**The Shurangama Sutra**

**VOLUME 5**

**CHAPTER 1**

**The Six Knots**

I3 The Buddha ties a strip of cloth to explain the principle.
J1 Ananda explains his question and asks for instruction.
 **Sutra:

Ananda put his palms together, bowed, and said to the Buddha, "Having heard the Buddha's unbounded, greatly compassionate, pure, everlasting, true and actual expression of dharma, I still have not understood the sequence for releasing the knots such that when the six are untied, the one is gone also.

"I only hope you will be compassionate, and once again take pity on this assembly and on those of the future, by bestowing the sounds of dharma on us and wash and rinse away our heavy
defilements."

Commentary:**

Ananda put his palms together, bowed, and said to the Buddha, "Having heard the Buddha's unbounded, greatly compassionate, pure, everlasting, true and actual expression of dharma, I still have not understood the principle whereby when the six are untied, the one is gone also. I haven't yet figured out the sequence for releasing the knots. I only hope you will be compassionate, and once again take pity on this assembly, all the people gathered here, and on those of the future great assemblies of beings. Take pity by bestowing the sounds of dharma on us. Make a gift to all living beings of the expression of the Buddhadharma, to wash and rinse away our heavy defilements."

Just as with vegetables: first you wash them, and then, fearing they might not be completely clean, you rinse them again. "Defilements" may be "heavy" or "serious" enough to cause us to fall into lower states of being. The defilements refer to our greed, hatred, and stupidity. Ananda seeks further clarification.

J2 The Thus Come One's clever explanation.
K1 He cleverly sets up an analogy.
L1 The original cloth is one strip.
 **Sutra:

Then, upon the lion's throne, the Thus Come One straightened his "nirvana robes," arranged his samghati, took hold of the table made of the seven gems, reached out onto the table with his hand and picked up a flowered cloth given him by the Suyama God.

Commentary:**

Then, upon the lion's throne, the Thus Come One, the dharma seat that Shakyamuni Buddha was sitting on was called a "lion's throne." It was so named to indicate that the Buddha's speaking of dharma was like the roar of a lion; When the lion roars, all other beasts tremble. When the Buddha speaks dharma, the heavenly demons and externalists are frightened. He straightened his "nirvana robes" "nirvana robes" refers to the Buddha's inner clothing, and arranged his samghati. The "samghati" is the outer sash, the "perfect robe" or "great robe." He took hold of the table made of the seven gems. The table placed before the Buddha was made of gold, silver, lapis lazuli, crystal, mother-of-pearl, red pearls, and carnelian. Lapis lazuli is sometimes described as "thick crystal." Crystal may not seem so special in this day and age when glass is so prevalent, but in these early times, crystal was hard to come by, so it was considered a precious gem. Mother-of-pearl sometimes has a pattern like cart-tracks in it. Carnelian is likened to "horse-brains" in its shape; it is red and white in color.

He then reached out onto the table with his hand and picked up a flowered cloth given him by the Suyama God. Suyama Heaven is the heaven of "well-divided time." "Flowered cloth" refers to a long hand-towel made of layered flowers. In India, such towels were valued highly, and this one was especially so, since it was a gift to Shakyamuni Buddha from the ruling god of the Suyama Heaven.

L2 He ties it in six knots.
 **Sutra:

Then, as the assembly watched, he tied it into a knot and showed it to Ananda, asking, "What is this called?" Ananda and the great assembly answered together, "It's called a knot."

Then the Thus Come One tied another knot in the cloth of layered flowers and asked Ananda again, "What is this called?" Ananda and the great assembly once again answered together, "It, too, is called a knot."

He continued in this pattern until he had tied six knots in the cloth of layered flowers. As he made each knot, he held it up to Ananda and asked, "What is this called?" And each time Ananda and the great assembly answered the Buddha in the same way: "It is called a knot."

Commentary:**

Then, as the assembly watched, he tied it into a knot. The Buddha, as if playing a game with children, took up the cloth of layered flowers and tied it in knots, while he was sitting there before the great assembly. He showed it to Ananda, asking, "What is this called?" He let Ananda see the knot and asked him what it was.

