

Cleaning Out the Stables

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All things, the Buddha said, are rooted in desire. This is especially true of your sense of who you are. It's part of a process called becoming, which is the act of taking on an identity in a world of experience.

It starts with a desire, and then you cling to the desire. Around the object of the desire, there develops a world in which that object exists. Then there's your sense of *you* in that world, both as what will enjoy the object when it's obtained and what has the power and capabilities to obtain it: the self as the consumer and the self as the producer.

This is how we function in the world. This is how we were born into the world to begin with. At the moment you left your last life, some image related to the human world appeared in the mind, and you went for it. The human world developed around it, and you took on this identity as a human being in the world. The Canon has a very vivid image for this: a crow sitting in a human skull. We like to think that we were human beings in the last lifetime and just became human again. But who knows what we were? Maybe we were crows. There can be a very incongruous change of identities.

But as we live in the human world, we find out it's not just one world and one self. There are many worlds in the human world and many objects of desire within those different worlds. As we go through life, we focus on wanting this, wanting that, and then getting a sense of the different worlds we would have to inhabit in order to gain those things and the different kinds of people we would have to become to get them.

Sometimes we go for the object and sometimes we decide it's not worth it. But over time, we develop a whole stable of different selves: the self of your work life, the self of your family life, the self of whatever other social identities you've taken on. In some cases, they're skillful; in some cases, they're not. But as the Buddha said, *all* of these states of becoming involve suffering.

This is the process we have to overcome. And this is one of the reasons he taught the teaching on not-self: so that we could learn how to strip away, starting with the unskillful senses of self, all the unnecessary members of the stable and to develop a few necessary ones that are going to be useful for the path. Then, when the goal is attained, you can put those selves aside, too.

But it's important that you realize, as you're clearing these things away, it's not just an issue of saying, "Not-self," "Not-self," "Not-self," or "That isn't me."

Because each sense of self is embedded in a particular world, and those worlds are based on clinging.

As you remember, clinging comes in four forms. There's sensuality—clinging to the pleasure of planning and fantasizing about sensual pleasures—which forms a nucleus for your desire. There are views about the world in which that object is going to be found. There are habits and practices—the things you have to do, the things you *should* do, within the context of that world, based on how that world is structured and how it works. And then there's you, the one who can develop those skills. So each “you” is embedded in quite a lot of other things: sensual desires, a view of the world, a view about what you should do within that world. In order to clean out the stables, you have to realize these connections.

Some people say, “Well, just let go of your clinging to self, and that'll take care of everything else.” But that's not the case. I know people who have had what they say was the greatest experience of not-self in their meditation. Yet they can go back and do really unskillful things. And they've learned to justify those unskillful things to themselves.

You have to look at *all* the things you're clinging to. The object you're clinging to: Is it worth it? For example, suppose you wanted to become an actor; you wanted to get an Oscar. You have to look at the Oscar. Is it really worth it to have that little statuette out on your mantle? Think about the world you'd have to go into, the world of the movie industry. Is that a world you really want to inhabit? What are the values of that world? And what are the things you would have to do in order to function within that world? What kind of person would you have to become within that world? We like to think that Oscars are handed out on the basis of merit, but there are lots of other things that go into getting them.

Looking at the object of the desire, you realize that it's really not worth it. You look at the world you would have to inhabit, and realize, “Okay, that's not a world I'd want to inhabit.” You look at the things you'd have to do and the skills you'd have to develop in order to make your way in that world, and you realize they're not the kind of skills that would be helpful for you in the long term.

So you have to attack each self in all these dimensions—the world and the desires and the shoulds it's embedded in—and you have to do it again and again. This is one of the reasons why it's so difficult, say, for old people to move to a new country. Their sense of themselves gets really threatened because the world is a different place. The skills that are needed are different skills from the one's they've identified themselves with. The barriers that are put up for the objects they desire are more insurmountable.

This is also how we find, say, after we've lived at the monastery for a while, when you go back home, you start picking up your old habits. The self that worked in that view of the world takes over.

So you really have to contemplate deeply about what it is in each of those worlds that you find attractive. What do you want to get out of those worlds? Have a strong sense of the kind of actions you will and will not do. That contemplation can help pry you loose from some unskillful habits, and the unskillful selves that you developed around those habits.

Even with the skillful selves, you have to see their drawbacks and the drawbacks of the worlds to which they lead. This is why the Buddha gave that teaching on the graduated discourse. He talked about generosity and virtue. These are all really great skills to develop. He talked about the rewards, particularly the rewards that come in heaven: the best place you can be reborn in. But then you realize it's almost like it's a fiendish trick. You work so hard at being good—being generous and virtuous, getting to a place you want to go—and then you're going to fall. And when you fall, it hurts very badly. All that work to get those rewards, and even they will let you down. This is why the Buddha said that *all* states of becoming involve suffering.

And this is why he'd recommend that you develop the perception of not-self together with other perceptions: He also recommends the perception of no delight in any world, because the self and the world go together. If you still delight in a particular world, then no matter how many times you contemplate the drawbacks of the kind of self you'd acquire, you're still going to go back and use it. So contemplate both sides: the self and the world. Contemplate all around because you cling all around.

The good news is that we don't have to cling. But you have to learn how to let go selectively. As I said, you clean out the stables. Get rid of the unskillful selves first. Develop the skillful ones. And when they've taken you as far as they can go, then you take the next step without them.

So try to see how deeply embedded your sense of identification is in everything you do. After all, with every action you engage in, you need to have to have a sense that you'll be able to do it, and you'll benefit from it. In fact, this is why a sense of self lingers on, even all the way through the third stage of awakening—because you've still got work to do. After the first stage, you've finished your work in terms of virtue. But you've still got work to do in terms of concentration and discernment, and you need a lingering sense of "I am" to do the work, because without that sense of your capabilities, without the sense that you're going to benefit, you can't do anything. To get rid of the unnecessary selves, you have to

realize how deeply embedded they are in every sense of the world and how you have to contemplate all around in order to get past them.

But it is possible to get past not only the unskillful selves but also the skillful ones. There's that moment of non-fashioning, dis-identification where there's no sense of identification at all. There's nothing to move into anything. And instead of leading to nothingness, it leads to the highest happiness, a happiness that doesn't need to be maintained. You don't have to do anything to gain any further, and you don't have to do anything to keep it going.

And that's when your self-strategies can all be put aside because in that attainment, there's no world either—nothing to be done and no further object to be attained. So there's no need for any further sense of self. You put that whole cluster of clingings aside.