

Me, Me, Me

July 22, 2020

The basic principle of taking on any big job is to break it down into smaller jobs. This applies particularly to the question of dealing with your clinging to your sense of self. As a Buddha said of the various forms of clinging, this is the big one. Other teachers, he said, recognized that there was sensual clinging, view clinging, and habit-and-practice clinging, but because they didn't recognize doctrine-of-the-self clinging, the people in that particular teaching would not gain awakening. So this is the crucial issue.

The problem with the doctrine of self is that we have many selves. Sometimes they work cross-purposes; sometimes they're mutually reinforcing. But each one is a strategy for happiness. Think of all the times you've been looking for happiness in our lives. Almost every action you do is for the sake of happiness. Each of those actions involves a sense of self, so you've got lots of selves—and they have teeth. They're very protective of their particular strategies for finding happiness. So you have to learn how to de-fang them and take them apart.

The Buddha's teachings as a whole are all about taking things apart. When he talks about suffering and the cause of suffering, he starts out with just those two principles: suffering and its cause. But as he traces them out, they get into dependent co-arising, which is very complex. Still, it's complex for a purpose. He's not just showing off how subtle he can be. He wants to show how he took his sense of self apart and he's giving us tools for taking our own selves apart.

To begin with, he talks about the different kinds of aggregates around which we can create a sense of self: form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness. That gives you five. In each of those cases, you can either identify directly with the aggregate or you can think of yourself as someone who *has* that aggregate, or somehow you're *in* the aggregate, or the aggregate is in you. That's four times five: twenty. Twenty possible ways of thinking about your self. On top of that, your sense of self is very much embedded in those other forms of clinging. You're very much a creature of your place in the world, particularly as you perceive your place: That has to do with view clinging. You're very much a

creature devoted to pleasures of various kinds, most of them sensual: That relates to sensual clinging. And you've figured out all the different strategies for getting those pleasures, and getting what you want: That's habit-and-practice clinging.

So you can't just take out the self on its own. You have to look at the world this self inhabits. You have to look at the pleasures for which it's designed and the type of actions it feels it has to engage in. Only when you deal with all four kinds of clinging can you really get down to the big one, because they're all very entangled. It's as if you have a whole ball of string filled with knots and you have to untie each little string that's been tied into a knot. It may seem daunting, but if you try to untie the whole thing all at once, it doesn't work. You have to take them apart piece by piece, by piece. That requires patience.

One of the reasons we practice concentration is to give the mind a good solid foundation where it can do this patient and precise kind of work. We give it a place where it can stand so that it can be separate from its other clingings. This is a habit and practice that you're going to be developing: the practice of concentration, the habit of getting the mind to settle down wherever you can, whenever you can. You also come with a right view: believing that it can be done—suffering can be brought to an end by attacking the cause—and that you can do it. This requires a view of yourself, a provisional of self that you hang on to, one that's capable of doing the work and will benefit from doing it. So hold on to those ideas and use them to take everything else apart.

So work on your concentration. Get it strong. You'll begin to notice as the mind starts wandering off, away from its concentration, that either you can go into the thought world that's pulling you away or you can watch it from the outside. When you watch it from the outside, you can see: This is a perception; this is a fabrication. That's precisely the skill set you're going to need in order to deal with your sense of self. Don't feel that you're *inside* your self. See this "your self" as a series of activities and that you can watch them from the outside, to see how this particular idea of self goes with a particular sense of the world in a particular sense of what should be done for a particular pleasure.

You can tease these things out, and that way the job isn't so big. If it's just *me, me, me, me*, as a problem, that "me" can get awfully inflated. But if you look at it as a series of activities, you can cut the problem down to size: There's this choice

and there's that choice, this habitual way of doing things without really thinking about the choices. You look at them and the question isn't, "What's wrong with me?" or "How can I get rid of me?" It's simply: "What's going on here? Where is the stress? Where is the suffering?" When you take things apart in this way, then the job becomes a lot more manageable, and you can do it without a lot of self-hatred.

Sometimes you see people who really hate themselves, loving the idea that there is no self, thinking they can just do away with any sense of self and not have to deal with it, just by denying it out of existence. But the Buddha didn't teach you to hate yourself. After all, he says: "Whatever is not yours, let go of it. That will be for your long-term welfare and happiness." All of this is for your welfare and happiness. He wants you to have a sense of concern for your happiness, to really have goodwill for yourself. When you can develop that attitude, then when you're stepping back and analyzing things, it's not in a mean way or a harsh way. You're doing it because you see: "I'm hurting myself unnecessarily here by holding on to these things. Why am I doing that?"

So you look at the other clingings that are associated with that way of acting, and you begin to tease them out. You see: "It's because of this idea, because of that notion, that I thought that I was going to get ahead by acting in that way, making those choices. Now I see that they don't really make much sense." When you see that you have the alternative that you don't have to do them and you're better off *not* doing them, you don't have to tell the mind that things are inconstant, stressful, and not-self or whatever. The mind simply lets go.

So we're dissecting the sense of self not because we hate it but simply because we see it's caused a lot of trouble. But there is a possibility for happiness. So you have to learn how to step outside of yourself and you do that, one, with concentration and, two, by developing the right view that you have many selves. You've been I-making and my-making for who knows how long. Like somebody who's been knitting sweaters for her whole life: The house is piled with sweaters, so many that if you try to get out of the house, you can't get make your way out because sweaters are everywhere. You have to take them apart, one by one, by one, and finally get to the door. So don't see it just as a big mass of yarn. See it as

individual sweaters and you can throw them out, throw them out, throw them out, one by one by one. That way you find your path.

If you let the sense that this house is just filled with yarn overwhelm you and the whole idea of taking the sense of self apart seems impossible, the problem gets too big and tangled, too amorphous. But if you can see it as specific actions, specific choices, specific aggregates, specific ways of clinging, you can pull them out, pull them out, pull them out, one by one by one. Then you find that you will arrive at the pathway, and the opening lets you out.

So learn how to break things down. When a thought comes up in the mind, recognize it *as a thought*. When the thought of *me, me, me* comes up, tell yourself, “That’s just a perception.” You ask can yourself, “To what extent, in what way, do I hold to that perception?” You should get interested in those questions. You don’t have to take on The Self in capital letters. You find that you’re simply taking on manageable problems, manageable actions, one by one by one, breaking the job down into manageable pieces. That’s how it gets done.