

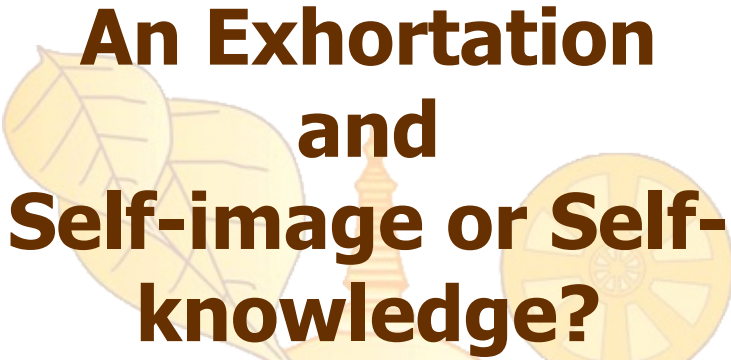
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# **An Exhortation & Self-image or Self-knowledge?**

*Two Dhamma Talks by  
Ayya Khema*



**BUDDHIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY**



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## **Two Dhamma Talks**

by

**Ayya Khema**

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# An Exhortation

**E**

very evening we chant, “*Pamadamulako lobho... doso ... moho.*” *Lobha, dosa, moha*, the three roots of evil: greed, hate and delusion.

We are born with these roots, We wouldn't be born at all if we didn't have them. But there are also the three opposite roots: non-greed, non-hate, and non-delusion. It is these roots of good which we must cultivate.

Non-greed is generosity, generosity shown in giving one's things away, giving one's money away, giving one's understanding away, giving ones love away. That is generosity. And the more one gives away, the richer one is. But unless one can give freely, one is caught by greed, *by lobha*.

*The opposite of dosa is the root of non-hate, loving kindness, metta.* The more we can generate *metta* in our hearts, the less we will suffer. But we have to work consciously at abiding in loving kindness. There is no hoping, wishing or praying that brings *metta*. There is no creator to grant *metta* to us. There is no grace which will bestow *metta* on us. It is we who must create *metta*.

There must be deliberate action, a deliberate action

of the heart which opens towards love. Loving kindness must not be directed only towards what is lovable. To love that which is lovable is possible for anyone. It's easy. To love that which is lovable is not even interesting. That is what all the romances, the movies, the novels are about. To love that which is lovable is not the spiritual path, but a worldly endeavour. The reason for loving kindness is because the heart has the ability to give; its purpose is for purification.

But trying to understand loving kindness with the mind can never succeed. It's got to be felt with one's heart. The heart has to be involved "wholeheartedly," for unless loving kindness is felt in the heart, the root of hate, *dosa*, will remain.

There is no intellectual understanding that will make *metta* possible because the mind is caught up in delusion, *moha*. The mind can take a stand on either side of any debate. It can say "pro" or "con" on anything. The heart cannot. The heart opens up and feels love, or it shrinks and feels hate. The mind can judge very easily, "This is lovable." Or the negative mind can say, "Oh no, it's not. It's detestable!" The mind can do that. But the heart cannot. Rely on the heart and not on the judgments of the mind. Work on the purification of one's heart. See within. Become fully aware when there is greed. Become aware when

there is hate. Then substitute the roots of good, generosity, and loving kindness, for the evil roots. The more often we look within, the more often we substitute the good for the evil, the sooner the ego-delusion will diminish.

*Moha* is the delusion of a self. Its opposite, non-delusion, is the knowledge that the idea of self is the cause of suffering, that our mind and body are coreless. It is because of the delusion of self that the other two roots, greed and hate, beset us. Without delusion, there would be no greed or hate, it is the self-delusion, saying "This is me, this is the way I see things, this is the way I want it, this is the way I'm separating myself," that is the cause of hatred, separation, isolation, resistance, and rejection.

The more deluded one is, the more greed and hate one generates. And how deluded one is depends on how much one identifies with what and who one thinks one is, and what one wants to get out of life for oneself. The more self-identification there is, the more delusion; the more greed, the more hate; the more hate, the more unhappiness.

