

The Stream Entry of Ajahn Chah

- By Ajahn Nyanamoli Thero

(An edited transcript based on talk no.70hh- The stream entry of Ajahn Chah, in which the themes of Right view; mundane right view; the first three fetters - wrong grasp of virtue and duty, doubt, and self-view; and what constitutes a *sotapanna*, are described.)

- **On Views**

"The practice of Dhamma goes against our habits, the truth goes against our desires, so there is difficulty in the practice. Some things which we understand as wrong may be right, while the things we take to be right may be wrong. Why is this? Because our minds are in darkness, we don't clearly see the Truth. We don't really know anything and so are fooled by people's lies. They point out what is right as being wrong and we believe it; that which is wrong, they say is right, and we believe that. This is because we are not yet our own masters. Our moods lie to us constantly. We shouldn't take this mind and its opinions as our guide, because it doesn't know the truth." - [Ajahn Chah, 'Right View, the place of coolness'](#)

Nm: That is a good example of how differently you could take what he just said. As he said, obviously you can't trust your moods; the starting point is that you don't have a right reference point to know right as right, or wrong as wrong. But many people would use this information to justify dismissing everything, and not committing to anything, because 'everything is not sure.' as sometimes Ajahn Chah would say.

If you take that last sentence for example: 'We shouldn't take this mind and its opinions to be our guide,' you can take that to mean: 'Ah-hah! So I shouldn't have any views!' Failing to see that in saying so, that is in itself the view that you hold onto, 'I will not commit to any view'.

"Master Gotama, this is my doctrine and view: "Nothing is my preference."

"Aggivessana, do you not prefer the view "Nothing is my preference"? "- [MN 74](#)

Yes, you should not commit to any view so that *you can keep looking for the right view*. But you should not refuse to commit to any view as a goal in itself.

Some people think that they can find a way out of views by just refusing to commit to any views, and that is quite a popular belief. They might quote people like Ajahn Chah to justify this, but you can see what a misquote that would be because he does not say that. He says that your starting point is that you don't know right as right and wrong as wrong - that is the *puthujjana's* necessary starting point. What you need to do from that starting point is to make the effort to clarify things for yourself - not make an effort to refuse to commit to anything because everything is seen as risky and dangerous.

Continuation of the Ajahn Chah passage: *"Some people don't want to listen to others at all, but this is not the way of a man of wisdom."*

Nm: You really want to take that seriously. People might think 'Oh sure, I have no problem listening to others.' But ask yourself: can I be mentally disturbed by hearing someone else's view? For example, if you have an idea of what the practice of Dhamma is, and now somebody challenges this; or simply has a different view to yours - ask

yourself: "Would I be affected by that? Am I threatened, do I feel a need to defend myself, or even justify myself - to myself? I might not necessarily get into an argument with someone, but am I personally affected by the opposing view, whether by doubt, unrest, or similar?"

If the answer is yes, that is what that means: you don't want to hear others, which is why you are not wise nor developing wisdom. There is absolutely no reason to be affected by anything, let alone for someone else's view to give rise to emotion in you. There is no justification for it. You do not learn by going and debating with everyone, you learn by understanding right as right, wrong as wrong. But if you keep protecting whatever you have, out of fear of perhaps being wrong, it means you will *never* know wrong as wrong and right as right, because you are not committing to learning it.

Continuation of passage: *"A wise man listens to everything. One who listens to Dhamma must listen just the same, whether he likes it or not, and not blindly believe or disbelieve. He must stay at the half-way mark, the middle point, and not be heedless. He just listens and then contemplates and sees the cause and effect for himself before he believes what he hears."*

Nm: He listens and he understands what that thing is saying, understands the meaning of it. That is exactly how he can know whether it is right or not, whether it is according to the Dhamma or not. And how can you understand the meaning of something if you never make the effort to understand it?

Continuation of passage: *"Even if the teacher speaks the truth, don't just believe it, because you don't yet know the truth of it for yourself."*

Nm: You need to understand it for yourself. Not "see it for yourself" in the sense of having some kind of mystical experience - no you need to *understand* it. The aim is not to have some completely inexpressible, idiosyncratic experience that nobody can relate to but somehow "it's my truth". That is simply a mystical experience, that's the only "truth" of it, while what needs to be understood is the universal nature of *all* experience that applies to all beings, consisting of the five aggregates.

