

ĀYATANA

(Ground/Field of experience)

These suttas have parallels in Chinese, Sanskrit or Tibetan

Why are so many people here afraid when the path has been taught with many āyatanani?
I ask you, O Gotama, broad of wisdom: on what should one take a stand to have no fear of the other world?"
Kiṃsūḍha bhītā janatā anekā, Maggo canekāyatanappavutto;
Pucchāmi taṃ gotama bhūripañña, Kismiṃ ʒhito paralokaṃ na bhāye"ti

SN 1.75

"This puppet is not made by itself,
Nor is this misery made by another.
It has come to be dependent on a cause;
With the cause's breakup it will cease.

*"Nayidaṃ attakataṃ bimbaṃ,
nayidaṃ parakataṃ aghaṃ;
Hetuṃ paṭicca sambhūtaṃ,
hetubhaṅgā nirujjhati.*

"As when a seed is sown in a field
It grows depending on a pair of factors:
It requires both the soil's nutrients
And a steady supply of moisture:

*Yathā aññataraṃ bijaṃ,
khetto vuttaṃ virūhati;
Pathavīrasañcāgamma,
sinehañca tadūbhayaṃ.*

"Just so the aggregates and elements,
And these six āyatanani,
Have come to be dependent on a cause;
With the cause's breakup they will cease."

*Selāya bhikkhuniyā:
Evaṃ khandhā ca dhātuyo,
cha ca āyatanā ime;
Hetuṃ paṭicca sambhūtā,
hetubhaṅgā nirujjhare"ti.*

SN 5.9

He then taught me the Dhamma: Aggregates (khandhā), āyatanani (āyatanā), and elements (dhātu). Having heard the Dhamma from him, I went forth into homelessness.

So me dhammadesesi, khandhāyatanadhātuyo Tassāhaṃ dhammaṃ sutvāna, pabbajim anagāriyaṃ.

SN 8.12

The birth of beings in the various orders of beings, their coming to birth, precipitation, generation, manifestation of the aggregates, obtaining the āyatanani for contact - this is called birth.

Yā tesam tesam sattānam tamhi tamhi sattanikāye jāti sañjāti okkanti abhinibbatti khandhānaṃ pātubhāvo āyatanānaṃ paṭilābho, ayaṃ vuccati, bhikkhave, jāti.

SN 12.2

But with the remainderless fading away and cessation of ignorance that body does not exist conditioned by which that pleasure and pain arise internally; that speech does not exist conditioned by which that pleasure and pain arise internally; that mind does not exist conditioned by which that pleasure and pain arise internally. That field does not exist, that site does not exist, that āyatana does not exist, that foundation does not exist conditioned by which that pleasure and pain arise internally."

Avijjāya tveva, ānanda, asesavirāganirodhā so kāyo na hoti yaṃpaccayāssa taṃ uppajjati ajjhataṃ sukhadukkhaṃ. Sā vācā na hoti yaṃpaccayāssa taṃ uppajjati ajjhataṃ sukhadukkhaṃ. So mano na hoti yaṃpaccayāssa taṃ uppajjati ajjhataṃ sukhadukkhaṃ. Khettaṃ taṃ na hoti ... pe ... vatthu taṃ na hoti ... pe ... āyatanam taṃ na hoti ... pe ... adhikaraṇam taṃ na hoti yaṃpaccayāssa taṃ uppajjati ajjhataṃ sukhadukkhan"ti.

SN 12.25 (see "Lexical references" below for khetta, vatthu and adhikaraṇa)

And how, bhikkhus, is a bhikkhu a triple investigator? Here, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu investigates by way of the elements, by way of the āyatanani, and by way of dependent origination. It is in such a way that a bhikkhu is a triple investigator.

Kathaṇca, bhikkhave, bhikkhu tividhūpaparikkhī hoti? Idha, bhikkhave, bhikkhu dhātuso upaparikkhati, āyatanaso upaparikkhati, paṭiccasamuppādaso upaparikkhati.

