

Undermining the Sense of Self

By Ajahn Nyanamoli Thero

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Ajahn Nyanamoli: What would be the measure of success in this practice?

Q: The full development of *anatta*.

Nm: How does one go about developing that?...

It's not enough to just say, "Oh, this is not mine, not I am, not myself." To do that, first, you need to discern that *sense of self* correctly, and then you need to see it as *not yours* and not as an independent master existing outside of this situation.

It's not about finding an answer to the question of "What is myself and not-self..?", and so on. It's about the mental practice of whatever that *sense of self* is, in whichever way it endures, to see it as second, as within, as fully enclosed within this inescapable limits of this situation as a whole—body posture, feeling, perceptions, intentions and so on—then sustain that view. You might then ask, "What's next?". But that's it.

You will of course fall from that view, and you certainly won't even do it right the first time. But, if you know that's what you're supposed to do, i.e not try to remove the *sense of self*, but simply set up the correct way of attending to it, by way of *yoniso* of that attention, (Peripherally knowing it concurrently with that which is being attended.) then you stand a chance for that view to take root.

You can presently recollect your *sense of self* now as we speak. It doesn't matter whether it's exemplified through a clear thought or ambiguous *sense of I am sitting here*. That *I am*, it's obviously not this physical thing. It's not about denying that *I am*, trying to force it into not-self, or dismissing it as unimportant. No, you want that *sense of self* to be known for what it is, and for that you need it to endure in clear comprehension, while there is this situation of this body, perception, sounds, mouth, taste, touches, etc enduring.

If that's too complex, you could simply see, "Okay, there is this *situation as a whole* based on this body to whatever extent it is, and there is this *sense of self enduring* there as well."

Do you see that? Do you see your *sense of self* enduring simultaneously on a different plane from your five senses, your thoughts, and everything else? Here and yonder, the situation of this infinite space and my *sense of self* perpendicular to that, simultaneously here?

At any given time, it doesn't matter what you're engaged with, if someone were to ask you who you are, you would have that recognition of *your self* right there. The point is to not bother trying to define

who you are or who *I am*. Just discern it enduring there as this weird-ambiguous-phenomenon that you can never put your finger on, but it's always there. The point is to not even bother trying to put a finger on it but to not lose sight of it as something that is always there lingering in the background.

As much as your body, your current posture, your feeling, and your perception are the basis of that inescapability of this situation, here and yonder, the image of the self—or the notion of the self—is equally the other end of the inescapability of your situation. You are not outside of that image either. When you recognize these two things: the body and situation as a whole are there on their own, you can then realize, “Oh, this phenomenon is there on its own, as a result of this here, that is also on its own.”

The *sense of self* being more ambiguous, more in the background, less palpable, less measurable, naturally gets bundled with that aroma of subjectivity, of *mine*, and *I am*, because it feels *above* or *behind* all of this. It's the observer of all of this. And it doesn't matter what kind of observer it is, and how it might feel. The only reason it can be an observer is because there is this to be observed. If there is nothing to be observed, the observer would not be—because nothing is defining it.

Recognize that it's not that the observer comes first and this, the rest, comes second. No, it's “*with the observer, the observed is*”. With the observed—felt, perceived, tasted, touched—the observer is. If your mind is calm within that principle, and you have room to move without falling off from it—from this type of *samadhi*—you can then think about various particular aspects of that relationship. But, fundamentally, the point is simply to get very used to having the *sense of self* endure simultaneously with having this experience endure as it changes, as you speak, move, and stand up, and so on. Two simultaneous things at the same time - “two points of view”. If you become familiar with that, because you've been looking for it, then that self-centered—one point of view—at the same time will be undermined simply through that. (For *self* to remain standing, there needs to be one point of view, not two. If there are two there is not one.)

The Buddha taught the undermining of the sense of self, the undermining of the one, through seeing the two simultaneously present. A person has to understand and see that. Not just think, “Oh, that's a lovely idea. I have faith in it.” but rather, one has to see it and then stick to repeatedly seeing it out of faith. And as a result, even without making effort towards more specific clarifications, you will arrive at the final goal.

By understanding and holding to that principle, keeping it clear—*with this, this is; without this, this would not be*, anything else that you assume is *in between*, anything pertaining to *mine* or *subjectivity* will evaporate.

All the other contemplations you find in the Suttas are all for exercising this same principle to completely remove any trace of conceit. For example, the recollection of this body that I'm enclosed with is dependent upon that which it isn't - namely food. The phenomenon of food being present is why this body is alive. If you take that away, the body will not be able to remain.

