

Sorting Yourself Out

November 11, 2010

When the Buddha talks about our sense of who we are, he talks about it in the context of karma, because we *make* a sense of who we are. He calls it “I-making” and “my-making.” And there’s not just one “I,” or one “my.” For each desire, you have a sense of self, especially the desires you’ve acted on. There’s the self that wants to experience pleasure as a result of the desire, there’s the self that wants to find the powers, or to develop the powers, to bring that desire about, and then there’s the author of the desire itself. So even with one desire you have a cluster of three selves right there. Multiply that by all the different desires you’ve had, and you realize you’ve got a whole herd in here.

So when you’re sitting down to meditate, it’s not just you. It’s all of the “you’s” in there. Some of them want to meditate; others would like to do other things. So when you’re sitting here, there’s an enormous question about where your allegiance is right now, because sometimes they’re split. Part of you wants to sit and get the mind still and quiet, other parts want to do other things. And they have all kinds of agendas and all kinds of reasons. And so you have to a little wary because some of them may seem like friends but they’re not actually your friends. Some may be taking on the voice of authority, saying, “You have to do this, you have to worry about that, you have to plan for this, you’re irresponsible if you don’t do that.” And you have to sort things out. Exactly where do those responsibilities lie? Others among your selves don’t have any real reasons. They just come on with a lot of force and bully you. It’s just like politics.

So an important part of the meditation is to remind yourself of why you’re here. What kind of happiness have you seen in the world, what kind of happiness have you gained from following your greed, your lust, your aversion, your fears? Then weigh those pleasures against the pain you’ve felt by following those things. Ask yourself: “Have you learned your lessons?”

If one of these unskillful internal selves is coming on really strong, you need some tools for at least fending it off. For the time being you want some space here inside so that you really can settle down and the members of the committee that do want to settle down will have a chance to get a sense of ease and well-being with the breath. Which means you can’t just grab onto the breath and force it. You want to simply allow it to be comfortable, to flow in different parts of the body, have a sense of the energy flowing all around without any obstacles, so that the parts of the mind that want to settle down will have some allies, and the part

of the mind that wants immediate gratification, immediate pleasure, will be able to find it. That way, when greed, aversion, and delusion do come up, your allegiances are more on the side of the quiet, the stillness, the concentration, the mindfulness.

Because the Buddha does give you lots of tools to deal with these seeming friends inside. But the important factor always is that you try to identify with the parts of the mind that really do want the tools to work. Because it's very easy, if your allegiances are someplace else, to say, "Well, I've gone to the tools, and they don't work. I guess I'll just have to go along with the lust or the aversion." But you didn't really give the tools a proper chance.

For example, one of the chants we have, the 32 parts of the body, is a really good tool for dealing with lust, but people have lots of ways to resist that particular meditation. But it's very simple: Just think about it—what is the body made of? Hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, down to the bones, down to the different internal organs, and all the different liquids in the body: the blood, the lymph, the urine, the oils, the saliva: things we don't talk about in polite company, and certainly not the things you want to think about when you're beginning to align yourself with the lust. That's exactly why you want to think about these things. It helps cut you short, or helps cut that particular member of the committee short. If you're lusting for somebody, you can ask, "Are you lusting for their liver, are you lusting for their large intestine, or small intestine, or stomach, or the contents of the stomach?" No, but these things lie just a few micro-millimeters under the skin. So it's a good contemplation. But the point is that you have to find which members of the committee want to use it and then you strengthen them. You reaffirm your allegiance and the tools have a lot more likelihood of working.

The same with aversion: Suppose there's somebody you really don't like. If you act on that strong dislike, what are you going to do? You're going to start doing a lot of unskillful things. You've got to keep that person's well-being in mind. Now, this doesn't mean you have to please the person or do what that person wants, but you want to make sure you don't do anything to harm that person. So it's good to remind yourself of all the good things that that person has done for you, the help that person has given you.

It's here where the Buddha's teachings on gratitude are important. You realize that if there's somebody who has helped you and yet you turn around and are really harsh with them, or unkind, or hurtful, it's really unfair. If you respond to kindness with hurtfulness, it takes civilization down a notch. So you try to remind yourself of the good things that that person has done or thought or said for you.

And even though you may feel a resistance, as if that person doesn't deserve it, or, "I'm going to be trapped in that person's net if I think nice things about the person," you have to remind yourself: No, you're doing this for your own protection, so that when you're dealing with that person you're not going to do anything harmful. You're not going to give rein to any of your harmful desires or reactions. So it's for your own sake that you're thinking about that person's good points, because you don't want to create any bad karma.

