A Good Buddhist Ego

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We hear so much about how our sense of self is a problem, that many of us think that we have to put our sense of self aside from the very beginning. But it doesn’t work that way. The Buddha also pointed out that a healthy sense of self is a necessary part of the path. And it’s not something you can decide to put aside. It’s time to put all sense of self aside, healthy or unhealthy. The first taste of awakening, called stream-entry, comes when you let go of the path after you’ve developed it for a while. You let go for a little bit, you encounter something that’s totally unfabricated, unconditioned. Intermediate reaction is to grab onto it, which is why that’s not a complete state of awakening. But the fact that you’ve experienced a level of consciousness that has nothing to do with any of the aggregates, not even the aggregate of consciousness, means that when you come back, you will never think of identifying with the aggregates ever again. You never hold to the view that you are the aggregates or that you own the aggregates or that they’re in you or you’re in them. But there’s still a link between sense of self. And this will linger around you until you attain total awakening. And again, it’s the experience of total awakening that lets go of that. It’s not something you can decide to let go. When it’s cut off completely, a sense of “I am” is gone. But you can still function, and function well. But up until that point, you need a sense of self to be confident that yes, you can do this path, and then two, you’ll benefit from doing it, and three, that you can watch what you’re doing, observe, make comments, make improvements. All these three roles for the self will be necessary all the way up to the end. Now there will be times in the course of the meditation when you’re simply not thinking in terms of self. You get the mind into concentration, and you don’t think about the fact that you’re doing the concentration, it’s just a process that you’ve mastered so smoothly by that point, that it becomes almost automatic. And you realize that your sense of self is not called into question. There’s nothing to obstruct what you want to do. It’s when you meet up with obstructions, that’s when your sense of self gets involved. When things go smoothly inside, there’s nothing to aggravate your sense of self. So you do have these periods when you’re not thinking in terms of self at all, but then when aggravation comes, when obstructions come, then you come back. There’s you versus what’s not you. The fact that the sense of self can keep coming back means that you’ve got to train it. In Western psychology they talk about the functions of a healthy ego, and in Buddhism they talk about the same functions. They don’t term them ego functions, but they are ways that you have to function. It has to be an underlying sense that you are responsible for your actions and you will benefit from the results. After all, the Buddha once told the monks, “Let go of whatever is not yours, and that will be for your long-term welfare and happiness.” Here he is teaching not self, but saying, “Okay, it’s for your happiness.” And this is what a healthy ego function is. Something that you do that will lead to true happiness, and there’ll be a sense that you’re responsible and you will benefit. So you want to be skillful in how you go about that. There are five qualities that the psychologists talk about. And again, Buddhism recommends all five, with slightly different names. The first one is anticipation. In other words, you see there are dangers down the line that you have to prepare for. If you’re just totally blissfully in the present moment, not concerned about the future, this thought wouldn’t occur to you. But when you realize that your actions will make a difference, and so you’ve got to prepare, there’s a sense of self in there. And the Buddha says that sense of self lies at the basis of all that is skillful. That you’re responsible and you will benefit from taking responsibility in a skillful way. So what the psychologists call anticipation, the Buddha calls heedfulness. And it’s an important quality to develop. Even in the passages where the Buddha talks about the importance of focusing on the present moment. It’s in the context of death contemplation. There’s one where he says you put aside thoughts of the past, thoughts of the future, concerns for the future, and you focus on what’s arising in the present moment. Why do you do that? You have to do it today. If you don’t do it now, it’s not going to get done. Because tomorrow you may die. In other words, this is the heedful response, focus on what you can do in the present moment. We’re not here just to register the present moment, say, “Oh, it’s like this.” We’re here to notice that there are good potentials and bad potentials. And how we shape our experience of the present moment. So we want to learn how to do it well. There was another time when the Buddha told the monks to think about death on a regular basis. And one of the monks said, “Well, I