Selves with Skills

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There’s a principle that the things you know best are the things that you do, the things that you make. If you’re a builder, you’ve had experience building houses, ordination halls. You see another house, you see another ordination hall, and you have an appreciation for what was done. If you’re a writer, you see someone else do something, a really good piece of writing, and you recognize it. And of course, the things you actually do yourself, you know those very well. You can look at every detail. So I did this, I did that. This is how this fits together. The problem is that we do certain things so continuously, so frequently, that we are no longer conscious of what we’re doing. As the Buddha pointed out, we construct our experience of the present moment through the way we breathe, through the way we talk to ourselves, through the feelings we focus on, the perceptions we make. In other words, the mental labels and images that we use to identify things. We use these processes, what he calls fabrications, to put together the raw material. The material that comes from our past karma. And we’re doing it all the time. But as the Buddha points out, we do it in ignorance. So we’re barely aware of it. One of the reasons why we meditate is so we can get good at being more conscious of these processes. Because you’re trying to get the mind into a state of concentration, you have to use those same processes. We’re to gather around. Not the breath that you’re focusing on. Where in the body you’re feeling it right now. Focus your attention there. Try to keep it there. Now that’s going to require that you talk to yourself about it. In other words, you notice that the mind is wandering off, you remind yourself to come right back. And then you’re trying to figure out ways to keep it here. And John Lee gives some good examples. Think of the breath not just as the air coming in and out through the nose, but the flow of energy through the body. Where do you feel that? And can it be comfortable? Is there a way of breathing that makes it comfortable? Short or long, fast or slow, deep, shallow, or in long, out short, in short, out long. Talk to yourself about this. And don’t just talk. Of course, experiment. And this will require that you use certain perceptions, certain images, of how the breath flows in the body. Which images are best? Try to think of your experience of the body right now as totally breath. Any sense of blockage? Remind yourself that the breath was there first. And it can still flow. So it doesn’t have to tense up here. It doesn’t have to tore over there. It can flow easily through the body, easily as you breathe in, easily as you breathe out. And this way you can create a feeling of ease. You become more conscious of it. This is how you put an experience together in the present moment. Then you begin to notice how you do it in other times of the day. The ways that you react to the world or process your experience of the world have a lot of identification around them. You’re a way of doing things. This is the part of you that has an instinctive sense that yes, you are constructing your experience. You’re not just sitting here watching things happen on their own without any interference from you. You’re playing a role. And you tend to identify yourself with the things that you do well. Or things that come easily to you. Because some of the things you do well may not necessarily be really skillful. We do greed well. We do anger well. Delusion. We’re experts. And we have a very strong sense of self around this is just the way I am. It comes naturally. In fact, you don’t even think that you’re doing it so much. It just comes. But you are putting these things together. And one of the important insights of the meditation is going to be that even though you may be good at these things, and you have an instinctive sense of how to play these games, it’s not always good to be doing it that way. There are better ways of putting the present moment together. We’re kind of like beavers. Beavers go into a forest and their idea of what’s missing in the forest is a dam, and a pond, and a lodge in the pond. There have been studies of beavers who were orphaned as little tiny kids. They were brought into captivity and raised. And the question was, would they be able to build their dams and their lodges without having experienced those things in the wild? Well, sure enough, they were released into forest and that was the first thing they did. Build a dam. Build a lodge. Create a lake. That’s the way we are too. We do a process that the Buddha calls becoming. We get a sense of something we want. And then we identify the world in which that desired object exists. And then we take on a role in that world. And that role that we assume has a lot to do with our sense of our skills. And if you’re good at anger, and good at greed, good at aversion, good at delusion, that’s the identity you’re going to take on. The Buddha wants to teach you that there are other ways of doing things. But first he does have you build a sense of becoming. He talks about what he calls the four bases for success. How we succeed in putting a state of concentration together. There’s desire, persistence, intent, and your powers of analysis. And just as we tend to identify with whatever skills we already have and tend to use them, the Buddha wants to teach you how to create a state of concentration. And it doesn’t matter that you create a sense of identity around these things. In fact it’s going to be necessary. Just learn how to do it well. The desire has to do with your sense of you as the person who’s going to enjoy the results of what we’re doing. This is a large part of your motivation. You hear people in some schools of meditation saying that they meditate without any purpose, without any goal. It’s always as if they’re showing off. But you wonder if they’re meditating to show off. We’re here because we have a purpose. That’s the nature of the mind. And so you think about what a good goal it would be to find something inside that doesn’t change. A happiness that doesn’t disappoint or change. It doesn’t do anything ignoble. It doesn’t even require maintenance. It doesn’t depend on anybody suffering. Nobody’s harmed by this. That’s a good goal. The Buddha talks about that as delighting in the unafflicted, delighting in seclusion, and delighting in what he calls non-objectification. You realize the identities you take on are all strategies. Once you reach the goal you can put the strategies aside and there’s no conflict. So use that sense of the goal. It’s a very sketchy sense of the goal. As the Buddha said, there’s no way you can anticipate what Nirvana is going to be like before you really hit it. He gives you some ideas, but he says it’s just arrows pointing in that direction. It’s the ultimate bliss, freedom, a state of consciousness that doesn’t depend on anything. And it’s a