

## *Selfing & Not-selfing*

*November 9, 2022*

The Buddha's basic image for his teaching was of a path—something you do, and it's important to keep that in mind. His focus is on actions, even when he talks about insight. There's a word, *yatha-bhuta-nāna-dassana*, which is sometimes translated as, "knowing and seeing things as they really are," but it really means, "knowing and seeing things they've come to be, as they function, as they act."

For instance, the main teaching is dependent co-arising, and it's all about actions. This causes that, that causes this, and as for what's behind those processes, the Buddha said, "Don't ask." Is there somebody doing these things? He doesn't say yes or no. Just don't ask that question. Focus on the activities.

So right now, focus on what you're doing. As for the question, "Who are you?" put that aside. The only extent to which you think about *you* is that this path is something you have to do. Nobody else is going to do it for you, but you are capable of doing it. Sometimes, you run into the *you* that says, "I can't do this, I'm a miserable meditator." You see the things going wrong in your meditation, and it just proves what you had decided on beforehand: You're a miserable meditator. And that's just a huge block. After all, what is the Buddha asking you? He's asking you to be mindful, which means keeping something in mind—something you can do—and just do it consistently. That's where it's new. Do it more consistently than you have before.

Keep the breath in mind. How do you do that? Each breath, one at a time. You don't have to do the whole hour right now. You do right now, right now. That you can do. The next breath comes, you can do that. The next breath comes, you can do that. You're capable of doing this, and you're going to benefit. Whatever suffering you're causing yourself right now will end when you achieve the goal. And you'll find that a lot of suffering falls away, a lot of stress falls away, in the meantime, as you're practicing.

You can see this very clearly as you're working with the breath. You begin to realize, as you breathe in, breathe out, that there are patterns of tension in different parts of the body. If you think of the breath flowing through them, they begin to dissolve away. So you're competent and you will benefit from this, and you're going to learn a lot.

I've had people ask me, "How do I know when my breathing is comfortable?" I'll say,

“Whatever is good enough for you right now, stick with that. Then as your concentration gets more solid, you get more sensitive, what was good enough before is not quite so good enough after all. Or you can improve it. Breathe in ways that are more subtle, breathe in ways that are more satisfying. You work with what you’ve got and move it in the right direction.”

As for who is the you that’s going to benefit: Put that aside. Remember that the Buddha doesn’t talk about questions about whether the self is or what the self is. He does talk about what the self *does*. The self can be its own mainstay. The self can be a governing principle. After all, what is your sense of self? It’s a strategy for finding happiness. You realize that you have to take responsibility for your actions, and you have to look carefully at what you’re doing and notice where you’re causing unnecessary stress or where you’re causing problems in life in general, and you learn how not to do that.

The Freudians talk about five functions of a healthy ego, and the Buddha teaches all five. He uses a different vocabulary, but he’s talking about the same sorts of things. For instance, the Freudians say that a healthy ego has a sense of anticipation. In other words, you see that there are future dangers, and so you prepare for them. Well, the Buddha calls that heedfulness. He said it’s the basis for all skillful qualities.

A healthy self realizes that if you try to find happiness for yourself and don’t care about other people, it’s not going to work. You have to think about other people’s well-being. The psychologists call that altruism; the Buddha calls it compassion.

You need how to learn how to say No to any unskillful impulses you may have. The Freudians call that suppression. It’s not the same thing as repression. Repression is when you deny that something bad is there. Suppression is when you admit—freely admit—that, yes, there are unskillful things in the mind, but you’ve got to say No to them. And you can. The Buddha calls that restraint.

Then you have to practice sublimation. In other words, you find other ways of channeling your desire for happiness in directions that are actually more skillful. The Buddha doesn’t have a term for that, but he does talk about noticing how you’re attached to sensuality and how many unskillful things you can do based on that attachment. You can replace the pleasure of sensuality with the pleasure that comes from concentration.

The fifth healthy ego function is humor. We don’t think of the Pali Canon as a humorous document, but that’s because most of us don’t read the Vinaya. The Vinaya has lots of good stories about monks and nuns behaving in really silly ways, foolish ways, and they’re often very funny. And you can see why they have stories like that in the Vinaya—they’re trying to get you

on the side of the rules. When you see that the behavior forbidden by the rules really is foolish, you're more willing to take on the rules. You also realize that this was a set of rules established by someone with a sense of humor. It wasn't some misanthrope who was trying to make everybody miserable. This teaches you to look at your own defilements and learn how to laugh at them. That's a healthy ego function.

