

The Problem of Egolessness

THANISSARO BHIKKHU

Years back, many Buddhist teachers in the West began using the term “egolessness” to explain the Buddha’s teaching on not-self. Since then, egolessness has come to mean many things to many people. Sometimes egolessness is used to mean a lack of conceit or self-importance; sometimes, a pure mode of acting without thought of personal reward. In its most extended form, though, the teaching on egolessness posits a fundamental error of perception: that despite our sense of a lasting, separate self, no such self really exists. By trying to provide for the happiness of this illusory self, we not only place our hopes on an impossible goal but also harm ourselves and everyone around us. If we could only see the fallacy of the ego and understand its harmful effects, we would let it go and find true happiness in the interconnectedness that is our true nature.

At least that’s what we’re told, and often with a fair amount of vehemence. Buddhist writers, often so gentle and nonjudgmental, can quickly turn vicious when treating the ego. Some portray it as a tyrannical bureaucracy deserving violent overthrow; others, as a ratlike creature—nervous, scheming, and devious—that deserves to be squashed. Whatever the portrait, the message is always that the ego is so pernicious and tenacious that any mental or verbal abuse directed against it is fair play in getting it to loosen its foul grip on the mind.

But when people trained in classical Western psychotherapy read these attacks on the ego, they shake their heads in disbelief. For them the ego is not something evil. It’s not even a singular thing you can attack. It’s a cluster of activities, a set of functions in the mind—and necessary functions at that. Any mental act by which you mediate between your raw desires for immediate pleasure and your super-ego—the *oughts* and *shoulds* you’ve learned from family and society—is an ego function. Ego functions are our mental strategies for gaining lasting happiness in the midst of the conflicting demands whispering and shouting in the mind. They enable you to say No to the desire to have sex with your neighbor’s spouse, in the interest of a happiness that would have less disastrous consequences for the things you truly value in life. They also enable you to say No to the demands of your parents, your teachers, or government when those demands would jeopardize your own best interest.

But ego functions don’t just say No. They also have a mediator’s sense of when to say Yes. If they’re skillful, they negotiate among your desires and your super-ego so that you can gain the pleasure you want in a way that causes no harm and can actually do a great deal of good. If your ego functions are healthy and well-

coordinated, they give you a consistent sense of priorities as to which forms of happiness are more worthwhile than others; a clear sense of where your responsibilities do and don't lie; a strong sense of your ability to judge right and wrong for yourself; and an honest sense of how to learn from your past mistakes for the sake of greater happiness in the future.

From this perspective, egolessness would be a disaster. A person devoid of ego functions would be self-destructive: either a beast with uncontrolled impulses, or a neurotic, repressed automaton with no mind of his or her own, or an infantile monster thrashing erratically between these two extremes. Anyone who tried to abandon ego functioning would arrest his psychological growth and lose all hope of becoming a mature, responsible, trustworthy adult. And as we know, self-destructive people don't destroy only themselves. They can pull down many of the people and places around them.

This is not only the view of trained Western psychologists. Buddhist communities in the West have also begun to recognize this problem and have coined the term "spiritual bypassing" to describe it: the way people try to avoid dealing with the problems of an unintegrated personality by spending all their time in meditation retreats, using the mantra of egolessness to short-circuit the hard work of mastering healthy ego functioning in the daily give and take of their lives.

Then there's the problem of self-hatred. The Dalai Lama isn't the only Asian Buddhist teacher surprised at the amount of self-hatred found in the West. Unfortunately, a lot of people with toxic super-egos have embraced the teaching on egolessness as the Buddha's stamp of approval on the hatred they feel toward themselves.

These problems have inspired many Western psychologists to assume a major gap in the Buddha's teachings: that in promoting egolessness, the Buddha overlooked the importance of healthy ego functioning in finding true happiness. This assumption has led to a corollary: that Buddhism needs the insights of Western psychotherapy to fill the gap; that to be truly effective, a healthy spiritual path needs to give equal weight to both traditions. Otherwise you come out lopsided and warped, an idiot savant who can thrive in the seclusion of a three-year, three-month, three-day retreat, but can't handle three hours caught in heavy traffic with three whining children.

This corollary assumes, though, that for the past twenty-six hundred years Buddhism hasn't produced any healthy functioning individuals: that the collective consciousness of Asian society has suppressed individualism, and that the handful of dysfunctional meditation teachers coming to the West—the ones who mastered the subtleties of formal meditation but tripped over the blatant pitfalls of

American money and sex—are typical of the Buddhist tradition. But I wonder if this is so.

My own experience in Asia certainly doesn't confirm this. During my sixteen years in Thailand I met, per capita, more people with a genuinely individual outlook on life and far fewer neurotics than I did on returning to the mass-media-produced minds of America. My teacher, Ajaan Fuang, had the healthiest functioning ego of anyone I had ever met—and he knew nothing of Western psychology. This observation doesn't apply just to the Thai tradition. Psychologists have studied ordinary Tibetan monks and nuns who have survived years of torture—the severest test of healthy ego functioning—and found that they bear no psychological scars.