That is why that understanding is what frees you, and everyone can relate to it, always. The Dhamma doesn't change, in the sense that the universal principles remain the same regardless of whether the path is revealed or not. But it cannot be revealed to you if you are not making an effort to discern it; it cannot occur accidentally or spontaneously. An experience that you can't explain or put in words may indeed be real, as such: a real mystical experience. But if you can't put it into words, you have not understood it.

"That bhikkhu is liberated by directly knowing this: the extent of designation and the extent of the way for designation; the extent of language and the extent of the way for language; the extent of description and the extent of the way for description; the extent of wisdom and the extent of the sphere for wisdom, the extent of the round and the extent to which the round turns. To say of a bhikkhu who is liberated by directly knowing this that he holds the view "One does not know and does not see" - that would not be proper." - [DN 15](#)

Continuation of passage: *"Most of us have the wrong view. It's just like a maggot - a maggot's living place is filthy, its food is filthy...but they suit the maggot. If you take a stick and brush it away from its lump of dung, it'll struggle to crawl back in. It's the same when the teacher teaches us to see rightly. We resist, it makes us feel uneasy. We run back to our 'lump of dung' because that's where we feel at home. We're all like this. If we don't see the harmful consequences of all our wrong views then we can't leave them, the practice is difficult. So we should listen. There's nothing else to the practice."*

Nm: You should listen to one who knows what he is talking about. You should not just listen to anybody appointed a teacher by an institution or tradition. If you have faith, based on discernment and wisdom, that the person you are listening to is correct - then yes, you should listen, and make the effort to practice.

You can also interpret what Ajahn Chah said there as referring to sense restraint, and think that simply by practicing restraint you are going against the grain, against your habits. But there he is really talking about the views, not only sense restraint; that's an important difference. How many people actively challenge their own existential views, invite on existential doubt in order to uproot it? Not many. Many people can live a restrained life, but that does not differentiate a person from a restrained householder: only the right view does. For the right view, being a renunciate is not enough; you must challenge your views.

Q: When you say 'if you don't have right view, you don't know' - this might give the impression that since we don't know, we can't really claim to understand anything by ourselves and we are probably in the wrong, so should therefore have to simply have faith in somebody else who says they have the right view.

Nm: Being aware that you do not have the right view does not justify you following someone blindly, regardless if that person has the right view or not. "Challenging your views" does not equate to just doing what a teacher tells you to do, without reading the suttas, without thinking for yourself. Even if that teacher is himself an *arahant*, that is not enough for you to become one. You cannot just "do what he tells you to do" with the expectation that this will automatically give results.

So even if it is your own teacher and somebody who does know what they are talking about, you must investigate that. (You must take responsibility for the views that you hold, regardless of how you have acquired them or from whom you have heard them)

I can give you verbatim instruction and you can go through exactly the same motions as I do, but if your attitude is one of not accepting responsibility, nothing will work because there is no Dhamma there! You going through these motions will be literally just *motions*, without Dhamma.

"Do not go by the thought 'This ascetic is our teacher.'" - [AN 3.65](#)

Continuation of passage: *"If we have Right View, wherever we go we are content. I have practised and seen this already. These days there are many monks, novices and lay people coming to see me. If I still didn't know, if I still had the wrong view, I'd be dead by now! The right abiding place for monks, the place of coolness, it's just Right View itself. We shouldn't look for anything else.*

Nm: There is no safe ground lower than the Right view.

That is why I keep insisting on this point with people who say that they don't have the Right view, but yet think that they are on the right track with their practice. You can only know that if you have the Right view. Until you have the Right view you shouldn't think you are on the right track, because it will make you complacent to that extent. If you are aiming for and content with anything lower than the Right view, you can expect a result even lower than that. You should really be aiming for higher, so that at least you might get the Right view as a result.

- **"Mundane" Right View**

"Therein, bhikkhus, right view comes first. And how does right view come first? One understands wrong view as wrong view and right view as right view: this is one's right view.

"And what, bhikkhus, is wrong view? 'There is nothing given, nothing offered, nothing sacrificed; no fruit or result of good and bad actions; no this world, no other world; no mother, no father; no beings who are reborn spontaneously; no good and virtuous recluses and brahmins in the world who have realised for themselves by direct knowledge and declare this world and the other world.' This is wrong view.

"And what, bhikkhus, is right view? Right view, I say, is twofold: there is right view that is affected by taints, partaking of merit, ripening in the acquisitions; and there is right view that is noble, taintless, supramundane, a factor of the path.

