

## *The Allure of Self*

*May 15, 2021*

There are some people who treat the problem of self and not-self as a logical problem. First they define self as something that's permanent. Then they have you look at the various things that you identify with, and you realize that there's nothing permanent there at all. Therefore, there is no self.

So why does that argument not have much force? Because we don't really care whether the self is permanent or not. We just want to be happy, and our sense of self is one of the ways in which we look for happiness. It's a part of our strategy for happiness.

There's the sense of self that wants pleasure, and then there's a sense of self built around what we can do to, what powers we have to find that pleasure. Then there's the self that watches over all of this, and decides whether the other senses of self have actually succeeded in finding a worthwhile pleasure. Those senses of self are all strategic, and the only way we're going to get over being attached to them is to see that the strategies are not working to our satisfaction, and that there's a better way to find happiness.

It's important to note that the sense of self is not dropped until the very last of the noble attainments, because the teaching on not-self is not going to work unless you have at least some sense of there's a happiness to be found that doesn't involve a sense of self at all, and it's a better happiness. By that point, you've seen that happiness, or at least you've had a taste of it.

Even up through non-return there's still a lingering sense of self. There's that famous passage where Ven. Khemaka an old monk, is sick. He's asked by a number of monks about his attainment. Back in those days, when a monk was about to die, the monks would gather around and say, "Whatever noble attainment you've got, put your mind there." Often they would ask, "What *is* your noble attainment?" He answered that he did not identify with any of the five aggregates, so they said, "Oh, then you must be an arahant." He said, "No, I'm not an arahant."

He was a non-returner, and he described what it's like. There's a lingering sense of self. It wasn't identified with any of the five aggregates, but it lingered around the five aggregates, he said, in the same way that when you used—back in those days they didn't have detergent, but they had the equivalent of detergent—when you used detergent to wash a piece of cloth, there would still be the scent of detergent lingering around the cloth. You put the cloth away, and after a while

that scent of detergent would go away. In other words, there was the self that got you there: the self that developed virtue, that developed concentration, that developed discernment. It got you to a dimension where there was no sense of self. You saw it, but then you returned to the experience of the senses, you returned to the aggregates, and you realized that there's more work to be done.

That lingering sense of self was still there to do the work. That's using your sense of self in a wise way. For most of us, though, we identify with things that are pretty foolish, like that passage we had just now from the Ratthapala Sutta, the four Dhamma summaries. You know the story. Ven. Ratthapala is being interviewed by a king as to why he ordained. He says that there were four reasons, four Dhamma summaries, that gave him the faith that he needed to go forth: "The world is swept away. It does not endure." That's the teaching on inconstancy. The king asks, "What do you mean, the world does not endure?" Ratthapala says, "Well, look at you. How old are you now?" The king's eighty. "And when you were young, were you strong?" "Yes, sometimes," the king says, "I thought I had the strength of two people." "How about now?" "Oh no, now that I'm eighty, sometimes I mean to put my foot in one place, and it goes someplace else." Aging, inconstancy.

The next summary is: "The world offers no shelter. There's no one in charge." What does that mean? Here's a king who feels he's very much in charge. Ratthapala asks him, "Do you have a recurring illness?" The king says, "Yes, a wind illness," which basically involved a lot of shooting pains. "Sometimes when it's really strong, I'm lying in my bed and the relatives and courtiers are standing around saying, 'Maybe this time he's going to die.'" Imagine that—you're a king and all your relatives can think about is, "Maybe you're going to die now and get out of the way." Ratthapala says, "Can you order them to take out some of that pain that you're feeling so that you don't have to feel so much pain?" The king says, "No, I have to face that pain all alone." That's the fact of illness, stress, suffering in things that are inconstant.

The next Dhamma summary: "The world has nothing of its own. One has to pass on, leaving everything behind." Here's a wealthy king who says, "What do you mean, the world has nothing of its own?" And Ratthapala says, "All this treasure you have, can you take it with you when you die?" "Well, no." So death, not-self.

Then Ratthapala says "The world is a slave to craving." Here's a king, of course, who doesn't feel like he's a slave to anything at all. But when Ratthapala quizzes him, saying, "If there were someone who told you there was another kingdom to the east with lots of wealth that you could conquer, would you take it?" Now

here's this guy, eighty years old, a recurring illness, ready to die. He's just been reflecting on the fact that he can't take anything with him when he dies, and yet he'll still go for the kingdom. "How about if another person were to come from the south, would you go for a kingdom there?" "Oh, sure." "A kingdom in the west? A kingdom to the north?" "Yes, yes." "How about a kingdom on the other side of the ocean?" "Of course."

We look at that and we shake our heads at how blind the king can be. He's just been reflecting on how he can't take anything with him, and yet he would be willing to go through all that trouble just to get more. But then what about us? What are the things that we hold on to? He had wealth. He had power. Our selves, though, hold on to narratives that are hardly worth thinking about. Some of the things we hold to most tightly are thoughts about times when we've been wronged. That's the strongest sense of self right there: very self-righteous, very tenacious. But just like the king, where is it going to take us? If you hold on to that when you die, where are you going to go? No place good. And here we are, we're not anywhere near death, at least as far as we know, and yet we're still holding on very tenaciously. At a time like that, when everything is slipping away, watch out for what the mind will hold on to. You have to think about other things, better ways of finding happiness, better ways of defining yourself. Because it's only in that way that this problem of self is going to be solved.

