

# Content of the Three Fetters

What are the three fetters? The three fetters are actually three kinds of afflictions. To ordinary people, “affliction” is having something to worry about in the mind that makes one suffer; such mental activity that causes one’s vexations is considered an affliction. However, according to the Path to Liberation of the Sound-hearer, any mental activity that prevents one from transcending the cycle of birth and death in the three realms is an affliction. Even the joyful mental activity, as long as it hinders one’s liberation and one’s transcending from the cycle of birth and death in the three realms, is considered an affliction. Then, what are the mental activities that will prevent one from transcending the cycle of birth and death? There are six primary afflictions: greed, aversion, delusion, conceit, skeptical doubt, and wrong views. These six primary afflictions are the afflictions that need to be eliminated in the Sound-hearer Bodhi.

What is greed? Greed is present when one is subdued by adorable states. For example, when one encounters money, sex, fame, food, and sleep or the enjoyable states of the five desires—delightful visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile stimuli—and does not have the ability to reject these temptations or say ‘no’ to them, one is said to have possessed a mental activity called greed.

Aversion refers to the arising of various malevolent mental activities when bound by non-adorable states. Such mental activity is aversion.

Delusion is ignorance, which also means the lack of wisdom. However, according to the Path to Liberation of the Sound-hearer, delusion refers to the lack of wisdom in eliminating afflictions. From the view point of the Path of Liberation, an arhat is said to have eradicated the aversion fetter when he has fully acquired the ten kinds of wisdom in eliminating afflictions. However, an arhat has yet to eliminate the ignorance of the Path to Buddhahood, and, therefore, has not completely eliminated delusion.

Conceit is despising other and boasting oneself when comparing oneself with others. However, there is one other type of conceit that an arhat must eliminate, i.e., egotism, conception of I—taking one of the five aggregates as the everlasting self, and then feeling joy in the existence of the five aggregates in the three realms. Such an egotism will hinder one from transcending birth and death in the three realms.

The definition of skepticism is very broad. It can be doubt about the mundane phenomena, skepticism about the transmundane world, and skeptical doubt about the mundane as well as transmundane dharmas. In the Path to Liberation of the Sound-hearer, skepticism only refers to the skeptical doubt about the Three-Jewels and doubt about the teaching on self-view.

There are five kinds of wrong view: (1) Misconception about self—treating one of the five aggregates to be the everlasting self. (2) Extreme views—falling into either extreme of annihilationism or eternalism. Treating one of the five aggregates to be the enduring self falls into the extreme view of eternalism while taking the neither-arising-nor-ceasing dharma as an arising-and-ceasing dharma is annihilationism; e.g., taking the everlasting eighth consciousness as an arising-and-ceasing dharma falls into the extreme view of annihilationism. (3) Fallacious views—all incorrect point of views. For example, believing that one can become an arhat without having eliminated the afflictions abandoned through vision or the afflictions abandoned through cultivation is a fallacious view. Believing that one who performs evil acts will not lead to evil fruitions is another form of fallacious views. (4) Attachment to rites and rituals, clinging to faulty disciplinary codes and modes of conduct—misconceptions about what constitutes real liberation and, as a result, various precepts that are unrelated to the truth are established and adopted to attempt to attain liberation is a form of attachment to rites and rituals. (5) Clinging to wrong views—one has an incorrect view but does not know it is erroneous and insists that: “my opinion is the most supreme and others’ are inferior” is an example of clinging to wrong views.

The above are the six fundamental afflictions while all other afflictions are derived from them.

Bonds and fetters are actually two characteristics of afflictions. When one’s mind is associated with afflictions, it is bound and shackled and cannot carry out wholesome acts as wished. What are the wholesome deeds in the Sound-hearer Bodhi? The acts that are absent of greed, aversion, and delusion are wholesome deeds. For example, one cannot display the mental acts of non-greed if one’s mind is attached to the attractive and adorable states when faced with the states of the five desires. Likewise, acts associated with the absence of aversion, delusion, conceit, skepticism and wrong views are all wholesome acts in the Sound-hearer Bodhi. In terms of “bond”, there is another explanation—to bind sentient beings up in the three realms and prevent them from transcending the cycle of birth and death. Such is also a characteristic of bonds.

Fetters refer to the ability of mixing or combining with whatever that generates sufferings or binding together various sufferings. So, what kinds of sufferings can fetters mix and combine with? There are eight kinds of sufferings: sufferings from birth, aging, illness, death, not getting what one wants, associated with those one hates, separating from what one loves, and the flourishing of the five aggregates. Afflictions can combine all these eight sufferings together.

The first of the three fetters is the self-view, which refers to mistaking one of the five aggregates as the real dharma—the everlasting self.

The second fetter is clinging to faulty disciplinary codes and modes of conduct—misconception about precepts—not knowing what the state of true liberation is and, hence, various precepts that are unrelated to the truth are established in hope of achieving liberation by complying with such precepts. For example, a non-Buddhist with heavenly-eye saw a dead fish taking rebirth in heaven and thought: “the fish took rebirth in heaven after death because it spent all days in water.” He misconstrued rebirth in heaven as true liberation and established the water precept that demanded one to soak in water for hours every day. There are some who only sit, do not lay down and never lay down to sleep; such ascetic practice will never lead to true liberation. And there are others who believe that one can attain true liberation through just practicing meditation till they achieve the state of abiding in a numinous awareness without any distracting thoughts. All the above are examples of misconstruing various precepts and believing that they can lead to true liberation; they all fall into the attachment to misconception of rites and rituals.

The third fetter is skepticism. Skepticism in the Path to Liberation of the Sound-hearer refers to the doubt about the Three-Jewels and the doubt about the teaching of misconception about self. Some examples of skepticism are doubt about the existence of the Buddha—whether the Buddha exists in the world everlastingly, doubt about the Dharma—whether the Buddha Dharma can be realized, doubt about whether one can eliminate the self-view, and doubt about whether one can accomplish the Path to Arhatship, etc.

These fetters of three wrong views can bind all humans, heavenly beings, heavenly kings, etc., to the transmigration in the three realms and restrain them from transcending birth and death. Due to their ability to shackle and bind, the three fetters are called the three fetters that bind and shackle.