Ananda and the great assembly answered together, "It's called a knot."

Then the Thus Come One tied another knot in the cloth of layered flowers and asked Ananda again, "What is this called?" He asked him the same thing over again.

Ananda and the great assembly once again answered together, "It, too, is called a knot." They gave the same answer. He continued in this pattern until he had tied six knots in the cloth of layered flowers. In all, he tied six knots in the towel. As he made each knot, he held it up to Ananda and asked, "What is this called?"

And each time Ananda and the great assembly answered the Buddha in the same way: "It is called a knot." The cloth of layered flowers represents the nature of the treasury of the Thus Come One. The six knots tied in it represent the six sense organs.
 **Sutra:

The Buddha said to Ananda, "When I first tied the cloth, you called it a knot. Since the cloth of layered flowers is basically a single strip, how can you call the second and third ties knots as well?"

Commentary:**
The cloth is just one piece, which you said was a knot, so how can you call the second and third ties in it knots as well? The Buddha deliberately quizzed Ananda in this way.
 **Sutra:

Ananda said to the Buddha, "World Honored One, this cloth of woven layered flowers is just one piece, but as I consider it, when the Thus Come One makes one tie, it is called a knot. If he were to make a hundred ties, they would be called a hundred knots, how much the more so with this cloth, which has exactly six knots, not seven or five. Why does the Thus Come One allow me to call only the first tie a knot and not the second or third ties?"

Commentary:**

Ananda said to the Buddha, Ananda replied to the Buddha's quizzing. World Honored One, this cloth of woven layered flowers is just one piece. The precious cloth of layered flowers is a single strip, but as I consider it, when the Thus Come One makes one tie, it is called a knot. If he were to make a hundred ties, they would be called a hundred knots. Every one of those hundred can be called a knot, how much the more so with this cloth, which has exactly six knots, not seven or five. You have only tied six knots in this strip of cloth. You didn't go on to tie seven knots nor did you stop at five. Why does the Thus Come One allow me to call only the first tie a knot and not the second or third ties? Buddha, why do you only admit that the first tie is called a knot and don't recognize the second and the third as knots? What's the principle behind this?

K2 He answers two questions.
L1 The answer that when the six are untied, the one is gone.
M1 By the analogy he shows that one starts with something that is the same and turns it into something different.
 **Sutra:

The Buddha told Ananda, "You know that this precious cloth of flowers is basically one strip, but when I made six ties in it, you said it had six knots. As you carefully consider this, you will see that the substance of the cloth is the same; it is the knots that make the difference."

Commentary:**

The Buddha listened to Ananda's answer with amusement. Of course, the six were all called knots. It's not that the first is called a knot and the others are not. The Buddha asked him that question to tease him. And Ananda insisted that all six could be called knots. This was all for the sake of debate. It was a point of argument, a principle to discuss.

The Buddha told Ananda, "You know that this precious cloth of flowers is basically one strip. It's a single piece. But when I made six ties in it, you said it had six knots. You then called it six knots. As you carefully consider this, look into this in minute detail, reflect upon it, you will see that the substance of the cloth is the same. It doesn't have so many names. It is the knots that make the difference. As soon as I added a knot, it became different."

This demonstrates that the nature of the treasury of the Thus Come One is basically one; the six sense organs are knots tied in it. But, although there are six knots, the original substance of the Treasury is still one. If you untie the six knots, not even one will remain.
 **Sutra:

What do you think? The first knot I tied was called number one. Continuing until I come to the sixth knot, and as I now tie it, is it also number one?

Commentary:**

What do you think? Ananda, what is your opinion? The first knot I tied was called number one. Continuing until I come to the sixth knot, and as I now tie it, is it also number one? Can the sixth one in turn be called number one?
 **Sutra:

No, World Honored One. If there are six knots, the sixth knot can never be called number one. In all my lives of learning with all my understanding, how could I now confuse the names of six knots?

