A Healthy Self (outdoors)

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As you practice, you’ll need to have a clear sense of how to use the concepts of self and not-self. We know that the Buddha says that the five aggregates are not-self, the six sense media are not-self, the elements are not-self. But then he talks about taking the self as your own mainstay. He talks about taking the self as a governing principle. So we need to have a clear sense of the right time and the right place for using the perception of not-self and using the perception of self. In particular, you’ve got to develop a skillful sense of self before you’re going to let it go. At the very end of the path, that’s when you apply not-self to everything. But before you get there, there are certain aspects of self that you’ve got to develop. You can’t just throw away your self because you don’t like it. You’ve got to develop it. There are three characteristics in particular that are important to develop. The first is having a sense of responsibility. When you’re sitting here meditating and things are not going well, you don’t just say, “Well, causes and conditions are such that it’s not going to go well, so I’ll just sit with it not going well, or I’ll give up for today.” It would have said that if you felt that everything was a result of past actions, there would be no sense in practicing the path. Some of the things that you’re experiencing right now come from your past actions, but some of them come from things you’re doing right now. When you take responsibility for what you’re doing, then you can have the opportunity to do it better. Take a mind that’s not settling down and turn it into one that is settling down. And you do that by developing another quality of the skillful self, which is that you make yourself capable. This principle is so basic to the teaching that when the Buddha was teaching his seven-year-old son, Rahula, it was one of the first things he brought up. Before you act, remind yourself again that you’re acting based on an intention. What do you intend to have happen as a result of the action? Why are you acting? Is your action causing any harm? If it is, you stop. When the action is done, you look at the long-term results and then you figure out if there’s something that went wrong, or what was it? You try to figure out how to correct for that mistake. John Lee makes this point. He compares meditating to becoming a skilled craftsman. For example, you make a basket. The teacher teaches you how to weave the basket, and then you weave your first basket, and you look at your basket, and you look at the teacher’s basket, and they’re two very different baskets. If you just give up at that point and say, “Well, I don’t have the talent,” then you’re not going to get anywhere. But if you decide, “Okay, the teacher’s a human being, I’m a human being, the teacher can do it, why can’t I?” So you rely on your own powers of observation to figure out what you did wrong. And the next time around, you try to correct for that mistake. You watch yourself as you’re doing the weaving. So when you look at the results, you have a clear idea of what you did and what might have been wrong. So with your third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth basket, you start getting better and better, because you’re relying on yourself to observe. You get a sense of what works and what doesn’t work. This is a sense of self that’s really necessary for the practice. The Buddha himself says, “You learn how to observe your meditation.” The Dhamma is a matter of committing yourself to the practice and then reflecting on it. You do it and then you reflect. What could be done better? Then you do it again, each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out. You look at the breath and you look at the mind. And if they’re not staying together, then the question can be either something’s wrong with the breath or something’s wrong with the mind. So you can try different ways of breathing to start out with, see if long breathing feels good, short breathing, fast, slow, heavy, light. Can the mind settle down if you change the breath? If there’s a sense of ease, how do you let that sense of ease spread through the body so the breath becomes more and more interesting, more and more intriguing? That’s one possibility. The other possibility is that you’ve still got something hanging over in your mind. From the events of the day to the events of the past week, you have to figure out what you can do to get the mind out from under the power of whatever that particular mood or emotion is. This is one of the reasons why we have the different recollections. You can recollect about the Buddha, what kind of person he was. He had a lot of power, wealth, status, everything that a normal human being would want, and yet it wasn’t good enough. He realized those things would leave him. If he didn’t die first, they might leave him first, before he died. But either way, he was bound to be separated from them. Could there be a happiness that you would not die away from, that you would not be separated from? He realized that where he was living was not the place where he could find the answer to that question, so he left all of his wealth, all of his relatives. He went out into the wilderness, and after many false attempts, finally