

(Māna) Soṇa Sutta

The Discourse to Soṇa (on Conceit)

S 22.49/3:48-51

Theme: The three psychological complexes

Translated by Piya Tan ©2005, 2008

1 Soṇa the householder

The protagonist of the (Māna) Soṇa Sutta is Sōna, a householder's son (*gaha.pati.putta*) of Rājagaha. The Suttas record two conversations he has with the Buddha at Veluvana: **the (Māna) Soṇa Sutta** (S 22.49), on the nature of *conceit*, and how it is overcome through seeing the three characteristics¹ of the five aggregates, their arising and their ending;² and **the (Parinibbāna) Soṇa Sutta** (S 35.128), as to why some beings achieve *complete cessation* in this life and others do not.³

This Soṇa is a householder's son, probably a very young man and a lay person. As such, he is not recorded in the Thera,gāthā, and is to be distinguished from the three monks mentioned there, that is, Soṇa Poṭiriya,putta (Tha 193 f), Soṇa Kuṭi,kaṇṇa (Tha 365-369), and Soṇa Koḷivisa (Tha 632-644). In fact, our protagonist, Soṇa Gahapati,putta appears only in the two suttas mentioned (S 22.49, 35.128).

2 The Sutta teachings

2.1 A detailed study on conceit can be found elsewhere.⁴ A summary suffices here. In the early discourses (such as **the Anatta,lakkhaṇa Sutta**, S 22.59), we often find these three not-self reflections—“This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self”—which are the respective opposites of the threefold graspings (*ti,vidha gāha*), namely,

“This is mine”	(<i>etam mama</i>)	(arises through craving, <i>taṇhā,gāha</i>)	= “mine-making”;
“This I am”	(<i>eso 'ham asmi</i>)	(arises through conceit, <i>māna,gāha</i>)	= “conceit”; and
“This is my self”	(<i>eso me attā</i>)	(arises through wrong view, <i>diṭṭhi,gāha</i>)	= “I-making.”

(Anattā,lakkhaṇa Sutta, S 22.59/3:68 = SD 1.2)

Etam mama, eso 'ham asmi, eso me attā ti. These are “the 3 graspings” (*ti,vidha gāha*), that is, of view (*diṭṭhi*), of craving (*taṇhā*), of conceit (*māna*) (MA 2:111, 225). The notion “This is mine” arises through craving (*taṇhā*); the notion “This I am” arises through conceit (*māna*); the notion “This is my self” arises through views (*diṭṭhi*).

These three considerations represent respectively the 3 kinds of mental proliferation (*papañca*) of self-view (*sakkāya diṭṭhi*), of craving (*taṇhā*), and of conceit (*māna*).⁵ The opposite formula, *n'etam mama, n'eso 'ham asmi, na mēso attā ti*, is applied below to the 5 aggregates [§§17-21].⁶

2.2 These three wrong mental attitudes are also known as the “latent tendencies to ‘I’-making, ‘mine’-making and conceit” (*ahaṇi.kāra,mamaṇi.kāra,mānānusaya*),⁷ which is a more complex name for the latent tendency of conceit.

More often, on a social level, we see the manifestations of the “three discriminations” (*tayo vidhā*), that is, the three conceits (*māna*), namely,

¹ That is, the impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-selfhood of form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness: see **Dve Khandha S** (S 22.48/3:47 f) = SD 17.1a.

² S 22.49/3:48-51 = SD 31.13.

³ S 35.128/4:113 = SD 74.2 (teachings identical to those at **Sakka Pañha S**, S 35.118/4:101 f = SD 74.1).

⁴ **Me: The Nature of Conceit** = SD 19.2a & *Anusaya* = SD 31.3 (3).

⁵ Nm 280; Vbh 393; Nett 37 f.

⁶ See Peter Harvey, *The Selfless Mind*, 1995:32 f.