Commentary:**

Ananda said, "Absolutely not. You can't switch them. Number one is number one. You can't change number one so that it is called number six or change number six so that it is called number one. No, World Honored One. If there are six knots, the sixth knot can never be called number one. If there are six, the sixth is just the sixth, and no matter what, it cannot turn into the first. In all my lives of learning, I, Ananda, the learned one, from limitless kalpas past down to the present, with all my understanding, what I have studied, what I have made my specialty, is to be well-read and good at debate. When I call upon all my accumulated learning and use all my skill in debate, how could I now confuse the names of six knots? How could I mix up the names? How could I fail to keep them in order?"
 **Sutra:

The Buddha said, "So it is. The six knots are not the same. Consider their origin. They are created from the one cloth. To confuse their order will not do."

Commentary:**

The Buddha said, "So it is. What you say is right. You can't change their names. You can't call the sixth one the first. The first one cannot be changed and called the sixth. You are absolutely right. The reason they cannot be interchanged is because the six knots are not the same. Consider their origin. They are created from the one cloth. To confuse their order will not do. If you mix up the numerical order of the knots, it won't work, you say. That's right."
 **Sutra:

Your six sense organs are also like this. In the midst or ultimate sameness, conclusive differences arise.

Commentary:**

Originally they are identical, but the eyes function as eyes, the ears function as ears, the nose functions as a nose, the tongue functions as a tongue, the body functions as a body, and the mind functions as the mind. Originally they were one and the same, but at this point they divide. Even then, it would be fine, if they worked together. They could all return their light and illumine within. The eyes could turn their light inward, the ears could listen within and hear the self-nature, the nose would not be turned by smells, the tongue would not be turned by tastes, the body would not be turned by objects of touch, and the mind would not be influenced by dharmas. If they could all work together and return the light, they would still be one. But they can't work together. The eyes see forms, the nose smells fragrances and is turned by them, the tongue tastes flavors and is turned by them, the body enjoys objects of touch and is turned by them, and the mind is influenced by dharmas and is turned by them. What's important is to not follow after them, but ordinary people are unable to avoid following after them.

M2 By the analogy he shows that if one gets rid of what is different, one can return to what is the same.
 **Sutra:

The Buddha said to Ananda, "You certainly dislike these six knots and would like there to be just one cloth. But how can that be done?"

Ananda said, "As long as these knots remain, there will be grounds for argument about what is and what is not. Their very existence will lead to such distinctions as this knot not being that knot and that knot not being this one. But if on this day, the Thus Come One unties them all, so that no knots remain, then there will be no 'this' and no 'that.' There will not even be something called 'one.' How much the less can there be six?" The Buddha said, "When the six are untied, the one is gone" is the same meaning.

Commentary:**

The Buddha said to Ananda, "You certainly dislike these six knots. It's for sure you don't like the six knots," says Shakyamuni Buddha to his disciple, "You would like to untie the six knots so they cease to be, and would like there to be just one cloth. You want to make one out of them. But how can that be done? How can you get back to the one, to that basic substance?"

Ananda heard the Buddha's question and said, "As long as these knots remain, there will be grounds for argument about what is and what is not. Right?" Ananda admits, "I would like to get rid of the six knots and have only one thing remaining, because as long as the six are around, there will be disputes about them." The reason for contention is that there is distinction between this and that. Their very existence will lead to such distinctions as this knot not being that knot and that knot not being this one. In the midst of these various knots will arise arguments about what is right and what is wrong. "This knot," the first one, is not the sixth, and "that knot," the sixth one, is not the first. Distinctions arise regarding this and that.

But if on this day, the Thus Come One unties them all, so that no knots remain, then there will be no "this" and no "that." There won't be a first, second, third, fourth, fifth, or sixth knot. There will not even be something called "one." If the six knots are destroyed there won't even be one knot. How much the less can there be six?

The Buddha said, "When the six are untied, the one is gone, is the same meaning. Not bad," the Buddha told Ananda, "You spoke that principle correctly. If you understand that principle, you can understand 'when the six are untied, the one is gone'; for that is the same meaning. Are you clear about it now?"

L2 The answer that untying the knots is done in sequence.
M1 He explains the sequence of the knots.
N1 He accords with sequence in tying the knots.
 **Sutra:

Because from beginningless time your mind and nature have been made wild and rebellious, you have produced false knowledge and views. This falseness continues to arise without respite, and the wearisomeness of these views brings about objective "dust."

