



## 55 – Our lens on the world: the six sense doors

### How contact builds our world

#### The doors of perception and reaction

*“I will teach you ‘the all’... And what ... is ‘the all’? The eye and forms, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and tangibles, the mind and mind-objects. This ... is called ‘the all’” ~ Gotama (The Buddha)*

*“In the seen will be merely the seen; in the heard will be merely the heard; in the thought will be merely the thought; in the known will be merely the known.” ~ Gotama*

#### The world as contact

In this Training stage of the journey, having learned how self-identity is assembled from the ‘five components of selfing’ (Chapter 54), we now open the instruction manual to the section on the ‘six sense bases’. Most of us were taught we have five senses, but in Buddhism there are six: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and thinking. Each is a channel through which experience arrives – sights, sounds, smells, tastes, bodily sensations, and the mind’s own events: thoughts, memories, images, plans, and ideas.

This matters because experience doesn’t arrive as one big lump called ‘my life’. It arrives through these channels, moment by moment. A sound is heard, a thought appears, a sensation flickers – and immediately there is contact, ‘Feeling Tone’ (Chapter 27), a label, and the beginnings of reaction. When we learn to notice the channel where a spiral starts, we can catch it earlier. Instead of being yanked straight into the story, we can recognise: ‘seeing is happening’, ‘hearing is happening’, ‘thinking is happening’. That small shift makes experience more workable.

Here’s the radical simplicity of the teaching: our lived world is built at these sense doors, through contact. From contact, feeling tone arises; and when mindfulness is absent, craving can ignite. Seen clearly, this isn’t abstract

philosophy – it's the practical hinge where we either run the old reaction, or we choose a wiser response.

### **The pinball effect versus the clean handover**

Without training, we live in the pinball effect. A sight strikes the eye (a bottle, a mobile phone, a person), and we bounce into craving or aversion. A thought strikes the mind (a worry, a regret, a memory), and we bounce into anxiety. We are pinged helplessly from one reaction to another. In the Feeling stage, we learned to recognise the stopping of this reactivity. Now, in the Training stage, we learn to act from that still point.

The aim is to get better at what happens in the first few seconds of experience. Instead of the automatic bounce from contact straight into reaction, we learn a cleaner sequence: something is noticed → it feels pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral → we pause. That pause is the difference between being pulled around by the senses and being able to choose where attention goes next. In the RAFT metaphor, we're training a clean handover on the bridge.

The 'Gatekeeper of Freedom' (Chapter 31) stands at the door: they register the visitor – seeing, hearing, smelling, thinking – but they don't automatically hand them the controls. The gatekeeper checks: what is this? What tone does it carry? What happens if I follow it? With that one small check, we stop being at the mercy of whatever arrives and start steering attention on purpose.

### **The sixth sense: the mind door**

In Gotama's Middle Way Programme, the mind is treated like another sense. The mind door registers mental objects – thoughts, memories, images, fantasies, plans – in the same way the ear registers sounds. This matters because it means a thought can be known as a mental event, rather than treated as an instruction from a hidden authority. A 'thought of craving' can be noticed in the same simple way we notice 'the sound of traffic'.

For the Navigator, this is a vital upgrade. When a craving-thought arrives, the gatekeeper can note 'thinking', feel the tone it carries, and decide whether to feed it with attention or let it pass. That is how the mind door becomes a place of choice rather than a trapdoor into the old loop.

### **The workbench of experience**

Gotama gives us a clear workbench for this training – a step-by-step view of

what happens in real time: a sense door meets an object, knowing arises, there is contact, and then a feeling tone appears (pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral). Once we can see this sequence, we stop treating experience as one solid lump called 'my life' and start spotting the precise moment where it begins to tip into reaction.

Next we pay attention to what we do with that contact. The texts point out that unhelpful attention – locking onto what seems beautiful, irritating, or must-have or must-get-rid-of – feeds craving and aversion, while helpful attention starves the loop by staying close to what's immediate and true. Then we practise the shorthand instruction: 'In the seen, only the seen' – meeting experience directly at the door before layering interpretation and identity on top. We let the Seven Supports (Chapters 43-50) steady the field so we can respond rather than react.

## **How to practice:**

### **★ A 'Six-Step' sequence**

There's a small skill we keep returning to: catching the moment, experience turns into reaction. Not perfectly. Just often enough to change the odds.

