

Questions for the 7th fetter, using the formless spheres

By Satyadhana

The 7th fetter is the insistent fixation (*rāga*) that the formless (*arūpa*) aspects of experience, everything that goes into the fabrication of form, is real.

- What does “formless” mean? It’s perhaps better to talk in terms of “pre form”, what is needed for a world of forms to persist.
- It’s where we create reified notions of time, space and unique attributes which make a three-dimensional world that rises and falls possible.
- It also mean committing to believe there are actual things in time and space

This fetter is perhaps best examined by taking the four meditative perspectives or states of the *arūpa jhānas* in reverse.

- Having a sense that “I Exist”, we adopt the perspective that we have something called “perception” by which we can possibly detect things “out there”.
- The belief that there is a faculty called perception that “I” have is the self-referent illusion here, what breaking this fetter addresses. It further affirms and embeds the illusion that “I Exist”, by giving us the possibility of detecting something to compare “me” to.
- From there, we start to selectively discern apparently real “things” out of our experience, believing we can actually do so.
- Thingness becomes a presumed inherent quality of reality and our experience of it.
- Once things are discerned, we assign finite attributes (color, shape, smell, etc.) to each of these things, giving them a unique and believable identity that we pick up with “finite consciousness”.
- That’s not just a real thing, but THAT real thing, based on how it looks, sounds and smells: an added level of certainty
- Finally, we create the notion of finite three-dimensional “space” into which everything is placed, completing the creative process for each thing, allowing it to take “form” in the 6th fetter.

Once this fetter is broken, both time and space as believable descriptors of what is happening fall away

- Also, that there are individual things which we observe is no longer believable, other than as a conceptual approximation.
- As a result, the perception of *pratītya-samutpāda* comes to a halt, since there is no longer the notion of time, space or things that are governed by this inferred “law”.
- Things no longer seem impermanent, but simply “are”, are just appearances.
- The perception of impermanence abruptly stops
- Two men were arguing about a flag flapping in the wind. "It's the wind that is really moving," stated the first one. "No, it is the flag that is moving," contended the second. A Zen master, who happened to be walking by, overheard the debate and interrupted them. "Neither the flag nor the wind is moving," he said, "It is MIND that moves."
- Emptiness that the Buddha talked about was obvious
- Doesn't have to be seen via the formless spheres, and the Buddha was clear that not everyone accesses or utilizes these spheres; can be enough to simply look for the faculty of perception which we think we have, and see if that was true.
- It is especially helpful that we can enter into the formless spheres temporarily and get used to this perspective

Possible exercises/modes of inquiry to open things up

Limitless space exercise 1

- Look at two things that are at recognizably different distances from you, for example a chair in front of you and something on the wall. Don't worry whether or not they really 'exist' - let's pretend they do :-)
- Now close your eyes: where is the 'distance' from you to the first object? Locate it within experience. And to the second object? No peeking!!! Where are those two distances?
- Keeping your eyes closed, now mentally compare those two distances: what and where is the difference between the two?
- When you're done, open your eyes and just observe the two objects for a few seconds.
- Where is the distance to the first thing? To the second?
- Same thing, except with the distance to a wrist and distance to an ankle?

- - - - -

Limitless space exercise 2

- Now focus on the boundary of your body, mostly skin but a few other bits and bobs too :-)
- Try to locate in your experience where exactly that boundary is: how is it that you know?
- Is it memory? Sensation?
- How is it that you know where your body is and isn't?
- Spend a few moments looking for the exact boundary of the body

- - - - -

Limitless space exercise 3

1. Do some mindfulness of breathing to settle in, etc.
2. With your eyes closed, pick a three dimensional direction (say, straight ahead, to the left, up and to the right, etc.): straight ahead is probably the best to start out with.
3. Imaginally send a ray of awareness out that direction, and see how far you can send it, how far out 'space' can theoretically be. Don't read too much into this: just mentally 'look' in that particular direction, and see if there is any limit as to how far away things could be, how far out you could possibly perceive. Don't insert objects, say by imagining a tree outside, then the church in the next town over, etc. This is more of, in theory, how far out in that direction are you able to imagine or perceive something being?
4. In that direction, where in experience are the limits that could be applied. For example, where is "three meters, three kilometers, three parsecs", etc. Where in experience are the finite limits, the differentiations, that could be placed on "space"?
5. Now pick another direction, say off to the left or right, and repeat 3 and 4. Then pick another direction, and maybe a couple more. In any direction, is there any limit to 'space'? Even out to infinity, is there any difference in direct experience between the distance to a remote galaxy and the house next door? Or your ankle?

