

How to Eradicate the Three Fetters?

How can Buddhist practitioners eliminate the three fetters (the three major factors that bind us to the incessant birth and death in the three realms) and attain the first fruition (the first grade of liberation)? To answer the question, we need to first understand that there are four grades of realization, i.e., the first to the fourth fruitions in the Sound-hearer Bodhi. A person who has attained the first fruition is a stream-enterer (*srotaāpanna*) who has eliminated the three fetters and will never fall into the three unfortunate destinations of rebirth (spheres of animals, hungry ghosts, and hells). A person who has attained the second fruition is a once-returner (*sakṛdāgāmin*) who will only be reborn into the human world just once after having been born in the heavenly realm, hence, the name “once-returner”. A person who has attained the third fruition is a non-returner (*anāgāmin*) who can enter nirvana in the intermediary stage of existence between death and rebirth after this life or after having been born in the heavens of the form realm or above. A non-returner will never be reborn into the human world again before being liberated from the cycle of birth and death in the three realms. An arhat is a person who has attained the fourth fruition and will enter remainderless nirvana after death, i.e., one who has transcended the cycle of birth and death in the three realms forever.

The Buddha taught that a person who has eliminated the three fetters is one who has attained the first fruition of *srotaāpanna*, also called “one who has seen the Path.” What does it mean to have seen the Path? Let us take climbing a mountain as an example. Whoever wants to climb a mountain must first find the entrance; otherwise he will never reach the destination but only wonder around incessantly. Similarly, to tread the Path of Liberation, one must first attain the first fruition, analogous to having found the entrance of the Path to Liberation for the Sound-hearer. There may be several trails or paths leading to a mountaintop, but there is only one path that will lead to the ultimate liberation of the Sound-hearer. Having eradicated the three fetters means that one has found and arrived at the entrance of the Path to Liberation.

One who cultivates and practices the Sound-hearer Path to Liberation must first establish strong faith before being able to find and arrive at the entrance (i.e., the first fruition of *srotaāpanna*) of the Path to Liberation. Even prior to that, one must be certain that the path of Sound-hearer Bodhi is indeed the path that one wants to travel. One must also understand that the arhat fruition is the ultimate fruition on the Path to Liberation and having attained the arhat fruition will ensure that one will enter

remainderless nirvana after death and never be reborn into the three realms. One must also know that there are the second and third fruitions to be attained between the first and last, and one will be able to transcend the cycle of birth and death in the three realms upon arriving at the end of the path. One will not walk to the trailhead of the mountain unless one has established a strong and firmed faith that the trail will eventually lead to the top. One who has eradicated the three fetters will have completely understood the content of the Sound-hearer Path to Liberation and will no longer have any doubt about its truthfulness.

The Buddha said that one who has eliminated the three fetters (*a srotaāpanna*) will never fall into the three unfortunate destinations of rebirth; even the dullest one will transcend the cycle of birth and death in the three realms forever after a maximum of seven rounds of rebirth between the human and heaven realms. How long does it take to accomplish such undertaking? Among the heaven realms, the lifespan in the Heaven of the Four Kings is the shortest. One day in the Heaven of the Four Kings is equivalent to fifty years on Earth. In the eyes of celestial beings in the Heaven of the Four Kings, a centenarian on Earth lives for only two days in heaven's time. A dullest *srotaāpanna*, who has eliminated the three fetters, will ascend to the heavens seven times and return to Earth seven times. Suppose he lives for a hundred years for each of his seven lives on Earth; his total lifespan on Earth is about fourteen days in the Heaven of the Four Kings, i.e., the total lifespan of taking rebirth in the human realm seven times is equivalent to only fourteen days in the Heaven of the Four Kings.

How long is the lifespan of celestial beings in the Heaven of the Four Kings? Their lifespan is five hundred heaven's years. Since one day in the Heaven of the Four Kings is equivalent to fifty Earth's years. Their lifespan is about 9 million Earth's years. That means if one lives for a hundred year in the human realm in a single round trip between the human and heaven realms, the time one spends in the human realm is only about one ninety-thousandths of the life of a celestial being in the Heaven of the Four Kings. Hence, before one is able to transcend the cycle of birth and death in the three realms, the time one stays in the human realm is extremely short in relation to the time spent staying in heavens living a pleasurable life. Why would anyone forgo such an attractive future? Therefore, one shall definitely strive to eradicate the three fetters.

