

Self-View, Afflictions, and Five Aggregates

The so-called self-view (misconception about self) consists of taking the five aggregates collectively or individually as a true eternal entity, i.e., holding the wrong view that the “five aggregates self” is truly everlasting.

There are various types of self-view that can be broadly classified into two categories based on whether they are associated with the body or with the mind. For example, when a kid told the parents, “Someone hit me,” he was obviously taking the physical body as the “self,” thinking that it was truly enduring. Such is an example of taking the physical body as the true “self.” On the other hand, if one takes feelings or imaginings as true existence, one is taking the mental states as the true “self.”

We have been continually taught and have continually learned the differences between others and ourselves since we were born. The older we become, the more we have learnt, the more distinctions have been ingrained in our minds, and, therefore, as time goes by, self-view becomes entrenched deeper and deeper in our consciousnesses.

A practitioner will not be able to eliminate self-view if he is not on the right path of cultivation. For example, there is a popular saying about practice and cultivation: “The purpose of practice is to eliminate suffering and gain happiness.” Let us take a more in-depth look at what has been implied in such a statement. Who stops the suffering? Who gains happiness? Obviously, there must be a subject, i.e., an “I” who stops suffering or gains happiness. Therefore, the “self” has always been behind the scenes to serve as the fundamental true entity that has been clung to by “me” to achieve “my” goals. Those who are not aware of the fallacy of such a saying and therefore take the “self” as true existence are practitioners on the wrong path.

What is the connection between self-view and worldly afflictions? The worldly afflictions are generally results of the five desires, which refer to the desires for wealth, form, fame, food, and sleep. Wealth refers to the money and treasures that one possesses. Form refers to physical or material objects—though it typically refers to sexual lust. Fame refers to one’s reputation and status. Food refers to eating and drinking. Sleep refers to actual rest. Any deprivation of the five desires will elicit afflictions.

Ordinary people usually believe that as long as one works hard to make enough money to satisfy all the above five desires, one will be able to stay away from afflictions. It might work to a certain extent; however, it is definitely not the fundamental approach to eliminating afflictions. To fundamentally get rid of these afflictions, one must know their root cause. In reality, the sense or feeling of such deprivations is derived from the illusion of the existence of a “self”. Whoever takes the “self” as the ultimate worldly existence will inevitably end up with the feeling of deficiencies and deprivation, which in turn leads to the arising of afflictions. Therefore, to eliminate afflictions, one must first eliminate self-view.

At a deeper level, one needs to eliminate not only self-view but self-attachment as well, in order to eradicate afflictions. “Attachment” means “clinging to” something, sensation and perception in particular, and such attachment is so strong that it turns into a habitual way of thinking and acting. One subconsciously holds the “self” as a truly enduring entity—this is called “self-attachment”. Therefore, one should change habitual actions or thoughts when they arise while encountering circumstances that normally elicit those actions or thoughts. Only by doing this continuously and relentlessly will one be able to gradually and finally eliminate the self-attachment.

How can one eliminate self-view then? The best way to eliminate self-view is to follow Buddha’s teaching of observing and contemplating the illusory nature of the idea of “self” that is erroneously derived from treating the five aggregates as truly enduring. The five aggregates are the form, sensation, perception, formation, and consciousness aggregates. The form aggregate refers to our physical body; the sensation aggregate refers to our feelings and emotions; the perception aggregate usually refers to the function of knowing; the formation aggregate refers to the function of judgment, contemplation and action; and the consciousness aggregate includes the six consciousnesses and their corresponding functions. Among the five aggregates, the latter four belong to the mental domain, within which the sensation, perception, and formation aggregates are derived from the discerning function of the consciousness aggregate. In other words, when we sense, perceive, conceive, decide, and take action, there must exist the function of discernment about the circumstances (the surrounding situation behind the scenes) of the consciousness. Therefore, the sensation, perception, and formation aggregates must rely on the consciousness aggregate to operate.

The afflictions which originate from the five desires for wealth, form, fame, food, and sleep can all be traced back to the attachment to the five aggregates. For example,

ordinary people wish to stay young forever and have a long life; this is attachment to the form aggregate. Through observation and contemplation, everyone will realize that staying young and living forever is impossible. When one is being judged, commented on, or criticized, various feelings pertaining to sensation will arise; these belong to the sensation aggregate. Observation and contemplation will show that all the feelings and sensations are transient, and will eventually fade away. After perceiving the comments or criticism, all sorts of thoughts, ideas, and imaginings will be provoked like waves in the ocean; such is the formation aggregate. Through observation and contemplation, one will notice that all these mental formations will not last forever. The consciousness aggregate is the foundation for the sensation, perception, and formation aggregates. Therefore, attachment to the sensation, perception, and formation aggregates is also attachment to the consciousness aggregate. Through observation and contemplation, one will notice that consciousness flickers, is transient, and will terminate and cease to exist in the five states of mental inactivity: the states of dreamless sleep, syncope, the absorption of non-perception, the absorption of cessation, and thorough death. Such is the illusory nature of the five aggregates.

It is important to know that eradication of self-view after having observed and contemplated the illusory nature of the five aggregates does not mean or lead to nihilism. Ordinary people always fall into either eternalism or nihilism while concocting the idea of “self.” Eternalism treats the five aggregates, individually or collectively, as everlasting entities, whereas nihilism purports that there is no connection among the past, present, and future lives and there is nothing left after death. To a nihilist, there is no cause and effect, and once a person dies, everything vanishes. Neither eternalism nor nihilism can withstand scrutiny. From the perspective of the motivations for cultivation, we are willing to practice today because we believe that there are connections among the past, present, and future lives, and that the merits and virtues accumulated in the cultivation in every lifetime will not be in vain, and there will be results to be harvested. If all is in vain, then all the cultivation becomes futile.

In conclusion, elimination of afflictions should start with elimination of self-view. To eliminate self-view, one must observe and contemplate the illusory nature and the deception of the five aggregates. Once the illusory nature of the five aggregates is accurately observed and contemplated, the desires as well as attachments to the mundane world will subside and no longer bind one to the phenomena associated with the six sense objects. One shall eventually achieve the benefits from the merits as well as virtues derived from liberation.