⁷ M 22.15, 72.15, 112.11 20, S 2:75, 3:236, 4:41, A 1:132, 133.

the conceit, “I am better”	(<i>seyyo ’ham asmi, māna</i>),
the conceit, “I am equal”	(<i>sadiso ’ham asmi, māna</i>), and
the conceit, “I am worse”	(<i>hīno ’ham asmi, māna</i>).

2.3 Conceit is a measuring of our self against others. Measuring self and others is based on the notion of duality, that is, as a result of not understanding not-self (*anattā*). When we measure ourselves against others, we will often perceive some kind of *lack* inside ourselves and when we *conceive* that what we lack or need is found in another, we have effectively attributed charisma⁸ onto that person.

2.4 The antidotes or preventives for conceit are meditations that arouse joy within ourselves and reflecting on the not-self (*anattā*) teaching. The best “inner joy” meditation is the cultivation of loving-kindness,⁹ especially when practised in connection with the breath meditation. There are also what are called *the inspiring meditations*—that is, the recollections of the Three Jewels, on moral virtue, of charity, and of the devas—which are useful in strengthening the previous two meditations.¹⁰

Reflecting on not-self is one of the most difficult practices, as it can be very abstract and easily intellectualized. However, a simplified form of the not-self reflection¹¹ is seeing conditionality—how causes and effects work as “events”—in daily life. In fact, when we truly understand the nature of not-self, we are on the way to arhathood.¹²

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⁸ See eg **Rūpa S** (A 4.65/2:71) @ SD 3.14; also **Me: The Nature of Conceit** = SD 19.2a (6.5).

⁹ See **Karaṇīya Metta S** (Khv 9 = Sn 1.8) = SD 38.3.

¹⁰ See **Mental Cultivation** = SD 15.

¹¹ See **Self & Selves** + SD 26.9.

¹² See **Anatta, lakkhaṇa S** (S 22.59/3:66-68) = SD 1.2.

The Discourse to Soṇa (on Conceit)

S 22.49/3:48-51

1 Thus have I heard.

At one time the Blessed One was staying in the Squirrels' Feeding-ground in the Bamboo Grove near Rājagaha.

2 Then Soṇa the householder's son approached the Blessed One, and saluted him. Then he sat down at one side.

Conceit towards the five aggregates

3 When Soṇa the householder's son was sitting thus at one side, the Blessed One said this to him:

4 (1) "Soṇa, when those ascetics and brahmins, by way of form—which is impermanent, suffering, subject to change—consider thus:¹³

'I am better' (seyyo 'ham asmī), or

'I am equal [just as good]' (sadiṣo 'ham asmī), or

'I am worse' (hīno 'ham asmī)—

why do they consider thus, but through not seeing things according to reality?

5 (2) When they, by way of feeling—which is impermanent, suffering, subject to change, consider thus:

'I am better' (seyyo 'ham asmī), or

'I am equal [just as good]' (sadiṣo 'ham asmī), or

'I am worse' (hīno 'ham asmī)—

why do they consider thus, but through not seeing things according to reality?

6 (3) When they, by way of perception—which is impermanent, suffering, subject to change, consider thus:

'I am better' (seyyo 'ham asmī), or

'I am equal [just as good]' (sadiṣo 'ham asmī), or

'I am worse' (hīno 'ham asmī)—

why do they consider thus, but through not seeing things according to reality?

7 (4) When they, by way of formations—which is impermanent, suffering, subject to change, consider thus:

'I am better' (seyyo 'ham asmī), or

'I am equal [just as good]' (sadiṣo 'ham asmī), or

'I am worse' (hīno 'ham asmī)—

why do they consider thus, but through not seeing things according to reality?

8 (5) When they, by way of consciousness—which is impermanent, suffering, subject to change, consider thus:

'I am better' (seyyo 'ham asmī), or

'I am equal [just as good]' (sadiṣo 'ham asmī), or

'I am worse' (hīno 'ham asmī)—

why do they consider thus, but through not seeing things according to reality?