do that every day.”Once a day I think about the fact that I’m going to die.” Another monk said, “Well, I think about it twice a day.” Another monk said, “Well, I think three times a day.” I finally got down to one monk who said, “When I breathe in, I say,”May I live to breathe out, “so I can accomplish a great deal.” Another monk said, “When I’m eating my food,”I’ve got a mouthful of food. “May I survive to chew this food out before I die.”I can accomplish a great deal “in that little moment of time.” And the Buddha said, of all the different monks, the last two were really hateful. In other words, they focused on what can be done in the present moment, and they don’t put it off. So when you use death contemplation, it’s not just thinking death, death, death all the time. It’s just being very alive to the fact that there’s work that has to be done. If you die before that work is done, you could suffer a great deal. So you work on it now. That’s a healthy ego function. The second is altruism, which in Buddhism is called compassion, or goodwill. We realize that if your happiness depends on other people’s suffering, they’re not going to stand for it. They’re going to do what they can to destroy that happiness. So if you want happiness at last, you have to take their happiness into consideration, too. The story goes that King Vasanidhi was in his palace up in his bedroom one-on-one with one of his favorite queens, Mallika. And in a tender moment, he turns to her and he says, “Is there anyone you love more than yourself?” You know what he’s thinking. He wants her to say, “Yes, your majesty, you.” And if this were Hollywood, that’s what she’d say, but it’s not Hollywood, this is the Pali Canon. She says, “No, there’s nobody I love more than myself. Don’t be a fool. How about you? Is there anyone you love more than yourself?” And the king has to admit there’s nobody he loves more than himself. So that’s the end of that scene. So the king goes down from the palace, goes to see the Buddha, tells him what happened. And the Buddha says, “You know, she’s right. You can go the whole world over and not find anybody you love more than yourself.” In the same token, everybody else loves themselves just as fiercely. So the conclusion he draws from that is not that it’s a dog-eat-dog world. The conclusion is, you should never harm anybody or cause them to do harm. For the reason I just said, if your happiness harms them, they’re going to try to destroy your happiness. If you get them to do harm, that’s going to become their bad karma. They’re really going to resent you. So compassion is a healthy ego function. You’re compassionate because it’s for your own true well-being. The ego function is suppression. This is not repression. In repression, if something negative comes up in the mind, you pretend that it’s not there. Suppression is you know that it’s there, but you simply say no. This corresponds to the Buddhist principle of restraint. You have impulses that you know are going to be unskillful, and so you learn how to say no effectively. The Buddha said this is one of your measures of wisdom. If you see there’s something you like to do but will give long-term bad results, you know how to talk yourself into not wanting to do it. Or if there’s something you don’t like to do that will give good results, you learn how to talk yourself into doing it. That’s wisdom. It’s on the side where you’re trying to stop yourself from doing something that will cause you trouble down the line. In Buddhism that’s called restraint. And it’s an important principle in the practice. In other words, even though you may have some defilements prowling around inside your mind, you don’t let them roam out and prowl around the neighborhood. You learn how to say no. And what goes together with that is the principle of the psychologist called sublimation. The Canon doesn’t have a term for that, but basically they’re saying rather than look for happiness and sensual pleasures, or your fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures, that’s what the Buddha actually means though, by sensuality. Not so much the pleasures themselves, but this fascination we have with thinking about them, planning for them, adjusting, “What should I have for dinner tonight?” “How about this?” “No, how about that?” “How shall I fix it?” We go on and on and on. And the Buddha says there’s a much better pleasure you can find. The pleasure is the concentration. This is why concentration practice is such a necessary part of the path. You get a sense of ease, a sense of well-being, that you can allow to flow through the body. One of the images the Buddha gives is of a lake with a spring of cold water, and the cold water wells up from underneath and fills the whole lake with cool water. You want to learn how to meditate in such a way that you have that sense of well-being, just by the way you breathe, by the way you settle in with the breath. And that pleasure, then it’s a lot easier to say no to other, more unskillful pleasures. That too is a healthy ego function. You realize that you have the choice of