Our Sense of Self

April 14, 2006

We tend to think of our sense of self as something we are. It’s a given in our experience. You tell yourself, “I am the body. I am my mind. This is me. It’s the way it’s been ever since I was born. It’s the way it’s going to be until I die.” But the Buddha didn’t think in that way. As with so many other things, he saw the sense of self as something we do. We want pleasure, we want to avoid pain, and so we try to get some control over them. That’s the essence of what self means, is a sense of control. That’s why we do it. It’s our strategy for controlling pleasure, for controlling pain. And we have many different strategies. These strategies are so ingrained in our habits that we hardly even notice them, which is why they seem to be a given. They’re there all the time. But one of the most useful insights for meditation is the Buddha’s teaching. The Buddha’s recognition that the sense of self is something we do. We identify with this, and then we drop that. We go and identify with something else. When anger comes, you identify with the anger. When greed comes, you identify with the greed. And when they go away, you identify with a state of mind that doesn’t have greed or doesn’t have anger. Sometimes you identify with your body. Sometimes you identify with specific thoughts in the mind. So your sense of self shuffles around a lot. If you could take a picture of it, it would be like an amoeba, spreading out a little pseudopod here, a little pseudopod there, changing shape all the time. And it’s a strategy that’s worked, to some extent. If it hadn’t worked at all, we would have dropped it a long time ago. This is why when the Buddha talks about not-self, we feel threatened. It’s as if he’s going to take something away from us, deprive us of our strategies. But that’s not the case. He’s actually providing us with more strategies. On the one hand, he tries to expand our sense of what kind of happiness is possible. There’s a greater happiness than that that can come from satisfaction with your work, gaining material things, gaining friends, gaining power, feeling good about yourself. There’s a greater happiness than this. But to attain it, we have to learn how to disidentify ourselves with strategies that we’ve clung to very tenaciously. And to get us ready for that skill, the Buddha has us develop more and more skillful senses of self to begin with. It’s why we practice generosity. It’s why we practice virtue. When you learn to identify with a generous mind state, you find that you really enjoy it. It’s much more expansive than a greedy or stingy mind state. And you learn how to drop the greedy or stingy mind state. It may come up, but you decide you don’t have to identify with it. That’s a little teaching in not-self right there. In other words, the Buddha provides you with new strategies. So you can drop some of the blatantly unskillful ones. And it’s not that the idea of not-self is anything really new in our lives. We’ve had to learn it from a very early age. You identify with some things, and you don’t identify with others. That’s what identification means. The self, that you can use to manipulate pleasure and pain, and the self that receives the results of that pleasure and pain. Those are the things you identify with. Everything else you disidentify with. Everything else is not-self. If your brother has a toy that you’d like to have as yours, and you go and claim it as your own, if he’s bigger than you are, he may sock you in the face. So you decide, well, maybe that’s not my toy. You learn how not to identify with certain things to maintain the well-being of things that you find are more important. So the whole strategy of self already involves the strategy of not-self, the things that you have to drop for the sake of maintaining the well-being of the part that you want to hold on to. What we’re doing as we practice is we’re learning how to articulate this sense of self and to develop a more skillful way. We learned how to articulate the strategy of not-self and develop in more skillful ways, like when we’re sitting here meditating. You can, if you want, identify with all the pains and all the aches and all the misery that may come up in the course of the meditation. But what does that do? It just gets you tied down and makes you miserable. Or, you can learn consciously not to identify with them. In other words, you want to take this process and bring it up into consciousness. It’s like talking cures in psychotherapy. It’s that strange process of finding that simply being able to talk about things many times can help solve a problem in the mind. What you’re doing as you’re talking is you’re learning how to articulate what’s going on in the mind. Once it’s articulated, then it’s a lot easier to deal with. So many times we have these vague notions that swim around in the mind. Because they’re so vague and ill-defined, we can never really get a handle on them. As a result, they have power over us. It’s like letting someone else come in and take over. It’s that old idea that if you can name the ghost, the ghost will go away. It’s the same thing in the mind. These vague, shapeless ideas, if you can name them, if you can articulate them, then you get power over them. So this amoebic sense of self that comes swishing through the body and then swishing through the mind, once you learn how to articulate it, you