

The 3 fetters in real life

An excerpt from *SD 60d An evolutionary Psychology of Mindfulness*, ©Piya Tan 2023.

[Previously published as fb221213 Piya Tan]

7.6 THE 3 FETTERS OF SELF-DECEPTION

7.6.1 Why 3 fetters?

7.6.1.1 Why are **the 3 fetters** (*samyojana*)—self-identity view (*sakkāya, diṭṭhi*), rituals and vows (*sīla-b, bata*), and doubts (*vicikicchā*)—always presented together as a triad?¹ In simple terms, we may posit that our self-identity view is reinforced by our ritual behaviour; however, since both these unwholesome qualities only fetter closer to discontent and suffering, we constantly have doubts, which we are unable to resolve. In the end, we accept them by identifying with them by way of the defence mechanism of **identification**, also known as the “Stockholm syndrome.”²

First, it has already been established that the Buddhist tradition regards as an error the belief in individuality. A party cannot be an “individual” in the sense of being an undivided whole, since such an entity would be incapable of action or change. However, since a party does act and change, it cannot be an undivided whole. Yet, a party is not an individual in the sense of having an identity that makes it distinct from other beings in the way that would warrant a preferential treatment of itself over others. Hence, this notion of “party” is merely a conventional one, for purposes of convenient communication and execution of social action.

When an individualist or narcissist identifies with himself (that is, with a part or the whole of his body-mind continuum), he views this self-constructed, self-centred virtual reality of himself actually in terms of “I, me, mine” [7.6.1.2]. When this is taken to be more than mere convention—that is, as truly real (which it is not)—believing oneself as the object of special treatment, then, this is self-identity view, that fetters the mind to the world, preventing it from ever reaching the path of awakening.

7.6.1.2 A key Buddhist psychological term is *ahañ, kāra*, “I-making,”³ that is, our futile attempts at imagining some kind of unchanging, desirable “self” or entity out there (“I”) that we identify with and must have (“me”), or that we have caught a glimpse of and want to cling on to it (“mine”). So, the hand takes the shape of what it grasps: we end up seeing only in terms of “I, me, mine.” In fact, *ahañ, kāra* (“I making”) is part of our latent tendencies, *ahañ.-kāra, mamañ. kāra, mānānusaya* (the latent tendencies of “I-making,” “mine-making” and conceit).

¹ I depart from Hayes’ approach in his essay, where he only discusses 2 of the 3 fetters: self-identity view and rituals (1996:355).

² SD 24.10b (2.3.3).

³ **M 112/3**:32,34, 36,30 (SD 59.7); **S 18.21/2**:252,16+30 (SD 19.2a), **18.22/253**,9+29, **22.71/3**:80,6 (SD 80.11), **22.82/3**:103,11, **22.91/3**:136,3 (SD 19.2a), **22.124/3**:169,13+17+27; **A 3.32/1**:132,25 (SD 31.8a), **3.33/133**,25 (SD 31.8b), **6.106/3**:444,8 (SD 19.13), **7.49/4**:53,9+13 (SD 2.3).

These are **the 3 graspings** (*gaha*), that is, respectively those of craving, views and conceit.⁴ Self-deception consists of craving for what is unreal and impossible, nose-led by our views of “this is mine, this is the way I want it,” based on the false view of some abiding self with which we measure our self against others. **Conceit** leads to the self-identity view [7.6.2]; **views** lead to doubts [7.6.7]; and **craving** leads to ritualism or superstition [7.6.4]. These are the 3 toxic roots of self-deception.

7.6.1.3 How do the 3 toxic roots of self-deception work? How do the 3 fetters and the 3 graspings work to fetter us to self-identity view, rituals and vows, and doubts?

