

Not-selfing Your Selves

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There are some Buddhist teachers who treat the idea of a self as a logical fallacy. They point out: “There’s nothing solid, nothing lasting, about anything that you could claim as a self, therefore there is no self. All you have to do is accept the logic and you won’t latch onto anything.” That’s what they say. But then, of course, people for some reason are stubbornly unable to accept the logic.

But that’s not the issue at all. We don’t hold onto the idea of self because it’s a logical conclusion. We hold onto it because it’s useful. We’ve found it useful in many ways. Your sense of self is part of what’s called “becoming.” And every becoming deals with a desire. You take on an identity in a particular world to attain that desire, and that identity consists of at least two parts. One is the part that’s going to experience the pleasure that comes when that desire has been met: the self as the consumer. The other part’s a self as the producer or the provider, the part that’s actually going to make the effort to find what needs to be found to bring that desire into reality. And that’s the part we hold onto, more than anything else.

With all the various skills we’ve learned in making use of the body—making use of our feelings, our perceptions, thought constructs, even our consciousness: The reason we hold onto these things is because we’ve found them useful for finding happiness. Now, the problem is that our notion of happiness may be limited, and we may be turning a blind eye to huge areas where we’re actually causing suffering for ourselves by holding onto a particular identity. But the fact that we see the identity as a useful strategy, a useful tool, means that we’re going to hold onto it regardless, no matter how many times people point out the fact that form is inconstant, feelings, perceptions, fabrications, consciousness, are all inconstant. Still, we feel, “Well, at least they’re constant enough for us to use.” And the effort that goes into holding onto a sense of self and clinging to a sense of self is repaid by the pleasure that comes by using that particular sense of self. That’s what we think. That’s the problem we’ve got to attack. It’s caused by our blindness.

We have lots of senses of self. There’s not just one self inside. There’s a self for each of the those desires, we’ve gathered them up over the course of the years, and they’re quite a stable. Some of them we haven’t looked at very carefully, but they lurk around inside the mind, in the dark corners of the barn. Others we’re more familiar with. Between them, there are huge areas of blindness around the consequences for a particular sense of self.

This is why we meditate: both to see that there are these limitations—the various senses of self we harbor all entail a fair amount of suffering—and also to give us new skills and new selves to go with the desires underlying those skills. You have to take on quite a few new selves as a meditator: the self who practices the precepts, the self who learns how to be pleased by generosity, all the selves that go with the different good qualities you’re trying to develop. You

take them on in a provisional way, but also as a way of changing the balance of power inside. Even though the fights among the different selves inside can be one of your main causes of suffering, still the fact that you have many different selves means that you can change your point of view, get out of a particular self and see it from the point of view of another self. You begin to see, “Oh yeah, it does have its drawbacks.” You’re not threatened by that fact, because you’ve got another self, another point of view to look from.

Concentration is the big becoming that we’re creating here. A sense of self is there inside, focused on the breath, at ease with the breath, having a sense of belonging, a sense of solidity from which it can look at other senses of self and ask the question, “Are they really necessary? Are they really worth the effort that goes into them?” This is also helped by being around people who’ve managed to look at their different senses of self and get rid of a lot of the unskillful ones. They show you that it is possible.

You can also change your ideas about what it means to be really worth the effort. We tend to be remarkably bad at gauging the payoff of a particular effort. Positive psychologists have noticed this for a long time: People have ideas about what makes them happy, but if you actually ask them at the moment when they’re engaging in that particular activity, they realize, well, they’re not as happy as they thought. But then, afterwards, they’ll dress it up, or beforehand, they’ll dress it up, largely because they don’t see any alternative. As the Buddha said, we put up with suffering to some extent, but then we figure that the only alternative to that suffering is the different pleasures that we can look for. Even though those pleasures may entail some problems, we don’t see any other alternative. So we say, “Well, it’s just part of life. You’ve got to accept that. If you don’t break a few dishes nobody listens to you and nothing gets done.” That kind of idea.

So we have to see that there are other alternatives and that they’re more effective ways of finding happiness. Having them to hold onto, you can put aside the pleasures that are not as healthy, not as productive of genuine happiness. This is how you begin to sort through the various selves inside.