"And what, bhikkhus, is right view that is affected by the taints, partaking of merit, ripening in the acquisitions? 'There is what is given and what is offered and what is sacrificed; there is fruit and result of good and bad actions; there is this world and the other world; there is mother and father; there are beings who are reborn spontaneously; there are in the world good and virtuous recluses and brahmins who have realised for themselves by direct knowledge and declare this world and the other world.' This is right view affected by taints, partaking of merit, ripening in the acquisitions." - [MN 117](#)

Q: What about this "mundane" or ordinary right view, isn't this also a kind of a right view?

Nm: The Right view I was referring to is the Right view of a *sotāpanna*; freedom from suffering. The mundane right view doesn't free you from suffering, it is a right basis for the noble Right view. That doesn't mean that it doesn't count or doesn't matter – you can't have the Right view of a *sotāpanna* without the mundane right view. But in having the mundane right view, you are still a *puthujjana*.

(At the same time, the mundane right view shouldn't be underestimated or taken for granted.) Most practitioners, even supposedly serious Buddhist practitioners, don't even have the mundane right view. If you start thinking about the mundane right view and take it seriously, you realise it is already quite an accomplishment in undoing lots of wrong views, and it involves developing quite a lot of self-transparency, and recognition of the nature of things.

The mundane right view is basically about authenticity and self-transparency: recognition of the validity of an arisen thing as a phenomena. 'There is good and bad, mother and father, there is this life and the next life' - there is the fact that I don't know something!

All these things represent a certain threshold of recognising how things genuinely appear, how things are, that is not overly interpreted in a materialistic way, nor mystified. The basis of the arisen experience – as a starting point. Not coming out of a view that you have preconceived. “There IS Rebirth! – because I believe in it, not because I see it.” Or equally, “There is NO Rebirth – because I don’t believe in it, not because I see it.” What you have to recognise first is the fact that “I don’t know” - lack of knowledge as a factual thing, an arisen thing.

(The wrong view is rarely very obvious or explicitly stated.) People might say for example, “Oh yes of course there is mother, there is father,” but then when you ask them more, they will immediately jump onto the view of modern science and medicine and talk about how “sure, it looks like a mother or father, but in *reality* it’s just a bunch of atoms and electrons and in reality there is nothing there, just all these atoms and electrons constantly changing.”

It is also common to use this to explain why “everything is changing, everything is impermanent,” and you often hear people saying that modern science is proving that the Buddha’s teaching is correct - though that has nothing to do with the Buddha’s teaching whatsoever. You can see that view even among fully committed Buddhist practitioners, undermining the basic reality of the world that they themselves have experienced. You can’t avoid that basic reality but you can certainly misinterpret it and cover it up with your view. One who does this doesn’t even have a mundane right view, because their views deny the basic, “mundane” aspects of their experience.

That is what it means to say “there is mother, there is father” – that’s it, there is no lower threshold than that [for what is real or true] in your experience. For example, take an emotionally charged experience like your father getting sick. Most people’s practice is about *covering up* even that basic starting point – far from recognising it – because it bothers them. The practice becomes management of what already bothers you, and the management is done through the wrong views: e.g. ‘Well, fundamentally it is just a collection of atoms...’ – which is just another way of saying ‘fundamentally, in reality, there is no father.’

But in reality your father *is* there, that is your starting point – and if you start thinking like that, your practice *cannot* be management, it can only result in uprooting the problem in the first place. You have no leeway, no way out, of denying the things that are there, that already bother you – experience of mother, experience of father, experience of doubt. These are the arisen, factually enduring, present states of your mind. And if you practice the Dhamma rightly, they will not be able to bother you in the first place – so there is no need, no reason for you to deny your mother, your father, divine realms... Why would you?

The only reason people deny them is that they don’t know the way out of suffering.

When you start to recognise things just as they are in your experience – “this is the experience of having a mother, this is the experience of having a father; this is the experience of doubt; this is the experience of sensuality” – you are already starting to withdraw yourself from the material content of those things that we are all so focused

on. That is the necessary basis for starting to discern the signs of the mind as phenomena.

On the other hand, having these preconceived views prevents you from seeing your own mind as a thing that has arisen, which is a prerequisite for the arising of the Right view (*citta-nimitta*). How can you see your mind as an enduring thing, when with your views you are denying even obvious enduring things? You need the mundane right view as a basis for seeing things that matter; mind, feeling, intentions. Then the impermanence you discern within that is the impermanence of ownership, the impossibility to be a controller-master of things, the impermanence of your sense of self. Not the impermanence of a random stone, tree, table, etc.