Not showing conceit

9 Soṇa, when those ascetics and brahmins, by way of form—which is impermanent, suffering, subject to change—do *not* consider thus:

'I am better' (seyyo 'ham asmī), or

'I am equal [just as good]' (sadiṣo 'ham asmī), or [49]

¹³ See Intro (2).

‘I am worse’ (hīno ’ham asmi)—

why do they *not* consider thus, but through seeing things according to reality?

10 When they, by way of feeling—which is impermanent, suffering, subject to change, do *not* consider thus:

‘I am better’ (seyyo ’ham asmi), or
 ‘I am equal [just as good]’ (sadiṣo ’ham asmi), or
 ‘I am worse’ (hīno ’ham asmi)—

why do they *not* consider thus, but through seeing things according to reality?

11 When they, by way of perception—which is impermanent, suffering, subject to change, do *not* consider thus:

‘I am better’ (seyyo ’ham asmi), or
 ‘I am equal [just as good]’ (sadiṣo ’ham asmi), or
 ‘I am worse’ (hīno ’ham asmi)—

why do they *not* consider thus, but through seeing things according to reality?

12 When they, by way of formations—which is impermanent, suffering, subject to change, do *not* consider thus:

‘I am better’ (seyyo ’ham asmi), or
 ‘I am equal [just as good]’ (sadiṣo ’ham asmi), or
 ‘I am worse’ (hīno ’ham asmi)—

why do they *not* consider thus, but through seeing things according to reality?

13 When they, by way of consciousness—which is impermanent, suffering, subject to change, do *not* consider thus:

‘I am better’ (seyyo ’ham asmi), or
 ‘I am equal [just as good]’ (sadiṣo ’ham asmi), or
 ‘I am worse’ (hīno ’ham asmi)—

why do they *not* consider thus, but through seeing things according to reality?

The aggregate characteristics formula¹⁴

14 (1) Now, what do you think, Soṇa, is form permanent or impermanent?”

“Impermanent, bhante.”

“Is what is impermanent unsatisfactory [painful] or satisfactory [pleasurable]?”¹⁵

“Unsatisfactory, bhante.”

“Is what is impermanent, unsatisfactory and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine, this I am, this is my self.’?”¹⁶

“No, bhante.”

15 (2) “Now, what do you think, Soṇa, is feeling permanent or impermanent?”

“Impermanent, bhante.”

“Is what is impermanent unsatisfactory or satisfactory?”

“Unsatisfactory, bhante.”

“Is what is impermanent, unsatisfactory and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine, this I am, this is my self.’?”

“No, bhante.”

16 (3) “Now, what do you think, Soṇa, is perception permanent or impermanent?”

“Impermanent, bhante.”

“Is what is impermanent unsatisfactory or satisfactory?”

¹⁴ From hereon up to the end, is as in **Anatta, Jakkhaṇa S** (A 22.59.12-24/3:67 f) = SD 1.2. A shorter version of this and foll sections are given as **Arahatā S 1** (S 22.76/3:82 f = SD 26.7) = **Arahatā S 2** (S 22.77/3:84, without verse).

¹⁵ *Dukkhaṃ vā sukhaṃ vā.*

¹⁶ *Etam mama, eso ’ham asmi, eso me attā ti.* See Intro (2.1).

“Unsatisfactory, bhante.”

“Is what is impermanent, unsatisfactory and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine, this I am, this is my self.’?”

“No, bhante.”

17 (4) “Now, what do you think, Soṇa, are formations permanent or impermanent?”

“Impermanent, bhante.”

“Is what is impermanent unsatisfactory or satisfactory?”

“Unsatisfactory, bhante.”

“Is what is impermanent, unsatisfactory and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine, this I am, this is my self.’?”

“No, bhante.”

18 (5) “Now, what do you think, Soṇa, is consciousness permanent or impermanent?”

“Impermanent, bhante.”

“Is what is impermanent unsatisfactory or satisfactory?”

“Unsatisfactory, bhante.”

“Is what is impermanent, unsatisfactory and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine, this I am, this is my self.’?”

“No, bhante.”

