Sorting Out Your Selves

April 4, 2015

I was in New York a while back, and one of the people I met said she liked listening to my dharma talks because she liked the crickets in the background. So give the crickets a little say here. As we’re saying today, one of the big problems in life is that we’re frazzled by our culture. We’re pulled in all sorts of directions because the culture has gotten very good at aggravating our desires. Back in the old days, a lot of effort was spent on teaching children how to keep their greed, aversion, and delusion under control, because their parents knew that this was going to be an important part of being a human being and surviving as a human being. But now the education is being turned over to the internet, over to TV, over all those apps they have out there. I was told that there are about 3,000 apps for kids five and under. And the people who design the apps don’t let their own children have access to them, because they know how they’re designed. They’re designed to aggravate your greed, aggravate your anger, whatever, aggravate your defilements. Of course, if we weren’t primed to be greedy and angry and deluded, these things would have no effect. But the mind does have this tendency. It likes to give rise to desires. This is one thing it’s really good at. And the reason we feel so torn is because for every desire that we go for, there’s a sense of self. Actually, two senses of self. The self that’s going to consume the pleasure that we’re aiming at, whether it’s a physical pleasure or a mental pleasure. And the self that can produce it, that has the capabilities, has the talents and skills to gain that pleasure. And a lot of the pleasures, a lot of the desires, pull in different directions. If you go for one, you’re going to be missing out on another. The culture promises us that you can go for as many desires as you want, because that’s what it means to be a fully realized human being. That’s what they say. But we can take this disadvantage we have of these scattered selves and turn it to our advantage. Stop and think for a moment. If you had only one sense of self, it would be either good or bad. If it was good, there’d be nothing you could do to change it. If it was bad, there’d be nothing you could do to change it. It just would be what it is. So even though we have lots of unskillful desires pulling in different directions and lots of unskillful senses of self to go along with them, we do have some skillful ones. And the whole purpose of the practice is to learn how to train those skillful ones, give them a larger range of skills, and in some cases create new, even more skillful senses of self, so we can change the balance of power inside. So we can streamline our desires, get them in line, get them coherent, aiming at a pleasure that’s really worthwhile. A pleasure that comes from generosity, a pleasure that comes from being virtuous, a pleasure that comes from meditating, all the way to the pleasure of nirvana. It’s something we can do because we have all these different senses of self. We can get the good ones to work together so that we can either convert the unskillful ones or show you that you really don’t want to identify with them anymore. That’s what the not-self teaching is all about. Is or is not a self? That’s a question you put aside. So you’re getting tangled in that question, “Do I have a self? Do I not have a self?” It’s a tangle of views, a wilderness of views, a writhing of views, you said. And we see this all around us. People say, “Well, if the Buddha said there’s no self, then x, x, x.” And you get yourself into lots of trouble if you say there is no self. You get yourself into trouble if you say there is a self, because there’s going to be attachment. What you’ve got to do is learn how to sort through your senses of self. Each one of them involves desire and attachment, but some of them are good. You learn how to train them. And you learn how to take this conversation we have inside, and although many times it’s polite enough to call it a conversation, it’s a shouting match, a war among the various senses of self. And you learn how to make it more polite. At the same time, you learn how to undo some of the tricks of your really unskillful members here. One of the things they like to do is hijack your breath. A desire arises in the mind, and if you go for it, there’s going to be a catch in the breath, and that will affect the hormones in the body, how you feel about your body, patterns of tension throughout the body. What you’ve got to do is learn how to get the body on your side, undo the effects of those unskillful members. This is why we focus so much attention on the breath here, so we can get the body on our side. Reclaim your breath. Get acquainted with it. Notice how it comes in, how it goes out, which parts of the breath energy in the body stay still, which parts of the breath energy in the body move around, and the various ways you can alter the breath energy. A lot of this is going to be trial and error. You force things too much and you start getting a headache, or force things in the wrong direction. You suddenly feel very tight in your chest, or as if there’s a blockage someplace around your throat. If that happens, you back off for a bit. You say, “Well, the breath is going to come in and go out on its own. Let it do that for a while.” You let things settle down, and then you