1. **Name the door:** When we notice we've been hooked, we quietly note the channel: *seeing... hearing... smelling... tasting... touching... thinking*. Even that small label can move us from being lost in it to noticing it happening.
2. **Name the tone:** Then we check the feeling tone: pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Neutral counts. Sometimes it's the overlooked one that sends us searching for something stronger.
3. **Make a little space:** A single breath can be enough. Feet on the floor. Longer out-breath. Jaw unclenches. Tongue softens. Not as a performance – just enough room for the system to downshift.
4. **Let attention widen:** If the mind has narrowed onto one thing, we broaden the frame: the whole body, the breath, the room, the larger field of experience. Or we turn towards something simple that steadies us without feeding the chase – a kind thought, a patch of beauty, the relief of the exhale.
5. **Borrow the right support (Chapters 43–50):** If things feel dull or flat, a bit of curiosity or energy helps. If things feel hot or spun-up, settling helps. Mindfulness is the thread running through both – the part that remembers what we're doing.

6. **Take one workable step:** From that slightly steadier place, we choose one small action that reduces harm right now. A glass of water. A short walk. A clear message. A kind refusal. Or doing nothing for three breaths and letting the wave move on.

### ★ **Door-by-door tactics**

- **Seeing (eye/forms):** Some sights hook fast – screens, food, certain faces, certain locations. Soft eyes can help: widen the gaze, loosen the focus. If we need to look, it can help to name the tone first, then look.
- **Hearing (ear/sounds):** Sound arrives whether invited or not. Sometimes the practice is simply letting it be sound: *hearing, hearing*. In conversation, it can help to listen fully, reflect back on what we heard, and then speak.
- **Smelling (nose/odours):** Smell is good at time travel – one scent and we’re somewhere else. When that happens, grounding helps: feel the feet, take one breath, name the tone, and then decide deliberately whether to move closer, step away, or just note it and stay present.
- **Tasting (tongue/tastes):** With eating and drinking, slowing the first few bites or sips often tells the truth quickly. Taste, name the tone, and notice what we’re actually seeking: nourishment, pleasure, comfort, numbness, belonging.
- **Touching (body/tangibles):** Touch includes comfort and pain, tension and restlessness. Whole-body breathing and a posture check can change the whole mood. Sometimes the kindest move is practical: stretch, shift position, drink water, warm up, rest.
- **Thinking (mind/ideas):** Thoughts are sense events too. A craving-thought can be noticed like any other contact: ‘thinking’. If it’s sticky, we can test it gently: ‘Did I order this thought?’ ‘Can I make it vanish on command?’ Usually not. Which means it’s not a decree from a boss inside our head – it’s a conditioned event passing through. And that’s often enough to loosen its grip.

### **A secular dharma perspective**

From a secular dharma point of view, Stephen Batchelor describes Gotama’s teaching not as four *truths* to believe, but as four tasks to do. Seen that way, the

sense doors are where the Feeling stage (third task) becomes real and practical. We ‘see the stopping’ when we notice the tiny pause after contact – the moment just after we see, hear, think, or feel something – before grabbing after it or pushing it away. There’s often a small still point there, even if it’s brief.

From that pause, we choose the next workable step. In everyday life it can be as simple as steadying the mind, gathering attention, finding balance, and then responding. It’s not a grand spiritual moment – it’s a repeatable rhythm we can practise right at the door, in real situations – one moment, one contact, one pause – at a time.

### **Self-reflections**

1. Which sense door is my primary trigger for stress or craving? (for example, Do I get triggered by what I see on screens, or what I *think* in silence?)
2. Can I actually watch a thought arise like a sound, or do I immediately jump inside it and ride it?
3. At which sense door do I lose balance most often, and what earliest cue tells me that a handover is about to be messy?
4. Do I leave the doors of my senses wide open to anything (violent media, toxic gossip), or do I guard what enters the vessel?
5. Can I catch the split-second gap between *seeing* an object and *wanting* it?
6. When nothing interesting is happening at the sense doors, do I get bored and look for trouble, or can I rest in the quiet? How could I honour neutrality as a valid, freeing texture rather than as nothing is happening?
7. Do I suffer more from what is happening *outside* (sights/sounds) or what is happening *inside* (memories/plans)?

### **Journaling prompts**

1. **A day through the doors (sense audit):** Document one ordinary day by noting three moments of contact (for example, ‘Eye saw notification,’ ‘Mind thought trouble’). Record the tone for each, the flow of reaction, and the step you chose from the pause.
2. **The gatekeeper's report:** Write a fictional report from your internal gatekeeper to the Captain. ‘Today at the ear door, we received insults. I labeled them ‘unpleasant sounds’ and did not let them reach the engine room.’ Include instructions on who to let in (wholesome states) and who to turn away (hindrances).