What defines wrong view as a wrong view is that it contradicts the universal aspects of your own experience. The Buddha did not 'invent' the Right view, he just discerned it on the right terms. But to see it, you do need the right instruction and you will never accidentally arrive at it, because everything points in the wrong direction.

Q: What about the experience of kamma and vipaka, we don't have this experience?

Nm: The Buddha never said to figure out and settle all the details of 'how *kamma* and *vipaka* works' – he actually said:

"The results of action (kammavipako), monks, are incalculable, and not to be calculated. One who tries to calculate them will become mad or frustrated." - [AN 4.77](#)

But what you can recognise is that very possibility, that very uncertainty: 'I don't know to what extent my actions will bear fruit.' That is your factual experience right here and now. How would you act then, if you are not dismissing *kamma*, nor having a perfectly clear-cut template of how *kamma* works? You realise that 'I don't actually know – so I had *better be very careful*, since even when I think something might not be a problem, I don't know for myself so it is not worth the risk.'

Q: Part of the mundane right view says 'there are in the world good and virtuous recluses and brahmins who have realised for themselves by direct knowledge and declare this world and the other world.'

Nm: Again, it is important to recognise that *possibility* of direct knowledge as a real thing. Usually, almost automatically, people start denying the basic manifestation of things, and they end up with the view of 'there is nothing truly to be attained.' If you take the view that nothing can be trusted, you don't commit to anything, then it follows naturally 'What, *sotāpanna*? No, no, nothing to be attained anyway, that's more attachment, the more you practice the less you know' and so on.

Thinking like this, you won't even feel responsible for not becoming a *sotāpanna*, instead you deny it so that you don't feel obliged to do it.

It always comes back to accepting responsibility. It is possible to be free from suffering – that possibility is present in everyone's experience right here and now. It always was, always will be. There is possibility of direct knowledge – so that means there is *my*

possibility of direct knowledge, possibility of *my* awakening. So what do you then do with that?

You can see: 'there is a possibility to be free – and I am perfectly free to decide *not* to go that way – but then I will also be perfectly responsible for not getting the results of it.' That is the first thing that hit me when I started reading the suttas as a layman. When the Buddha said:

"Bhikkhus, both formerly and now, what I make known is suffering and the cessation of suffering." - [MN 22](#)

I had never even found somebody saying that, but now finally somebody directly said it, and I felt that: 'I don't have to follow it. I could go the other way. But if I choose not to become a monk and practice this, I am fully responsible for whatever happens to me for the rest of my life, even if it is 'not my fault' in lay terms.'

I couldn't ignore that. I would be responsible for even things that are completely out of my control – good or bad - if I were to choose to stay in the domain where they can happen. There is the world, there is freedom from the world. When you choose the world, the realm of Mara, you choose everything that comes with it – on account of that choice to not renounce it.

How can a person, without fully acknowledging that choice and taking that responsibility – how can he then take the practice seriously? He can't. His practice will have a magical connection to the result. 'I'm devotional, I meditate, I respect tradition, I watch my nostrils and the soles of my feet, and then Enlightenment will *happen to me* on account of these observances and duties that I do.'

Enlightenment cannot 'happen to you' – you can only develop it. In order to develop it, you need to understand what it is – and how can you understand what it is if you are denying the basic possibility of it, in the first place?

As Nanavira said,

"So long as you are content to put the sotāpanna on a pedestal well out of reach, it can never possibly occur to you that it is your duty to become sotāpanna yourself (or at least to make the attempt) here and now in this very life; for you will simply take it as axiomatic that you cannot succeed...you are not required to admire a sotāpanna, but to become one."

<https://nanavira.org/index.php/letters/post-sotapatti/1963/102-l-50-19-may-1963>

It is a hard thing to do and the only way to do it is to fully accept responsibility for not doing it. If you are not free from suffering, it's on you. If you are free from suffering, it's also on you. So you have a choice.

Q: Some people say that they cannot become arahant in this lifetime because of their kamma.

Nm: People say that when they talk about *kamma* factually and try to use *kamma* that they can't even remember as an excuse for doing nothing now. Actually it wouldn't work, even if you had a memory of it – let alone if you don't have a memory of it. If that is your *kamma* from before, it is the same as a *kamma* from yesterday – what you have done yesterday, ten years ago, - all are equally your *kamma*, why stop then? You choose to draw this invisible line where your memory is – 'Oh, I don't remember, so it's not my problem (if it somehow causes me to not become an *arahant* now.)'. You actually want to go the other way – I can't remember, thus it is a big problem and definitely my problem.

