

# Samyojana — The Last Seven Fetters

Bhante Bodhidhamma · DhammaBytes · 10:53

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*Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa.*

Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed Noble and the Fully Self-Enlightened One.

So these *samyojana*, these fetters, remember there were ten of them. I'll just run through them quickly again. The idea of self, the personality belief, this personality being me. Skeptical doubt, doubt in the Buddha's teaching. This is specific to doubt in the Buddha's teaching. Clinging to mere rules and rituals, that means thinking that rules and rituals are material, directly material to the process of liberation, as some practice in the East, believing, for instance, that standing in the Ganges gets rid of your karma, stuff like that. The fourth and fifth are sensual craving and ill will. And then the sixth and seventh are these *rūp a jhānas*, the absorptions, based on *samatha* meditation. Then there's restlessness and finally ignorance.

So the *sotāpanna*, the stream entrant, someone who's glimpsed *Nibbāna*, the Buddha talks about it like a flash of lightning, has got rid of the first three.

Now there's another lovely image that the Buddha gives us. So we had the image of the *sotāpanna*, like a flash of lightning sees everything, but it is only a flash. And the once-returner, the *sakadāgāmī*, is like a full starlit night. The non-returner, the *anāgāmī*, is like a full moon night and the *arahat* sees things clearly as the sun at midday. That's the image he gives.

But there's another rather interesting image which tells us about the effort. Ordinary people are swimming under the water, he says, and the stream entrant is one whose head keeps bobbing up out of the water. The once-returner is the person who can tread water. So the head's always above water. And the person who is swimming towards once-returner is actually making the effort to get to the island. It's a swim. And the *arahat* is somebody who's landed on the island.

So it gives you two points of real effort. The first one is coming out of that fundamental delusion into the first glimpse of *Nibbāna*. And the second one, the difficult one, is getting to a non-returner. And the reason for that is that you're leaving the sensual world.

So the once-returner is somebody who has attenuated their sensual desire and ill will. But it doesn't go at all, their aversion doesn't go at all until they get to the state of non-returner. And what that means is that that being no longer desires to come back to this realm of existence. There's nothing attracting them here. That's basically it. And that's why they're called non-returners.

Now, there's still an attachment, and the attachment is to what the mind itself can produce, which are these beautiful states that we call the *jhānas*, the absorptions. And they have to get over that attachment to

going up there. People who practice that, of course, the more you practice that, the more you tend to want to be there because, in a sense, you're in control of that. Once you become an adept at *jhāna* practice, you can enter it almost at will. So obviously, it's like having ice cream whenever you want it. There's no reason to come down for real ice cream when you can get it as a mental state. So that's one of the big problems of somebody who's an *anāgāmī*. They're already very easily accessible, blissful states.

And the last three things. I must have missed out conceit. Conceit, restlessness and ignorance. They're the last three. Now, conceit, of course, is the self. And remember, conceit is always that comparison. The self is always comparing itself to somebody else or to another way of living. So it's always, I'm better than, or I'm worse than, I'm not as good as, or the more subtle one, I'm equal to. And when you say I'm equal to somebody you're basically creating a group and the group is not as good as or worse than something else so even though it might come out as humility well I'm equal to you actually it's just another form of conceit. I can't remember who said it but all comparison is odious and in a sense that's what the self does it's always comparing itself to others.

And that conceit only goes with the ending of self. So that's basically someone who has achieved the full enlightenment, the full awakening. Restlessness, I think here, the way I see it anyway, is that it's basically a lot of the old habits that a person has, but they're now so attenuated, they're now so small, that they're only felt as a restlessness. So there's nothing particularly grave about such a person. By the time they get to an *anāgāmī*, really they're very, very refined. The heart has been cleared of all its major obstacles because that's what keeps us here.

So this sense of restlessness, I would presume, is very fine. And I'm thinking of people like the Mahāsi Sayadaw whom I met. Some say that he was fully awakened and others say that he only attained this non-returner. At least that's what I got from the monks, so I don't know which is true. But the thing about such a person is that you do feel that they have some extra virtue about them. In the case of the Mahāsi, the feeling of silence. And it affects you as soon as you walk into the present. Your own head goes, your thoughts actually begin to stop. It has that effect on you. So we're talking about somebody who has really refined their heart and clarified their understanding. And that's basically somebody who's moving towards being fully awakened.

So really that takes us to the end of these *samyojana*, these fetters. And I suppose the thing to say about them is that these are not under our control at all. They arise when the time is right. All we can do is practice to continuously purify the heart, to try and get rid of as many of these defilements as we can, or to work on them constantly, and through the *vipassanā* to create that situation where insight can arise.

But we don't have any direct control. We can't make this thing happen because this whole process is beyond the self. And that's one of these conundrums, one of these paradoxes, that you have to try, but you can't try and get something. So Zen puts it in that paradoxical way of the effortless effort. So as soon as your effort in meditation is to try and attain one of these fruits, you're just creating an effort which is just

knocking on the wrong door. It just ain't going to open because these things cannot be attained by an act of will coming from the self. And it's only when you drop that completely that insights arise, these *vipassanā* insights arise.

So that's why the Buddha's always insistent that we place the attention on the qualities of impermanence, of seeing how we're creating suffering for ourselves, and of seeing how we don't have control. That's the *anattā* doctrine, the not-self doctrine. And it's looking at, as things arise in this present moment, from one of those three vantage points, that begins to liberate this *paññā*, this wisdom that we have within us, this active, intuitive intelligence, intuitive awareness. And that's what does the job. That's what does the job. That's where the insights come.

So, what the Buddha here has done by giving us these fetters, is he shows us how our delusion about the self, about how our defilements are all linked into the path, so that you can't have a growth of wisdom without the growth of virtue. They run parallel to each other. And that's basically what the *samyojana* are pointing to.

So I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you be liberated from all the fetters sooner rather than later.

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