

The Parable of the Six Creatures

Salāyatana Saṃyutta XXXV.206 (S IV,198)

When a person,
seeing a form with the eye, is attached to pleasing forms and
repelled by unpleasing forms; or,
hearing a sound with the ear, is attached to pleasing sounds and
repelled by unpleasing sounds; or,
smelling an odor with the nose, is attached to pleasing odors
and repelled by unpleasing odors; or,
tasting a flavor with the tongue, is attached to pleasing flavors
and repelled by unpleasing flavors; or,
touching a physical sensation with the body, is attached to
pleasing physical sensations and repelled by unpleasing
physical sensations; or,
cognizing a mental state with the mind, is attached to pleasing
mental states and repelled by unpleasing mental states;

S/he is one who has not established mindfulness of the body,
and dwells with a limited mind.

S/he does not understand as it really is the liberation of the
mind, the liberation by wisdom, in which those baneful,
unwholesome mental states which have arisen entirely cease.

It is just as if a person, catching six creatures of different habitat,
of different range, were to bind them with a strong rope:
Catching a snake, s/he would bind it with a strong rope.
Catching a crocodile, s/he would bind it with a strong rope.
Catching a bird, s/he would bind it with a strong rope.
Catching a dog, s/he would bind it with a strong rope.
Catching a jackal, s/he would bind it with a strong rope.
Catching a monkey, s/he would bind it with a strong rope.
Binding them with a strong rope, and tying them all together with
a knot in the middle, s/he would release them.

Then, my friends, those six creatures, of different habitat, of
different range, would each struggle to return to their own range
and habitat:

The snake would struggle, [thinking]: "I'll go into the anthill."

The crocodile would struggle, [thinking]: "I'll go into the water."

The bird would struggle, [thinking]: "I'll fly up to the sky."

The dog would struggle, [thinking]: "I'll go into the village."

The jackal would struggle, [thinking]: "I'll go to the charnel
ground."

The monkey would struggle, [thinking]: "I'll go into the forest."

And when, my friends, these six hungry creatures would get
tired – then they would submit, they would surrender, they would
yield to the power of whichever creature was the strongest.

It is just the same, my friends, for a person who's mindfulness of
the body is undeveloped, is unpracticed:

The eye struggles to reach pleasing forms, and unpleasing forms
are considered repulsive.

The nose struggles to reach pleasing odors, and unpleasing
odors are considered repulsive.

The tongue struggles to reach pleasing flavors, and unpleasing
flavors are considered repulsive.

The body struggles to reach pleasing physical sensations, and
unpleasing physical sensations are considered repulsive.

The mind struggles to reach pleasing mental states, and
unpleasing mental states are considered repulsive.

But, when a person,
seeing a form with the eye, is not attached to pleasing
forms and not repelled by unpleasing forms; or,
hearing a sound with the ear, is not attached to pleasing sounds
and not repelled by unpleasing sounds; or,
smelling an odor with the nose, is not attached to pleasing odors
and not repelled by unpleasing odors; or,
tasting a flavor with the tongue, is not attached to pleasing
flavors and not repelled by unpleasing flavors; or,
touching a physical sensation with the body, is not attached to
pleasing physical sensations and not repelled by
unpleasing physical sensations; or,
cognizing a mental state with the mind, is not attached to
pleasing mental states and not repelled by unpleasing
mental states;

S/he is one who has established mindfulness of the body,
and dwells with an unlimited mind.

S/he understands as it really is the liberation of the mind, the
liberation by wisdom, in which those baneful, unwholesome
mental states which have arisen entirely cease.

It is just as if a person, catching six creatures of different habitat,
of different range, were to bind them with a strong rope...
And binding them with a strong rope, s/he would fasten them all
to a strong post or stake.
Then, my friends, those six creatures, of different habitat, of
different range, would each struggle to return to their own range
and habitat...
But when, my friends, these six hungry creatures would get tired –
then they would stand or sit or lie down beside that post or stake.

It is just the same, my friends, for a person who's mindfulness of
the body is developed, is practiced:
The eye does not struggle to reach pleasing forms, and
unpleasing forms are not considered repulsive.
The ear does not struggle to reach pleasing sounds, and
unpleasing sounds are not considered repulsive.
The nose does not struggle to reach pleasing odors, and
unpleasing odors are not considered repulsive.
The tongue does not struggle to reach pleasing flavors, and
unpleasing flavors are not considered repulsive.
The body does not struggle to reach pleasing sensations, and
unpleasing sensations are not considered repulsive.
The mind does not struggle to reach pleasing mental states, and
unpleasing mental states are not considered repulsive.

The "strong post or stake," my friends, is a metaphor for mind-
fulness of the body.

Therefore, my friends, you should train yourselves [thinking]: "This
training in mindfulness of the body will be developed by us, will
be practiced, followed, built upon, reinforced, augmented, and
thoroughly undertaken."

This text reveals some of the poetic structure that underlies so much of the Pali prose literature. Some liberties were taken in the translation to render it more user-friendly to our modern ears (e.g. "my friends" for "O monks," and gender-neutral pronouns).
-Andrew Olendzki