Dismantling the Self

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The Buddha once said that one of the signs of being a wise person is knowing what are your problems and what are not your problems, and working only on what really are your problems, not caring around everything else. This is an important point to reflect on. It’s one of the first things I learned from Ajahn Phuong. In Thai they say, “What are your issues? What are your issues? What are your problems? What are not your problems?” This is basic discernment. It’s important to keep this point in mind as you go through the Buddha’s various teachings. You need to see exactly what problems he’s attacking, the genuine problems you have, which, of course, are the problems of suffering, the stress and suffering you create for yourself. That was the topic of his first sermon when a group of monks went to pay their respects to Sariputta before going off to a land where Buddhist monks hadn’t been before. Sariputta said, “When people meet you, they’re going to ask you, ‘What are your teacher’s advice? What’s the first thing you’re going to tell them?’” So the monk said, “Well, we’d like to hear your advice on what should be the first thing we tell them.” Sariputta said, “Our teacher teaches the letting go of attachment to the five khandhas, to your body, feelings, perceptions, thought constructs, consciousness.” He said, “Then they’ll ask you, ‘What are the drawbacks of clinging to these things?’” Because we cling, we suffer. That’s what it boils down to. What are the advantages of not clinging? Well, the advantages of not clinging are that when you don’t cling, you don’t suffer. That, in a nutshell, is the Buddha’s teachings. Clinging is suffering, and it’s something you can do or you cannot do. It’s not that we have to cling. So that’s the problem. We’re clinging, and we don’t know how to let go. So the purpose of the practice is learning how to let go of our clinging to those five types of things. Keep this in mind as you look at the Buddha’s other teachings, because this basic point forms the framework. We learn how to let go of our ways of clinging. We cling through sensual passion. We cling through our views. We cling through our fixed ideas of how to do certain things. If you only do this right or do that right, that’ll take care of everything. In other words, if you don’t step on the cracks in the sidewalk, that kind of ritualistic thinking, which we all bring with us from childhood, is still there. Even though our society has learned to dump on as many rituals as possible, still we have lots of ideas about whether there’s a proper way of doing this or a proper way of doing that, and that absolves you from all responsibility because you did it the right way, without looking into your intention behind it. That’s a kind of clinging, too. Finally, there’s clinging to doctrines of the Self. This is probably the most firmly entrenched form of clinging, which is why the Buddha focused so much attention on giving us the tools to uproot this clinging. But you have to look at exactly what the problem is. Sometimes people say that the Buddha’s teachings are not Self, or that there is no Self. Well, is that your problem? Do you have a problem because you have a Self, or do you have a problem because you create a Self and cling to it? That’s the issue. If you keep creating a sense of Self, that’s something you can learn how to take apart. But do you suffer because you have a Self? We suffer because we think we have a Self, and we get all wound up in maintaining that sense of Self. But when you look at what’s actually going on in the mind, we keep creating a sense of Self. That’s the problem. That’s what the not-Self teachings are all designed to take apart. If you looked at it the other way and said, “What would life be like if you didn’t have a Self?” Well, that would create problems, too. There are not as many of these outlined in the canon, but they’re there. The Buddha said, “If you taught people that they had no Self, they’d be bewildered. ‘What happened to the Self I used to have?’” Or there would be people who would try to use the teaching that there is no Self to get around karmic responsibility. “If there is no Self, then what Self is going to suffer from the karmic deeds done by what is not-Self?” A monk came up with that question one time. And you see this all around you. People say, “Well, if there is no Self, I can just go ahead and do as I like, because what karmic consequences can there be? I’m not going to be around for them.” That’s a problem, too. But very few people can maintain that idea that there is no Self, even if they have it as a doctrine. If you look at the way they behave, they don’t behave in that way at all. If they really felt they had no Self, they wouldn’t take care of anything, they wouldn’t worry, they wouldn’t make any effort at all, because they wouldn’t be there to enjoy the fruits of their effort. But people keep acting in this way, which means that even if they have a formal doctrine that there is no Self, still, deep down inside, they act as if there is one. So the real problem is our attachment to the notion of Self that we keep creating. Because what do we do? We latch on to the five khandhas. And what are the five khandhas? Well, those are constructed things as well. If you look at what the Buddha has to say about them, there’s always an element of fabrication, even in your experience of life. You form your experience of feeling, perception, fabrication, consciousness. There’s the potential for these five kinds of things to be experienced, but you have to take that potential and work with it in order to turn it into an actual experience in the present moment. So there’s already something fabricated there. You’re taking fabricated things and then you’re going to take those and you’re going to turn them into a Self. Because when you analyze exactly where your sense of Self lies, it’s in one of these five kinds of things. You either identify with a body, a sense that you are the body, or something that your Self is in the body, or the body is in the Self, or the Self possesses the body. Or feelings, the same four types of relationships. Either you identify directly with the feeling itself, or you have a sense that your Self owns the feeling, or the feeling is in your Self, or your Self is in the feeling, and so on down with the different aggregates. So what the Buddha has us do is focus on this sense of Self that we create, and to see precisely that it is a creation, and that in the course of creating it, you cling to it, and because you cling to it, there is suffering. That’s what your real problem is. So you learn to take that apart. So as we sit here and meditate, what do we do? Well, we take those same five khandhas and we turn them into a path. You work with a body, you work with a feeling, you adjust the feelings in the body through the breath. So there you have two of the khandhas already—body, or form, and feeling. And then you have your perceptions of the breath. The breath is coming in here, the breath is going out there. This is what you do in order to have to breathe. That’s a perception. The way you label the different sensations in the body as we