So there are many Asian Buddhists who clearly know the secret of how to develop a healthy ego. Some psychologists would have us believe that this was despite, rather than due to, their Buddhist training, but that belief could easily be based on a superficial reading of the Buddhist tradition. So we need to put this belief to the test.

One way would be to read the ancient texts with new eyes. Instead of assuming that the not-self teaching is counseling egolessness, how about assuming that it's part of a regimen for developing a healthy ego? This idea may seem counterintuitive, but that's no measure of its usefulness. The measure lies in testing it as a hypothesis. So as a thought experiment, let's look at the earliest record of the Buddha's teachings, the Pali canon, from the perspective of Western psychology and pose a question: is there any evidence that the Buddha was advocating a healthy ego?

Actually, tips on healthy ego functioning fill the texts. To begin with, the Buddha defines a wise person as one who knows the difference between what are and are not his personal responsibilities, who takes on only his own responsibilities and not those of others. This is the first principle in any ego functioning. Then there's the famous verse at *Dhammapada* 290:

If, by forsaking a limited ease,
he would see an abundance of ease,
the enlightened person
would forsake the limited ease
for the sake of the abundant.

This is practically a definition of how ego functions function well.

These insights aren't random. They're based on another assumption necessary for a healthy ego: the teaching on karma, that we're responsible for our actions and that we're going to experience their results. This assumption in turn is framed by the larger psychology of the Noble Eightfold Path. As any therapist will tell

you, a healthy ego is strengthened by developing a healthy super-ego whose *shoulds* are humane and realistic. It's also strengthened by the ability to safely satisfy your raw demands for immediate happiness so that the ego's long-term strategies don't get derailed by sudden overwhelming desires. These two functions are filled, respectively, by the path factors of right view and right concentration.

Right view contains the Buddha's *shoulds*, which are in service to the desire to find true happiness. You divide your experience into four categories: suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the path to its cessation. Then you take to heart the imperatives proper to each: comprehending suffering, abandoning its cause, realizing its cessation, and developing the path. That's the Buddhist recipe for a healthy super-ego—a series of *shoulds* that are on your side, that never ask you to sacrifice your own true well-being for the sake of anyone or anything else.

As for right concentration, one of its crucial factors is a sense of bliss independent of sensual objects and drives. When you've gained some skill in meditation and can tap into that bliss whenever you want, you can satisfy your desire for immediate pleasure, at the same time weakening any demand that the pleasure be sensual. As the Buddha once noted, people pursue sensual pleasure, with all of its inherent limitations, simply because they see no other alternative to physical and mental pain. But once you've mastered this more refined alternative, you've found a new way to feed the demand for pleasure right now, freeing the ego to function more effectively.

You have also learned the key to the Buddha's strategy for true happiness: it is possible to taste an immediate gratification that causes no harm to yourself or anyone else. Genuine happiness doesn't require that you take anything away from anyone—which means that it in no way conflicts with the genuine happiness of others.

This understanding is revolutionary. For people dependent on sensual pleasures, happiness is a zero-sum affair. There are only so many things, only so many people, to go around. When you gain something, someone else has lost it; when they've gained, you've lost. In a zero-sum world, the pursuit of your own happiness constantly has to be negotiated and compromised with that of others. But when people access the bliss of right concentration, they've found a way to satisfy their own desire for happiness in a way that can actively augment the happiness of those around them. When they're more content and at peace within, they radiate a healthy influence in all directions. This is how healthy ego functioning, from the Buddhist perspective, benefits others as well as yourself.

The classic image illustrating this point is of two acrobats, the first standing on the end of a vertical bamboo pole, the second standing on the shoulders of the first. To perform their tricks and come down safely, each has to look after his or her

own sense of balance. In other words, life is a balancing act. In maintaining your balance you make it easier for others to maintain theirs. This is why, in the Buddhist equation, the wise pursuit of happiness is not a selfish thing. In fact, it underlies all the qualities traditionally associated not only with the path the Buddha taught to his disciples, but also with the Buddha himself: wisdom, compassion, and purity.

Wisdom, the Buddha says, starts with a simple question: What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? The wisdom here lies in realizing that your happiness depends on what you do, and that the pursuit of happiness is worthwhile only if it's long-term. The test of how far your wisdom has matured lies in the strategic skill with which you can keep yourself from doing things that you like to do but that would cause long-term harm, and can talk yourself into doing things that you don't like to do but that would lead to long-term well-being and happiness. In other words, mature wisdom requires a mature ego.

The ego basis for *compassion* is depicted in one of the most delightful stories in the canon. King Pasenadi, in a tender moment with his favorite consort, Queen Mallika, asks her, "Is there anyone you love more than yourself?" He's anticipating, of course, that she'll answer, "Yes, your majesty. You." And it's easy to see where a B-movie script would go from there. But this is the Pali canon, and Queen Mallika is no ordinary queen. She answers, "No, your majesty, there isn't. And how about you? Is there anyone you love more than yourself?" The king, forced into an honest answer, has to admit, "No, there's not." Later he reports this conversation to the Buddha, who responds in an interesting way:

Searching all directions
with one's awareness,
one finds no one dearer
than oneself.
In the same way, others
are fiercely dear to themselves.
So one should not hurt others
if one loves oneself.

