Pain, Self & Not-self

February 1, 2012

Our sense of self and non-self is something that moves around all the time, and the boundaries keep changing. It’s something we’ve been doing ever since we were children. First learning how to establish a boundary, realizing there was a need for a boundary, and then learning that it moves. Very rarely, though, are we conscious of this. What forces it to move is that we keep running up against things beyond our control, or something that seems to be under our control for a while and then changes. And as the Buddha points out, this is a part of our process of becoming. We take on an identity, and we have a relevant world of experience that goes with that identity. And the identity comes from where? It comes from desire. We have a specific desire, and we define ourselves around it. We’re the ones who can hopefully bring that desire to fruition, and then we’ll be the ones who will experience it. And as for the world, it becomes relevant or irrelevant, or an obstacle depending on whether it’s helpful to the desire, or not related to the desire, or actually gets in the way of the desire. Because desire is always moving someplace, it’s always running into things. One of the purposes of the meditation is to learn how to watch this process, learn how to understand it, and readjust our desires to actually do lead to happiness. It’s going to mean making some changes in our sense of who we are and the world around us. Years back, a relative came to visit the monastery. We picked him up down in San Diego as we were driving through Valley Center. He noticed the one place in Valley Center where alcohol was served. Now, that’s a place I had never noticed, because that’s not relevant to what I’m interested in. But for this relative, it was very relevant. It shows how our sense of the world really depends on what we’re looking for. So as we’re sitting here meditating, try to think about this a bit. You’re sitting here trying to get the mind to settle down. That’s the desire. And you learn how to define your sense of self around that. Which parts of the mind are helpful, which ones are not, which ones are irrelevant. And as for the body sitting here, which parts are helpful, which ones are irrelevant, and which ones are obstacles. Learn how to adjust things accordingly. For example, if we sit here with a desire to make a pain go away, the pain becomes the big issue. It becomes the big obstacle. Then we become the person who wants the pain to go away and is pushing and pulling and trying all these various techniques to get it to go away. And our sense of ourselves and our sense of how the meditation is going often gets defined around that, which may or may not be helpful. Because there are some pains that really are caused by our actions in the present moment, and others that are the result of past karma. If it’s a past karma kind of pain, you have to work around it. And if the spot in the body where there’s a pain is part of your identity, you’re going to have to learn how to redefine yourself, redefine your relationship to the body. And if you find the mind going back to the pain again, remember that’s the thing that is the self that’s defined around the desire to get rid of the pain. And you may say you want to retire that self for a while. And it may be very insistent, it’s upset about the pain, it has lots of fears and issues around the pain. But just let it rest. Work with a new desire. How to be able to settle in with a sense of ease in the body. That doesn’t have to be affected by whether or not that pain is there. And the self that’s concerned about the pain, worried about what it’s going to do in the future, just tell it, “Okay, let’s work with this new self for a while, have a new place to go.” And if the pain is in your knee or if the pain is in your back, well, go someplace else. If you can’t hang out in the body, hang out in the sense of space around the body. But try to get a sense of yourselves as fluid. This is one of the important lessons in the meditation. Because actually they already are. It’s simply that we tend to hang on to inappropriate ones at the wrong time. That’s what causes a lot of trouble. So we concede these selves as a committee or as a stable that you’ve got to keep for various purposes. If you find the self that’s willing to be with the body and not get worked up about the pain is weak, try to feed it with some comfortable breathing and feed it with the right attitude as well. If this is a new self that requires training, it’s going to take some time. Be patient with it. It may take a little while to get used to it, but all of our selves have taken a while to get used to it. Some we’ve latched onto very quickly. But if you trace things back, you’ll find that you may have had some old habits in that direction already, and so it’s very easy. Now we’re working on new habits, and it takes time. It’s like working with a puppy. You have to be firm and consistent, and gain a sense of the puppy’s strength. How much training can it take in the course of a day? And then work within those parameters. This is one of the ways you can work with the puppy. It’s one of the ways in which concentration practice really helps us understand what’s going on in the mind, all the different roles the mind plays, all the different worlds and selves it creates. It’s really good to know these things, see them in action, and learn how to do this process of becoming in a skillful way. Concentration is the ultimate level of becoming, the most skillful level of becoming. It enables us to watch what’s going on in the mind. Things are relatively quiet. When they’re quiet, you can see the subtle things. Just as when we’re here in the meditation room, when we’re chanting, we can’t hear the sound of the pilot light in the heater. Now it’s very clear. It’s because we’re quiet. So when the mind gets quiet, you begin to see its movements and its strategies. And you find that it has a lot of strategies, some of which are skillful, some of which are not. You want to get to learn how to know them, watch them in action, and learn how to do some of these things that we’ve been doing unskillfully or with some skill or with some lack of skill. Be consistent in doing them skillfully before you’re going to let go totally of your sense of self when it’s no longer needed, i.e., when you reach the deathless. You’re going to need to learn how to manipulate that sense of self, realizing that it can take many different shapes. So you want to find the shape that’s just right for this quest to put an end to suffering, to understand the mind, to gain some insight that will put an end to suffering. So we don’t jump in right away and say everything is not-self. We learn how to be selective about self and not-self in a more skillful way. Right now that pain is not-self. But the awareness, the focal point of the awareness, that’s where your sense of self is going to gather around right now. You can be around the pain. You can be a totally different part of the body. As long as you’re willing to redefine yourself in this way, you find that you can do things a lot more skillfully. I was talking over the weekend to someone who’s interested in one of those systems where they define people’s personalities by numbers. And she was pointing out that as people get more and more skilled at meditating, they get less and less clearly defined. It’s harder to pin them down into one number or another. It’s because as a meditator you’re learning to take on lots of different roles and lots of different selves, more and more appropriate. We run into our sense of self when it’s part of the obstacle, when it takes on a role that’s really inappropriate. But as you learn to take on more appropriate roles, your sense of self gets more fluid. It’s more subtle. It’s more appropriate for whatever’s going on. So here’s an object lesson. We’ve got a pain that doesn’t respond. Work around it. The Buddha says we’re putting an end to suffering. It doesn’t mean we’re putting an end to physical pain. We’re putting an end to the unnecessary suffering the mind creates through its desires, its craving, its ignorance. So try to bring some knowledge to what’s going on through mindfulness, through concentration. That’s the path to the end of suffering. You can see it right here. This is where it all plays out. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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