

## *Conceit Defanged*

*September 21, 2020*

There are two fetters associated with a sense of self. One is self-identity view, and the other is conceit. The quick explanation of the difference between the two is that with self-identity view, you have a sense of “I am this.” You have a specific object with which you identify. With conceit, it’s simply “I am.” It’s a more undefined sense of self.

The longer explanation is that with self-identity view, you can create a sense of self around any of the five aggregates, and there are four ways you can do it with each of the aggregates.

Take form, for example: your body. You can either identify yourself as being the body, or you can identify yourself as being the owner of the body. You can have a sense that you are in the body or that the body’s in you. With the last one, you can have an infinite sense of self—a cosmic sense of self—within which the body moves or simply an enlarged sense of, say, consciousness that involves the body. In that case, you identify with the consciousness. But at the same time, you have a sense that the body’s inside you. So you have five aggregates, four ways of identifying, and 20 different self-identity views.

Conceit is explained in different ways. There’s a passage where a non-returner—who has abandoned self-identity views, but still hasn’t abandoned conceit—explains to a group of monks that even though he doesn’t identify around the five aggregates, still there’s a lingering sense of self, a subtle lingering of “I am” around the aggregates, even though there’s no “I am this.” He compares it to washing some clothes. When the clothes are clean, they’ll still have a lingering scent of the soap—in other words a sense of “I am” that was doing the practice. For non-returners, that means they’ve perfected virtue; they’ve perfected their concentration, but they’re still working on discernment. The “I” doing that is still the lingering scent.

This “I am” can have nine different forms, they say, in which you compare yourself to others. Either the other person is worse than you are, or equal to you, or better than you. In each case, you could say the other person is worse or equal or better, which means that even when you’re correct in your estimation, it still counts as conceit.

Now, with the fact that conceit is one of the last fetters that’s abandoned, you’ve got some people who say, “In that case, I don’t have to worry about it right now.” But conceit has its skillful and unskillful uses on the path, and it’s

important to notice the difference. The unskillful ones are referred to in the passage we chanted just now, about the person who doesn't exalt himself over others for the fact that he's more content than other people are—he doesn't exalt himself, doesn't disparage others.

The unskillful use of conceit there would be that you're practicing a particular practice either in terms of, say, virtue or your concentration, and because you have a better attainment than somebody else, you say, "I'm a better person." That, the Buddha says, is the mark of a person with no integrity. You have to remember that we're each on the path because we have the diseases of greed, aversion, and delusion. We're here treating our diseases. We're not here in a race. So if you have a virtue of any kind but then use that virtue as a means or the basis for looking down on other people, you're using the medicine for the wrong purpose. You've spoiled the virtue. You've spoiled the integrity of the virtue.

However, there are skillful uses of conceit. One is that if you see somebody who's better than you are in something, you tell yourself, "If they can do it, I can do it, too." This is a useful way of thinking when you're living here in the monastery. It's impossible for me to teach you everything that I learned over in Thailand because a lot of what I learned had to do with ways of acting in different circumstances. It was never really articulated, just a sense that I picked up from being around Ajaan Fuang in trying to notice what he did that seemed to be skillful.

So it's up to you to look around. Look for good examples around you and tell yourself, "I can take that as an example. Here's an area where I have some room for improvement." One of the things I found really helpful in dealing with Ajaan Fuang was a comment he made one time that when an ajaan does something, he has a reason. He wouldn't explain the reason every time. It was up to me to look for the reason and try to figure it out.

I've encountered some other Westerners who were with monks over in Thailand, and they'd written off some of the behavior of their teachers simply as "Well, that's the way the Thais do it." That meant, of course, when they came back to the West, they wouldn't be doing it here. And that deprived them of the opportunity to think about, "What would be a good reason for that kind of behavior?" When you assume there are people around you who are wiser or more skillful, and you try to figure out exactly how or exactly why, then you grow as a person. That way of comparing yourself is actually useful. It's a necessary part of the path—a necessary part of the training.

Another skillful use, of course, is the one that Ven. Ananda talks about, which says that you think about the fact there are people who are awakened. You remind

yourself: “They’re human beings. I’m a human being. I can do it, too.” That, he says, is a necessary use of conceit on the path.

So conceit has its uses. After all, it functions as the sense of “I” that’s going to be responsible for doing the path. And because it involves a sense of judgment, a comparison, it’s useful for times when you realize, “I could be doing things better than I am. There are examples around, and I can learn from the examples.” And, of course, there’s that sense that *you’re* going to benefit from all this.

It’s only when you get to the very end of the path that you don’t need that sense of “I am.” At that point, it’s one of the few things still standing in the way of total freedom. So it is one of the last things you let go. But in the meantime, learn how to use it skillfully. Otherwise, in Ajaan Maha Boowa’s phrase, it grows fangs—especially when you’re exalting yourself and disparaging others.

If you can use that sense of “I am” to remind yourself that “I am suffering, but I am capable of putting an end to suffering and capable of learning from the good examples around me,” then you’ve defanged your conceit and found a good use for it.