Even the views we hold are stained with ego-discolouration. They cannot be absolutely true. But they are true from the standpoint of the ego. The ego says and the ego thinks and therefore the ego wants.

This is the root of *moha*.

It is not possible to work on eliminating ego-delusion alone. It is done through awareness of the three roots: greed, hate and delusion. For this is the path of purification. This is the path of self-inquiry. This is the path of self-discipline. And there is nothing else on this path as important as mindfulness—watching the mind. This is a simple formula, but just sitting and waiting for enlightenment is not going to bring enlightenment. Nothing happens by itself. What matters is action. Take the action of following the Noble Eightfold Path. With awareness, with no fixed views, but only the knowledge of something to be done: the elimination of *lobha*, *dosa*, *moha*. Without that deliberation to remove the three roots of evil, meditation is a total waste of time.

So, we watch the mind. A mental state arises. Don't believe it! Check it out. Which part of the ego-delusion is talking—greed or hate? Or both? And then—watch. The thought arises and it ceases. If the thought doesn't cease, there is clinging, hanging on for "dear life," keeping the thought. There are even people who are enormously attached to their own dissatisfaction, to their own *dukkha*. This is one of the greatest absurdities: being attached to one's own suffering.

Remembering to be aware is another problem

because our minds get caught up in our own thinking processes. Drop the thinking processes. They aren't worth having. Look instead at the greed and the hate and the delusion, the things worth seeing.

Our ego-delusion has at its roots the identification of ourselves with the five aggregates, the *khandhas*: the body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. Yet we know that our problems, our suffering, our unhappiness, stem from that identification. And we know we must abandon this wrong view. For we are not the aggregates.

But there is no way of getting at the root of delusion as long as one strongly identifies with one's thoughts, and with who one thinks one is. The identification takes away the possibility of stepping back and watching, of stepping back and watching mindfully. Mindfulness is what we learn through meditation, and mindfully we learn to watch every moment of our daily life. Mindfulness means being fully aware, "the miracle of being awake," which is not the opposite of being sleepy, but the opposite of being foggy. Not thinking foggily and woozily, but being fully aware—fully awake to what is going on within oneself.

Self-identification with one's state of being is the great trap. So we must first become aware of the props we use to maintain who we think we are. It begins



with: “I’m a woman” or “I’m a man.” There’s strong identification. There’s strong support for the ego, for that “I am” is the ego itself talking. Next we identify with our abilities and our knowledge. “This is what I can do” and “This is what I know.” Two further strong supports for the ego.

Ask yourself: “Who do I think I am? Why do I think I am like that? What makes me think like this? Is it because I’m identifying with the body? ... the feelings? ... the perceptions? ... the thoughts? ... the consciousness?” If you identify with any or all of these, what misery! What a miserable situation owning all those aggregates. Drop the identification and you get nearer the truth. This is just a body, prone to *dukkha*. These are just feelings. These are just perceptions. These are just mental formations. This is just consciousness.

So greed, hatred and delusion, *lobha*, *dosa* and *moha*, are everybody’s lot. The work on the spiritual path is eliminating these roots. For unless something is done about them, they’ll be with us— life after life after life.

The three roots of evil, with delusion as the base, make the world go round, “Love makes the world go round,” it is said. But if love really did make the world go round, this would be a very different world! No, it is greed that makes the world go round; it is hate that

makes the world go round; it is delusion that makes the world go round. Because of these, relationships don't work, friendships deteriorate, people have personal difficulties with one another. That is why love is lacking. That is why people steal, kill, wage wars.

But the only world we need be concerned with is the world we have inside of ourselves. And doesn't that world look different for each one of us? And different each time we look? And one does have to look to see for oneself what one is really like. Do you know that the whole of the universe lies within this mind and body? Each one of us has an entire universe within him. Let's get to know the universe by getting to know ourselves. And we get to know ourselves through meditation.

