

Breaking the First Three Fetters and becoming a Stream Enterer

Enlightenment is a state of freedom, which can be spoken of in terms of *freedom to* or *freedom from*. The Buddha once said that Enlightenment consisted of freedom from ten 'fetters', which bind us to *samsara*, (the world of suffering), or, we could say, the wheel of life. These fetters are not all broken simultaneously, and this week we're going to look at the first three of these fetters, try to see how they bind us, and what the effects of breaking them are.

In traditional terms, the first fetter is 'self view', which is the notion that deep down there is a fixed, unchanging self or soul. The second fetter is 'dependence on rites and rituals (as ends in themselves)'. This is the idea that if we perform certain rituals, then we are living the spiritual life, *regardless of our motivation or state of mind while we are performing those rituals*. The third fetter is 'doubt and indecision'. This is not doubt in the sense of questioning the validity of a teaching or practice – the Buddha encouraged questioning, independent thought and discussion. The *fetter* of doubt is really an unwillingness to commit yourself to a course of action that might change you. In this case the kinds of 'doubts' that you may have are really rationalizations of an unwillingness to change.

Someone who breaks the first three fetters becomes what's called a 'stream enterer' – they've entered the stream that leads to enlightenment – and their future enlightenment is assured. Breaking the three fetters then marks a decisive point in the spiritual life. Before then it's always possible that you'll give up, turn back, but once you've broken free of those fetters, you'll never give up.

Here is a transcript of a talk that Sangharakshita gave, in which he talks about the first these fetters in a less traditional way:

What, then, are the three Fetters? I've spoken about them on a number of occasions before. I've written about them, rather technically. But tonight I'm going to describe them in very general terms, even in very basic terms, if I may say so, down to earth terms. In those terms the three Fetters are:

- (1) The Fetter of Habit.
- (2) The Fetter of Superficiality.
- (3) The Fetter of Vagueness.

1. The Fetter of Habit

The dictionary defines 'habit' as 'the tendency or disposition to act in a particular way.' Thus habit is a matter of action. Action, however, is an essential part of ourselves, not something just added on. In fact, according to the *Dharma-Vinaya*, we **are** our actions. What we usually think of, what we usually refer to, as a person is the sum total of his or her actions, actions of body, speech and mind. And the person does not exist apart from them. The fact that we have a tendency or a disposition to act in a particular way means, therefore, that we have a tendency or a disposition to **be** in a particular way. And thus we are not just the sum total of our actions, we are

the sum total of our habits. We are our habits. We could even say that we ourselves, each one individually, we ourselves are simply a habit - probably a bad habit! The person we think of as George or Mary and recognise as acting in a particular way is simply a habit that a certain stream of consciousness has got into, just like a knot tied in a piece of string. But since it has got into it, it can get **out** of it, it can become free from it. So breaking the Fetter of Habit means, essentially, getting out of the habit of being the kind of person we were, or even are. Just getting out of the habit of being that particular kind of person. It's only a **habit** you've got into. You don't **have** to be the way you are! There's no necessity about it! So breaking the Fetter of Habit means getting rid of the old self. Getting rid of the past self, throwing it into the dustbin. It means becoming a New Man, it means becoming a True Individual, one who is aware, emotionally positive, responsible, sensitive, creative. It means becoming continually creative, continually re-creative of our own self. The Buddhist doctrine of no-self, incidentally, the Buddhist doctrine of *Anatta*, does not mean so much that we never have a self, it means rather that we always have a **new** self. Always have a new self. And, ideally, each new self that we have should be a better one than the last. That's what we mean by progress.

Now, it's not easy to get out of the habit of being the kind of person we were, the kind of person we are. It's not easy to get rid of the old self, not easy to get rid of the past self and to become a New Man, and one of the reasons for this is - other people. Not only have we ourselves got into the habit of **being** in a particular way, but other people have got into the habit of experiencing us as being in the habit of being in a particular way! So the sum total of people who experience us as what we **were**, rather than as what we **are**, is what we call the 'group'. It is in this sense that the group is the enemy of the Individual, that is to say the enemy of the True Individual. The group will not allow the True Individual to emerge from its ranks. It insists on dealing with him not as he is but as he was, and to this extent the group deals with someone who no longer exists. You may experience this sometimes when you re-visit your family after an interval of several years.