Lack of memory should make you responsible for everything. If you do something today because ten years ago you started developing a certain habit, you would not be able to deny responsibility for it, as you have a memory of it. What that means is that if you can't practice properly now because of something you did ten lifetimes ago, that still simply means that you can't practice properly because of yourself. So 'I can't become an *arahant* because of my previous *kamma*' just means 'I can't become an *arahant* because I can't become an *arahant*.' That's the reason in itself.

Q: I think it is connected to what you mentioned before about the observances. Someone follows some practice and observance without the results...

Nm: They would end up with an excuse that relieves them of responsibility instead of thinking 'wait, maybe I've been doing something wrong!'

No – I couldn't have been doing something wrong because it would mean my efforts have been wasted, but that is too unpleasant to admit, so instead I'll just dismiss it, I'll say 'No, I'm doing everything *right*, but I cannot get to it because of something in the past, that I have no memory of.'

If you have no memory of something, it is the same as saying it doesn't exist for you – yet that which doesn't exist for you, you have no knowledge, no memory, no perception of it, you still take it as a presently perceived reason for your failure. You can see what a deeply rooted act of self-deception that is.

So you can wear robes throughout your whole life, yet still not even have the mundane right view. And that is nobody else's fault. You are always solely responsible for the views you hold, and nothing you do will make any difference if there is not even a mundane acceptance of responsibility and transparency in regard to your own life, your own actions.

That doesn't mean just repeating it theoretically 'yes, I'm responsible!'

It means that you must *feel* it – you must feel that existential anxiety. There is no other way around it, though you can suffer to different degrees on account of it, depending on your development of proper virtue and *samadhi*. Nonetheless, it is still the same thing that needs to be done.

Only when you start accepting this, can you realise that the practice of Dhamma is not optional; that it's not up to anyone else - any external form, method, guide or institution; and that it doesn't manage your suffering, it uproots the basis of it. In other words, it is only about oneself being free from craving, or not free from craving.

When the suffering is uprooted there is nothing to manage, thus you are free from any burden, duty, and no reason to do anything anymore. But you will not arrive at that through blindly adhering to the dependence on needing something to do.

- **Sīlabbataparāmāsa**

That is what *sīlabbataparāmāsa* means – not rites and rituals, or things that are very obviously ridiculous when it comes to practice. ‘Virtue’ (*sīla*) and duty, sense of duty, something you need to do.

For example, one might take for granted that ‘it’s my duty to sit cross-legged and meditate as a monk.’ – Yes, but why do you do it? Why does it help you? Do you understand why it helps you and why you are doing it? No, you are just doing it because ‘it is my duty to do this, and my virtue is also my duty.’

That is a fetter. How can you abandon that fetter – *without* abandoning your virtue and without abandoning your efforts?

What differentiates it is that when it is taken as a duty, you bypass responsibility - at least a little bit. For example, a judge when sending someone to jail will not see it as *his* decision, his choice, his responsibility for putting someone in jail: ‘I’m a judge, it’s my duty to pass a judgement on you.’ Well, you chose to be a judge, the one who sends someone to jail. You introduce a proxy to cover up the fact that it is *you* condemning people to die, or not.

One can say ‘I need a job, I have to work’ – and yes you do, because you have six children, resulting from things that you yourself wanted to do. But even if somebody had forced those children on you and you had to look after them, it couldn’t truly be a duty. You would still be free to accept it or not.

That is the initial realisation involved in accepting responsibility: ‘Oh, so I could then decide to not do it.’ A whim of thought can change the direction of your whole existence. And that is very scary. No matter which way your life went and what you invested in it, one morning you can decide to wake up and leave it all.

Having that edge constantly present freaks people out, because the mind is undeveloped and unrestrained, without a basis of proper virtue and self-control. Just a sight of that edge makes people run in terror.

So instead they just go from one authority to the next authority. Monks - when they ordain end up turning to *vinaya*, rules, their duty and so on, to the point of becoming extremely neurotic, whereby they are following and holding on to what is not even *vinaya* anymore; but some extreme, ridiculous interpretation upon interpretation. Although the rule is clear; the context is clear, everything is clear, someone can’t sleep for five days because of the worry (that they might have *broken the rule*).

That is the problem - through avoiding responsibility you actually make things worse for yourself. Initially it is much more unpleasant (and difficult) to accept responsibility for your virtue and see that *I am choosing to do this*, (as opposed to just ‘this is the rule.’) But taking responsibility for it yourself is what will enable you to draw a line for the mind

infected with doubt, tempted by Mara. You can say ‘No – I will not think that, because I know exactly what is right.’