Meditation is about purification. Meditation is about finding the Dhamma within oneself. The Buddha said: "Whoever sees me, sees the Dhamma. Whoever sees the Dhamma, sees me." And the Dhamma can be seen with an inner vision—but only if one does the work. One can't get an inner vision by merely thinking about wanting one. There's work to be done. Nothing can replace the work each of us must do. But with the joy of the path there is energy. And when the joy of the path arises, there is confidence. Have that confidence in your experiences.

The Buddha said that we are like children playing in a house on fire and are too foolish to jump out. We don't realise that the fire of our passions, of our wanting, of our rejections, of our views and opinions, of our self-centred assertions is the fire that is burning us, and we are too foolish to let go. Like little children we want to keep on playing. That's childish, not childlike. And if we keep on playing we're going to get burned by our passions over and over again.

Each day has a limited number of hours, each week a limited number of days. Knowing that time grows shorter each day, a state of mind called urgency, *samvega*, arises. See that urgency. Jump out of the house which is on fire. This work is the seeking of enlightenment. Get on with it.

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## **Self-image or Self-knowledge**

The question arises: What is the difference between having a self-image and knowing oneself? This is an

important question, and one well-worth discussing, because it does seem at first that they are one and the same. But they are not.

First of all, a self-image is a burden to carry. Yet, unfortunately, everyone does carry around a self-image, and some people carry around a heavier burden than others. And carrying around a self-image is not only a burden, but a danger. For a self-image is fragile. At any time it is likely to be broken, smashed, shattered. And when one's self-image is broken—or even just jarred a bit—then there is pain, grief, and lamentation, *dukkha*, suffering. When one's self-image is shattered, for that precise moment it is seen to be untrue, unstable. *Dukkha* arises because self-identification has been momentarily lost.

Yet one carries around with oneself that self-image because that identity is supposed to bring security. This security, of course, is imaginary, it has no basis in fact: In fact, it creates insecurity because a self-image is imaginary, and I has to be protected all the time: So one runs around with an illusory self-image as if one were carrying a porcelain figure made out of the finest porcelain on one's head and trying to protect it from being smashed!

It's not a very viable situation, is it? Yet everybody does it. This self-image, in most cases, is built upon the

best one hopes to offer. In some cases, though, it is built upon the worst one has to offer. Those who develop a negative self-image are the people who have created a poor image of themselves, those who think they can never do anything right. Now people in the other lot have created images of themselves as worthy persons, preferably kind, sweet, good-natured balanced, always understanding, in perfect command of every situation, never upset, never angry.

But having any kind of self-image cannot possibly bring security. On the contrary, it invariably brings worry and fear. Just below the surface lie the underlying tendencies, which indicate clearly that one may not be quite the way one thinks one is. But if one doesn't look too closely, maybe one can sustain the image. Or if nobody pokes enough. Of course there's no guarantee for that— everyone gets poked and pushed. But people who don't practise meditation and don't train themselves will shift blame to the one that's poking and pushing. By blaming an outside agency, they are able to keep their self-image intact or they tell themselves: That's only momentary anger and fury, which is excusable.

A person who has gained some insight may feel bereaved. He has lost something he thought he owned. Maybe he thought he owned kindness—or maybe he thought he owned equanimity. Or love

towards all beings. Or any of the lofty qualities that everybody praises. All of a sudden what he thought he had disappears and cannot be restored. Because he has already trained himself a little, such a person does not blame another, but he can become extremely unhappy. Some people react by crying, some by sulking: Some become so upset about the loss of their self-created image of themselves that they cannot handle it and run away.

The only useful response is understanding: to know that this self-created idea about oneself has absolutely no genuine basis in real fact. With the seven underlying tendencies, the *anusaya*—sensuality, irritation, doubt, wrong view, conceit, clinging to existence, and ignorance—constantly rearing their ugly heads, how could there be a person who is always perfectly kind, always perfectly loving, always sweet, always pliable, always giving? Where is such a person? Where can it be found?

Obviously it stands to reason that one has made up nothing but a self-protection—a shield—so that one doesn't have to see the qualities which really exist and which are based on the three roots of evil and the three roots of good: greed, hate and delusion, and greedlessness, hatelessness and undeludedness. All six are there. And if one doesn't see the three negative ones, how is one ever going to get rid of them? As

long as one imagines one is free of the roots of evil, there is no way of getting rid of them.