Commentary:**

Because from beginningless time your mind and nature have been made wild and rebellious. From beginningless kalpas on down to the present, your pure mind and your basic nature of true suchness, your self-nature, have been made wild. "Wild" refers to your "appearance-of-production" ignorance, which is innate. From the "appearance-of-production" ignorance comes the discriminatory knowledge of dharmas which is also innate. "Wild" refers to ignorance.

"Rebellious" refers to the three subtle appearances discussed before. They are:

1. the appearance of karma.
2. the appearance of turning.
3. the appearance of manifestation.

The appearance of karma brings about the appearance of turning, which leads to the appearance of manifestation. This is very subtle, however, not something which ordinary people can discern. One unenlightened thought produces three subtle appearances. With the existence of these three appearances, the first knot is tied. The point at which you have produced false knowledge and views is when,

The experience of states becomes the condition from which six coarse appearances arise.

These have already been discussed. They are:

1. The appearance of knowing. This knowing refers to worldly knowledge and skill in debate. It includes science, technology, and all kinds of professions. Because you have "produced false knowledge and views," you give rise to the appearance of knowing. This falseness continues to arise without respite, and brings about the second of the six coarse appearances.

2. The appearance of continuity. It never stops. The appearance of knowing is the second knot, and the appearance of continuity is the third knot.

3. The appearance of grasping. You give rise to attachments.

4. The appearance of assigning names.

5. The appearance of the production of karma.

6. The appearance of karmic-bound suffering. These four represent the last three knots.

N2 He uses an analogy to explain further.
 **Sutra:

It is just like strange flowers appearing when your eyes grow weary of staring. They arise at random without any cause within the tranquil, essential brightness.

Commentary:**

It is just like strange flowers appearing when your eyes grow weary of staring. This is like the passage earlier in the sutra: "He stares into emptiness and after a long time gets weary." When he gets weary, he sees strange flowers in emptiness. So, too, here: They arise at random without any cause within the tranquil, essential brightness. For no reason at all, they appear haphazardly in the nature of the treasury of the Thus Come One.

N3 To oppose the sequence is connected with the analogy.
 **Sutra:

Everything in the world, the mountains, the rivers, and the great earth, as well as birth, death, and nirvana, is all just a strange weariness: the upside-down appearance of flowers.

Commentary:**
It is not only the three subtle and six coarse appearances that arise because the eyes grow weary from long staring, so that they begin to see the appearance of flowers in emptiness. Everything in the world, the entire universe, that is, not just our world, but all worlds throughout empty space and the dharma realm, the mountains, the rivers, and the great earth, as well as birth, death, and nirvana, is all just a strange weariness. They all exist because the eyes, as it were, have stared for a long time and become weary. They all come about through the same kind of circumstances as the eyes, staring. They are the upside-down appearance of flowers. Originally there were no flowers in space. All these things are like the upside-down appearance of flowers. So the Buddha's principle here is: "Do you know where everything in the world came from? Everything arises from living beings' ignorance. That one unenlightened thought produces the three subtle appearances. Experiencing states becomes the conditions from which six coarse appearances arise."

M2 He shows that the untying is done in sequence.
N1 First he teaches him the technique of untying.
O1 Ananda seeks to untie the knot of weariness.
 **Sutra:

Ananda said, "This weariness is the same as the knots. How do we untie them?"

Commentary:**

Having heard the Buddha's explanation, Ananda said, "This weariness is the same as the knots. This fatigue which comes from overexertion, is the same as the knots. How do we untie them? How do we get rid of them? How can we make them go away, so that we can return to our original face? How can we get back to our inherent nature of the treasury of the Thus Come One?"

O2 The Thus Come One uses a clever analogy to show them.
 **Sutra:

The Thus Come One took hold of the knotted cloth and pulled on its left end and asked Ananda, "Is this the way to untie it?"

"No, World Honored One."

Then with his hand he pulled on the right end and again asked Ananda, "Is this the way to untie it?"

"No, World Honored One."

Commentary:**

The Thus Come One uses an analogy to cause Ananda to understand for himself how to untie the knots, which are identical with the weariness that comes from overexertion.

