, gaha,pati, yassa te gambhīre buddha,vacane paññā,cakkhu kamati*: S 41.1,-11/4:283 @ SD 32.11; S 41.5/4:293 @ SD 71.9; S 41.7/4:297 @ SD 60.4. The vb *kamati* (Skt *kramati*, from √KAM², to stride: DP sv), “he goes” has both the literal sense of “going, travelling” and fig sense of “going into, penetrating, effecting.”