

Self-esteem

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Conceit is one of the last fetters to be let go. Only arahants are freed from those last five fetters. But still even though they're the last to be let go, it doesn't mean we shouldn't work at them now.

The Buddha talks about conceit in two places. In one, he lays out nine kinds of conceit, basically where you compare yourself with other people.

In the first set of three, you actually are better than the other person and you think you're better or you think you're worse or you think you're equal.

In the next set, you're actually equal to the other person and you think you're better or you think you're worse or you think you're equal. In other words, even when you're right about the relative level, it's still conceit.

In the last three, you're actually worse than the other person and you think you're better or you think you're worse or you think you're equal. Here again, even when your comparison is correct, it's still conceit.

Ajaan Maha Boowa calls these forms of conceit the fangs of unawareness. They bite when, for some reason you can't focus solely on what you're doing and the results of your actions, you start to focus on other people and compare yourself with them. It's something we all do. But the question is, "What do we get out of it?"

If we compare ourselves in the sense of seeing something that they do that we admire and we want to develop that quality within ourselves, then it's a useful kind of conceit. Or if we see something that they do that we realize is not a good thing, we turn around and look inside ourselves to see if we have that same unskillful quality: Again that's a good use for conceit.

But most of us don't use it that way. We find other ways of using it and we can get eaten up by the way we compare ourselves with other people. And so, as with any defilement, the best way to look at this is to see: What do you gain by making those comparisons? There may be a little sense of satisfaction you get from making the comparisons but it's pretty paltry, and it's really not worth all the effort that goes into it.

So when you see that happening in the mind, recognize it for what it is: a fetter. It ties you down, keeps you coming back. We don't have to think about coming back through many lifetimes—even right here it just keeps you coming back to the same old mind-state that somehow tries to find some satisfaction out of making comparisons, hoping against hope that you'll find yourself better than

other people.

If you look a little bit deeper, you realize that it comes down to the question of self-esteem. If your self-esteem has to depend on comparing yourself with other people, it's pretty weak. There's something lacking in the practice. If the practice were really satisfactory, you wouldn't have to worry about other people. This is one of the reasons why only arahants can let go of this kind of conceit, because they're the only people whose practice has been totally satisfactory.

But still, you can work at it in stages. Focus on getting the mind to settle down. Trying to develop a real sense of satisfaction being settled down. Learn which parts of the body respond best to your breath work. For most people, it's the area right down the middle of the torso. That's a sensitive area of the body that tends to get abused in terms of the energy flow of the body. So turn around and give it what it needs. Because it's sensitive, it develops a sense of dis-ease very easily, but it can also be gratified. And when it's really gratified, it's *really* gratified. So work on that.

In other words, try to get a sense of satisfaction in the practice: either satisfaction in concentration, or satisfaction in your ability to spot the defilements in the mind and take them on. That way, you don't have to worry about what happens to other people or where they are in the practice compared to you.

If you're going to look at people outside, look at them as mirrors. As I said earlier, if you see something good that they've got, try to emulate that quality in your own behavior. If you see that they do something that really looks ugly, look at it as a mirror: Do you do that same thing? Well, now you see how it looks.

Beyond that, other people shouldn't play that much of a role in our practice, because the practice is purely an internal matter. As Ajaan Lee once said, it's your own business where you are in the practice. It's nobody else's business. If your behavior is a burden on them, that makes it other people's business. But the less burdensome your behavior is, then it becomes less and less and less anybody else's business—until finally you reach the deathless. That's totally your own business. Nobody else has to know. They just sense it in that you're less of a burden on them.

Basic to those nine kinds of conceit is another one the Buddha talks about: the simple conceit "I am." This, he says, lies at the basis of all kinds of trouble. The thought, "I am the thinker," he says, is the root of all mental proliferation, all the creation of issues that, as soon as they get set into motion, turn around and then it assail us. In other words, we beat ourselves up with this idea of "I'm the one who's thinking." There's this "I am" in there that's doing all this and has desires that need to be fed. That's the ultimate root of all conceit.

So we have to chip away at it and try to find: Exactly what are you identifying

this “I” with? For most of us, it comes down to the Wizard of Oz inside, the one behind the curtain who’s pulling all the strings inside, making this decision, making that decision.

If you look at it carefully, though, you realize that there’s not just one “I am” in there. There are lots of little “I ams.” This is one of the reasons why training the mind is so difficult. You’ve got one “I” under control and another one will pop up. Or one of them gets trained and another one forgets what it was trained in.

So wherever you see a sense of identification that’s causing stress, learn how to work at it. See exactly what it’s made out of. And you realize it’s made out of stuff that you really can’t say exists or doesn’t exist. These are processes that come and go. This helps to loosen up a lot of this sense of the “I am.”

They say that even non-returners continue to have a sense of “I am,” even when it gets pried away from the five khandhas. There’s a sense of “I am” that still surrounds them, like the lingering scent of a detergent surrounding a cloth that’s been washed.

Ultimately, though, the attainment of arahatship cuts through that as well. This doesn’t mean that arahants don’t have a sense of “I.” They know how to function. They know the difference between their bodies and other people’s bodies, their things and other people’s things. Simply they don’t have the “am” behind it, the idea that there is something really existing there that corresponds to that particular word. They see it as a function, a strategy. They use it when it’s useful and they drop it when it’s not.

There’s a sutta where Sariputta starts out his discussion of right view with that distinction: between what’s skillful and what’s not. In his explanation, this is the distinction that goes all the way through the path, underlying everything else.

The sense of “I” with which we start out, and which is so strong and so troublesome and seems to be so real and basic to our experience, turns out to be just a series of strategies. A lot of the meditation is learning how to sort out which ones are skillful, which ones are not. When you see it just as a bunch of strategies, then the question of comparing your self to other people’s selves makes no sense at all. What you want to do is compare strategies to other strategies, to figure out which ones are the most appropriate for right here, right now. When you can look at your meditation in that light, then all these other issues of comparison fall by the wayside.

And the sense of self-esteem you need in order to keep going on the practice gets fed by your ability on the one hand to recognize an unskillful strategy for what it is; then, two, the ability to imagine a more skillful one to replace it; and then, three, actually using that skillful strategy and getting the right results.

That's where self-esteem is useful. It doesn't need to have any relation to other people at all, aside from not being too conceited to go and ask for advice when you need it. Otherwise, it's a purely internal matter.