A self-image is a created figure—a *persona*— which is supposed to be the same all the time. One carries around that image of an ideal person wherever one goes. Whatever image is desirable. And that image is intended to be a permanent vision of oneself. “That’s the way I am. That’s my true self. Let no one dare change it.”

That way of thinking certainly prevents self-knowledge. For nothing is permanent—least of all one’s own reactions, one’s own feelings, one’s own thoughts, one’s own emotions. Nothing of the kind exists which is permanent. If one has this image of an ideal person being carried around—this porcelain figure of oneself that one has made up—then that view prevents knowledge of the change in oneself, that prevents a true understanding of oneself. For every time the defilements rear up, the mind says: “Oh, no! That couldn’t be me. I’m the other kind. I’m the good kind.”

It often takes a trauma for one to wake up from this dream, a trauma with enough impact to make one fully aware that what one has thought about oneself is a total myth. Only then will one start investigating oneself. Before that everything one does has a veil

around it. It's foggy and unclear. And whatever one does cannot have any truth within it. Because all that one does must comply with one's image, and whatever cannot comply is not accepted. One actually tries to fit reality to the self-image instead of seeing oneself according to reality.

Knowing oneself means knowing whatever happens. Whether one approves of it or disapproves of it doesn't matter. It's happening, isn't it? And anyone who is not an Arahant has to deal constantly with the defilements of the mind in all their subtlety and variety. Deny them—either totally or partially—and we deny the truth. And if we deny the truth within us, we cannot find the truth anywhere. The truth is within us. We don't have to be resigned to the fact that we have defilements in our minds. But we do have to recognise them when they arise. We have to know them with direct knowledge. Direct knowledge does not mean that we know lists of names and categories; it means that we recognise and identify the defilements when they arise within us. Only then can one acquire self-knowledge.

A self-image is hard and brittle. Because it is hard, it does not easily change; because it is brittle, it is easily broken. And after it's broken, we pick up the pieces and put it back together again saying: "I've got to have that self-image! I need to believe I'm a good person!"



What's the good in believing in that? Believing in something which cannot possibly be true. What one needs to do is practise and make the image conform to reality.

Some people need a self-image more than others because they feel more insecure. When one feels insecure, one needs to grab hold of something and if there's nothing external to grab hold of, then one grabs hold of the self-image. One can create a self-image based on anything. Being a woman, a nun, a nun in-training, a lay person—being tall or short, fat or thin, beautiful—anything. And every self-image is something self-created. It denotes a collection of physical characteristics and personal traits, but surely it does not denote an "I." If one has an idea that "I" am a certain person, obviously that idea cannot be true because that certain person is always changing.

It is our need for inner security that makes it imperative for us to find something which seems secure, solid, unchanging. So we make up a self-image and try to maintain that it is secure, solid, unchanging. But there is nothing in the universe which is solid and unchanging. Not only do we make up this self-image of ours, but we create a certain kind of a self. One that we find pleasing, one that we can approve of.

If we repeatedly insist that our self-image is real, we

are distorting reality, trying to make it fit our self-image instead of abandoning the self-image in order to see reality. It's a difficult habit to overcome, and the less insight we have, the harder it is to overcome. Usually one needs a real push to be woken up. Sometimes that push can come from "losing one's cool," from being the exact opposite of one's self-image. Then one suddenly sees that there is something wrong with the self-image, and one actually starts to recognise what one has created—a false picture of oneself—and then one really sees the suffering to which it gives rise.

The introspection which is necessary on the path in order to know with mindfulness one's feelings, thoughts, and the content of the mind can only start when one knows each facet of one's mental make-up—how each facet changes, how it operates, how it arises and ceases, how one reacts to these aspects of the mind. This self-knowledge is extremely valuable and cannot be dispensed with. But a self-image will block the way. Self-image and self-knowledge are diametrically opposed to each other. One is imaginary, the other real.