Hayes quotes the obvious example of **theft** (1992:355 f), which I will develop and relate to those teachings. Theft is a conduct that is warranted only by **identifying with “our” self**, the assumption that our own want or need for a piece of property is more important than the want or need of the being who is currently its rightful owner. We keep thinking about this, and when we see something desirable we seem to see or think about that desired object (**a ritual behaviour**); we can hear ourself saying, “By God, I must have that! I want that!” and so on. Then, we wonder if this were right: we have **doubts**. We swing back and forth between wanting and not sure of it. This too, becomes ritualistic behaviour which only reminds us of what we desire. Fettered to this cyclic habit and constant reinforcement, we steal it in the end. [7.6.7.1]

By committing the theft, we alienate the owner from his property, or deprive those whose life depends on it of what they rightfully deserve. Moreover, taking what is not rightfully ours, without the free consent of the rightful owner, we would, at best, lose their cooperation; at worst, we would provoke them into some form of unpleasant retaliation. Hence, *abuse always has two victims: the abusive party and the party abused*. Therefore, theft is an unwholesome method of taking care of our own interests. And since theft is motivated by a wrong belief in an individual identity, it is also an unwholesome act with bad karma.⁵

Now as we also saw earlier, in a Buddhist context, when an unwholesome set of beliefs and attitudes prevails over a wholesome set within the same party, that party can be said to be a victim of self-deception. Therefore, the attachment to personal identity is the key factor underlying self-deception.

7.6.2 Self-identity view: The status is not the state

7.6.2.1 Let us recap on the 3 fetters, beginning with the 1st fetter:

Self-identity view refers to the wrong belief that our body, mind, a part thereof, or both of them together, or something outside of them—*form* (the body), *feeling*, *perception*, *formations*, *consciousness*—is real and permanent, that it is the Self or Soul, that “I am, that’s

⁴ The 3 graspings are those of craving (*taṇhā, gaha*), of views (*diṭṭhi, gaha*), and of conceit (*māna, gaha*), SD 6.1 (5); see **Anatta Lakkhaṇa S** (S 22.59, 17+12 nn), SD 1.2, applied to the 5 aggregates (§17-21). These are at the very root of suffering.

⁵ Hayes: “Incidentally, this line of argument about theft can also be made *mutatis mutandis* about ownership of property, but it is considered rude to make this argument outside monastic circles.” (1992:356). For sexual self-deception, see W Doniger, ““Sex, lies and tall tales,” *Social Research* 63.3 fall 1996:663-699.

me, that's mine" [7.5.2.1]. Generally speaking, this is the belief that there is any such reality in any or all **the 5 aggregates** (*pañca-khandha*), or beyond them.

More particularly, the term refers to the belief that a "party" [7.5.1.3], that is really a complex of dissociable physical and psychological characteristics, in part or as a whole (holistic), has an existence of its own. The notion of "a self" (abiding entity) in the separate existence of the components of the complex whole should thus be discarded; so too, we should discard that the parts as a whole, or anything else, constitute our "self." In this sense, early Buddhism is anti-individualistic as well as anti-holistic.

Those who believe in some kind of abiding Soul depend on a **Creator-God belief** for its existence. Since Buddhism rejects the abiding Soul idea, there is no need of a God-idea too: it is thus atheistic. Since Buddhism rejects the idea that the 5 aggregates form a unity, singularity or universe, it is acosmic. Hence, to hold any view that is individualistic, holistic, theistic or cosmic stands in the way of true reality and real happiness.

7.6.2.2 Self-identity view often exists in ethnic Buddhism. **Ethnic Buddhists** generally do not search or study the suttas, but depend on their leaders and teachers who tend to feed and lead them with Buddhist teachings and traditions: they tend to be a herd of "followers." They are also mostly nominal Buddhists—"Buddhist" only in name but have neither feeling nor respect for it—who tend to worship or fear local deities, Hindu devas, and tutelary spirits. They even worship or fear people to whom they attribute some kind of status or power (with which "holiness" is equated).

Local Buddhists, especially the Chinese, are often industrious, but they also tend to be materialistic with simple needs and wishes centering around the family. They tend to see their children as investments than free individuals; hence, these children often never mature emotionally, or tend to replay this commodification of family members.

