

Our Sense of Self

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We tend to think of our sense of self as something we *are*. It's a given in our experience. You tell yourself, "I am the body. I am my mind. This is me. It's the way it's been ever since I was born, so it's the way it's going to be until I die." But the Buddha didn't think in that way. As with so many other things, he saw a sense of self as something we *do*. We want pleasure, we want to avoid pain, and so we try to get some control over them. That's the essence of what self means: a means for control.

That's why we do it. It's our strategy for controlling pleasure, for controlling pain. And we have many different strategies for many different circumstances. Many of these strategies, these habits, are so ingrained that we hardly even notice them—which is why they seem to be a given. They seem to be there all the time. But one of the most useful insights for meditation is the Buddha's recognition that the sense of self is something we *do*. We identify with this and then we drop that, and we go identifying with something else. When anger comes, you identify with the anger. When greed comes, you identify with the greed. When they go away, you identify with the state of mind that doesn't have greed, doesn't have anger. Sometimes you identify with your body. Sometimes you identify with specific thoughts in the mind.

So your sense of self shuffles around a lot. If you could take a picture of it, it would be like an amoeba, spreading out a little pseudopod here, a little pseudopod there, changing shape all the time. And it's a strategy that's worked for us, to some extent. If it hadn't worked at all, we would've dropped it a long time ago.

This is why when the Buddha talks about not-self, we feel threatened. It's as if he's trying to take something away from us, deprive us of our strategies. But that's not the case. He's actually providing us with new and better strategies. On the one hand, he tries to expand our sense of what kind of happiness is possible. There is a greater happiness than what can come from satisfaction with your work, gaining material things, gaining friends, gaining power, feeling good about yourself. There is a greater happiness than this.

But to attain it, we have to learn how to dis-identify with strategies we've clung to very tenaciously in the past.

To get us ready for that skill, the Buddha starts by having us develop more and more skillful senses of self to begin with. That's why we practice generosity; it's why we practice virtue. When you learn to identify with a generous mind-state,

you find you really enjoy it. It's much more expansive than a greedy or stingy mind state. You learn how to withdraw from the greedy or stingy mind state. It may come up, but you decide you don't have to identify with it. That's a little teaching on not-self right there.

In other words, the Buddha provides you with new strategies so that you can drop some of your blatantly unskillful ones.

And it's not as if the idea of not-self is anything really new in our lives. We've had to learn it from a very early age. You identify with some things and you don't identify with others. That's what identification means. The self that you can use to manipulate pleasure and pain, and the self that receives the results of that pleasure and pain: Those are the things you identify with. Everything else outside of the boundary of that self, you dis-identify with. Everything else is not-self. If your brother has a toy that you'd like to have as yours, you can try claiming it as your own. If he's bigger than you are, he may sock you in the face. So you decide, "Well, maybe that's not my toy. It's not worth trying to claim it if it means getting my face bashed in." You learn how not to identify with certain things so as to maintain the well-being of things you feel are more important.

So the whole strategy of self already involves a strategy of not-self, the things you have to drop for the sake of maintaining the well-being of the part that you *do* want to hold onto. What we're doing as we practice is learning how to articulate the sense of self and to develop more skillful ways of doing it. We learn how to articulate the strategy of not-self and develop more skillful ways of doing it too.

Like when we're sitting here, meditating: You can, if you want to, identify with all the pains and aches and the misery that may come up in the course of the meditation, but what does that accomplish? It just gets you tied down. It makes you miserable. Or you can learn consciously *not* to identify with them. In other words, you want to take this process of selfing and not-selfing and bring it up into consciousness by trying to articulate it.

It's like talking-cures in psychotherapy: that strange process of finding that simply being able to talk about things can often help solve a problem in the mind. What you're doing as you're talking is that you're learning how to articulate what's going on in the mind. Once it's articulated, then it's a lot easier to deal with. All too often, we have these big vague notions swimming around in the mind; because they're so vague and ill-defined, we can never really get a handle on them. As a result, they have power over us. It's like letting an ill-defined ghost come in and take over your mind.