Even people who blindly adhere to rules and avoid responsibility, do know exactly what is right. But because they are projected in this third-person view of duty, something that just *must be done* that has nothing to do with me, they also keep needing the third person’s confirmation that what they are doing is right. The doubt can only be settled by going around and asking people so that they tell you what you want to hear – by reading and reading and reinterpreting until you *get* from it what you want to hear; by having everyone else around doing and keeping the same rites and rituals and techniques as you, because if they don’t it will question the validity of what you do. *Everything is out there, nothing in me, nothing is my responsibility.*

That is why someone can be genuinely upset, existentially threatened, simply by someone else acting in a slightly different way, even as small as wearing their robe differently. If others don’t do it then you would realise that you are responsible for assuming that ‘this is what must be done’. It would bring you back onto that personal responsibility that you were trying to avoid all along, which is why you latched onto that fetter of duty and virtue in the first place.

Q: As far as I understand, sīlabbataparāmāsa is basically about this attitude. So you remove that attitude, but do not abandon the sīla. You might not see any difference in the external behaviour of that person.

Nm: Exactly, there is no Dhamma without *sīla*, but Dhamma is not the *sīla*. A *sotāpanna* doesn’t abandon his *sīla* to become a *sotāpanna*, quite the opposite. But for a person who is fully projected in that third-person view of things, they can’t see that. For them, if you say ‘Dhamma is not *sīla*’ it means ‘Oh, so you mean I must not keep *sīla* then?’ Removing *sīlabbataparāmāsa* would seem to imply that ‘oh, so I should disrobe and go and find a wife.’ No, it doesn’t mean that at all. Virtue remains unchanged, but your attitude is now changed. You are no longer doing it on account of the assumed external authority, or whatever, you are doing it because you see it as a necessary basis for discerning the phenomena of your mind, intentions, which you now understand is the way out of suffering.

Unless that responsibility is taken on for what you are doing in the first place, the wrong things you are doing and the fetters you are holding, you can never ever uproot them. You deny that as a fetter, you cannot undo that fetter because you are not seeing it.

Even when you go and practice Dhamma and become a monk, that takes you even further away from seeing it – instead you just find a niche of specific things you do now and worldly doings get replaced with ‘what monks do.’ Yet you are still *doing* - doing your meditation technique, doing your methods, and your duties, and you never stop and think about the contradictions that you carry throughout all that doing. The existential attitude is the same: *I must do this, because if I don’t do anything I’m going to start sinking.* Even when people try to ‘do nothing’ they end up making it into something i.e. ‘I am going to Do Nothing Now’ – it just becomes another form of doing. And the most basic definition of *sīlabbataparāmāsa* is assuming that *doing certain things* will automatically cause purification or enlightenment.

Only (right) efforts to understand the nature of things contribute to enlightenment, but you will only know to what extent in hindsight. You can't quite tell at the time. Only once you get the Right view can you see (for example) 'Yes, it's all those nights I spent thinking and pondering relentlessly on the nature of my feelings, intentions, and so on'. That is the direct way to develop it, but not until you understand. That is the simile of the axe and the handle – 'oh look, it's gone, I need to replace it! I used it all up, it's worn out, ignorance is gone.' [*Sn22.101](#)

You can't *do* your way out of ignorance. You can only set up the right kamma, so to speak, (renunciation, sense restraint, so on) – that provides the basis for understanding the nature of action. In the same sense, you abandon evil by establishing the good, so that you can understand both and free yourself.

But people have difficulty accepting that because it makes things much more overwhelming. First you have to accept responsibility; accept responsibility for not being a *sotāpanna* - then have to go through all that confusion of 'what do I do then?' and finally, it is hard to give up that dependence on having something to do.

Rather than go through all this, the view tends to be: 'Sure, maybe I don't have the Right view, but I've been practicing for fifteen years, surely that cannot have been a waste.' Surely it counts for something – simply because you cannot accept the possibility that it might have been wasted.

Q: Maybe it was not wasted – maybe just a little bit more...?

Nm: Yes, but how would you know that? Fifteen years – a little bit more. If you are honest with yourself, you realise that you do not know how, in what way, that 'little bit more' will help you. So you are just hoping, using wishful thinking, for magic to happen, to win the lottery, for you to get the Right view – it's on the same level. You would have to realise: 'actually, I don't know how what I have been doing relates to getting the right understanding, because all I have been doing is *doing* – of different kinds – I went to this teacher who told me to do that, another teacher who told me to do this – I've now got my Own Way Of Doing Things – all on the level of depending on something to do.'