There's another healthy function that the Buddha talks about but that the Freudians don't talk about, and that's a healthy sense of shame. This is not the shame that's the opposite of pride. It's the shame that's opposite of shamelessness—in other words, not caring what good people might think about your behavior. With healthy shame, the point, of course, is to choose the right people. You want to choose the noble ones as those whose eyes you want to look good in. They could look at your behavior and would approve of it. So if you think of doing things they would disapprove of, you say, "No, I can't do that, I'd be ashamed to do that, ashamed to have them see me do that." That's a healthy function of the self.

So the Buddha does teach all these healthy self-functions. It's simply a question of learning the right time and place to have an identity of "me, the meditator, who's going to benefit from all this," and "me, the meditator who's watching what's going on and can improve it." It's a matter of learning how to have a good sense of the right time and place.

As I said, the Buddha doesn't talk about what your self is, or if it is, but he does talk about what it *does*, and one of its main functions is to exert control. The question is, what things are worth trying to control and what things *can* you control? Now, obviously, the five aggregates are things you ultimately can't totally control, but you can squeeze them in the right direction enough to make a path. This is where the image of the raft comes in.

As I mentioned last night, you're on this side of the river, where there's danger, and you want to get to the other side, where it's safe, but there's no nibbana yacht that's going to come and pick you up and take you over. So you've got to fashion a raft out of what you've got here. And what have you got? You've got these five aggregates—form, feeling, perceptions, fabrications, consciousness. The Buddha calls them twigs and branches. You bind them together as a raft. And one of the ways of binding them together, of course, is to get the mind into concentration.

You've got the form of the body. You've got the feeling of pleasure that you're trying to maintain; the perception of the breath that holds you with the breath; fabrication of directed thought and evaluation as you keep thinking about the breath and evaluating how good it is, and adjustments so that it feels good breathing in, good breathing out, all the way in, all the way

out. You can maintain that sense of well-being with the breath, then let it spread throughout the body. All of that is fabrication. Then there's consciousness, which is aware of all these things.

So you can exert some control over the aggregates. If you couldn't exert any control, there'd be no path. Discernment, right view, is a matter of perceptions and thought fabrications. Right resolve—a matter of fabrications and perceptions. All the elements of the path—all the factors of the path—are composed of aggregates.

So you learn how to develop skillful ones, let go of the unskillful things that would pull you away from the path. So you exert that extent of control, and in this stage of the path, you apply the perception of not-self to things that would pull you away from the path.

The Buddha talks about this. There are things that would pull you away from your practice of the precepts or of right action, right speech, right livelihood. There's fear that you're going to suffer physically: You might damage your health; you might lose some of your wealth. In other words, if you're honest in your dealings with other people, there are people who engage in business and they lie and they get ahead. You can't do that. There may come times when the only way you can find any food is if you steal it. Well, you can't do that, either, so you have to go without. The other loss the Buddha talks about is loss of your relatives. To feed your relatives, you might have to steal, but you say, "No, I can't steal, even for them." So in cases like that, the Buddha has you reflect on how these things are not-self. After all, they're going to go away anyhow. You're going to be separated from them anyhow.

The things that are dangerous to lose, the Buddha said, are right view and your virtue, because it's not necessary that you have to lose those things. You lose them only when you throw them away. So you hold on to them. You identify them as yours, and as for the things that will pull you away from the practice, you identify them as not-self, because they're not worth trying to control. What *is* worth trying to control is your own behavior. That's where you want to focus your sense of self.

So things that you can't control or things that are not worth controlling you identify as not-self. Notice that self and not-self are value judgments. Is it worth it? When the Buddha gives that questionnaire that so often resulted in people's becoming fully awakened, he went down the list of the aggregates and asked, "Are these aggregates constant or inconstant?" They're inconstant. "And if something is inconstant, unreliable, is it stressful or easeful?" "It's stressful." It's like a chair where the legs are not the same length. You sit on the chair and you have to be very tense in order to stay balanced. You build your house on sand and you have no

idea when it's going to start tipping over.

Notice, he doesn't say *impermanent*—he says *inconstant*. These things are changing all the time, and for that reason, they're stressful. Then he asks, "If something is inconstant and stressful," he doesn't say to come to a conclusion there is no self. The conclusion is, "Are they worth claiming as your self?" As long as you haven't developed the path, you've got to hold on to the aggregates that are on the side of the path, let go of the ones that are not, but when you fully develop the path, that's when you let go of everything. That's when you apply the perception of not-self to everything that comes up. So there's a time and a place for self and not-self, and a lot of the skill in the practice is learning that sense of time and place.