The Thus Come One took hold of the knotted cloth and pulled on its left end. He took up the jeweled embroidered cloth which he had knotted and pulled its end to the left. At the same time he asked Ananda, "Is this the way to untie it? Is this how you get it undone?"

Ananda answered, "No, World Honored One."

Then with his hand he pulled on the right end and again asked Ananda, "Is this the way to untie it? Can I get the knots undone this way? Have the knots loosened now?"

"No, World Honored One, they haven't come loose. If you just pull on them, they won't come untied," Ananda replied.
 **Sutra:

The Buddha said to Ananda, "Now I have pulled on the left and right ends of the cloth and still have not been able to undo the knots. What method do you propose for untying them?"

Ananda said to the Buddha, "World Honored One, you must untie the knots from their center. Then they will come undone."

Commentary:**

Ananda is so intelligent! The Buddha couldn't do it, but Ananda thought of a way. The Buddha said to Ananda, "Now I have pulled on the left and right ends of the cloth and still have not been able to undo the knots. I haven't untied even one of the knots. I can't do it. What method do you propose for untying them? You think of a way. Use some clever expedient. How can we get them undone? You're very smart, Ananda. You will certainly come up with a method."

Ananda said to the Buddha, "World Honored One, you must untie the knots from their center. Then they will come undone. If you just pull to the left or to the right, you can't get them undone. What you have to do is work on the heart of the knot. Once you loosen that, the knot will come undone."
 **Sutra:

The Buddha said to Ananda, "So it is, so it is, if you want to get them undone, you have to untie them from the center."

Commentary:**

The Buddha's reply is, "You are truly intelligent, Ananda. Aren't you? So it is, so it is. That's what you do. You figured it out. I couldn't think of how to do it, and you came up with this wonderful method!" He expresses his approval. "Right, correct. Now I understand. If you want to get them undone, you have to untie them from the center. So, you aren't just well-educated, you're fundamentally intelligent."

O3 He tells him that he should not erroneously accept or believe what was spoken.
 **Sutra:

Ananda, the Buddhadharma I explain arises from causes and conditions. But that is not to grasp at the mixing and uniting of coarse appearances in the world. The Thus Come One understands all worldly and world-transcending dharmas and knows their fundamental causes and what conditions bring them into being.

Commentary:**
Ananda, the Buddhadharma I explain arises from causes and conditions. But that is not to grasp at the mixing and uniting of coarse appearances in the world. It's not that I'm referring to the coarse appearances that anyone can see. I, the Thus Come One understands all worldly and world-transcending dharmas. "Worldly dharmas" refers to the defiled and defiling dharmas in the six common realms of rebirth. "World-transcending dharmas" refers to the pure dharmas found in the four sagely dharma realms. "I know their fundamental causes and what conditions bring them into being. I know the basic source of these dharmas and how they accord with conditions."
 **Sutra:

This is so to the extent that I know how many drops of rain fall in as many worlds away from here as there are dust motes in the Ganges. The same is true for all the things you can see: why the pine is straight, why the brambles are twisted, why the goose is white, why the crow is black, I understand the reasons.

Commentary:**

This is so, I know what conditions bring things about, to the extent that I know how many drops of rain fall in as many worlds away from here as there are dust motes in the Ganges. I know what the conditions are in worlds infinitely far away and in all the worlds in between. There's nothing in this world that I do not comprehend, and even in worlds vast distances beyond this world, I know exactly how much rain has fallen. The Vajra Sutra says,

The Thus Come One completely knows and sees all the thoughts in the minds of all living beings.

It doesn't matter whether the beings are human or not; whatever thoughts go on in their minds are known to the Buddha. The same is true for all the things you can see. You can't see things in as many worlds away from here as there are sand grains in the Ganges, but as to the things that are right now before your very eyes, Why the pine is straight, why the brambles are twisted, why the goose is white, why the crow is black, I understand the reasons.

O4 If he selects an organ and unties the knot, then he will certainly be certified.
 **Sutra:

Therefore, Ananda, you can select whichever one of the six sense-organs you wish. If the knots of the sense-organs are removed, then the defiling appearances disappear of themselves. All falseness ceases to be. If that is not the truth, what do you expect in addition to it?