There's that belief that if you can name a ghost, the ghost will go away. And it's a principle that actually works in the mind. These vague shapeless ideas: If you can

name them, if you can articulate them, then you get some power over them. So as this amoebic sense of self comes swishing through the body and swishing through the mind, once you learn how to articulate it, you notice, “This is when I’m identifying with my hands. This is when I’m identifying with the breath. And now I’m identifying with fear. Now I’m identifying with anxiety.” You see that act of identification as something you do. Then you can start manipulating it in ways that are helpful.

You’re sitting here in a body that has the potential both for pleasure and for pain. Learn to identify with the pleasure. Learn how to keep it going. You know that sitting here for an hour, there will be pains coming up. You’ve done it many times before. You know where the pains tend to be. So you get yourself ready. Work on making the breath comfortable. Once the breath is comfortable, start spreading it down, especially into the areas that tend to be painful, and out through them.

If the pains are in your back and your hips, think of the sense of comfortable relaxed breath going down the neck, down the back, out through your hips, out through the legs, out through your toes and the space between the toes. You keep the center of your awareness, say, in the chest or in whatever part you know is not going to get pained. As little pains come nibbling here, nibbling there, be aware of them. Don’t wait until they get really blatant before you suddenly turn your attention to them, because by that time, your sense of self has probably latched on to them. Notice them when they’re small. Notice them when they’re just beginning. And be very conscious about reminding yourself, “That’s not me. That’s just a pain.” Part of mind will say, “Well, it’s in my body.” So you say, “What’s yours about the body?”

That’s why we have that contemplation on the 32 parts the body. You go through the list: Which part of the body is really you or yours? The liver? The lungs? The intestines? Is there anything in there that you can really, ultimately, totally control? This gets back to that initial impulse for having a sense of self to begin with: the sense of control. You realize that it’s pretty shaky. You can control these things a little bit for a certain period of time. But as the Buddha said, you can’t say, “Don’t grow ill. Don’t get old. Don’t die.” They’re going to do these things regardless of whether you give permission or not.

During my ordination ceremony, when I was given instruction on the 32 parts the body, my preceptor made the point of *anatta* by saying, “Now that you’ve shaved your hair, can you tell your hair not to grow?” The idea struck me as funny. I actually laughed in the middle of the ceremony, which he didn’t like. But it’s true. We’d like to think that we have some control over our bodies. After all, these

are the things we're going to control so we can get other forms of happiness. But in ultimate terms, there has to come a point where you realize you don't have total control, even over such little, immediate things like the growth of your hair.

So the question is, are you just going to continue to hold on to this, or are you going to learn how to let go? And in letting go, the Buddha doesn't leave you defenseless or without any other place to go. He says, "First learn to hold on to things that are more skillful." You can hold on to the sensations of pleasure, sensations of ease, that you can learn how to create in the body through the breath. And you learn how to hold on to the qualities of mind that make that possible: mindfulness, alertness, and concentration.

Now, this goes against our old habits, so it's going to require effort, especially in the beginning because you're rusty at these new skills. It takes it takes time to work through them, to develop them, to keep coming back to them. But it's an effort that's well spent. Right effort doesn't mean middling effort all the time. Sometimes it means a lot of effort; sometimes it means just the barest minimum of effort, determined by what's appropriate for the issue at hand.

But as you learn to get it a conscious handle on this habit you have of creating a sense of self as a strategy, then you can turn it into a more skillful strategy. Take it as far as it can go. Once it gets you into good states of concentration, you begin to gain some insights. Bit by bit by bit, you learn how to let go of things you can't really control, and find that there is a greater sense of freedom with less a sense of being burdened in the mind. As you appreciate this process, it gets you more inclined to see what else can you let go of. Are there subtler burdens in there? This is where the not-self strategy takes precedence over the self-strategy.

But again, it's a strategy for happiness, simply that it gets more and more refined, until you can find an ultimate happiness that comes from letting go of any sense of self or any sort. You don't even identify with awareness or the ground of being or whatever. And you find that that's a really, really worthwhile skill.

So we're not being deprived of our strategies. The Buddha is giving us a wider range of strategies. He's also to trying to expand our imagination as to what kind of happiness is possible, so that we'll be more willing to try new strategies, to gain that greater happiness.

So don't look at the teaching on not-self as a form of deprivation. It's a very important set of skills that you can add to your self skills—to replace them, in many cases, with better skills—until eventually you attain release. There's freedom lurking here in this practice that we're following. And whether it takes a lot of effort or little effort, it's worth every bit of effort that goes into it.