I've been reading a book on anthropology, and they talk about how for most of the history of the human race, people lived in different social arrangements in different seasons. Say, if you're hunting and gathering, the season when it's time to go out and hunt the animals, the society would be organized in one way. You would have chiefs. You would have people who were in charge of the hunt, people organizing everybody else, people giving the orders. Then, when the hunt was over, people would go back home, and all of the sudden, the chiefs weren't chiefs anymore. People who gave orders: People would laugh at them. When you grow up in a society like that, you develop a sense of time and place—when is the time to be in charge, when is the time to abandon your sense of control.

In modern society where we play by the same rules year round, year round, year round, we've lost that sense of learning how to take on a role and then put it down. But that's precisely what the Buddha is asking you to do. You're the person who's going to practice the path, and you're also the one who's going to benefit from it. You focus, not so much on what you are, but on what you can do, and so you do it, without asking too many questions about who's doing it. You find that you can do it. Then there will come a time when you don't have to do it anymore—you stop.

Ajaan Mun talks about nibbana as being the place of non-activity. There's nothing to do there. We're talking about the duties of the four noble truths, and there is the duty of realizing unbinding, but once you've realized it, there's nothing more you have to do with it. It's there. It's outside of the four noble truths. There are no duties with regard to it. But to get to that point, you have to learn your duties around self, your duties around not-self. Focus on the doing.

Years back, a Buddhist scholar complained to me, "I don't understand how the Buddha could have attained anything unconditioned. After all, we're conditioned beings. How can a

conditioned being know anything unconditioned?” I said, “The problem is that you’re defining yourself first, and once you’ve defined yourself, then you’ve placed limitations on yourself.” The Buddha himself said that to define yourself is to place limitations on yourself. However you define yourself, there are things that that self cannot do. So he left himself undefined. The question then became simply what can be done, and he found that there was a path that can be followed that leads to an experience of the unconditioned. So focus on the doing, not on the what.

As I told that scholar, he was like a person who could read only three letters at a time. He sees the word “antelope,” and all he sees is “ant,” so he thinks the Buddha is talking about ants. And then you point out to him, “Well, no, that’s antelope,” and he says, “But ants don’t elope, that doesn’t make any sense.” He didn’t appreciate the humor.

But the point is, don’t let the limitations of your imagination get in the way of doing the practice. Focus on what can be done, what you can do, and you’ll find that your sense of what you can do will grow, and your sense of self will grow as well.

This is how we develop a sense of self in a state of becoming. You take on an identity in a world of experience based around a desire. Say you have a desire for ice cream. If you don’t know how to make ice cream, your sense of “you” will be different from a “you” who does know how to make ice cream. Your sense of the world will be different as well. If you don’t know how to make ice cream, ice cream can be found in places where you buy it, and that’s the part of the world that’s relevant. If you do know how to make ice cream, you know where equipment is, you know where the ingredients are—your sense of the world will be different.

In the same way, as you do the path, you find that your sense of your self and the sense of the world are going to change, which is one of the reasons why the Buddha doesn’t impose a definition on what you are. As he says, you’re defining yourself, and for the time being, you want to do it in a skillful way by developing skills. You’re not focused so much on the self, but on the skills that you can develop, and your sense of who you are and of what’s possible in this world will grow until you get to something that doesn’t require “world” and doesn’t require “self” at all. That’s when you can put everything down.

Although, when you put it down, if you’re going to teach, you can pick it up to teach, but it’s not for the purpose of your own well-being anymore, because you’ve found your well-being. You’ve found true well-being.

Years back, there was a controversy in Thailand about whether nibbana was your true self or whether it was not-self. It actually got into newspapers. Can you imagine the newspapers in

Canada debating whether nibbana is the self or not-self? They actually had columns in the newspapers in Thailand devoted to this. So someone took the question to Ajaan Maha Boowa and asked him if nibbana was self or not-self, and he said, “Nibbana is nibbana.” In other words, concepts of self and not-self just don’t apply. He said that if you apply these concepts to nibbāna, it’s like taking excrement and using it to cover something really good.

When you reach total awakening, questions of self and not-self are no longer important. While you’re on the path, they’re part of the path. As Ajaan Maha Boowa said, it’s like the stairway up to a house. You use your sense of self in a skillful way, you use your sense of not-self in a skillful way, to get you to the house. When you get in the house, you don’t carry the steps of the stairway into the house. You leave them where they were.

That’s where we’re headed, but right now we’re on the steps. So learn how to focus on the doing, and as for questions of what is or is not, put those aside. After all, you begin to see that even your sense of self is an activity—what the Buddha calls I-making and my-making. You learn to do it when it’s skillful and drop it when it’s not. That’s how the unconditioned is found. And as the Buddha said, once that’s found, there are no more questions.