what kind of pleasures you’re going to pursue. And some pleasures will get in the way of the path, but other pleasures are actually part of the path. So there’s nothing wrong with indulging in the pleasures that are part of the path. The only warning there, of course, is that when you’re practicing concentration, and the breath gets really comfortable, don’t drop the breath and wallow in the comfort. You stay with the breath. That’s what’s going to produce the comfort. And then you can let the sense of comfort work on your body, work on your mind. It’ll do its work. All you have to do is make sure that you’re diligent in maintaining the causes. That’s how you can experience the pleasure of concentration without being overcome. Which is an important skill. Finally, the fifth ego function that the psychologists talk about is humor. Again, Buddhism doesn’t talk much about humor, but there are lots of examples in the Pali Canon. Now you may say, “I’ve looked through the Pali Canon, I don’t see much humor.” It’s mainly in the section about the rules, which is an interesting fact. Each of the major rules has a story that goes along with it, telling who misbehaved, a monk or a nun. And when word gets to the Buddha, he calls the monk responsible in and says, “Did you actually do this?” The monk says, “Yes, I did.” And the Buddha gives reasons for saying, “Well, that’s not a skillful action. That’s worth a rule.” But the stories can be very humorous. There’s one about a monk who had psychic powers. He didn’t have much of a memory, though. When it came his turn to give instructions to the nuns, he could remember only one verse. So he would repeat that verse over and over again. The nuns, of course, didn’t like this. So it came his turn one time. The nuns learn about this. They say, “Oh, this is not going to be effective at all. He’s just going to repeat that same old verse over and over again.” But they go anyhow. And after the formalities at the beginning of the talk, he says, “Oh, here’s today’s talk,” and he starts repeating the verse. And the nuns turn to one another and they say, “Didn’t we tell you? This is not going to be effective at all.” Well, he overhears them. Now, as I said, he had some psychic powers, so he decided to put on a show. He levitates up into the air, splits himself into many beings. Some of them are emitting fire, some are emitting water, some are emitting smoke. And many other verses by the Buddha. And the nuns are watching this and say, “Wow, this is the most effective Dhamma talk we’ve ever seen.” Well, he gets carried away. And so he keeps on displaying his powers until after sunset. So he dismisses them. They have to go back to the nunnery in the town. Well, the town gates back in those days, they would be closed at sunset. There would be a pavilion outside for travelers who came too late. So the nuns spend the night at the pavilion. And the next morning, the gates are opened, the nuns come filing into the city. And the people say, “Oh, here come the nuns back from spending the night with the monks.” Word of this gets to the Buddha. From that point on, the monks are not allowed to teach the nuns after dark. There’s another case where a monk with psychic powers had defeated a fire-breathing serpent. Word of this gets out, and they leave. And the people say, “Well, gee, we’d really like to make merit with that monk. What can we do to give him something special?” So they go to consult with some monks. They ask, “What is it that monks don’t usually get?” Well, they consult with the wrong monks. And they get this bad group that says, “You know, what we usually don’t get is hard liquor.” So the next day, everybody in town has prepared a glass of hard liquor for the monk. So he takes one glass after another, after another, after another, around the city. Then he passes out. Again, at the city gate. The Buddha comes along with some other monks. He has them carry this monk back to the monastery. They lay him down on the ground with his head facing the Buddha. He has no idea where he is, so he tosses and turns, tosses and turns, so his feet are pointing to the Buddha, which is not what you do. So the Buddha’s comment is, “Before, didn’t he show respect to us?” “Yes.” “Does he show respect to us now?” “No.” “And before, didn’t he do battle with the fire-breathing serpent?” “Yes.” “Could he do battle with the salamander now?” “No.” So there are examples of humor in the Pali Canon. The important thing about humor as an ego function is it helps you step back from what you’re doing and see where it’s incongruous, see where it’s ironic. So you can see where you’re not being consistent with your values. Now the reason this is listed in the section about the monk’s rules, I think, is because they wanted to show you, yes, the people who set forth the rules did have a sense of humor. There’s nothing worse than having to live by a code of rules made by humorless people. And at the same time, it makes you side with the Buddha. That behavior really was stupid. In that last case, that’s why we have the rule against monks taking alcohol. So you can