So breaking the Fetter of Habit means becoming free from the old self, free from the past self. It means becoming free from the group, that is to say free from the influence, the habit-reinforcing influence of the group. It doesn't of course necessarily mean that we break off actual relations with the group.

2. The Fetter of Superficiality

The word 'superficiality' is derived from 'superficial'. Superficial is defined as 'of, relating to, being near or forming - the surface'. Hence 'displaying a lack of thoroughness and care'. And 'only outwardly apparent, rather than genuine or actual'. So in the present context, superficiality means acting from the surface. Acting from the surface of ourselves, acting without thoroughness or care, acting in outward appearance only, rather than genuinely or actually. Now why do we act in this way, superficially? What is the **reason** for our superficiality? The reason is that we are divided. More often than not the conscious, rational surface is divided from the unconscious emotional depths. We act out of intellectual conviction but we do not succeed in carrying the emotions with us. Sometimes of course we act out of the

fullness of our emotions. But then only too often the rational mind holds back, perhaps even does not approve. In either case we do not act totally, we do not act with the whole of ourselves, and therefore we do not really act. We are not **wholehearted** in what we do, and this state of affairs is very general. We could say that superficiality is one of the greatest curses of the modern age. Matthew Arnold, more than a hundred years ago, spoke of 'our sick hurry, our divided aims' - and that just about describes the situation. We are in a hurry, a sick hurry, yet our aims are divided. We don't really and truly **do** anything. We don't do it with the whole force of our being. When we love, we don't really love, and when we hate, we don't really hate. We don't even really think. We half-do all these things. And it's the same, only too often, when we take up the spiritual life, when we try to follow the *Dharma-Vinaya*. We meditate with only **part** of ourselves. We communicate with only **part** of ourselves, and we work, perhaps, only with **part** of ourselves. We go for Refuge even, as we think, only with **part** of ourselves. And consequently we don't get very far. We don't really grow, we don't really develop, we don't carry the whole of our being along with us, so to speak. A small part of us is prospecting ahead, but the greater part is lagging far behind. So breaking the Fetter of Superficiality means acting with the **whole** of ourselves, acting with thoroughness and care; acting genuinely and actually. It means, in a word, **committing** ourselves to the spiritual life, committing ourselves to being a True Individual.

3. The Fetter of Vagueness

We all know what vagueness means. We all know what a vague person is. But what is the **reason** for the vagueness? Why should anyone **be** vague? We're vague when we are undecided. We're vague when we don't **want** to decide. We're vague when we don't want to commit ourselves, and the vagueness is, therefore, a dishonest vagueness. After all, spiritual life is very difficult. Growth and development is often a painful process, even though it is enjoyable! So we tend to shrink back, we tend not to commit ourselves. We keep our options **open**, as we say. We keep up a number of different interests, a number of different aims on which we can fall back, and we allow ourselves to oscillate between them, even to drift between them.

At all costs we remain **vague**, woolly, cloudy, dim, indistinct, faint. Breaking the Fetter of Vagueness therefore means being willing to think clearly. It means being willing to think things out, to think things through. It means being willing to see what the alternatives really are. It means being willing to sort out our priorities. It means being willing to make up our minds. It means being willing actually to choose the best, and to act wholeheartedly upon that choice. It means not postponing the moment of decision.

These then are the Three Fetters: the Fetter of Habit, the Fetter of Superficiality, the Fetter of Vagueness. And these fetters are broken by means of Insight, by means of the knowledge and vision of things as they really are. Or, if you like, they are broken by our becoming creative, that is to say, self-creative, creative of our own new self; committed and clear.

SUMMARY OF THE FIRST THREE FETTERS

TRADITIONAL NAME	SANGHARAKSHITA'S VERSION	BREAKING IT INVOLVES...
1. Fixed self-view	Habit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognizing that we don't have to be the way we currently are • Freeing ourselves from the habit-reinforcing influence of the <i>group</i>
2. Dependence on rites and rituals (as ends in themselves)	Superficiality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acting wholeheartedly with all aspects of ourselves • Committing ourselves to being a <i>true individual</i>
3. Doubt and indecision	Vagueness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being clear about our alternatives • Prioritising them • Not postponing the moment of decision