If you cultivate this right way of viewing, based on the precepts, sense restraint, and solitude, you will be able to handle it, not be overwhelmed with anxiety and can take it to its conclusion - complete *Nibbana*. If, however, you try to bypass those prerequisites, the anxiety that will appear due to not seeing any ground for yourself to stand upon will overwhelm you. But, if you have been cultivating the Gradual Training beforehand, this view will be liberating. That undermining the *sense of self*, in that indirect manner, will feel like a relief from a burden, from the tension, from the pressure of existence. The clearer the view becomes—*with this, this is*—two simultaneous things. Even if you don't specifically think about the ownership and uprooting it, it is being uprooted.

Sometimes people mystify it and say, "Oh, it's the observer, the pure consciousness, the knower, the this, the that..." It's just different phrasing for the same thing - *I am*. And that's not the way out. Never has been. You want to see that it doesn't matter how lofty, how remote, how distant, or how great that observer or the knower might feel. Would it be there if this situation is not enduring the way it is? No. Thus '*with this, this is*'. That all-knowing seer, the knower, it's pretty much to the same extent, not a bit more, not a bit less, subjected to the same things that all of this is subjected to—impermanence, suffering, and unownability. It doesn't matter how it feels, what matters is that it ceases to be assumed as *yours*. Whether that *sense of self* feels coarse or lofty, refined, pleasant or unpleasant, it's just the reflection of the same principle that's here, nothing else. That's the true unburdening because there is no more of that assumed center that takes all the weight on.

Q: Getting used to this type of contemplation will lessen its dissonance with one's sense of security and sense of self. The first time you realize that something you thought was so solid and so secure is just a flimsy house of cards, it's terrifying. But now, if it's just a house of cards, it's just a house of cards, you don't expect anything else.

Nm: If through the Gradual Training, you stop adding more fuel to the fire of passion, aversion, and ownership, then the more of the same recognition that *this is a flimsy house of cards which is going to collapse*, will be cultivated. The more you have that established, the less unpleasant it will be. And it was unpleasant, not because of its recognition, but because of your emotional involvement with the house of cards, dependence on it, views, refusal to allow it to be otherwise—out of that gratuitous sense of ownership of the self-centered experience.

Now if doubt, regarding the principle of that simultaneous view, arises, you can, if the view has been established, see that doubt as also second to it. The purpose isn't to avoid doubts, but rather to overcome them with the same principle of non-ownership. Doubt cannot access that which precedes it, which is its necessary basis.

Mn38, Mahātaṇhāsaṅkhaya Suttaṃ:

On one occasion the Blessed One was living at Sāvattṥī in Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's Park.....

1- Bhikkhus, do you discern "THIS IS"?

Yes, Bhante.

2- Do you discern 'with nutriment it IS'?

Yes

3- Do you discern 'with ceasing of nutriment that which IS is of the nature to cease'?

Yes

4- Is there doubt if there is uncertainty whether THIS IS?

Yes

5- Is there doubt if there is uncertainty 'with nutriment it IS'?

Yes

6- Is there doubt if there is uncertainty 'with ceasing of nutriment that which IS is of the nature to cease'?

Yes

7- Is doubt abandoned by seeing and understanding - (in whichever way a thing IS) that "THIS IS"?

Yes

8- Is doubt abandoned by seeing and understanding - (in whichever way a thing IS) that "with nutriment it IS"?

Yes

9- Is doubt abandoned by seeing and understanding - (in whichever way a thing IS) that 'with ceasing of nutriment that which IS is of the nature to cease'?

Yes

10- Are you certain "THIS IS"?

Yes

11- Are you certain "with nutriment it IS"?

Yes

12- Are you certain 'with ceasing of nutriment that which IS is of the nature to cease'?

Yes

13-Do you see clearly and rightly understand, in whichever way a thing is that 'THIS IS'?

Yes

14- Do you see clearly and rightly understand, in whichever way a thing is that "with nutriment it IS'?

Yes

15- Do you see clearly and rightly understand, in whichever way a thing is that 'with ceasing of nutriment that which IS is of the nature to cease'?

Yes

A person thus with such a purified view, thus accomplished, holding it, cherishing it, taking it as one's own, would they know that the Dhamma is like a raft for the sake of crossing over rather than holding on to?

No

A person thus with such a purified view, thus accomplished, not holding it, not cherishing it, not taking it as one's own, would they know that the Dhamma is like a raft for the sake of crossing over rather than holding on to?

Yes.....