SN 22.57

“So long, bhikkhus, as I did not directly know as they really are the gratification, the danger, and the escape in the case of these āyatanani, I did not claim to have awakened to the unsurpassed perfect enlightenment in this world with its devas, Mara, and Brahma, ...

Yāvakīvañcāhaṃ, bhikkhave, imesaṃ channaṃ ajjhattikānaṃ āyatanānaṃ assādaṇca assādato, ādīnavaṇca ādīnavato, nissaraṇaṇca nissaraṇato yathābhūtaṃ nābbhaññāsim ... pe ... paccaññāsim.

SN 35.15

“Bhikkhus, if a bhikkhu does not understand as they have come to be the origin and the passing away, the gratification, the danger, and the escape, in the case of these six āyatanani, then he has not lived the holy life; he is far away from this Dhamma and Discipline.”

“Yo hi koci, bhikkhave, bhikkhu channaṃ phassāyatanānaṃ samudayaṇca atthaṅgamaṇca assādaṇca ādīnavaṇca nissaraṇaṇca yathābhūtaṃ nappajānāti. Avusitaṃ tena brahmacariyaṃ, ārakā so imasmā dhammavinayā”ti.

SN 35.71

Bhikkhu, you should clearly see the eye as it really is with correct wisdom thus: ‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’ Thus this first āyatana for contact will be abandoned by you for no future renewed existence. ... pe ...

...you should clearly see the mind as it really is ...

bhikkhu, cakkhu ‘netam mama, nesohamasmi na meso attā’ti evametaṃ yathābhūtaṃ sammappaññāya sudiṭṭhaṃ bhavissati. Evaṃ te etaṃ paṭhamaṃ phassāyatanaṃ pahīnaṃ bhavissati āyatiṃ apunabbhavāya ... pe ...

... mano ‘netam mama,...

SN 35.72

Whatever, bhikkhus, is the extent of the aggregates, the elements, and the āyatanani, he does not conceive that, does not conceive in that, does not conceive from that, does not conceive, ‘That is mine.’

Yāvatā, bhikkhave, khandhadhātuāyatanam tampi na maññati, tasmimpi na maññati, tatopi na maññati, tam meti na maññati.

SN 35.91

“The eye, bhikkhus, as an āyatana for contact—if well tamed, well guarded, well protected, well restrained—is a bringer of happiness. The ear as an āyatana for contact ...

Cakkhu, bhikkhave, phassāyatanaṃ sudantaṃ suguttaṃ surakkhitaṃ susaṃvutaṃ sukhādhivāhaṃ hoti ... pe ... jivhā,...

....

“Just six, O bhikkhus, are the āyatanani for contact,

Where one unrestrained meets with suffering.

Those who know how to restrain them

Dwell uncorrupted, with faith their partner.

“Saḷeva phassāyatanāni bhikkhavo, Asaṃvuto yattha dukkhaṃ nigacchati; Tesaṇca ye saṃvaraṇaṃ avedisuṃ, Saddhādutiya viharantānavassutā.

SN 35.94

And what, bhikkhus, are the six mastered āyatanani? Here, bhikkhus, when a bhikkhu has seen a form with the eye, there do not arise in him evil unwholesome states, nor any memories and intentions connected with the fetters. The bhikkhu should understand this thus: ‘This āyatana has been mastered. For this has been called a mastered base by the Blessed One.’

Katamāni ca, bhikkhave, cha abhibhāyatanāni? Idha, bhikkhave, bhikkhuno cakkhunā rūpaṃ disvā nuppajjanti pāpakā akusalā sarasaṅkappā saṃyojanīyā. Veditabbametaṃ, bhikkhave, bhikkhunā: ‘abhibhūtametaṃ āyatanaṃ’. Abhibhāyatanañhetam vuttaṃ bhagavatāti ... pe ...

SN 35.96

“Therefore, bhikkhus, that āyatana should be understood, where the eye ceases and perception of forms fades away. That āyatana should be understood, where the ear ceases and perception of sounds fades away. ... That āyatana should be understood, where the mind ceases and perception of mental phenomena fades away. That base should be understood.”