With self-knowledge comes the ability to work with one's own difficulties, and from that arises wisdom, which is the third aspect of the threefold path: moral conduct or *sila*, concentration or *samadhi*, and wisdom

or *pañña*. The only knowledge really worth gaining is self-knowledge. Each one of us is no different from the rest of humanity. What is happening inside of oneself is happening inside of everybody. But most people are totally unaware of what is going on inside. If wisdom is to arise, it has to come through self-knowledge.

The wisdom that the Buddha gained and passed on to us is based on the direct knowledge of the Four Noble Truths. Direct knowledge is the inner-seeing, the inner-vision.

The impermanence of all states of being has to be reflected upon, contemplated, and directly experienced. If we only know about impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and non-self— *annica*, *dukkha*, and *anatta*— without experiencing them, we know something interesting and true, but the mere knowing doesn't help us to progress on the path. We do not gain insight just by knowing. And so we look within. And what better way is there to experience these truths than to see them in oneself, to see how one's own mental states are constantly changing? One then knows when one responds with love and kindness, and one knows when one reacts with negativity. And one clearly knows that it is utter foolishness to create a self-image from such responses and reactions, constantly changing, very often not even predictable.

The sooner we can drop our self-image and become aware of the here and now, the moment to moment, the sooner we're starting to practise. We are not practising if we cling to a cherished idea about ourselves and then try to impress that idea on others. A self-image is a mask. Sometimes we can actually feel it as bodily armour, and sometimes it shows through as body language. There is a way of feeling this armour: by becoming attentive, completely attentive to oneself.

Since there is nothing else really worth attending to, let us attend to our own body and mind. "The whole of the universe, O monks, lies in this body and mind." If that is where it lies, we might as well fix our attention right there.

And that person we've been trying to portray, the person we'd like to be, is the terrible burden, the bearer of *dukkha*, which must be seen for what it really is—an imagined self-image. Then it must be dispensed with, the quicker the better. A real impact comes when we can see ourselves as we really are, and see that we are not the same from one thought-moment to the next.

Think back over only today—just one day. Were you the same person all day long? Happy, smiling, loving and kind? All day, from morning to night?

Always the same? Having the same kind of thoughts? The same kind of feelings? Were there feelings and thoughts of resistance, of worry, of hope, of planning? Or were they strictly in the moment and constantly the same? Just look at one day—today. Or one hour, or ten minutes, or five minutes. If there is total attention, you can be aware of the constant changes within yourself even within seconds.

Get in touch with your self-created image and let go of it. The whole of the practise is letting go, for this is where security lies. That image was supposed to bring you security, which is why it was created in the first place: to give you something solid and unchanging to hang on to. But if you really examine it, you will find that security is gained by letting go, by having absolutely nothing. If there's nothing, there's no threat, no fear of losing anything. There is just each moment.

Let go of all self-images, of all ideations, of all hopes and plans. Then you can dwell in this particular moment—and no one can take that away from you. It can't disappear, or be broken, or get lost. It just is. Security lies in the simple fact that in essence one has nothing and one is nothing.

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## **About the Author**

Sister (Ayya) Khema was born in Germany, educated in Scotland and China, and later became a United States citizen. She was ordained as a Buddhist nun in Sri Lanka in 1979, and in 1984 established Parappuduwa Nuns Island as a training centre for Buddhist nuns and other women leading a contemplative life. She spends part of each year teaching meditation courses in different parts of the world, and the rest of the time in residence at Nuns Island.

## **Parappuduwa Nuns Island**

In the south of Sri Lanka, on Ratgama Lake near Dodanduwa, is the serene and idyllic Parappuduwa Nuns Island, a Buddhist nunnery which has been established by Sister Khema for women of all nationalities.

Some of the women here are ordained nuns, having made a full commitment to the homeless life; some are anagarikas taking the eight precepts for a minimum of one year; some are women who have come for a three-month period in which to do intensive study of the Dhamma and guided meditation before they return to their home countries.

As an integral part of their training, daily lectures

and discussions are held on the various aspects of the Dhamma. The essays presented here have been edited from Dhamma talks given on Parappuduwa Nuns Island by Sister Khema.

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