The more you invest in it, the harder it will be for you to look at it for what it is, to see that you still depend on having something to do. Having spent thousands of hours in meditation and so on, it becomes practically impossible to admit that it *might* have been a waste of time. Admitting it would equate to breakdown.

- **Sakkāyadiṭṭhi**

Q: So we have that first fetter, sakkāyadiṭṭhi (Person-view, personality view) – It is removed for a sotāpanna, but it seems that craving is still present even for someone who has removed sakkāyadiṭṭhi.

Nm: *Sakkāyadiṭṭhi* is on the level of the view of self, *attavāda*. You can only know to what extent there is still craving for the five aggregates, when you are free from *attavāda*. A *puthujjana* can't get an accurate representation of what craving is present in a *sotāpanna* without becoming a *sotāpanna*; that is an important thing to keep in mind. People's

minds are used to having it all laid out – ‘this is what *arahant* is, this is what *sotāpanna* is’ – but you have to know that if you truly understood what it is, you would be at least a *sotāpanna*.

That criteria must not be compromised, because otherwise you would end up thinking you understood these things without becoming them - which means there is no understanding of it. In order to free yourself from *attavāda*, you have to understand what *attavāda* is, and this understanding in itself (i.e. practical discernment, not merely theoretical understanding) already frees you from *attavāda*.

And what is *attavāda*? It is assuming the sense of self externally, so to speak.

You can describe to yourself your experience as a whole, which can be called ‘the five aggregates’. If something is external to it – you realise ‘how could I even think of that? How could I *think* of something external to my thinking?’ That is a complete contradiction in terms.

But if you become aware of the vague, ambiguous sense of self that you have, you can see that it kind of has that property (of being external, independent of or separate from your experience as a whole; i.e. it is the self that ‘experiences things’ or ‘has the experience.’) – which means, it is not actually independent, but you keep maintaining that utter, blatant discrepancy, purely because you never think about it.

Q: How I understand it, is that Atta – is included in your experience and your experience is conditioned by external things, so to speak, so atta cannot be independent.

Nm: The reason why what you just said is not quite accurate is that even when you have a thought of how your experience is externally conditioned – that cannot be *that external* because of which your experience is conditioned.

How can you experience that which is beyond your experience, unless you are experiencing it? If you are experiencing it, it cannot be external to your experience.

Q: I mean external to this sense of ‘me’.

Nm: Any notion of ‘external’ is fundamentally internal for you already. That’s how you uproot *attavāda*. Not giving it any way out, not leaving any room for that contradiction. Of course you actually have no choice in the matter, but your view doesn’t think that. Any form of allowing any form of ‘external to me/my experience’ is allowing the basis for *attavāda* to be there. So even when you say ‘my *attavāda* is conditioned by external’ you already assumed ‘external’ independent of your experience and that is the basis for your very *attavāda* you are trying to undo.

Regardless of what kind of sense of self you might have – whether lofty, superior, inferior, far, near, it has to still be within the aggregates and when you think ‘It’s all within’ even that thought of ‘it’s all within’ is still within the aggregates. That contradiction cannot remain without that constant nutriment of you providing the basis for it. Stop providing the basis for it, and the nature of it will become apparent, after a period of time.

Q: So it is to basically repeat this same process of thinking?

Nm: You can repeat it, it will seem to all make sense in the beginning, then you might start doubting it, but then you can find a new way of getting back to it through that very doubt. Initially a new idea is so inspiring – everything makes sense. As you keep applying it, that inspiration runs away, and then you start doubting it and you don't see it anymore – that is when you have to keep pushing forward. But that is the idea, yes; developing the theme that doesn't provide the basis for any notion of external in regard to your experience as a whole.

It is not to deny it, 'There Is No External' – no – there is external, which is experienced by you, thought by you, conceived by you, which means that external is fundamentally internal.

Q: I realised one thing, that you cannot make any kind of progress if you keep trying to watch the five aggregates as if from outside. Because I was trying to watch them, trying to, you know, see them as impermanent and so on...

Nm: Your watching of the five aggregates is within the five aggregates. The fact that you keep assuming that you could 'watch them as if from outside', means that you still keep allowing the possibility of 'external' and that in itself is already wrong. It is providing the base for *attavāda*.

