Self Images

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When you read Western Dharma books and listen to Western Dharma talks, it’s striking how often the issue of self-image comes up. It seems to be people’s biggest concern. They want to have a good image of themselves, a good sense of themselves, a good identity. Then they come to the meditation, they come to the Dharma as a tool, looking for a tool, to shore up that identity, to shore up that self-image. And even though there are teachings on not-self, we still manage to squeeze our self-image in there. We pride ourselves on our understanding of not-self. We pride ourselves on being good meditators, on being kind, loving people. Of course, the problem with self-image is that it’s built out of what? It’s built out of the five khandhas, and those things are like sand. You build your house on the sand, and of course the foundations are going to wear away, and the house is going to come crashing down. It’s not so easy for these things to come crashing down. They don’t have to wait for your body to disintegrate. As we’re mentioning today, sometimes the slightest lapse of mindfulness and a very negative thought comes into the mind. Of course, the existence of that negative thought, that vindictive thought or whatever, completely shatters a self-image. That seems to be the big issue, that it’s shattered the self-image. It seems to be the bigger issue than anything else. The purpose of the practice is to start focusing our attention away from issues of self-image. Years back, when I had just come back from Thailand, the organization that had sent me over was looking for some way of improving the training of the people who were going over to Asia. Someone had come up with the idea of bringing someone in from an institute in New York that had an especially effective way of teaching language. So they got in touch with the institute. The institute sent someone out, a Chinese woman whose English was amazing. To demonstrate the method, she decided to teach everybody Chinese for an hour. It was an interesting method. Instead of teaching about the grammar of Chinese or teaching the vocabulary, she had a pile of sticks. She would pick up a stick and say, “In Chinese, this is a stick.” She’d show it around the room, saying, “This is a stick, this is a stick,” and then have you repeat what she had said. In the course of the hour, without explaining anything but just through pantomime and through examples, she taught us how to count up to five. She taught us a number of colors in Chinese, how to say, “Give me a stick. Please take two sticks, take three sticks, take four red sticks,” whatever. It was amazing how much grammar you could pick up just by getting involved in the process, how much you learned about the language. Of course, I’ve forgotten it all by now. But there were a couple of people who just couldn’t get the hang of it. They spent all their time analyzing why other people could do it and they couldn’t. So, of course, the more they analyzed, the less they were able to do it. Or they got hung up on their self-image, on what this meant about them as potential language teachers or potential language learners, got in the way of actually learning the language. So the Buddha offers us, as meditators, a set of skills to focus on, and it’s not just in the beginning we may be concerned about how good we are as meditators or how good we are picking up the skill. But the point is that over time the skill itself becomes so absorbing that the issue of you or your image of yourself as a skilled meditator or as an unskilled meditator or as a kind person or as an unkind person or whatever just gets put aside. It’s simply the process of getting more and more in touch with what you’re doing, how you breathe, what you can learn from the breath, the things you learn about the breath, the way the breath reflects certain attitudes in the mind, and how you can use those insights. The point is that these things become more compelling, and the issue of self-image just gets put aside. We might use it at the beginning to pat ourselves on the back as we do something well. But we have to realize that there are limits to the uses of our self-image. Even a good self-image has its drawbacks, because, as I said, it can be so easily blown apart by one or two negative thoughts. If your concern is with maintaining that self-image, you’re spending all your time shoring it up and trying to defend it from those negative thoughts. Then you miss the point of the practice, which is to get into the skill. So that you find enjoyment simply doing it right, doing it well. And even when you’re not doing it well, you take enjoyment in learning. Because the issue of skillfulness relates directly to the Four Noble Truths, which is where the Buddha has us direct our meditation. That’s the direction we’re wanting to head. We focus on issues of skill, just mastering this process of being with the breath and immediately not thinking too much about how it’s going to teach you about inconstancy or stress or not-self. Just focus on mastering the skill, being alert, being mindful, so that when positive thoughts come up in the mind or negative thoughts come up in the mind, you approach them from the issue of are they skillful or not? What are their limitations? Because every skillful tool you have in your skill has its limitations. There are times when you need a positive self-image to pat yourself on the back. Well, pat yourself on the back, then put it aside. Other times you need a negative self-image to stir you up. Say, “Here I am.” I’m eating the food of other people, depending on their generosity. What am I doing? Sitting around, shooting the breeze, worried about this, worried about that, things that are off the path. Use that image to stir yourself up to do better. There are certain negative self-images that are not skillful at all. Say, “I’m totally hopeless. This is never going to go anywhere. I don’t know what to do.” That kind of image you just totally put aside. But there are times when you can be down on yourself that can motivate you to practice more strongly. So try to look at your self-image not as a static thing or an actual real thing. It’s a tool. If you approach life with a question of how to be more skillful in your thought process, in your thoughts, in your words, in your deeds, you realize self-image is a kind of thought. How can you use it skillfully, and how can you put it aside skillfully? In this way, instead of denying that you have a self, say, look at the question of self as an activity. It’s not a given. It’s something that you do. You create this image, and then you give yourself proof, “Well, I’m a good person because this, this, this, this.” But there are other things that happen in your mind that could just as easily be used to create a negative image. So learn how to develop this image as an activity that’s useful at some times but not useful at others. If you find yourself getting too smug, okay, that’s time to tear it down, because smugness leads to complacency. When you’re complacent, you miss a lot of things that are actually going on in the present. Your sense of ardor begins to flag. There are times when a negative image is good, times when a positive image is good, but most of the time you don’t want to be involved in that image at all. Get with the skill in and of itself. And the sense of exhilaration that comes from being with the skill, working on the skill, gets absorbed. So you don’t care who you are. It’s just being with the process that matters.

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