see these five ego functions that the psychologists talk about. Buddhism has them as well. And they all do involve having a sense of self, that you are responsible for your actions and you will benefit from being careful in what you do. There’s a sixth healthy ego function that the psychologists don’t mention. That’s a sense of shame. Now there are two kinds of shame. There’s the shame that’s the opposite of pride. That’s an unhealthy sense of shame. The Buddha doesn’t recommend that. But then there’s the shame that’s the opposite of shamelessness, where you break the rules, do what you want, you don’t give a damn about what other people think. That kind of shame is unhealthy. As the Buddha said, without that kind of sense of shame, the world would be unprotected. People would do all kinds of horrible things, as we see around us, shameless people in power. When you have a healthy sense of shame, you have a sense that you would want to look good in the eyes of the wise. So there’s a sense of you there, and a sense of self-respect. And again, a sense that you will benefit from being skillful in your actions. So at the times when you do have a sense of self in the practice, make sure that it has these five or six qualities. Because when your sense of self becomes healthy like this, then when the time comes to let it go, you’re not letting it go out of any neurotic anger or fear. You’re letting it go because it’s been a tool that you’ve used, and you realize you’ve completed your work. You don’t need the tool anymore. Then you can put it down. The image the Buddha gives is of a raft. You’re on this side of the river, which is dangerous, and you want to go to the other side of the river that’s safe. And there’s no bridge over the water, and there’s no Nirvana yacht to come pick you up. So what do you do? Well, you take the twigs and branches and leaves on this side of the river, you make a raft, and then holding on to the raft really tight, and making an effort with your arms and legs, you cross the river. Now, the fact that you’ve made the raft out of things on this side of the river means basically you’re taking the aggregates, the form, feeling, perceptions, thought constructs, and consciousness, and you turn it into the path, like we’re doing when we concentrate. You’re focused on the breath, which is an aspect of form. You’re trying to develop a feeling of pleasure. As you do that, you hold in mind a picture of what the breath does in the body. That’s perception. You ask yourself if the breath is comfortable or not, and if it’s not comfortable, what can be done to improve it? If it is comfortable, what can be done to maintain it? That’s the aggregate of fabrication. And then consciousness, which is aware of all these things. So you’re taking these aggregates, and you’re turning them into the path. You’re taking the twigs and leaves on this side, the branches on this side, you make them into a raft. Then you do whatever effort is needed to get across. And then we’ve gotten to the other side. That’s when you can let the raft go. And as the Buddha said, you don’t let it go out of hatred. You don’t let it go out of disgust. You let it go with a sense of appreciation. This raft has been very useful to me, but I don’t need it anymore. So you pull it up on the shore, and you go on your way. So you take your senses, many senses of self, and you try to train them. Because what are they? They’re basically strategies. As the Buddha said, everything comes from desire. Everything is rooted in desire. And you’ve developed your sense of self and your sense of what is not self, based on the different desires you followed. Both self and not self are strategies. Each desire will have a different sense of self and a different sense of not-self. Whether or not to use our sense of self and our sense of not-self wisely, it is possible to use not-self unwisely, you know. When people ask if you’re responsible for something you did, you say, “Well, there’s no me here.” That’s not a skillful use of not-self. A skillful use of not-self is when you realize there are certain things I used to identify with and they’re not worth identifying with. You use both self and not-self as strategies to get to happiness. And when you get to the ultimate happiness, you don’t need either of them. That’s when you can put them both aside. So even though there are times in the practice when you don’t seem to have any sense of self, you realize there are also times when you come back and you do have a very strong sense of self. That’s the self that has to be trained in these proper ego functions. Heedfulness. Compassion. Restraint. Developing the pleasures of the path and the pleasures of concentration. Having a sense of humor, a sense of healthy shame. When you’ve trained all your different selves to have these qualities, then when the time comes to let them go, you let them go as friends. When you let go in that way, then it’s skillful. Because you’ve used them for their best use. You appreciate them and then you can put them aside.

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