3. **Trigger race:** Choose a recent strong reaction. Trace it back. What was the initial sensory input? What feeling tone arose? When did the reaction start?
4. **The pinball replay:** Describe a recent situation where you felt batted around by stimuli. Rewrite the scene: how would the ‘Gatekeeper’ have handled the intake of information differently?
5. **A sense fast:** Experiment with closing one sense door for an hour (for example, silence/no audio, or eyes closed/no screens). Journal on how the *other* senses changed in clarity.
6. **De-conditioning a trigger:** Pick one visual or auditory trigger that usually causes craving. Write a description of it using *only* dry, physical data (for example, instead of ‘delicious wine,’ write ‘red liquid in curved glass’).
7. **The ‘all’ reflection:** Gotama said the six senses are ‘the all.’ Write on the idea that there is no problem in your life that exists *outside* of these six inputs. Does this make life feel smaller and more manageable?

### **Supporting Material: scientific and philosophical perspectives**

For those interested in the scientific and philosophical underpinnings of ‘the six sense doors’, the following overview highlights some key connections.

- ★ **Neuroscience:** The brain is flooded with sensory data, but only a sliver makes it into awareness. Attention is constantly ‘gated’ by systems that decide what matters now, and a key player is the salience network (strongly linked with the anterior insula and anterior cingulate), which helps detect what’s relevant and shift resources between inner narrative (default-mode) and goal-directed control. In compulsion, that priority system can get skewed: habit-linked cues are tagged as urgent, grabbing attention and pulling behaviour before reflective control comes online. Addiction neuroscience increasingly describes disrupted interactions among salience, default-mode, and executive control networks, which maps neatly onto why ‘catching it at the door’ matters. Mindfulness at the sense doors – naming the channel, naming tone, inserting a breath – can be understood as training top-down regulation and weakening cue-reactivity over time (not instantly, and not identically for everyone), which is consistent with emerging fMRI findings in substance use studies.
- ★ **Psychology:** From behavioural psychology, the sense doors function like

cues that set off learned responses. Discriminative stimuli (signals that ‘this is the situation where the habit happens’) can exert strong control over craving and seeking, and are notoriously hard to extinguish – one reason relapse can feel so sudden and irrational.

This is where the Buddhist emphasis becomes psychologically sharp: even when we can’t control the environment, we can change what happens at contact. Naming the door and tone, and pausing before reacting, is a form of in-the-moment interruption – an internal version of stimulus control. It shifts the job from ‘white-knuckle resistance’ to ‘early detection + a small reset,’ which is often more realistic in real life.

★ **Philosophy:** The Stoics are especially close to the ‘sense doors’ hinge: an *impression* arrives through perception, but distress and reactivity depend on the *assent* we give it – our judgement. That’s why Epictetus says we’re troubled less by events than by the views we take of them. It matches the point that the crucial moment is right after contact, before the story hardens.

The Pyrrhonian skeptics (Sextus Empiricus) also emphasise appearances and recommend ‘holding back’ judgement (*epoché*) to cultivate calm (*ataraxia*). And thinkers like Plato and Aristotle explore how perception is structured and can mislead if treated as final truth. The Greek takeaway you can borrow is simple: perception delivers an appearance; what happens next is interpretation – and that’s where freedom can enter.

### **Remember to remember**

Contact can be a hinge. A moment arrives at a door – seeing, hearing, thinking – and there’s often a beat before the mind starts explaining it, defending against it, or reaching for something else. Noticing ‘eye–form’ or ‘mind–idea,’ calling the tone, and taking one breath can shift the whole atmosphere. Attention doesn’t have to collapse onto the object; it can widen to include the body, the room, the larger field of experience, and whatever is already true without commentary.

Neutrality turns out to be more valuable than it sounds. Much of the day is neither pleasant nor unpleasant – just ordinary, middling, nothing special. Resting there for a few seconds can feel like the system unclenching, as if the nervous system is finally allowed to stop chasing and stop bracing. In that steadier space, craving often has less to argue with, and the next step doesn’t need to be heroic. A small, workable, kind response – or even three quiet

breaths – can be enough.

*“Our conscious experiences... are kinds of controlled hallucinations.” ~ Anil Seth*

*“Nothing in life is as important as you think it is while you are thinking about it.” ~ Daniel Kahneman*

## **Sutta references**

### ★ **Chachakka Sutta (MN 148): The Six Sextets**

- *Summary:* A detailed analysis of the six doors, showing exactly where clinging inserts itself and how to break the chain. It maps the sequence: Sense Organ → Object → Consciousness → Contact → Feeling → Craving.

### ★ **Ādittapariyāya Sutta (SN 35.28): The Fire Sermon**

- *Summary:* The Buddha declares that the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind are "burning" with the fires of greed, hatred, and delusion. He urges us to cool the fires through dispassion and clear seeing.

### ★ **Bāhiya Sutta (Udāna 1.10): Bāhiya of the Bark-cloth**

- *Summary:* Contains the famous pithy instruction: *“In the seen, only the seen.”* This is the ultimate instruction on non-proliferation (not adding stories to raw data).

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