Fortunately, the solution, not-self, is something we already have some experience with—things we've learned to dis-identify with, seeing that they're not worth it. It's simply that the Buddha's asking us to be more systematic and clear-eyed about it. Normally, we can go through the day, and the line between self and not-self gets moved around quite a lot, like playing a game of football where they keep moving the goal posts. Someone's a good friend and all of a sudden they're not a good friend: They become not-self, the other. Then they become a good friend, and they're part of your circle of friends again.

The Buddha's saying to look at the things you hold on to. Then apply that analysis of the five steps. This is why it's so important that he talks about self not so much as a thing, but as a process of I-making and my-making. He says, "Notice what originates it. How does it come about? What sparks a sense of self?" And when it goes, how does it go? When it comes back again, how does it come back again?

We talk about the ego. It's a role. We can play the ego as a role, but it's a role we pick up and put down. Then we pick it up again, and we define it in different ways. We have lots of egos, lots of selves. So you want to notice when you pick one up, especially one that involves suffering: Why? That's the next step.

You've seen the origination, what causes it. You've seen the fact that it passes away. Then when it comes back, you go for it again. What's the allure? A lot of things we identify with, when you really look at them, are not worth it. The king at least had treasures. He had his kingdom. But what are your treasures? What is your kingdom? Sometimes you look at the things you hold on to and it's like looking at a pack rat's nest: the weird little things that it's stolen from around the house. Yet you hold on, hold on.

There's that sutta where one of the Buddha's disciples is talking about how some people are very wealthy, with very high status, and yet they find it easy to give it all up to ordain. Other people are really poor. The example given is of a man who has a little hut, not the best sort; he has a wife, not the best sort; he has a few pumpkin seeds, not the best sort. Yet he can't let those things go. You have to realize that the tenacity of our attachments has very little to do with the real worth of the things we hold on to. It's more connected with what the mind tells itself about them. The poor man's attitude is, "If I don't have this, I have nothing. Something is better than nothing." So he holds on. As for the wealthy person who can let go, he realizes, "If I let go, something better is going to come." That's what you have to look at.

When we're talking about the drawbacks of things, it's not only seeing the negative side of a particular activity that the mind does. It's also a matter of realizing that if you engage in that sort of activity, you're missing out on things that are better. In this case, if you hold on to your old narratives, you're preventing the mind from settling down, finding some peace, finding some quiet in the mind. You're preventing the mind from gaining some insight, some discernment. And when the mind doesn't have any concentration or discernment, there's no way it's going to have an experience of the deathless.

As Ajaan Maha Boowa once said, if you could take the deathless out and show it to everybody, nobody would want anything else. The problem is that it's within the mind of the person who's experienced it, or it's to be touched there. Nobody else can know. That's why we say it's *paccattam*: It's individual.

So as we practice, we have to have the faith. We have to have the conviction that, yes, there is something better, so that when we look at our various strategies — this has to do with however we define our self in any interaction with anybody else—we have to realize that the things that we're doing to defend ourselves, to keep ourselves safe, are actually getting in the way of a truer happiness. As for the part of the mind that clutches to those old habits, saying "Well, if I don't have these old habits, I'm exposed, I'm vulnerable": Maybe in the beginning, as you're learning new skills, you don't feel quite as at ease practicing the new skills, so there

may be a sense of feeling exposed. But you're not being exposed just for the sake of being vulnerable.

Some people talk about being vulnerable as an ideal state of mind—open and vulnerable—but it's stupid. The Buddha's not going to leave you exposed. He's actually giving you something better, a better way of protecting your happiness, protecting your well-being. But it requires redefining your well-being, what really is well-being, and realizing that some of your old skills are actually getting in the way of finding that well-being and protecting it.

So you have to be willing to be a little bit exposed for a while as you master the new skills. When they're mastered, then you do find that it's possible to have an experience of the deathless. When you come back from that, your relationship to all the other things you used to identify with is quite different.

As I said, even with that first taste, though, there still remains a lingering sense of self.

Some people say that stream entry is when you see there is no self, but if that were the case, why did the Buddha have to give the not-self teaching to the monks who had already gained the Dhamma eye after hearing his first sermon? There's still a lingering sense of self, but it's lingering around in a lot more skillful ways. Even if you don't let go totally, the fact that you've had that experience of the deathless means that your relationship to things that you used to hold on to is very different. You're much more likely to hold on to worthwhile things. When you look at the world, the unskillful things you used to hold on to—the narratives of being abused, of being victimized, of having to fight, fight, fight for yourself—no longer hold any interest. As I said this afternoon, you look at them and it's like seeing a dog finding a dead bird and rolling in the dead bird. It loses its appeal. It loses its allure because you've found something better.

Through finding something better, you develop dispassion. And through dispassion, you're freed.

That's the logic of not-self. It's not a syllogism. It's more strategic. You see that the Buddha honors your desire for happiness, but he says there are better kinds of happiness, and better ways of getting there. You see that the sense of self you've been holding on to is actually getting in the way. It's interfering with happiness. It's not bringing you happiness. It's interfering. When you see that, that's when you let go. That's when it makes sense to let go.

In the meantime, work on trying to identify with what's skillful in the mind. Disidentify with what you can see is not skillful. As when you're practicing concentration: Anything that comes in to interfere with the concentration, see it as not-self, not-self. If there's any sense of self lingering in the concentration, okay,

make it skillful. That way, you're not totally set adrift. You begin to see that the Buddha's teaching really is for your own well-being. He really is on your side. He's not trying to strip you of anything valuable. He's just showing you that the things you're holding on to are really not worth it. There are things that are a lot better, and he shows you the way there.