Break Things Down

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There’s a romantic belief that the source of all evil is your sense of separate self. If only you could realize your connections with everybody else, all other things, we’re all one. That would be the end of the problem. When we come to Buddhism, we hear all the teaching on “not self, not self, not self.” We seem to be saying the same thing. This also fits in with a neurotic problem that a lot of us have since we’ve been trained to believe that we’re bad. If only we could erase our sense of self, then we wouldn’t have any problems anymore. The Buddha never taught that. He never said that the source of evil is the self. Sometimes you hear that, especially in the Mahayana circles. The source of evil is heedlessness, lack of compunction. In other words, you don’t care about the results of your actions. You just want to do what you want to do. You don’t want to think about what the long-term consequences are going to be. That’s something totally different. It’s a habit. And the whole point of the teaching is that habits can be unlearned. There may be a habit you identify very strongly with, and yourself seems to be very much tied up in that habit. But you have to separate these things out. The Buddha doesn’t have to get rid of yourself. He actually recommends that you train yourself to be skillful. And primarily he doesn’t have you think much about self at all. He says focus on qualities, mental qualities. That’s what he said is the source of where you’re going to find the solution. As he said, if skillful mental qualities couldn’t be developed, he wouldn’t have taught that. And if developing skillful mental qualities led to suffering, he wouldn’t have taught that either. The same with unskillful mental qualities. If it were impossible for us to get rid of unskillful qualities, he wouldn’t have taught us to do that. If we had to suffer because we got rid of unskillful qualities, he wouldn’t do that either. But it’s because we’re going to benefit from developing skillful qualities and abandoning unskillful qualities that we can do it. That’s what he taught. So instead of trying to get rid of yourself, notice what your habits are and try to identify them. As the Buddha said, the beginning of wisdom, or an aspect of wisdom, is seeing through things as separate. You have habits, but you don’t have to identify with them. Urges come up, old habits come up, but you don’t have to ride along with them every time. You can step back and say, “No. This time around I’m not going to go there.” And if you find that you can’t restrain yourself, the problem is not your sense of self. The problem is an inability to restrain. So what do you say to yourself when you can’t restrain yourself from doing something unskillful? What are the arguments you give yourself that say, “I can’t do that”? Those are the things you have to focus on. There’s going to be some heedlessness in there, some lack of compunction, in other words, not caring about the results of your actions. There’ll be the argument that you’re too weak, you don’t have the strength to restrain yourself. This is why we practice concentration, it’s to strengthen the mind. Sometimes you say, “I can’t visualize myself doing this path.” Well, you’ll find out that your sense of who you are is going to change as you do the path. You focus again, not on yourself, but on specific habits, specific qualities. What should be abandoned, what should be developed. Separate things out like this. It becomes a lot easier. So when you tell yourself, “I’m bad,” the Buddha said that kind of thinking is not helpful at all. When you tell yourself, “I’m good,” that’s not helpful either. After all, if you’re really good, you wouldn’t be suffering. Our problem is that we glom things together. We’ve glommed ourselves into a sense of self. It’s kind of a fruitcake. You’ve got all those different candied fruits inside, with a little bit of batter to hold them together. And it’s pretty disgusting. I don’t know anybody who likes fruitcake. So if you don’t like the fruitcake, take it apart. Get the fruits out, the candied fruits, and there’ll be some batter left over. And the batter may be okay. But don’t just toss the whole thing. This is where the analogy breaks down. You probably should toss the whole thing. It’s a fruitcake. But what you’ve got to see is there are individual things in there. And not all of them are bad. But sometimes the way you stick them together makes it bad. This is why the Buddha said, “I’m going to take things apart.” There’s a passage where he asks Sariputta about what it means to fathom the Dhamma. Sariputta is quiet for a while. And then the Buddha asks him, “Have you seen that this has come to be?” That’s when Sariputta launches on quite a long discourse on seeing things as they’ve come to be. As individual events in the mind, individual habits, individual qualities in the mind. And you see that they have their nutriment, something that feeds them. There’s