So you can't simply stop *attavāda*, but you can stop maintaining this obvious contradiction of assuming the external through these little unquestioned attitudes, habits, and thoughts. You undo that to the extent necessary, there will be no room for *attavāda*. Then you can realise that, you can say in a way there is a self, but it is not yours.

"His very self is not his own." -Dhp 62

That's another thing people say: 'There Is No Self'. That which was taken as 'self' is there; it's simply *these five aggregates*, (which should be seen as not-self). That is what the Buddha said, but people never arrive at it because their whole practice is based on a denial: 'There is No Self'.

"If, Ananda, when I was asked by the wanderer Vaccagotta 'Is there a self?' I had answered 'There is a self', would this have been consistent on my part with the arising of the knowledge that 'All things are not-self'?"

'No, venerable sir.'

'And if, when I was asked by him, 'Is there no self' I had answered 'There is no self' the wanderer Vaccagotta, already confused, would have fallen into even greater confusion, thinking, 'It seems the self I had before, now is not there.'" - [SN 44.10](#)

So already there is the external view of my aggregates as per modern science and so on; and then this is extended even further with another layer of wrong view 'there is no self.' A denial upon a denial. All of it is assumed externally which means that you are through and through *attavāda*.

First you need to admit that there is that sense of self, then stop putting it first; stop putting it external to the experience as a whole, see it within it. Change the order, that is all you need to do.

"It is as if he were putting upright what had been overturned, revealing what was hidden, showing the way to one who was lost, or lighting a lamp in the dark so that those with eyes could see sights – in this way, Master Gotama has made the Dhamma clear to us in many ways." - MN 41 (for example).

You can take that in a poetic sense, or in a very literal sense. It is not to discover new things, but cease perverting the order, messing them up.

And now somebody can think, 'oh yes, I get it, I get it!' Great – but now develop that theme, day and night. Don't abandon it. It doesn't matter whatever else is going on in your life, don't abandon the theme that your sense of self can *never be* external – including your very thought of external. You will be literally sucking out the oxygen that is necessary for that sense of self to keep enduring in that external manner. There is no basis for it – and if you stop ignoring the fact that there is no basis for it, it cannot be maintained.

There is nothing mystical about it. But there is nothing scientific about it either; science is already the wrong view. You need instruction to know what you need to look for, but now you also need to start discerning it in your own experience. If now you go with it as your view, or make a mantra out of it and mechanically think about the concept or repeat it, you're not going to be uprooting anything.

Q: Does sotāpanna have suffering?

Nm: From an *arahant's* point of view yes, from *puthujjana's* point of view, no.

Knowing the way out of suffering means that you can't suffer. And that's what *sotāpanna* knows; he knows the way out of suffering. If *puthujjana* doesn't accept that as a criteria, he will think he knows what *sotāpanna* is, while still being a *puthujjana*. And that is a contradiction in terms – the only way to know what a *sotāpanna* is, is to become one.

Q: What is that suffering which from the point of view of an arahant is in sotāpanna?

Nm: Symptoms of the illness that linger, while the illness has been cured. Nuisance. Imagine you were dying of cancer, so your joints ache, your lymph nodes are swollen, everything is unpleasant. But really you mentally suffer because you know you are dying of cancer. Now I come as a doctor and I cure your cancer. But now your joints still hurt, your lymph nodes are still swollen, you still don't have hair – but you know you are free from cancer. You would be quite joyous actually, you wouldn't mind any of this discomfort. From the point of view of someone who is free even from those lingering symptoms of cancer, yes, you can say that is some sort of suffering. Not from the point of view of someone who is still in sheer terror of dying of cancer – who is not even bothered by his symptoms in themselves. His real bother is the fact that he is dying of cancer. When you uproot that, the symptoms would bother you even less. That is why *sotāpanna* can turn away and go back to a worldly life and still engage in sensuality. You have uprooted the illness completely and you fully understand that – it's not like 'oh

what is happening to me?' You know exactly what is happening. No amount of symptoms can re-introduce the illness.

Q: He still doesn't have the full understanding?

Nm: He has full understanding but has not dwelt in the theme of full understanding long enough. In the same sense that I just described, how to uproot *attavāda* - you can't just think about that theme once or twice, you have to keep discerning it and dwell in it until the handle of the axe wears out. You don't know when that is. For *sotāpanna* it is even clearer than that, because he knows exactly what to think and what themes to develop; he just needs to do it. That is why the Buddha kept encouraging a sense of urgency in them.
