

## *The Reflective Self*

*January 4, 2021*

We've talked in the past about how the Buddha recommended using a sense of self as a strategy, just as he recommended using not-self as a strategy. The skillful sense of self comes in two types: the self as the producer and the self as the consumer. The producer is what will give rise to happiness or the conditions of happiness. The consumer is what will enjoy them. Both of these senses of self are aimed at happiness. Each is a strategy for happiness. We use them as we go through the day, and the Buddha's simply recommending that we make them more skillful before we put them aside.

Well, there's a third sense of self that he also recommends using, and that's the reflective self: the one that watches the other two and gives feedback. In that passage where he says that the Dhamma requires both commitment and reflection, this reflective self provides the reflection and it becomes the basis for discernment. When you use it as you meditate, it plays the role of evaluation: "How is the breath right now? Is it good enough? Is it good enough for the mind to settle down with? How's the mind? Is it willing to settle down or does it need some work? What kind of work?" You try different things, adjusting the breath in different ways, adjusting your mind in different ways. Then you evaluate again. You reflect again.

In fact, of the various senses of self, this reflective self is the one that needs the most training to become skillful. To begin with, it has to hold the other two to a high standard—higher than its normal standard—as to what counts as satisfactory happiness: in other words, setting satisfactory goals and then finding satisfactory ways of getting to them. The Buddha's recommending a really high standard—absolute happiness, unconditional. That really raises the bar.

But to get there requires more than just having high standards. It requires understanding your own mind, gaining of sense of where you are and what's needed to get you to where you want to go.

This, to begin with, requires that your reflective self is very perceptive, because the mind has lots of ways of lying to itself, and you want to be able to see through them. You can tell yourself you have the best of motives and that your practice is going great—and yet it's a lie. You can tell yourself that the practice is miserable, it's not getting anywhere—and that can also be a lie. The part of your mind that wants to sabotage the practice: You've got to watch out for that part, too.

So you've got to learn how to see through the mind's subterfuges. Then, when you can see what's really going on, you have to know when to apply the carrot, when to apply the stick, because if you're not careful, this reflective self can turn into a harsh critic that's aimed solely at destruction, that uses its right to criticize to undermine everything you're trying to do. So it has to be taught some goodwill and some kindness. It also has to be taught to be realistic about how to read the progress of your practice, realizing that there are going to be ups and downs, and times when you hit a plateau. And sometimes the mind needs to hit a plateau for a while. It's like climbing a mountain. If you just climb the really steep passages and don't have a place to rest and gather your energy, you begin to wear out. It's also the case that you can make a lot of progress in one area of the mind and then you have to wait for the rest of the mind to catch up.

So you have to learn how to read the ups and downs of the mind, to know when it needs to be pushed a little bit, when it needs to be coddled a little bit. But above all, it needs the right standards for judging how things are going in your practice.

The Buddha gives a list of six qualities to look for, asking yourself: How far have I come in these qualities?

The first is conviction. Are you really convinced that this is a good path, and that you're up to the path? What more do you need to do? I received a letter recently from someone saying that she was trying her best to believe in rebirth and kamma, but she wanted advice on how to strengthen her conviction. I reflected back on myself. It was my time with Ajaan Fuang that really sealed the deal, seeing that someone who lived by these principles lived a really good life and was much more skillful than anybody else I had ever met. Lacking that opportunity to live close by to somebody like that, you can read the biographies of the ajaans. But do what you can to make sure that you have a strong sense of conviction if you find that that's lacking.

Another quality is learning. How much do you know about the Dhamma? It's not that you have to read all the Tripitaka, but you want to get the basic principles down. One of the reasons why we memorize the Dhamma is so that you can have it in the back of your mind. In the old days, when the Buddha gave a Dhamma talk, it was designed to be memorized. It exercised your mindfulness, your power of memory, and gave you a fund of things to draw on when you needed them. So it's always good to read a little bit every day to acquaint yourself with things you may not have heard or read before, and to clarify things that you have.

Then there's relinquishment, which can cover both generosity—being generous with your time, generous with your energy—and giving up unskillful

mental states. Here at the monastery we have our chores, and it's good to think of them as an opportunity instead of seeing them simply as chores. Here's an opportunity to do something well. Do it with a sense of confidence that you're going to uncover some of your defilements as you do the work, and that it'll be good to see which parts of the mind resist taking on different jobs and to learn how to train yourself to be willing to give up those defilements.

The fourth quality is persistence. How much energy are you putting into the practice? Could you put in more? You find that out by putting in more and seeing how it goes. It's only when you realize that you're getting burned out, then you can back off somewhat. Otherwise, you never really know what you're capable of.

And the fifth quality, of course, is discernment, which is basically what this reflective self is: looking back on your actions, figuring out what really is skillful and what's not, and what can be made more skillful. If there are parts of the mind that resist, learn how to psych them out so that you're happy to see your defilements go, happy to see that you're able to put more energy into the practice than you might have thought.

It's interesting: The Buddha lists six qualities here, and the first five are the qualities that can make you a deva. It's the sixth one that goes beyond that, and that's the quality of quick-wittedness—*patibhāna* in Pali. It can also mean ingenuity. This ties in with one of Ajaan Fuang's comments: that you're going to have to be ingenious in applying the Dhamma to your own individual case, because what we've got in the Canon, what we've got in the teachings of the ajaans, are general principles. The Buddha taught the Dhamma so that it would last 2,600 years. He probably intended it for more. If you're going to teach something so that it'll last that long, you have to stick to the basic principles, which requires that people listening to the Dhamma or reading the Dhamma have to fill in the details: "How does this apply to me right now?"

That's where your active intelligence comes in. And how far has that gotten? How well developed are you there? It's basically a question of using your intelligence, using lessons you've learned from other skills and applying them to the practice of the Dhamma, because it's that ability to see parallels that haven't been pointed out to you: that's where your real intelligence lies. It lies in figuring out—when you find yourself face to face with a problem that you can't find in the books and you can't find in the teachings of the ajaans—how you take the principles that you've mastered and apply them to a new problem.

Ajaan Fuang once made the comment that when he was teaching meditation in Bangkok, he'd come across problems in his students that he had never had in his own meditation. He had been meditating decades, but each person has his or

her own problems. He said he found, though, that he could take the basic principles that Ajaan Lee taught, those seven steps in “Method Two,” and every problem that came up in meditation was caused by a lack in one of the steps. So go back and look at those steps and say, “Okay, if these were the only tools I had, how would I use these tools to overcome, say, bouts of delusion concentration or laziness or having to sit with pain?” The solutions are there, but it does require ingenuity to find them. It’s through your ingenuity that you make the Dhamma your own.

So these are the areas to look for. These are the standards by which you should judge your practice, and then ask yourself, “How far have I come? Which areas do I need to strengthen?” It’s in holding yourself to the right standards that this reflective self becomes more and more useful, because after all, it’s the one that gives instructions to the self as the producer and the self as the consumer, tells the producer when it’s not up to snuff, tells the consumer when it’s not being demanding enough or too demanding.

So focus on how you reflect on yourself and on this reflective self: How far has it come? It may sound like you’re falling into a hall of mirrors, reflecting on the reflector, but you can get a sense of what’s working, what’s not working, and your willingness to engage in trial and error is what gets you to trial and success.

So keep these three roles of the self in mind, because they all need to be trained. They’re all useful. They’re all part of the path.