found the true way. He almost died in the attempt. But when he came back alive, he didn’t charge anything for his teachings. He just wandered all over northern India for forty-five years, teaching anyone who was interested in putting it into suffering, and asked for no payments at all. It would be hard to find a person like that today. You think about the politicians we have, about the movie stars, other people of status and wealth and fame. It would be hard to find somebody who’d be willing to go off in the wilderness like that. But that’s what he did. It’s hard to find people who teach the Dhamma for free, but that’s what he did. So we have this Dhamma, taught by this kind of person. That should give you a sense of inspiration that this is something really worth following. So see if developing a sense of conviction in the Dhamma this way will help. Or, if you’re feeling lazy in the practice, you can think about death. Death can come at any time. A little cloud of blood in your bloodstream can suddenly start wandering around and get lodged in your kidneys, lodged in your brain, and that would be it. It wouldn’t give you any warning. So have you developed the qualities you’re going to need when you have to go? If you haven’t, there’s work that has to be done right now. So these are various ways of thinking that you can try to get the mind ready to settle down, because you take responsibility for it, and because you learn the ins and outs of your own mind with time. So you can get a good idea of what particular treatment, what particular approach is going to work. And all this, of course, is based on a third principle, which is that you really have goodwill for yourself, really love yourself. This is what the Buddha talks about, the self as a governing principle. Because there will be times when you get discouraged and you might think of giving up. But then you ask yourself, the fact that you started on this path was because you loved yourself, right? You wanted to put an end to suffering. Do you no longer want to put an end to suffering? Your original intention was wise and it was compassionate. Do you no longer have any wisdom or compassion? So those are three aspects of a healthy, skillful sense of self - that you’re responsible, that you make yourself capable, and that you really love yourself in the best possible way. You are concerned for your genuine well-being. That kind of sense of self is going to carry you through. If you start out by saying everything is not self, not self, and then you don’t do anything, claiming that it’s all beyond your power, you have to wait until conditions get right. John Lee has a good comparison. He says it’s like having a wound on your hand and saying, “Well, the hand is not self, the wound is not self, so I’ll just let it go because it’s not a concern of mine.” Well, the wound is going to get infected and you’re going to suffer. So you take those three qualities. You’re responsible for looking after the wound. You’re capable. You figure out what needs to be done in order to protect it. And you do that because you love yourself. That’s the kind of self that will see you through on the path, the kind of self that likes to compare itself to other people, saying, “My jhana is better than your jhana. My precepts are better than your precepts.” That kind of self, the Buddha says, you should put aside. So you’re trained in a healthy sense of self. You put aside the unskillful one. And then you use that healthy sense of self in order to develop the path as far as you can go. There will come a point where you have to let everything go, including that sense of self. But at that point, you let it go, not because you hate it or dislike it, but simply because you’ve seen it’s served its purpose. Now you can put it aside. The image the Ajahns like to use is of being a carpenter. When you’re working on a chair or working on a desk, you have to hold on to your tools. You have to take good care of them. Then when the desk or the chair is done, you can put the tools down. The same goes for the marks that you would make on the wood. When you’re going to cut the wood, when you’re going to put the pieces of wood together, sometimes you have to put pencil marks on it. But when the cut is done, when the pieces are put together, then you erase the pencil marks. So in the same way, your sense of self, a good, healthy sense of self, is a useful tool, it’s a useful marker for getting the job done. As for not-self, you apply that to things that would pull you off the path, like when you’re sitting here meditating. Any thoughts that come up with regard to the past, thoughts with regard to the future, you can say, “Those issues are no concern of mine right now,” and you put them aside. The sound of the wind in the leaves, the sound of the birds, the sound of the planes, there’s really no concern of yours right now. You put them aside. So it’s a matter of learning how to use the perception of self and not-self for the right time, for the right place. Someday, when you reach the end of the path, you put everything down, all perceptions. But meanwhile, learn how to use them well, so that when you do put them down, you put them down with a sense that they’ve served their purpose, and they’ve served their purpose well.

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