

Self View & Conceit

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We read about the various fetters that are abandoned in the practice, and there's a temptation to want to reason our way past them, but that's not how the practice works. It works by a process of cause and effect. The fetters are abandoned as the effect of the practice and not the effect of reasoning things through. We practice virtue, concentration, and discernment, and they, in turn, are dependent on developing certain factors like heedfulness, conviction, and desire. After all, the path itself needs to be put together. It's a fabricated thing. And there has to be a desire to do it. If we don't have any desire, we don't fabricate things. It's one of those truths of the will where it's not going to happen unless you want it. Wherever there's a desire, there's going to be becoming. And becoming involves a sense of self. What the path needs is a skillful sense of self. The Buddha talks about this quite a bit: "The self is its own mainstay." In other words, you have to depend on yourself. If you don't depend on yourself, who are you going to depend on? Who can do the work for you? It's not the case that someone is going to come and save us from ourselves. We have to figure out for ourselves where we are lacking skill.

And that's one of the definitions of *avijja*: The cause of suffering is a lack of skill. We're being unskillful, so what are we going to do to get past it? We have to depend on ourselves. Nobody can give us a skill. We have to learn it ourselves. So as with any desire, there's going to be your sense of self as a producer and the self as a consumer. The producer is the one who can do this. The consumer is the one who's going to enjoy the results.

As for the self as the producer, we have to have the confidence that we can do this. This comes in in a discussion one time of how we need conceit in order to get past conceit. The conceit that "Other people can do this, they're human beings, I'm a human being, why can't I?" That's a good sense of self. You need that. You have to have that kind of confidence. Otherwise, you can't do the path. You may think that nibbana is off some place else. A lot of us here think that nibbana is over in Thailand. Ajaan Fuang was telling me when he was a little kid he thought nibbana was up in the Himalayan mountains. And you can imagine what the people in the Himalayan mountains think. Some place else. Actually, it's something we can attain through our efforts right here. Someone once asked me, "Where's the best place to practice?" And I said, "Right where you are." This is where things are going to be found. So you have to have that confidence that it's

here and you're capable of finding it—which is how conceit is needed on the path. You can't let go of healthy conceit right away. You have to think that you're capable of this.

And then there's the self as a consumer: There's the passage where the Buddha talks about the self as a governing principle. He's got three governing principles for ways to think when you're feeling tempted to leave the path. One is the world is a governing principle: realizing that there are beings in the world who can read your mind. What are they going to think when you're getting ready to give up? Then there's the Dhamma as a governing principle: realizing that here's an excellent Dhamma. It's very rare that we find a true Dhamma like this. So here's our chance to practice. If we don't practice now, when are we going to get another chance? Then there's self as a governing principle, which is where you remind yourself, "I got on this path because I wanted to put an end to suffering and if I get off this path or if I stop or if I get lazy and lax, do I really love myself?" In this case, you're thinking about yourself as the consumer of the results of the path. It's something you want to hold in mind.

Don't be afraid of having a desire to practice. Don't be afraid of building up a self around it. I was once reading book by a monk saying that concentration and effort require a strong sense of will, a sense of motivation, and motivation requires a sense of self, and we all know that Buddhism is against a sense of self, so we've got to not do concentration, not do right effort—which is getting everything all backwards. You use the sense of self, a healthy sense of self, until you don't need it anymore. Then you naturally drop it. Even the beginning of wisdom starts with a question framed in terms of self: "What, when I do it, will be to my long-term welfare and happiness?" There you've got the self both as the producer and as the consumer built right into the question. What makes it wise is that you realize there is long-term happiness, you want long-term, and you realize it's going to have to depend on your actions.

So where do you try to find an answer to that question? You look at your own actions. Where are you causing suffering? Can you stop? Can you be more skillful in your actions? When you're doing concentration, it's the same sort of thing. When the mind gets settled down, is it really as still as it could be? Is there still some disturbance in here? Look around see what you're doing that's causing the disturbance—because it's the acts of the mind that are causing the disturbance.

The Buddha devotes a refrain in a sutta to the need to settle in and indulge in concentration, which means you let yourself enjoy it for a while. Don't be afraid of enjoying the concentration. Don't listen to those people who put a warning signs all over jhana saying, "Watch out. Watch out. Dangerous." The Buddha

never put warning signs. He never cordoned it off. He said that this is something you want to do. If you're going to be attached to the pleasure, this is a much better pleasure to be attached to than not having this pleasure to be attached to—because otherwise, you're just going to go back to your old ways, looking for pleasure in sensuality.