Tasmātiha, bhikkhave, se āyatane veditabbe yattha cakkhu ca nirujjhati, rūpasaññā ca nirujjhati, se āyatane veditabbe ... pe ... yattha jivhā ca nirujjhati, rasasaññā ca nirujjhati, se āyatane veditabbe ... pe ... yattha

mano ca nirujjhati, dhammasaññā ca nirujjhati [ni+rundhati], se āyatane vedītabbe”ti.
√ ■■■■ rudh - to sprout , shoot , grow RV.

SN 35.117

“Bhikkhus, I do not say of all bhikkhus that they still have work to do with diligence in regard to the six āyatanani for contact, nor do I say of all bhikkhus that they do not have work to do with diligence in regard to the six āyatanani for contact.

“nāhaṃ, bhikkhave, sabbesaṃyeva bhikkhūnaṃ chasu phassāyatanesu appamādena karaṇīyanti vadāmi, na ca paṇāhaṃ, bhikkhave, sabbesaṃyeva bhikkhūnaṃ chasu phassāyatanesu nāppamādena karaṇīyanti vadāmi.

“I do not say of those bhikkhus who are arahants, whose taints are destroyed, who have lived the holy life, done what had to be done, laid down the burden, reached their own goal, utterly destroyed the fetters of existence, and are completely liberated through final knowledge, that they still have work to do with diligence in regard to the six āyatanani for contact. Why is that? They have done their work with diligence; they are incapable of being negligent.

Ye te, bhikkhave, bhikkhū arahanto khīṇāsavā vusitavanto katakaraṇīyā ohitabhārā anuppattasadatthā parikkhīṇabhavasāṃyojanā sammadaññāvimuttā, tesāhaṃ, bhikkhave, bhikkhūnaṃ chasu phassāyatanesu nāppamādena karaṇīyanti vadāmi. Taṃ kissa hetu? Kataṃ tesāṃ appamādena, abhabbā te pamajjituṃ.

“But I say of those bhikkhus who are trainees, who have not attained their mind’s ideal, who dwell aspiring for the unsurpassed security from bondage, that they still have work to do with diligence in regard to the six āyatanani for contact.

Ye ca kho te, bhikkhave, bhikkhū sekkhā appattamānasā anuttaraṃ yogakkhemaṃ patthayamānā viharanti, tesāhaṃ, bhikkhave, bhikkhūnaṃ chasu phassāyatanesu appamādena karaṇīyanti vadāmi.

SN 35.134

“Bhikkhus, it is a gain for you, it is well gained by you, that you have obtained the opportunity for living the holy life. I have seen, bhikkhus, the hell named ‘Contact’s Sixfold Āyatanani.’ There whatever form one sees with the eye is undesirable, never desirable; unlovely, never lovely; disagreeable, never agreeable. ... etc...

“Lābhā vo, bhikkhave, suladdhaṃ vo, bhikkhave, khaṇo vo paṭiladdho brahmacariyavāsāya. Diṭṭhā mayā, bhikkhave, chaphassāyatanikā nāma nirayā. Tāttha yaṃ kiñci cakkhunā rūpaṃ passati aniṭṭharūpaṃyeva passati, no iṭṭharūpaṃ; akantarūpaṃyeva passati, no kantarūpaṃ; amanāparūpaṃyeva passati, no manāparūpaṃ.

SN 35.135

“‘The empty village’: this is a designation for the six internal sense āyatanani. If, bhikkhus, a wise, competent, intelligent person examines them by way of the eye, they appear to be void, hollow, empty. If he examines them by way of the ear... by way of the mind, they appear to be void, hollow, empty.