Commentary:**

Therefore, because of the Buddha's total comprehension, as he has just explained, Ananda, you can select whichever one of the six sense-organs you wish. You yourself can choose whichever sense-organ you prefer. Do you remember how I explained the various merits of the sense-organs to you, how some have all twelve-hundred merits and some do not? Based on that, you can pick whichever one you want. Once you pick the organ, and if the knots of the sense-organs are removed, then the defiling appearances disappear of themselves. You apply the method to whichever organ you select in your cultivation, until the organ, the knots, and the defiling objects are all done away with. All falseness ceases to be. Then, all false thinking, thoughts based on production and extinction, all discriminations disappear.

"What happens then?" you wonder. "What do we do when all our false thoughts are gone?" If that is not the truth, what do you expect in addition to it? If you're not true then, what will you have left? All that's left is the true. When the false is gone, the true is total. Get rid of your mind that seizes on conditions, and the nature of wonderful true suchness appears, the pure and fundamental mind, the original face of the nature of the treasury of the Thus Come One.

At this point in the sutra, you should be particularly attentive. You should develop your skill by working on one of the six senseorgans.

Which one? Any one will do: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, or mind, you can apply your skill to any one of them. The entrance to any of the six sense-organs is the Way. All are a part of the nature of the treasury of the Thus Come One. All you have to do is take one in hand and put your mind to it in your cultivation, and you can return to the basic substance of the nature of the treasury of the Thus Come One.

N2 Then he shows that the untying is done in sequence.
O1 He first questions him to lead him to awakening.
 **Sutra:

"Ananda, I now ask you, can the six knots in the cloth of layered flowers be untied simultaneously and released all at once?"

"No, World Honored One. The knots were originally made one at a time, now they must be untied one at a time. The substance of the six knots is the same, but they were not made simultaneously, and so now when it is time to release them, how can they be untied simultaneously?"

Commentary:**

Shakyamuni Buddha says, "Ananda, I now ask you, can the six knots in the cloth of layered flowers be untied simultaneously and released all at once? This cloth from the Suyama Heaven has six knots in it, as everyone can see. Can these knots be untied all at the same time?"

"No, World Honored One," Ananda replied. "Why not? The knots were originally made one at a time. They were tied in sequence. Now they must be untied one at a time. They have to be untied in sequence. The substance of the six knots is the same, but they were not made simultaneously. Although the six knots are all tied in the same cloth, they were not tied all at the same time, and so now when it is time to release them, how can they be untied simultaneously? They have to be released one at a time."

O2 He uses that awakening to further unite with understanding.
 **Sutra:

The Buddha said, "Releasing the six sense-organs is the same way. When the sense-organ begins to be released, one realizes the emptiness of people first. When the nature of that emptiness is fully understood, then one is released from dharmas. Once one is freed from dharmas, neither kind of emptiness will arise."

Commentary:**

The Buddha said, "Releasing the six sense-organs is the same way. The principle is the same as the principle for untying the six knots. You release the sense-organs one by one; you can't work on them all at once. When the sense-organ begins to be released, that is, the organ you have chosen to cultivate to perfect penetration, one realizes the emptiness of people first." With the emptiness of people, there is no attachment to self. There are two kinds of attachment to self:

1) Innate attachment to self.
2) Differentiated attachment to self.

At this point, both these attachments are finished. When the nature of that emptiness is fully understood, when the emptiness of people is fully perfected, then one is released from dharmas. Then dharmas are also empty. One is liberated from the two kinds of attachments to dharmas:

1) Innate attachment to dharmas.
2) Differentiated attachment to dharmas.

Once one is freed from dharmas, neither kind of emptiness will arise. Once you attain liberation from dharmas, there is no longer any emptiness of people or emptiness of dharmas. Neither of these kinds of emptiness arises.
 **Sutra:

This is called the patience with non-production attained by the Bodhisattvas by means of samadhi.

Commentary:**

The Bodhisattvas attain the power of concentration, and thus can awaken to patience with the non-production of dharmas, which is the state of a Bodhisattva.