some allure to that nutriment, which is why those qualities continue. But if you learn to have some dispassion for the allure, then they break apart. They fall away. The message here, of course, is that you are making these things happen, and then you’re complaining about them. And you don’t see yourself making them happen. Or if you do, you tell yourself, “Well, I can’t think of any other way of doing this.” This is why a lot of our addictions are basically a failure of the imagination. We can’t think of any other way to act in a particular situation, so we just go along with our own habitual way of reacting. So a part of the meditation, as the Buddha said, is learning how to prevent unskillful qualities from arising. That means you do some anticipation. You think about what may happen tomorrow, and think about where your buttons tend to get pushed, and try to come up with some ideas of how not to let them get pushed. So if they say things that ordinarily would set you off, you have to ask yourself, “Why do I let myself be a slave to what they say? Can I step out of that?” Think of some of the ways the Buddha has you think. This is one of the reasons why it’s so important that we have the suttas. A lot of people study Abhidhamma. It’s just lists of terms, and lists of x causes y and y causes z. But that’s all the wisdom that comes in the suttas, when the Buddha says, “This is how you should talk to yourself. This is how you should hold certain images in mind. This is how you should breathe.” Those are the instructions that are really useful. So think about how you breathe. Think about how you talk to yourself. Think about the images you hold in mind. Tell yourself, “I can do this differently. If this is causing suffering, I don’t have to continue doing this.” So the Buddha is giving you examples to expand your imagination. So take advantage of them. When you break things down like this, then that problem of the self gets broken down. And you find that your sense of self has some uses. After all, if you’re a really wise self, you’re going to think about consequences. That’s said to be one of the healthy ego functions, anticipating what the results of your actions are going to be, and caring about that. That kind of self is something you want to encourage. But if you don’t like thinking in terms of self, just learn how to encourage that habit of thinking about the consequences of your actions, caring about the consequences of your actions. Tell yourself, “I don’t want to cause suffering. What can I do?” That’s the question. What can I do? How can I get rid of myself? How can I be more heedful? How can I learn to care about the consequences of my actions enough so that I can change my habits? That’s how you learn how not to suffer. The whole issue of self gets put back in the background. Our Western tendency is to want to go straight to the heart of the matter, not fool around with a lot of lesser things. We want to go straight to the top. I had a dream one time, very early in my practice. There was a big museum. It was many stories. You could go in the front door and you could walk up the stairs. But there’s also a ladder leaning against the side of the building. They went straight to the top floor. And I said, “I want to go up the ladder.” As I go up the ladder, the ladder begins to fall. That’s when I woke up. I realized the message of the dream was, you’re not going to go straight to the top. You have to work on the foundations. Go up through the floors, one by one by one. Have some patience. And have some persistence. So in the same way, even though we’re told that the final thing that stands between you and awakening is when you can let go of your sense of self, we go straight there. But you can’t do that. You need a healthy sense of self to get up to those higher levels. And this just comes down to certain habits. The habits that say, “Whatever needs to be done, I’m willing to do it. I’m confident that I can do it. And I know I’m going to benefit from the results.” That’s a very slim sense of self. So slim that you don’t even have to think about it as self. Just think about it as the motivation that it’s good to be skillful. It’s good to think about the consequences of your actions. And then to motivate yourself to want to do your best. And as you focus on the individual problems, the big problem gets solved. So even though the texts don’t talk about problems in the kitchen, who gets along with whom, who doesn’t get along with whom, learning how to solve those problems is a part of the path. Developing the right attitude so you don’t get sucked into a lot of needless fights, so you don’t get sucked into a lot of needless chatter, may not seem like a big deal. But again, working on the little things gives you practice so you can work well with the big things. So be willing to break things down. After all, every big problem is solved that way. Break it down into little problems. Those you can manage.

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