Suñño gāmoti kho, bhikkhave, channetaṃ ajjhattikānaṃ āyatanānaṃ adhivacanaṃ. Cakkhuto cepi naṃ, bhikkhave, paṇḍito byatto medhāvī upaparikkhati rittakaññeva khāyati, tucchakaññeva khāyati, suññakaññeva khāyati ... pe ... jivhāto cepi naṃ, bhikkhave ... pe ... manato cepi naṃ, bhikkhave, paṇḍito byatto medhāvī upaparikkhati rittakaññeva khāyati, tucchakaññeva khāyati, suññakaññeva khāyati.

SN 35.238 (simile of the vipers - maybe one of the best summary of Buddhism).

“‘The near shore,’ bhikkhu: this is a designation for the six internal sense āyatanani. ‘The far shore’: this is a designation for the six external sense āyatanani. ‘Sinking in mid-stream’: this is a designation for delight and lust. ‘Getting cast up on high ground’: this is a designation for the conceit ‘I am.’

“Orimaṃ tīraṇ’ti kho, bhikkhu, channetaṃ ajjhattikānaṃ āyatanānaṃ adhivacanaṃ. ‘Pārimaṃ tīraṇ’ti kho, bhikkhu, channetaṃ bāhirānaṃ āyatanānaṃ adhivacanaṃ. ‘Majhe saṃsādo’ti kho, bhikkhu, nandīrāgassetamā adhivacanaṃ. ‘Thale ussādo’ti kho, bhikkhu, asmimānassetamā adhivacanaṃ.

SN 35.241

‘The six gates’: this is a designation for the six internal sense āyatanani.

‘Chā dvārā’ti kho, bhikkhu, channetaṃ ajjhattikānaṃ āyatanānaṃ adhivacanaṃ.

SN 35.245 (simile of the City - another best summary of Buddhism)

“Bhikkhus, when a bhikkhu’s mind has been subdued, well subdued, regarding the six āyatanani for contact, it then becomes inwardly steady, settled, unified, and concentrated.

bhikkhave, yato kho bhikkhuno chasu phassāyatanesu cittaṃ udujitaṃ hoti sudujitaṃ, ajjhattameva santiṭṭhati, sannisīdati, ekodi hoti, samādhiyati.

SN 35.246

‘May I, with the destruction of the taints, in this very life realize for myself with direct knowledge the taintless liberation of mind, liberation by wisdom, and having entered upon it, may I dwell in it,’ he is capable of realizing it, ... there being a suitable āyatana.

...tatra tatveva sakkhibhabbatamā pāpuṇāti satī satiāyatane

MN 73, AN 3.101, AN 3.102

Lexical references

Sanskrit:

■■■■ āyatana [act. āyat] n.

- resting-place , support , seat , place , home , house , abode TS. ŚBr. ChUp. AitBr.
- a sanctuary ChUp.
- the place of the sacred fire KātyŚr. ĀśvŚr. ĀśvGr.

■■■■ āyat [ā-√ yat]

- to arrive , enter ; to adhere , abide ; to attain to RV. AV. ŚBr.
- to cause to arrive at or reach ŚBr. AitBr.
- to rest on , depend on ; to be at the disposition of MBh.

√■■■ yat [linked to yam] v.

- to seek to join one's self with , make for , tend towards RV.
- to place in order , marshal , join , connect RV.
- to join, associate with, march or fly together or in line RV.
- to conform or comply with RV.
- to meet , encounter RV. Br.
- to join , unite RV.

√■■■ yam [linked to yat]

- to offer, confer , grant , bestow on, present with RV.
- to sustain , hold , hold up , support RV. Br. ChUp.
- to extend one's self before AitBr.
- to stretch out , expand , spread , display , show RV.
- to give one's self up to , be faithful to , obey RV.
- to fix , establish RV.

■ ā

- near , near to , towards (the speaker)

Additional references
(see SN 12.25 above)

Khetta [Vedic kṣetra, to kṣi]

- field□ suitable place□ a place where something is produced.

■■■■■■■■ kṣetra (√ kṣi)

- land , soil (RV. AV.)
- place , region (RV. AV. TS.)