meditate, we learn to label more and more of our sense of the body as a type of breathing, a type of breath energy. That is a way of getting your awareness to become totally immersed in the body as a whole. As for the fabrication, well, that’s the direct thought and the evaluation that you do as you’re working with the breath, as you keep reminding yourself to stay with the breath. The breath itself is a kind of fabrication. The direct thought and the evaluation, that’s a kind of fabrication. The feelings and perceptions around the breath, that’s fabrication, too. Physical, verbal, mental fabrication. It’s all right here. Then there’s the consciousness underlying all these things. So what we do as we practice is we take these five khandhas that we’ve been building into a self, and then we turn them into something else, turn them into a path. Because as you turn them into this kind of path, it’s easier and easier to watch them, to get a sense of what you’re doing. Because there’s a greater sense of well-being, there’s a greater sense of calm, peace, stillness in the mind. So those bricks you’ve been carrying on your shoulders, you take them down and you pave a path with them. As the path gets smoother and smoother, you can start inspecting the path and realize, “Why are these the same old five khandhas?” Then you realize that even the path is something impermanent. You can’t identify with that. Basically, when you take the khandhas and turn them into the path, this is as good as the khandhas can get. If you’re really observant, you notice that it’s not all that good. The Buddha said that when you see that, even in the state of jhana, you can get really still, really plugged into that state of absorption. After a while, you can pull yourself out a little bit and look at that state of absorption and see that the khandhas are still there, and they’re still. Wherever there’s fabrication, there’s going to be stress. It’s going to be impermanent, stressful. Do you really want to identify with something that’s impermanent and stressful? When it really hits home, then you incline the mind, as the Buddha says, to the tapas. It’s through inclining it to the tapas that you can let go of these things. The path this way turns into a runway, and you take off. You’ve learned how to stop creating suffering, which was the original problem. At that point, would you say there is a self or there is no self? It’s irrelevant to the issue. You know that if you create your sense of self, you’re going to suffer. You create that sense of self-identity, so you’ve learned to stop doing that. But whether in the larger scheme of things there’s actually a self lurking back there or there is no self lurking back there, that’s irrelevant to the problem. It actually gets in the way if you really think there is a self. You tie yourself up in knots. If you think there is no self, well, that creates problems as well. The issue at this point is a non-issue. So it’s important, you realize, that the teachings are there to point to your real problems. The real problem is the way you create suffering for yourself. You find along the path that there are times when a sense of self-reliance, self-responsibility, a sense of self-worth and self-esteem, these are useful things on the path that keep you there. You notice that on certain levels of the teaching, the Buddha actually encourages you to rely on yourself. In other words, there’s a way of teaching you to not go around hoping for other people or outside forces or fate or whatever to do everything for you. You realize you’ve got to do this practice. You’ve got to take care of your problems. And you need a sense of self-worth in order to stick with the path. You need a sense of self-reliance so that in these stages of the path, the sense of self is a useful thing to have. It’s only when you’ve taken that sense of self as far as it can go that you want to start taking it apart. Start realizing that that sense of self is an activity. It’s something you do. The Buddha’s term is this activity of “I-making” and “my-making.” That’s the problem. The problem is the issue of whether there’s a self back there. That’s not a problem. If there is a self, it’s not a problem. If there’s no self, that’s not a problem. But if you believe there is or is not a self, that creates a problem. It’s the belief. That’s the issue. That’s the self-making. When you weigh it down and cling to it, that’s what’s the issue. That’s what the problem is. So as a wise person, you want to focus on what the real problem is. And as for anything that’s not a real problem, you let it go. Like the story of the stupid people they were telling today. The man’s going to marry off his wife, goes to the house of the groom, and sees this stairwell where there’s an old axe hanging over the door, held up by rusty nails. And he starts to think, “Someday those nails are going to rust out, and it’s going to happen, and it’s going to fall, and it’s going to kill my grandchild.” And he starts crying. That’s a sign of a stupid person, worrying about things that are not really the issue. So as meditators, you want to focus on what your real issues are. And the issues are, how are you creating suffering, and how can you learn to stop creating that suffering? And so you look at your sense of self. In what ways is your sense of self a useful thing to help you stop? When it teaches you self-reliance, when it teaches you self-responsibility, when you learn how to act on those principles so you can build a sense of self-esteem, then it’s a useful principle, a useful activity. Once you’ve learned how to create that good, strong sense of accomplishment, competence self, then you can take it apart. Many times, if you try to take it apart before you have that sense of competence, it’s kind of a neurotic running away. You don’t like yourself, and teaching of not-self sounds like a good way of obliterating that self you don’t like. That doesn’t work. First you have to create a sense of self-reliance, self-esteem. In other words, take that sense of self as far as you can take it. Then when you’ve taken it as far as it can help you go, then you drop it. Take it apart. Take that activity apart as part of your larger project of learning how to stop creating suffering for yourself. So always keep this point in mind, that we’re working on our real problems here. As the Buddha pointed out, this is what our real problem is—the suffering we’re creating for ourselves. And he offers a solution to the problem. You focus on that solution. As for other issues, just put them aside. Don’t weigh yourself down. Don’t burden yourself with things that are not real issues. This way, you practice staying on course. Your thinking about the practice keeps coming back and helping your meditation, rather than leading you off into other lands and other chat rooms. The Buddhist teachings were designed to be tools that you apply right here to what you’re doing right here, right now. So make sure you use them properly. They’re sharp tools. They’re precise. And because they’re sharp and precise, they can cut you if you’re not careful. But if you keep their true purpose in mind, they do a lot of good.

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