So learn to view your skill as a meditator, the skill of concentration, as one of your important forays into rearranging the stable: getting rid of the animals that are really viscous, nasty, and even some of the ones that seem relatively benign, but on closer examination have their shadow side as well. As you learn to identify more and more with the self as a meditator, you find that that’s where all your clinging goes. And so you can loosen up a lot of your clinging to other selves and other old habits.

And it’s by focusing all your clinging right here that—when you finally do turn around and look at the concentration itself or look at the acts of discernment that you’ve been doing as part of the concentration—you can begin to see that they, too, are fabricated. They, too, carry a level of stress. The fact that your clinging has been concentrated right here means that when you do let go of this clinging, there’s nothing else that the mind wants to hold onto. That’s how you gain your first taste of the deathless.

With full awakening, they say you have no more need of a self. Because, after all, the self is there as a tool for finding happiness, but the happiness of awakening, once it's found, doesn't need tools, so it doesn't need a sense of self. In fact, your sense of self is going to get in the way. So you drop it at that point, not because you've decided it's bad or whatever; it's simply that you don't need it any more. It's dropped, not out of hatred, simply out of a sense you've outgrown it.

So that's where we're headed. It's not a process of finding your true self and then denying it, or finding out that there was no self there to begin with. There are all these selves and some of them will require a certain amount of arguing, a certain amount of negotiating, a certain amount of reasoning, until it really does hit home to you that the activities belonging to those selves carry lots of drawbacks and you have a better alternative. Because one thing all these senses of self have in common is that they want happiness. It's simply that their idea of what happiness is and how you best get there can be pretty limited. Their ideas of what's possible are limited. So they can be reasoned with when you show them better alternatives.

There's that old problem in ancient philosophy. The question is, do your desires have any reasons at all? There was one school of philosophy, starting with Plato, that said that reason is one thing and desire is something else. Desires have no reasons whatsoever. They're just brute force. And another school, the Stoics, who seem to have been more insightful, said that even your desires have reasons. Otherwise, there would be no way of communicating with them, no way of saying Yes or No to them. They would just overpower you.

So every self inside has its reasons. And learning the reasons of the selves can sometimes be a really fascinating project. You can figure out: Where did they go wrong? It's not a matter of logic. It's a matter of faulty strategy, not seeing what they were really doing. Where were they thinking that they were clever? But what did they get wrong, so that their cleverness was misguided? It's only when you see that your desires have their reasons and, from a certain point of view, they make sense: That's when you can understand, "Okay, this is how far the sense goes and this is when it becomes nonsense." That's when you can really let those selves go. If you don't understand their reasons, they're going to hold on, because you haven't dealt with their reasons properly.

So the process of meditation is not simply one of noting things arising and passing away. You note them so that you can recognize, "Okay, this is an event in the mind." Then the question is, "What is the impact of this event?" And particularly these voices in the mind, what are they saying? Why are they saying it? What's their reasoning? Where do they really lead? This is what the investigation is all about, so that you can get past their reasons.

This is also why people who have gained awakening don't brag about it, because they've been discovering how stupid they've been all along: listening to voices in the mind that seemed reasonable, but deep down inside they knew were wrong, and finally they realized why. It's only when you see that you've been stupid that your discernment really does have a chance to free you. But you can see that these things are stupid only when you have better alternatives.

This is why we develop the path as an alternative set of selves, a set of becomings: so that the mind doesn't feel so bereft. Because, deep down inside, it knows if you say, "There is no self," it's like a denial of your hopes: You can't find happiness because you have no tools to do so. Of course, that's not what the Buddha is saying. He's not saying that there is no self. He's saying, "These senses of self you have are troublesome." Again, you hold on because you think, "I need them for these particular kinds of happiness." So we're giving you the opportunity to see that there are alternatives: You don't need those old kinds of selves. You can get great new ones inside based on your skills. That way, you can let go of the old ones without feeling deprived of anything at all. Even when you let go of the great selves of the path, there's no sense of deprivation, because you've found something even better.

So that's where we're headed. Which means that the skills we master—learning how to deal with pain, learning how to deal with frustration, learning how to deal with all the other issues that come up in the meditation—are all worth the effort, because they take the mind to a place that's better than good.