The not-self totality formula¹⁷

19 (1) “Therefore, Soṇa, any kind of form whatsoever, whether past, future or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near¹⁸—all forms should be seen as they really are with right wisdom thus:

‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’¹⁹

20 (2) Therefore, Soṇa, any kind of feeling whatsoever, whether past, future or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near—all feelings should be seen as they really are with right wisdom thus:

‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’

¹⁷ This whole section is mutatis mutandis at **Cūḷa Saccaka S** (M 35.24b/1:234 f) = SD 26.5. These are the characteristics of a learner (*sekha*). The arhat, on the other hand, not only has the right view of not-self, but has also abandoned all clinging, as the Buddha explains in the foll §22. The “specific not-self formula” is the line, “This is not mine, this I am not, this is not the self.” The combined “aggregate characteristics formula” [§12-16] and the “not-self *totality* formula” [§19-23] is called the not-self *general* formula.”

¹⁸ See (Dve) **Khanda S** (S 22.48/3:47) = SD 17.1a. This classification of the aggregates (by way of the totality formula) is explained in detail in the *Vibhaṅga* and briefly in the *Visuddhimagga*: “internal” = physical sense-organs; “external” = physical sense-objects; “gross” = that which impinges (physical internal and external senses, with touch = earth, wind, fire); “subtle” = that which does not impinge (mind, mind-objects, mind-consciousness, and water); “inferior” = unpleasant and unacceptable sense-experiences [sense-world existence]; “superior” = pleasant and acceptable sense-experiences [form & formless existences]; “far” = subtle objects (“difficult to penetrate”); “near” = gross objects (“easy to penetrate”) (Vbh 1-13; Vism 14.73/450 f; Abhs 6.7). “Whether or not the details of the *Vibhaṅga* exposition are accepted as valid for the *nikāyas*, it seems clear that this formula is intended to indicate how each *khandha* is to be seen as a class of states, manifold in nature and displaying a considerable variety and also a certain hierarchy” (Gethin 1986:41).

¹⁹ *N’etaṃ mama, n’eso ’ham asmi, na mēso attā ti.* A brief version, “There can be no considering that (element) as ‘I’ or ‘mine’ or ‘I am’” (*ahan ti vā maman ti vā asmī ti vā*) is found in **Mahā Hatthi, padōpama S** (M 28/1:184-191 §§6b-7, 11b-12, 16b-17, 21b-22). This is opp of “the 3 grasplings” (*ti, vidha gāha*) formula: *etam mama, eso ’ham asmi, eso me attā ti* [§§12-16]. In **Anatta, lakkhaṇa S** (S 22.59.12-16/3:68), these formulas is applied to the 5 aggregates & in **Pārileyya S** (S 22.81/ 3:94-99 = SD 6.1) to the 4 primary elements. See also (**Dhātu**) **Rāhula S** (A 4.177/2:164 f). See **Pārileyya S**, SD 6.16 Intro (5). See Peter Harvey, *The Selfless Mind*, 1995:32 f. Se3e Intro (2).

21 (3) Therefore, Soṇa, any kind of perception whatsoever, whether past, future or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near—all perceptions should be seen as they really are with right wisdom thus:

‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’

22 (4) Therefore, Soṇa, any kind of formations whatsoever, whether past, future or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near—all formations should be seen as they really are with right wisdom thus:

‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’

23 (5) Therefore, Soṇa, any kind of consciousness whatsoever, whether past, future or present, [50] internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near—all consciousness should be seen as they really are with right wisdom thus:

‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’

Revulsion

24a Seeing thus, Soṇa, the learned noble disciple is revulsed [disenchanted] with form, is revulsed with feeling, is revulsed with perception, is revulsed with formations, is revulsed with consciousness.

Liberation

24b Through revulsion, he becomes dispassionate.

Through dispassion, his mind is liberated.

When he is liberated, there arises the knowledge: ‘Free am I!’ He understands: ‘Destroyed is birth. The holy life has been lived. What needs to be done has been done. There is no more of this state of being.’”

— evaṃ —

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