The material things they value in life tend to be seen as "blessings" rather than the wholesome fruit of honest labour. Hence, they usually have little understanding or inclination for keeping the precepts, but uphold Confucian values and social ethics of deferring to family, seniority and authority. Hence, they have no fear of lying, even proudly declaring they have to break a precept "for a good cause"! When faced with life's challenges, such as disease or death, they would betray beliefs in some kind of abiding Soul; their term for it is often related to the Pali *viññāṇa*, such as Sinhala අත්මය *ātma*, Burmese ဝိညာဉ် *winyarin*; Thai วิญญาณ *winyaan*. This is also true of local Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhists, who use the word 靈魂 *líng hún* for Soul.⁶

7.6.2.3 Self-identity view is when we identify with anything that gives us a (false) sense of permanence, certainty and plenty (that is, a self, craving and clinging)—in a word, *power*. For this reason, the Buddha warns us of the dangers in any desire for power by way of "**gain, honour, praise**" (*lābha, sakkāra, siloka*), as recorded in **the Bhindi Sutta** (S 17.33): "Bhikshus,

⁶ See SD 40b.4 The Soul of Chinese Buddhism.

dreadful are gain, honour and praise, bitter, vile, an obstruction to attaining the unsurpassed security from the yoke.”⁷

The self-identity view often manifests itself disguised as harmless, even desirable, qualities; but are really the symptoms of deeper, underlying problems that prevent us from seeing the true teaching and practising it. This view is an almighty “**meme**” (that is, “me, me,” a self-promoting replicator)⁸ that draws everything else to itself; for example:

- (1) In Prosperity Buddhism, the leaders identify with **wealth**, and so need to dress impressively and go around in chauffeured vehicles and hobnob with renowned scholars and world leaders. Secularized monks often keep their hair long and dress to look like laymen. Psychologically, this is to identify with a high social status they hope people will attribute them—which ironically means that they lack the state that inspires joyful renunciants to look and live simple Vinaya-based lives.
- (2) Most Buddhists (including Temple leaders) have the impression that any person of high status, even with a “Dr” title (in any discipline) is qualified to speak on Buddhism. This is one of the reasons that mislead monks and priests into believing that having an academic title gives them more respect and better support from others, especially the laity. In other words, they are identifying with status and taking the monastic life as a **career** instead of as a path of renunciation.
- (3) When monks and priests become titled and wealthy, they often feel **entitled** to set aside Vinaya, or simply identify with the world and indulge in worldliness (especially in having money): they claim to “touch money only with the hands, not the heart”! Sometimes, they teach Buddhism as if it were some scientific subject, but missing the spirit of the Buddha’s teaching. They probably identify more with science and modernism than with Buddhism.
- (4) In traditional and ethnic Buddhism, the ability to **chant Buddhist texts well** or know some Pali words may give others the impression that they know Dharma very well, or that they are “holy.” But the chanters do not follow the Vinaya or keep the precepts, and keep promoting superstitious beliefs and practices. This is where we identify with **the sound**,⁹ rather than looking up to Dharma training.
- (5) **Meditation** is not about how long we are able to sit, but how well we have become better as a practitioner inspired by the Dharma. We should not identify with the “power” of meditation, but rather with the right mindfulness (*sammā sati*).
- (6) Pious but gullible devotees often think that when monks or priests, especially with **titles** like “Chief High Priest,” etc, remain stoic and silent before them, they appear to be very calm and restrained, even may have “powers.” Yet, as a rule, these titled clerics do not hold any fortnightly Pātimokkha recital, nor keep to the Vinaya, nor meditate, nor

⁷ **Bhindi S** (S 17.33), SD 46.24. This whole para is stock, recurring in all the 43 suttas of **Lābha,sakkāra Saṃyutta** (S 17/2:225-243).

⁸ See **Memes**, SD 26.3.

⁹ On not identifying with externalities, see **Lakuṇṭaka Bhaddiya** (SD 3.14 (6)).

promote the suttas. Moreover, their “silent treatment” is a means of social control to keep **social distance** or assert “power distance” [4.5.1.5, 7.6.2.1] from those whom they see *nothing* worthwhile to identify with. Yet, they will be chatty and chummy with the “right” people. [4.5.2.2]

R804 Revisioning Buddhism 337

[an occasional re-look at the Buddha’s Example and Teachings]

Copyright by Tan Beng Sin 2023