In other words, true self-love requires an appreciation that others feel self-love, too. This principle works in two ways: First, you recognize that if your happiness depends on the misery of others it won't last, for they'll do whatever they can to destroy that happiness. Your long-term happiness thus has to take into account the long-term happiness of others. Second, in a less calculating way, you recognize what we all have in common. If you take your own self-love seriously, you have to respect the self-love of others. In this way, compassion is based not on a sense of

your superiority to those who are suffering but on a sense of mutual respect—a respect solidly based in your own self-interest.

Purity grows from providing your ego-based wisdom and compassion with a reality check. The Buddha once taught his son, Rahula, that purity is developed by examining your actions and their results to make sure that they actually cause no harm to yourself or to those around you. If you anticipate harm from an intended action, you don't do it. If you see unanticipated harm coming from something you've done, you freely admit your mistake and learn how not to repeat it. You don't cling childishly to the need to always be in the right. But if you see that you aren't causing harm, you can take joy in the fact that you're on the path to true happiness.

Because the Buddha saw how these enlightened qualities of wisdom, compassion, and purity could be developed through the pursuit of happiness, he never told his followers to practice his teachings without expecting any gain in return. He understood that such a demand would create an unhealthy dynamic in the mind. In terms of Western psychology, expecting no gain in return would give license for the super-ego to run amok. Instead, the Buddha taught that even the principle of renunciation is a trade. You exchange candy for gold, trading lesser pleasures for greater happiness. So he encouraged people to be generous with their time and belongings because of the inner rewards they would receive in return. He taught moral virtue as a gift: when you observe the precepts without ifs, ands, or buts, you give unconditional safety to all other beings, and in return you receive a share of that safety as well.

Even when advocating that his disciples abandon their sense of self, the Buddha justified this teaching on the basis of the rewards it would bring. He once asked his monks, "If anyone were to burn the trees in this monastery, would you suffer with the sense that they were burning you?" "No," the monks replied, "because we're not the trees." "In the same way," the Buddha continued, "let go of what's not you or yours: the senses and their objects. That will be for your long-term well-being and happiness."

Notice that he didn't say to abandon the sense of self as a form of self-sacrifice. He said to abandon it for the sake of true well-being and happiness.

This point highlights one of the special features of the Buddha's instructions for healthy ego-development. In Western psychology, ego-development is impossible without assuming a clear sense of self. But in Buddhism, with its realization that there is no clear dividing line between your own true happiness and that of others, the underlying assumption of ego-development is a clear sense of cause and effect, seeing which actions lead to suffering, which ones lead to short-term happiness, which ones lead to a happiness that lasts.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha never used terms like “ego-development” or “a well-integrated self.” The types of functioning we associate with a well-developed ego he would have described as a well-integrated sense of cause and effect focused on insights into the results of your actions. Buddhist practice is aimed at refining these insights to ever greater levels of sensitivity and skill. In this way he was able to teach healthy ego functioning while avoiding the twin pitfalls of ego-obsession: narcissism and self-hatred.

Because the Buddha’s basic terms of analysis were actions understood under the framework of cause and effect, we have to understand his use of “self” and “not-self” under that framework. For him, “self” and “not-self” aren’t metaphysical principles. They’re mental actions that can be mastered as skills. This is why he was able to use both concepts freely in his teaching. When the concept of self was conducive to skillful action, he would talk in terms of self—not only on the level of generosity and virtue, but also on the level of meditation. If you think that meditation is an exercise in not-self from the very beginning, read the discourses on mindfulness and you’ll be surprised at how often they describe the meditator’s internal dialogue in terms of “I,” “me,” and “mine.”

As for the concept of not-self, the Buddha would advise using it whenever unskillful attachment to things or patterns of behavior got in the way of your happiness. In effect, he would have you drop unhealthy and unskillful ways of self-identification in favor of ways that were more skillful and refined. Only on the highest levels of practice, where even the most skillful concepts of self get in the way of the ultimate happiness, did the Buddha advocate totally abandoning them. But even then he didn’t advocate abandoning the basic principle of ego functioning. You drop the best happiness that can come from a sense of self because an even greater happiness—nirvana, totally timeless, limitless, and unconditioned—appears when you do.

So this is where our thought experiment has led. If you open your mind to the idea that the Buddha was actually advocating ego development instead of egolessness, you see that there’s nothing lopsided or lacking in his understanding of healthy ego functioning. In fact, he mastered some ego skills that Western psychology has yet to explore, such as how to use right concentration to satisfy the desire for immediate pleasure; how to develop an integrated sense of causality that ultimately makes a sense of self superfluous; how to harness the ego’s drive for lasting happiness so that it leads to a happiness transcending space and time.

These principles have taught many Asian Buddhists how to develop healthy egos over the centuries—so healthy that they can ultimately drop the need to create “self.” All that remains is for us to put these principles to the test, to see if they work for us as well.