So you learn how to enjoy the pleasure but without losing your focus. This is one of the practices you do in order not to be overcome by pleasure or overcome by pain. What little pains there are in the body, you learn to work through them. As for the pleasure, you don't let the pleasure absorb all of your attention. When you're with the breath, you don't leave the breath. It's a matter of learning how to be with pleasure, sometimes very intense pleasure, and yet not focus on the pleasure itself. Keep your eye on the breath. Stay with the breath.

It's like that image the Buddha gives of the man walking through a crowd. He's got a bowl of oil on his head and someone following right behind him with a sword raised. If a drop of oil falls from the bowl, the man with the sword is going to cut off the guy's head. On one side there's a huge crowd, and on the other side there's a beauty queen singing and dancing. And the crowd is exclaiming, "The beauty queen is singing! The beauty queen is dancing!" And if he let's himself get distracted by either side, he's going to die. Well, it's the same with the concentration. It's not that you're going to die if you start wallowing in the pleasure, but your concentration will die. You'll lose your focus and your concentration will become less and less alert. Sometimes you sit here for a while and there's a nice kind of a nice, hazy buzz, but then you come out and you don't have any sense of where you were. That's concentration lacking alertness. Delusion concentration.

So you learn how to be with the pleasure but not overcome by the pleasure. And then you can ask yourself, "Is this as still as it could be? Is there something in here that is still a disturbance to the mind?" You look for that. You see what you are doing, what perception you're holding in mind. As you abandon any perceptions that create even the slightest disturbance, you go into deeper, deeper, and deeper stages of concentration. Basically, what you're doing is asking yourself the questions of the four noble truths: Where's the suffering? Where's the stress? In this case, it's very subtle. It's hard to call it suffering, but it is stress. When you notice it, the next questions are: "What action is causing it?" and "What can you do to let it go?"

If you keep up this process, you finally do get to something in the mind that's deeper than concentration. You can actually touch the Deathless inside. And because you've gotten used to seeing how the mind fabricates states, you recognize

this as something *not* fabricated. You know that you didn't do it. But the fabrication of the path got you there.

When you have that experience, then you come out of it. And coming out of it, that's where the fetters get cut. The very first time around, you've gained certainty. You're no longer uncertain about what the Buddha taught. You've experienced what he taught. As he said, there really is a Deathless and you found it. There's no holding onto teachings about the self because however you could define a self would have to be around the five aggregates. And you've had that experience that had nothing to do with the five aggregates at all. There's not even any desire to want to define yourself in any way, as a separate self or a connected self or a finite self or an infinite self, cosmic self, whatever: There's no desire to define yourself in any way, shape, or form.

Finally, there's no clinging to precepts or habits and practices. In other words, your virtue is mastered. What does it mean not to cling to virtue? It doesn't mean you don't hold to the precepts anymore, it's just that the precepts are part of your behavior now and you don't have to build any sense of self around it. There's no fashioning of a sense of self, so you're not "*silamaya*": You're not fashioned of your precepts. In other words you're virtuous, but there's no sense that you're better than other people because you're virtuous. You're not defining yourself in terms of your virtue.

But you're still holding onto the practice of concentration and discernment, and that's where a lingering sense of self remains. There still has to be a little bit of conceit around these practices, otherwise they're not going to get mastered.

It's not the case that we can make up our minds, "Okay, I'm going to abandon this fetter today and then work on the next fetter tomorrow." You can't plan these things in advance. Instead, as the *ajanas* say, you're cooking the mind.

As in Ajaan Lee's image, you're putting a piece of rock in a smelter. As the heat gets higher, then the different metals in the rock begin to melt and come flowing out of the rock. First there's the tin, then there's the lead, then there's the zinc, then there's the silver, then there's the gold as the heat gets higher and higher. You can't pick these things out of the rock with a toothpick or a scalpel. The only thing you can do is to put the heat of your effort on the mind, keeping after the mind when it's causing any sense of stress or suffering or disturbance. You want to figure it out what's going on. That's the heat: Ajaan Lee calls it the heat of ardency. Then the good things start showing themselves.

So the way we test the Buddha's teachings is right here in getting our mind into concentration and then asking the right questions. As for the things that get

abandoned, they get abandoned based on experiences that will come when you subject the mind to the right practice.

So focus on the causes, and the results will take care of themselves. The path is something fabricated. It leads to something unfabricated. It doesn't cause the unfabricated, but it leads you there. Without the path, you can't get there at all. So focus on what you're doing right now. Be really sensitive to what you're doing right now because your sensitivity is what's going to allow you to see where there's stress that you didn't notice before, along with what's coming along with the stress. What's causing it? It's not just a matter of repeating a formula, like "inconstant, stressful, not-self." It's a matter of learning to be sensitive to what you're doing and the results of what you're doing. As you get more and more sensitive, things will start showing up that you didn't see before. And in that direct experience, you find that the results come on their own without your having to know about them beforehand.