notice, “Okay, this is where I’m identifying with my hands. This is where I’m identifying with the breath. Now I’m identifying with fear. Now I’m identifying with anxiety. Now I’m identifying with anxiety.” You see that as something you do, then you can start manipulating in ways that are helpful. You’re sitting here in a body that has the potential both for pleasure and for pain. Learn to identify with the pleasure. Learn how to keep it going. Know that sitting here for an hour, there are going to be pains that are going to come up. You’ve done it many times before. You know where the pains are going to be. So you get yourself ready. Work on making the breath comfortable. Once the breath is comfortable, start spreading it down, especially into those areas that will tend to be painful, and out through them. Say if it’s in your back, in your hips, think of it going down the back, out through your hips, out through the legs, out through your toes, a sense of comfortable, relaxed breath. Keep the center of your awareness, say, in the chest or in a part that you know is not going to get pained. As little pains come nibbling here and nibbling there, be aware of them. Don’t wait until they get really blatant until you suddenly turn your attention to them, because by that time your sense of self is probably latched onto them. Notice them when they’re small. Notice them when they’re big. Notice them when they’re just beginning. Be very conscious about reminding yourself, “That’s not me. That’s just a pain.” If the part of the mind says, “Well, it’s in my body,” what’s yours about the body? That’s why we have those 32 parts of the body to contemplate. Go through which part of the body is really you or yours—the liver, the lungs, the intestines. Is there anything in there that you can really, ultimately, totally control? This gets back to the initial impulse for having a sense of self to begin with, as a sense of control. You realize, no, you can’t. You control these things a little bit for a certain period of time. But as the Buddha said, you can’t say, “Don’t grow ill. Don’t get old. Don’t die.” They’re going to do these things on their own. During my ordination ceremony, when I was given instruction on the 32 parts of the body, my preceptor made the point of anatta by saying, “Now that you’ve shaved your hair, can you tell your hair not to grow?” The idea struck me as so funny that he actually laughed in the middle of the ceremony, which he didn’t like. But it’s true. We like to think that we have some control over our bodies. After all, these are the things we’re going to control so that we can get other forms of happiness. But in ultimate terms, there will have to come a point where you realize you don’t have total control. So the question is, are you just going to continue to hold on to them, or are you going to learn how to let go? In letting go, the Buddha doesn’t leave you defenseless or without any other place to go. He says, “Learn to hold on to things that are more skillful. You can hold on to sensations of pleasure, sensations of ease that you’ve learned how to create in the body through the breath.” And then you learn how to hold on to the qualities of mind that make that possible—mindfulness, alertness, concentration. This goes against our old habits, and it’s going to require an effort, especially in the beginning, because you’re rusty at these new skills. It takes time to work through them, to develop them, to keep coming back to them. But it’s an effort that’s well spent. A hard effort doesn’t mean a middling effort all the time. Sometimes it means a lot of effort. Sometimes it means just the barest minimum of effort, determined by what’s appropriate for the issue at hand. As you learn to get a conscious handle on this habit you have of creating a sense of self as a strategy, then you can turn it into a more skillful strategy. Take it as far as it can go, which will get you into good states of concentration. You may begin to gain some insights. As, bit by bit by bit, you learn how to let go of things that you can’t really control and find that there is a greater sense of freedom, a less sense of being burdened in the mind. As you appreciate this process, it gets you more inclined to see what else you can let go of. Are there other more subtle burdens in there? This is where the not-self strategy takes precedence over the self strategy. But again, it’s a strategy for happiness, simply that it gets more and more refined. Do you find that you can find an ultimate happiness that comes from letting go of any kind of sense of self? You don’t even identify with awareness, or the ground of being, or whatever. Do you find that that’s a skill that’s really, really worthwhile? So we’re not being deprived of our strategies. The Buddha’s giving us wider range. He’s also trying to expand our imagination, our sense of what kind of happiness is possible. So we’re more willing to try new strategies to gain that greater happiness. So don’t look at the teaching of not-self as a form of deprivation. It’s a very important set of skills. You can add to your self-skills, replace them in many cases with better skills, until eventually you attain release. There is freedom lurking here in this process. Whether it takes a lot of effort or a little effort, it’s worth every bit of effort that goes into it.

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