

Our Attitude to Ourselves

by

Professor Emeritus Dr. Asanga Tilakaratne PhD

Department of Buddhist Studies, University of Colombo.

It would be good to start this discussion of attitudes with ourselves, or, putting it in singular form, my attitude to myself. This beginning point is quite relevant for the reason that, usually, we build our universe of social relations placing ourselves at its centre. My attitude to myself is a key determining factor behind my attitude to the rest of the world.

We will begin with the question: who am I? There are many ways of answering this question, namely: I am a man or I am a woman. Starting from this, we may identify ourselves, with reference to the country we are born, different regions of that country, the religion we follow, the school we studied, the work we do, the profession we belong to, the position we occupy, the political and ideological views we hold, the beliefs we cherish and on and on and on.

Some of these identities, we inherit by birth. Some others are attributed to us by society still some others, we adopt ourselves. The identities become challenging when we perceive that the others in our society too have their own identities. We cannot escape this fact because we are not like Robinson Crusoe who lived all by himself in an isolated island. While we hold many different identities simultaneously, we are constantly dealing with others who similarly have their own identities.

Troubles begin we when we hold on to our identities as inviolable, sacred and substantial. This is when we start fighting with others, or being contemptuous or being too grasping or possessive or negligent of others. When men become arrogant of being men, or when women become arrogant of being women, gender problems arise among us.

Given the prevalence of situations of this nature, what would be the right attitude we should have toward ourselves? Most of the time, we inherit identities from society or we attribute them to us. There is nothing wrong in identities in themselves. They become good or bad, right or wrong, healthy or unhealthy, pleasant or unpleasant etc. depending on how we treat others based on our identities. For example, if our attitudes make us selfish, arrogant, unkind, or unreasonable toward others then such attitudes, we should avoid. We become arrogant, for example, owing to our wealth, education, social status, social identities like caste and family background. Again, there is nothing wrong having wealth, education, social status etc. What is wrong is being arrogant owing to those.

Buddhism teaches us to have very broad attitude toward others, to other men and women as fellow human beings, with whom we share hopes and fears, expectations and aspirations, desires and wants, and many psychological and physical features providing justification for us to be caring and sharing with them, and for being compassionate and considerate toward them. Going further, as Buddhism teaches us, we can identify ourselves with all living beings who love happiness and, who hate pain and who want to live and not die. In brief, my having right attitudes to myself is reflected in how I behave toward others.

This, however, does not amount to neglecting myself, in particular, although I may neglect my material comforts for the sake of others, or I may sacrifice my resources such as wealth, time, energy, and knowledge for the sake of others, the Buddha teaches us to look after our own welfare, both inner and outer welfare, at the same time. Here we need to maintain a balance. Although it is not good to be arrogant and looking down upon others, preserving my own moral integrity amidst challenges, or, not to compromise my own moral stability for the sake of others has to be an essential aspect of my right attitude to myself.