Is space finite? When you look for 'space', do you actually get a finite answer, a certain length? Can you do such a thing?

Please let me know what you find - I look forward to hearing how this goes :-)

- - - - -

Have a look into consciousness. What is that? Particularly the 6 sense-consciousnesses by which you become conscious of things in space?

Sight is generally the dominant sense, so let's try a simple experiment.

1. In a quiet area where you won't be disturbed, quiet the mind for a bit. Then, pick an object in the room, say a cup. Look at the cup for a little bit, noting its shape, color, height/size, etc. Yep, it's 'that' cup.
2. OK, now close your eyes. With your eyelids shut, mentally follow the information pathway from your eyes to experience, where that information was coming into experience and where it was going.
3. In direct experience, do you find an eye somewhere in space? Can you find an eye consciousness or sight faculty? How about data/information pathway that could convey the attributes of the cup?
4. Open your eyes and get a good look at the object again, and repeat Steps 2 and 3 one more time.

Then try it all over again with another object.

What did you find?

Now please look around, listen around, feel around ... put all six senses to work, taking in sense objects like you always do.

As you take in a pair, say a sound and a sight from something making noise, where are the two sense bases that take that information in? In direct experience, can you see any difference between the two sensory receptors, channels or content? Try this while mixing and matching any of the 6 sense bases with this thing or that.

Does consciousness, whether an individual one or all six, have any discernible limits?

And ... what is consciousness? What thing are you conscious of? In direct experience, where is that thing?

Please try the looking away thing, where the cup starts out as a non-thing blob in the periphery of awareness, then becomes a thing as you turn to face it.

Watch what happens: where in you do recognize the "signs" of color and shape, such that you interpret and conclude "ah, that thing"??

It might be more immediate look at something, and then simply close your eyes such that the thing is no longer seen or recognized. Then, open your eyes and look directly for what in you takes in what consciousness is now offering. Is what is seen a sign that there's something out there, and you're simply noticing that, or is it just "the seen" that has no inherent divisions?

- - - - -

Whereas in Fetter #6 I suggest people try to "stay out there" with things, what I'd like you to do here is to either be on a moving vehicle, or simply cast your gaze around for a bit, such that most people would say that things are passing before your eyes. I'd like you to notice if, at any time, your attention "sticks" on something, as opposed to simply taking in the next bit of visual information that passes before your eyes. By "sticking" I mean that a 'thing' sticks out as a thing, is identified as a thing, or otherwise is more than "just the seen".

If there are things which are "thinged", where in you does that recognition take place? What part of you is participating in, and even creating this perceptual situation?

Put another way, why can you NOT simply scan the room or look out from a train/bus and not simply let the visual information flow by? What in you says, at least now and again, that "hey, that's..." as a thing is differentiated and discerned?

- - - - -

Imagine you're in a movie theater, and quite into the movie, such that it seems like you're there, the characters are real, etc. Halfway through the movie, the house lights come on, and you snap out of the illusion that what you were seeing was real: it's just images and sounds coming from a screen. If they turn the house lights back down again, you will probably be able to re-engage with the movie after a bit.

Is everyday experience any different than this movie?

- - - - -

As you cast your eyes about the room, and this or that comes into view, do things seem Permanent? Impermanent? Both? Neither?

How about substantial? Insubstantial? Both? Neither?

And as you go from lamp to doorknob to book to clock, what in you is perceiving this and determining that you're looking at lamp, etc.? Is there something that you have somewhere that is making such distinctions and recognitions possible?

Put another way, is it possible to both perceive and not-perceive?

- - - - -

If you can sit with experience temporarily empty of things, what in you seems to decide that isn't OK, and wants to at least focus on something (for crying out loud...)?

To "get" to this perspective, anything that comes into your mind, look in direct experience for the "thingness" of it. It might feel like looking all the way through a thought or image until you're out the other side and realize "hey, there wasn't anything to that thing". It might take doing this to/with a few 'things' until your mind gets the hint... :-)

As you look through things, also step back and just behold the insubstantial image. Is anything more needed to get on with life than the insubstantial image?

If you're making a cuppa, do you really have anything more to work with than an insubstantial image? And yet, do you need more than that to make a cuppa? Sure, you could superimpose thingness onto the cup and tea and spoon and table and... but do you have to?

Part of this is trusting that you already know what you need to know, without the augmentation of what thought brings to it all.

The "gap" here is holding off on doing anything with the images you have, and seeing it there is something that COULD do anything with those images. Spend more time looking inside for that thing, as opposed to staying "out there" with either the image or the thinged-thing if you jump out of the gap.

Where is the faculty you have which perceives insubstantial images and turns them into things?

- - - - -