The Identity Crutch

September 10, 2007

We all know that one of the goals of Buddhist practice is to get beyond the limitations of your self-identification, your sense of who you are. But that doesn’t mean you drop it right from the beginning. After all, self-identification does have its uses. If it didn’t have its uses, we probably wouldn’t have invented the idea and we wouldn’t find it so hard to let go. And as it turns out, it’s actually a useful thing to have on the practice. It’s a useful tool if you learn how to use it well. So instead of being embarrassed about it and trying to deny it, which means that it goes underground and you never really get much use out of it, try to bring it more out into the open. There is that passage where a nun is teaching a nun, saying that the conceit “I am” is something you want to overcome in the practice, but that particular conceit is something that helps you along the way. You hear that other people have attained the goal, and you realize, you stop and think, “Those are human beings. I’m a human being. They can do it. I can do it.” In other words, you see yourself as potentially equal to them. They started from the same place where you are, and you have the potential of going to the same place where they are. That’s a healthy use of conceit. There are many other healthy uses for the sense of identification. After all, what is that sense of identification? You draw a line. The things that are yours, the things that are not yours, the things that lie under your control, the things that don’t. The things that are worth fighting for, the things that are not. We need to make these distinctions in order to function. It’s a basic prerequisite for our ability to find happiness in the world, which is why many people don’t like the teaching on not-self. They think they’re going to be deprived of their strategies for happiness. But that’s not how the Buddha taught it. Actually, the teaching on not-self is something that’s inherent even in having a self. When you have a sense of self, there’s going to be an area that’s not-self. But that area changes. The lines change. You see this from the very beginning of your life. If you have any siblings, say you have a brother, there are times when you have to draw the line very clearly between yourself and your brother. Especially when you’re fighting over something. He has a toy truck, you want the toy truck, he is very much not you at that point. But say he is your big brother, and then someone down the street comes and starts beating up on you. You go running to your big brother to help you. After all, he is your brother at that point. The lines have changed. And you find this. If you look at yourself in the course of the day, your sense of who you are changes over time. It’s very mercurial. It’s like an amoeba. It sends out a pseudopod here and a little blob there, and then it pulls back and moves someplace else. What we’re doing in the practice as we’re on the path is not so much trying to erase those boundaries as to be more deliberate and figure out, “Where is happiness?” “Where are the useful things to identify with and where are the useful things to not identify with?” That’s what the not-self teaching is all about. You’re looking at things that you’re identifying with and seeing that they’re causing you to suffer. So you learn how to let go. Simply, as the practice progresses, you get a more and more refined sense of how to draw the line and begin to find that there’s less and less territory that you really want to let claim to as yourself or your own. And you finally get to the point where you find a happiness that doesn’t require this anymore. That’s when you let it go. As long as your happiness requires a sense of self, you’re going to have to learn how to use it, how to use it wisely. For instance, I don’t know how many times I’ve heard the idea that once you become a meditator, don’t build an identity. There are areas where it’s unhealthy to build an identity around being a meditator. You think, “Here I am, I’m a meditator. I’ve been meditating all these years and my mind can still crash if there’s something wrong with me.” That’s an unskillful use of that identity. A skillful use is when you come up against a problem and you find yourself reacting to it in an unskillful way. You remind yourself, “Hey, I am a meditator. I’ve got some tools I can use.” You learn how to deal with this problem. Things I’ve been learning, dealing with the breath, learning how to focus on the breath, learning how to spread a sense of ease through the body, learning to develop that sense of ease in a way that’s not dependent on things outside. That’s maybe a useful skill to bring into this particular situation, my ability to examine my thoughts, to step back from my thoughts and look at them simply as being. Processes in the mind. That might be useful to bring in here. The qualities of endurance that you’ve learned. Learn to endure pain as we’re sitting here. Not because this is the only place where endurance is necessary. When other situations come up, you learn to put your preferences aside and just do what needs to be done. Stick with what needs to be done. Endure the situation. Do not get entangled in your dislike of suddenly having to take on that particular role or do that particular task. It’s going to take a long time. Or stay in a situation where things are going to be difficult. If you’ve learned endurance as a meditator, bring it out and use it. If you find yourself slipping back into your old habits, your old emotional patterns, remind yourself, “I’ve got some tools now that I can use that I didn’t have before. I don’t have to be that old person. I can be a new person, someone who’s got a few tricks up his sleeve or her sleeve.” In this way, your identity as a meditator becomes a useful tool. It may be a crutch, but when you need a crutch, use the crutch. Otherwise, it’s like a person who’s got a wounded foot and he’s on crutches and someone says, “Well, when you get well, you won’t need to use your crutches anymore.” So he throws the crutches away so he’ll get well. It doesn’t work that way. You use the crutches as long as you need them. And then, when you don’t need them anymore, then you can drop them. We’re not here trying to clone awakening. We’re following a path. The path doesn’t look like awakening. It bears some resemblances now and then, but it’s something different. The process of following the path develops your skills in the sense of becoming more sensitive, more alert, all the skills you’re going to need for awakening. But you don’t need to have a very clearly articulated idea of awakening in order to follow the path. That’s one of the reasons why the Buddha didn’t talk about the goal that much. He gave a few teasers to make you interested. But by and large, he was concerned in how to get you there. Once you get there, you don’t need to have it described. You know it. What needs to be described is the various skills you need. How to judge when something is useful and when it’s not. Again and again, the Buddha kept saying, “Look at the results.” If you’re using your identity as a meditator and it’s making you miserable, well, you’re using it the wrong way. Drop it for the time being. Or look for the positive ways you can use it. That helps remind you of some skills. It helps remind you that you’re not the person you used to be before you meditated. There are lots of things in the path that you have to hold on to. That’s why we have the path, again, the simile of the raft. We all know the part that you would let go of the raft after you’ve gotten across the river. But while you’re on the river, crossing over the river, hold on. Sometimes you’re worried about not getting attached to concentration. You’ve got to be attached to concentration if you’re going to do it well. You have to see the pleasure of concentration as something that you really like, that you really are interested in. That way you put in the energy you need in order to master the concentration. So don’t throw away your crutches. You’ve reached the point where your foot is healed enough and you don’t need them anymore. Learn how to use them skillfully. As the John Lee once said, “A person of discernment can take anything and use it skillfully.” So before you start throwing things away willy-nilly, see if they have any uses left to them. Think of the Buddha’s image of a bird. The bird’s wings are a burden. They have some weight to them. The bird is just sitting around, not doing anything. The wings weigh on its back. But the wings can enable it to fly, so it’ll be willing to have a few burdens. Be very careful to choose only the burdens that can help you to fly.

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