When you're feeling lazy, you think about death—not to get yourself depressed, but just to remind yourself that there's work to be done, and you've got a chance right now. You'd better do it now, because you can't wait until later. That way of thinking about death is actually useful. If you think about it in a way that gets you depressed, you're not using the thought right. As the Buddha said: You remind yourself, "If I get one more chance to breathe in and breathe out, I'll use it for practice." Well, here it is one more chance right now, so use it. The purpose of this is to give you the sense of the importance of right here, right now. Because you have this right here, right now, but you don't know how much longer you're going to have a right here, or a right now, so you make the best use of what you've got.

Whatever the unskillful thought, whatever the unskillful member of the committee, you've got to remember, "This is not my friend, this is not helping me." Ajaan Suwat mentions how we often hate pain but we love our cravings, without reflecting on the fact that the craving is what leads to the pain and suffering. You should have a friendlier attitude toward pain because it reminds you: This is an issue you have to watch; this is an issue you have to learn about. Remember that your craving is the enemy.

Of course, you have to sort out which desires are helpful and which ones are not. The desire to act skillfully and to avoid doing unskillful behavior: That desire is your true friend. But the craving for sensuality, the craving to take on this identity, or to destroy that identity: Those are the ones that are going to cause you suffering.

So you have to sort things out. You have friends in the mind, you have enemies in the mind, and they're all labeled "you." All these different identities that you've taken on are like the wife of the dictator who had 5,000 pairs of shoes in her closet. At one point, sometimes, she must have worn those shoes, but then she kept them all. You've got thousands of selves in here. And you've got to sort out: Which are the ones that are really helpful, and which ones are enemies in disguise?

Now, fortunately they can all talk with one another. And this is one of the purposes of meditation: to create a neutral place where there's a sense of ease,

there's a sense of well-being, so that the really hungry, exasperated, and impatient selves can be fed a sense of pleasure. Then you can talk to them and point out to them: "Okay, we can all be happy, but the happiness that this or that particular self is proposing is not going to lead to long-term happiness. It's going to lead to pain down the road." And then that self will say: "Well, I don't care. I want what I want right now." And you say, "No. Look, it's going to be painful, and if you are me, I don't want to suffer." And those selves, the ones who want pleasure right now and are willing to suffer pain down the line are the ones that run away when the actual suffering comes, and you're left holding the bag.

So it's tricky. You're talking to your selves, and each one of them claims to be you, and you've had experience with each one of them being you at one point or another. You have to learn how to identify with the selves that want long-term happiness, that realize you have to behave responsibly in order to find that happiness, who realize that there are things that you like to do that give pleasure, and things that you don't like doing that give rise to pain in the long term. But then there are also the problematic ones, the ones who have things they like to do that give pain down the line, or things they don't like to do that give pleasure down the line. And you've got to strengthen the selves that really are concerned with the long-term results, the selves that have learned to be patient, the selves that have learned to be responsible, the selves that really do have your long-term best interest in mind.

So you have to sort out all your various allegiances here. Because, as I said, the difficult part is that at some point in time you have identified with all of the members of the committee. But it's best to see them as tools or as outfits you put on. Just because you put a certain outfit on back when you were a child doesn't mean you need to wear it now. In fact, it's probably inappropriate. There are some really old tools that you used at one point in time, like that *Far Side* cartoon of the cow's tools. You look at the tools and you don't see any possible use for them at all. But the cow is very proud that it made them. In the same way, we've created different senses of self from our I-making and my-making, and a lot of them have really limited uses.

So in one sense we're doing some housecleaning here. Instead of looking at the selves as who we are, look at them as tools. Some of them are useful, and some of them are not, and we'd be wise to throw out the ones that are not of use anymore. As for the ones who continue to hang around, learn how to convert them so that they like to meditate and want true happiness too. The same with all the different outfits you've worn. Figure out which ones are your baby clothes, which ones are the things you wore when you were six years old, 12 years old, whatever. Notice

that they don't fit anymore, so give them away. Keep only the clothes that are useful. Don't get carried away by nostalgia.

And if you don't see any of the selves in there that you like, well, here's one of the things that we do when we meditate: We create a new sense of self around the meditation. So try to make it a healthy self. Because each self, especially the useful ones, are created around skills. We're working on a good skill here. We're learning to find a sense of well-being simply by the way we breathe, a perfectly harmless peace, a perfectly harmless pleasure. Even though it may take a while to gain a sense of skill around this, it is possible. And once you have this skill, you find that it's a really true friend.