can try again. One of the purposes of the instructions is to give you ideas of possibilities you might not have thought of before. So you’re not limited to your old ways of thinking. You’re not limited to your old ways of relating to the energies in the body. Then you can use this knowledge. Anger comes up. Greed comes up. Sadness comes up. How do you deal with them? Well, get the breath on your side. That’s where you can start sorting out yourselves. Because you’re coming, the skillful part of you, the skillful members of the committee, are coming from a position of strength. The breath is theirs now. It puts you in a position where you can step back from things. And the obstreperous members of the committee are not so strong. They may be devious, but you have to be more devious than they are. In other words, anticipate the way they argue with you, or the way they argue their case. Many times they’re really dumb, but they’re smart enough to know that they can get away with things by threats or whispering campaigns. So you have to be on your guard against those things and learn how to defend yourself from them. Greed, aversion, and delusion have their glamour. They’ve learned how to dress themselves up to look really nice, really attractive. Often we’re more attracted by the greed or the lust or the anger than we are attracted to the object or repelled by the object. We like these energies, but then they exhaust us. Part of it, there’s a sense of power that comes with them. So what you’ve got to learn how to do is learn how to identify with the sense of having extra skills now and learning to exercise your powers so that you can be stronger than them. You can be on top of the game. So the senses of self that want to have true happiness, a happiness that lasts. Again, notice that the Buddha is not saying, “Sacrifice your well-being for other people.” He’s saying, “Sacrifice your lesser happiness for the sake of a larger happiness.” Happiness is not only lasting, but it’s also blameless. There is a moral aspect to all this. Think about the Buddha when he left home. He said he wanted to follow a noble path. There was a sense of honor in his quest for true happiness. So this is not a selfish thing. The fact that you’re finding happiness is not going to put a burden on anybody else. That’s an important principle to hold to. So learn how to strengthen the good members of your committee, the good selves in your stable. You can be in a position to look at the unskillful ones and realize, “This is not really what I want to be. This is not something that’s worth identifying with.” When the Buddha asked those questions about is your body constant or inconstant, the answer was inconstant. Is it something inconstant, stressful, or easeful? Well, it’s stressful. And the conclusion is, “Is this worth holding on to as yourself?” Well, no. Notice he’s not saying, “Is there a self or is there no self?” He’s saying, “Is this particular thing you’re holding on to or attached to that you’re identifying with, is it worth identifying with?” That’s how you use the not-self to strip away all the unskillful selves that you’ve been gathering over the years. Strengthening the good ones, creating new good ones that are even stronger. Have a wider range of skills, because you can’t get rid of unskillful senses of self-worth without having new skills, both to change the conversation and to let go of the ones that you’ve been holding on to for a long time. You’ve got to give the mind a greater sense of pleasure. As the Buddha said, if you don’t have a really good sense of pleasure that comes from concentration, it’s going to be hard to give up the pleasures of lust and other defilements. So learn how to be skillful at getting the mind to settle down. Be skillful in finding a sense of fullness in the body, learning how to make the most of that. As you exercise those skills, again, the new senses of self will come up. You have a greater sense of the self as a producer. You can create happiness just sitting here breathing. You can find happiness in the middle of your life. When things are getting kind of hectic, you can step back and focus inside for a bit, get back in touch with your breath energy. These are good skills to have. Ultimately, they’ll take you to a point where you don’t need them anymore. After all, nirvana is a sense of well-being that doesn’t require either a producer or a consumer once it’s attained. It requires the producer, though. Make sure you don’t make the mistake of trying to clone the goal or think that the path is a cloning path, like so many other paths. It doesn’t resemble where it’s going. But it does get you there. A road that goes to a mountain doesn’t look like a mountain, but it gets you to the mountain. So it involves effort. It involves attachment. It involves a sense of self. It involves desires. But you’re learning how to take all these things and focus them in the right direction. After all, the goal is unfabricated. But how are you going to get there without fabrications? So you take these talents that the mind has and learn how to use them well. Use the skill of meditation to change the balance of power inside. So you can sort out yourselves and foster the ones that are going to be useful and learn how to let go of the ones that are not. That right there is a lot of the dynamic of the practice.

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