truth. You can rely on it. It’s not going to change. And it is the ultimate. There’s nothing better. Everything else in the world exists for the sake of something else. But here there’s no “for the sake of” anything. It’s totally arrived. So think about that as where you’re going. And if you have an idea that you’ll be disappointed when you get there, the Buddha says that’s wrong view. So have some confidence in this desire. And do your best to create a sense of how much you actually as a person would enjoy that. That’s you as the consumer. Then the next step, persistence. You realize you can’t just sit here and want this to come. As the Buddha said, the desire for there can be no aging, illness and death. If you just sit there and desire it, it’s going to be suffering. But if you act on the proper path, you actually find that you can attain that. That’s you as the producer. You as the agent. And here you take delight in developing skillful qualities and abandoning unskillful ones. A large part of that identity as an agent lies in that delight. You enjoy doing these things. And if it doesn’t come naturally, you learn how to make it more natural. Because it is a part of wisdom. There are a lot of things that will give good results, but you may not like to do them. But if you have any sense, any discernment at all, you’ll talk yourself into wanting to do them. The same with the things that you would like to do, but give bad results. You learn to talk yourself into not wanting to do them. The Buddha’s discernment is strategic. We’re not here just to accept things and be okay. We’re here to figure things out. And especially to figure out our own likes and dislikes. To learn how to train, our likes in the right direction. To learn how to enjoy that particular identity as well. The agent who wants to do this, who delights in being persistent, who delights in whatever is required by the path. Then there’s the self as the observer. That goes with intent. You really want to pay careful attention to what you’re doing. Because it is possible to follow the Buddha’s instructions. But if you’re not really paying careful attention, you’re not going to learn anything. Because the Buddha never said that you can gain awakening simply by following steps A, B, C, D. It requires that you put in your own willingness to really observe all around what you’re doing. That’s you as the observer. And finally there’s you as the commentator. Analysis. When you’ve done something, ask yourself, “How good are the results?” This analysis here requires a value judgment. Sometimes you hear it said that the Buddha doesn’t want you to pass judgment on things, just accept them as they are. There’s inconsistency in life, and there’s stress in life, and there’s a lot of stuff that’s just not you, that you can’t control. The Buddha never said that. That’s taking the three characteristics and making them the big issue. The big issue is actually in the Four Noble Truths, the fact that we suffer from our clinging. And we cling because of craving, and we crave because of ignorance. Now it is possible to put an end to that ignorance, put an end to that craving, by following the path. These are truths that carry duties. The suffering is to be comprehended, the craving and the ignorance to be abandoned. The goal is to be realized, and that’s by following and developing a path. That’s the framework for our analysis. Then you look at what you’ve done, and how does what you’ve done fit? How does it measure up? Are there things that you should be developing that you haven’t developed yet? Are there things you should be abandoning that you haven’t abandoned yet? And if you get really good at this, you’re not just passing judgment, but you’re also making suggestions. This self as commentator, that sends it back to the agent. How about trying this? How about trying that? If you’re a commentator, your inner critic is nothing but a critic. If this isn’t good enough, that’s not good enough. But without offering suggestions, you really need to train that inner critic. Just tell it, “If you can’t offer anything positive, and can’t offer any ideas, I’m not going to listen to you.” Because you still want to maintain that desire, you as the consumer. And you want to develop that sense of competence in you as that agent. So you as the observer and the commentator, they go very closely together. But when you develop them well, you’re developing these bases for success, the desire, the persistence, intent, and your powers of analysis. And as you get better and better at this, you find that you’ve got some new selves inside. These are the ones that you want to encourage. The selves that are really good at greed, aversion, and delusion. You’re asking yourself, do you really want to continue identifying with them? You’ve got something better inside. Because that’s one of the principles of the Buddhist teachings all around. If it’s asking you to give up something, it’s not to deprive you of anything that’s really necessary, or anything that’s really good. It’s because you’ve got better things to offer. So you want to learn how to identify with the desire for the path, the desire for the goal. Identify with the willingness to do what’s needed, to be persistent in abandoning anything that’s going to get in the way, developing things that will move you further. Identify with the observer to be really, really observant. And with the inner commentator, the analyst, who both passes judgment on what’s done and then tries to figure out if something’s wrong, what you can do to improve it. In the beginning, because you’re not good at these skills, it’s going to require a lot of pep talks and a lot of encouragement. But as you get better and better, it becomes more natural, and it does really feel more and more like you. You, the meditator, is an identity that becomes more and more second nature. The time will come when you have to put it down. But in the meantime, use it. All these roles of the new you. As you see how you’re putting all this together and getting really skilled at it, the skill is what confirms the sense of wanting to identify with this. It’s hard in the beginning when the path doesn’t go as smoothly as you’d like. And you keep on thinking, “Well, there are other things I can do more easily, other things I can do better.” But you have to remind yourself, this is THE skill. These are THE identities that you want to develop. So take heart. There are some people who say they can’t imagine themselves attaining any of the Noble Attainments. The response to that is, “Well, you get changed by the path.” It’s like learning a foreign language. Depending on the nature of the language and the people who teach it to you, you find that you develop a new personality in that language. And it’s just as much you as the personality in your original language. So develop the personality of a meditator. Until you get really fluent at it.

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