√■■■■ kṣi

- to abide , stay , dwell , reside RV.
- to inhabit TBr.
- to remain , be quiet AV. ŚBr.
- to make a person live quietly RV.

Vatthu:

- occasion for, reason, ground.

- basis, foundation, seat, substratum.

■■■■■ Vatthu [Class□Sk□vastu, fr□√ vas] - lit□"ground"

- the seat or place of.

√ ■■■ vas

- to dwell , live , stop (at a place) , stay RV.

- to cause to exist , preserve ŚBr.

- to remain , abide with or in ŚBr.

Adhikaraṇa: [adhi + karaṇa]

- relation□reference□reason□cause.

- case□question□cause□subject of discussion.

■■■■■ adhikaraṇa [adhi-karaṇa]

- receptacle, support.

■■■ adhi

- above , over and above, besides.

■■■ karaṇa

- the act of making, doing, producing, effecting ŚBr. MBh.

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Notes

Think of āyatana (ground/field of experience,) as the support of the indriya (faculty).

Think of one of your āyatana (eye for instance,) as the muscle of the frog you dissected in your natural science class; and on which you applied some electrical current (indriya). The capability of the muscle (e.g. reflex,) can only be expressed through this electrical current.

For instance, we know that cakkhu - the physical, as well as its "non-physical ability; that is to say "sight" - is the āyatana (support) of the indriya (faculty, power).

However - and this is important - this "sight" must be considered, not as the physical ability of "seeing"; but instead, as the ability of a mere sensory activity.

In other words, āyatana is just a physical & sensory field of experience, that is acquiring its sensory capability only when the indriya is triggered. (see [SN 22.47](#) to understand how & why the indriya descends (avakkanti) in the āyatana).

The descent (avakkanti) of the indriya, in the āyatana, will trigger the resulting sensory experience - like the muscle will trigger a reflex.

Note that āyatana is the ground (field) of the sensory experience, and that the faculty of the organ; the faculty (the power,) of this field of experience that is the organ (cakkhu, sota, etc.), is the indriya.

Cakkhu (the eye,) for instance, is both the physical eye without its faculty (power); and "cakkhu" as a the physical "eye", with its faculty.

What counts is not so much the physical eye (which operates all the time), but the sensory experience on this field of experience that is the āyatana, when triggered by the indriya.

Cakkhu is a general field (ground) of experience.

So when one reads the following:

Passati bhagavā cakkhunā rūpaṃ,

the Blessed One sees a form with the eye,

Chandarāgo bhagavato natthi.

yet there is no desire and lust in the Blessed One.

SN 35.232

One cannot say from the above extract, that the Blessed One - because he restrains his faculties (indriyāni) - has lost his physical faculty of "seeing". And that this is the reason why, he has no desire and lust?

It's not the physical "sight" that counts. But the sensory "sight".

It is all about the nature of the sensory experience, correlated to the order of magnitude of the indriya.

It is not so much the physical "sight" that is concerned; but the sensory experience itself, through this (physical) "sighting" ability.

It is the indriya, and the nature of what it yields as a sensory experience, that matters.
The less indriya, the less is the sensory experience; the less one has a defiled citta.

So one can say from the above extract, that the Blessed One - because he restrains his faculties (indriyāni) - has an experience proportional to its indriya.
The ability of the purely physical "sight" is just there, as a quite irrelevant interface.

**It is the nature and amplitude of a particular sensory experience,
linked to the nature of a particular physical & sensorial organ (āyatana),
and induced by the intensity of the indriya,
that matters.**

"But, Uttara, how does Parasariya teach his disciples the development of the faculties?"

*"Here, Master Gotama, one does not see forms with the eye, one does not hear sounds with the ear.
That is how the brahmin Parasariya teaches his disciples the development of the faculties."*

"If that is so, Uttara, then a blind man and a deaf man will have developed faculties, according to what the brahmin Parasariya says.

For a blind man does not see forms with the eye (cakkhunā), and a deaf man does not hear sounds with the ear (sotena)."

MN 152 (SA 282).

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