On the other hand, what are the bad consequences of falling into the three unfortunate destinations? There is nothing but suffering! An animal is not certain where the next meal will be. This is suffering indeed. Hungry ghosts have never had enough to

eat and suffer more severe hunger than animals, and they are hence called hungry ghosts. The worst destiny with the most severe suffering is the Uninterrupted Hell. Sentient beings in the Uninterrupted Hell experience suffering in every part of their bodies with no cessation, and they will not be able to kill themselves or leave the Uninterrupted Hell before having completed their karmic retributions. To avoid falling into the three unfortunate destinations is another incentive for one to strive to eliminate the three fetters.

The three fetters are self-view, misconceptions about precepts, and skepticism about true reality. How can one eliminate the three fetters? First of all, one must believe in the Three Jewels. One must believe in the first jewel, the Buddha, believing that a Buddha possesses three-bodies—an everlasting dharma-body, a reward-body which enables Him to be delivering Dharma in *Akaniṣṭha* Heaven (the highest heaven of the form-realm), and tens of millions of the emanation-bodies that are saving sentient beings in the *Sahā* and other worlds. Therefore, the Buddha did not vanish into nihilistic emptiness when He entered into nirvana in the human world. One must believe that a Buddha has the virtues of the ten powers, four fearlessnesses, eighteen unique qualities, and ten epithets.

Next, one must have faith in the Dharma, the second jewel, believing that one can actually realize the fruitions if one follows exactly the teaching of the Buddhadharma. Many people claim that they are learning and practicing the Buddhadharma, but they do not really trust that the Buddhadharma can be realized. These people can be divided into two groups. Those in the first group regard the practice of the Buddhadharma as simply doing good deeds. They usually do not read the sutras, do not explore the contents of sutras, and do not inquire into why the Buddha was born and manifested on Earth. If learning and practicing the Buddhadharma was simply doing good deeds, then Christianity and other religions that teach people to do good deeds would also be Buddhism. This wrong view will never be corrected if this group of people are not taught that Buddhadharma can be practiced and realized.

Those in the second group study the Buddhadharma as a system of philosophical thought. These people can never realize any of the fruitions. In their mind, the three Jewels of Buddha, Dharma, and sangha are not treasures. They regard the Buddha as just a person who had authored and preached a set of philosophical theory called the Buddhadharma and there is not much difference between the Buddha and Confucius or Mencius, and hence the Buddha is not a jewel. They think that the Dharma is just a set of philosophical thoughts and not something that can actually be realized; so the Dharma to

them is not a treasure. As to the sanga, since they do not think that the Dharma can be realized, so they do not think that anybody can realize the fruitions, and so the sanga is not a treasure either. For these people, there are no Three Jewels to take refuge in or to pay homage to. Those who take refuge in the Three Jewels but do not believe that the Buddhadharma can be realized cannot be considered as the disciples of Three Jewels. Lastly, one must believe in the sanga, believing that one can realize the fruitions through the practice of the Buddhadharma taught by the jewel of sanga and eventually achieve the virtue possessed by the jewel of sanga. When one has faith and confidence in the Three Jewels, one is equipped with the conditions to eliminate the three fetters.

To eliminate the three fetters, one must first eliminate the first of the three fetters—self-view. Once the illusory nature of the five-aggregates is ascertained, one will have truly eliminated self-view.

Before assuring the illusory nature of the five-aggregates, however, one must understand the Noble Truth of Suffering in the Four Noble Truths. The Truth of Suffering means that one suffers due to the existence of the five-aggregates. When practicing the Path of Liberation of the Sound-hearer, the end of suffering is the elimination of the five-aggregates—the state of extinction of suffering. There is one question though. If the five-aggregates are illusory, will it not become nihilistic after having eliminated oneself? Hence, one must trust that there exists an everlasting and never ceasing dharma—the eighth consciousness. If one has not yet realized the eighth consciousness, one will need to believe that it does exist and is everlasting so that one has the will and courage to practice and to contemplate and observe that one's own five-aggregates are indeed illusory. Once one has ascertained that the five-aggregates are illusory, one's self-view will be eliminated.

Next, let us examine the second of the three fetters—misconceptions about the precepts, which refers to the misconception that liberation can be attained by following misconstrued and irrelevant precepts. When one has realized and understood the true state of liberation, one will no longer believe in any precept that cannot lead to liberation. One will have then eliminated the misconceptions about the precepts.

Lastly, one should examine the last of the three fetters—skepticism about true reality. After one has eliminated self-view, one can easily tell whether any master has already eliminated self-view simply by looking at one paragraph or a sentence from his

writing. When the skepticism about true reality is eliminated, all the three fetters are then fully eliminated. One has then become a saint with the first fruition.

What has been explained above is the approach to eliminate the three fetters. May you attain the first fruition of Sound-hearer and achieve the virtues of liberation through the elimination of the three fetters!

