

Self Bypassing

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People have noted how ironic it is that in a teaching that emphasizes not-self we have some of the earliest spiritual autobiographies of the world. The Buddha talking about his quest for awakening, his finding awakening, spoke very much in terms of: *This is what I did, and looking at what I had done and seeing that it hadn't given the results I wanted, I tried something else.* That's the pattern.

When you think of it in other terms, though, it's not ironic at all because the Buddha's main teaching was karma: We suffer because of our actions, but we can find the end of suffering because of our actions, by understanding our actions—the actions that lead to suffering, and then the actions of the path to the end of suffering. That understanding is what opens the way. The Buddha's autobiography shows the lessons he learned about action in the course of his awakening, and he tells it to show how we can learn from our actions, too.

Now, in doing an action and learning from it, you have to take responsibility for it. After all, the Buddha said, if you felt simply that things were happening on their own without any input from yourself, that would make a path impossible. Whether it came from a creator god or simply past actions or random fate, if you chalked all your experience of pleasure and pain up to something totally apart from what you're doing right now, there would be no path possible.

That goes against a teaching you hear every now and then, that if you come to the path with the attitude, "I am going to do the path," you're coming from wrong view, and that taints everything you're trying to accomplish. You have to have the attitude there's nobody here doing anything; the path is just developing out of causes and conditions. There is simply awareness, seeing things arising and passing away. That's all there is there.

That's the enlightened way to approach the path, we're often told, but what happens with an attitude like that is that whatever definition of self you might have goes underground. You start identifying with the awareness. You start identifying with what you think is an awakened awareness. In that way, you can let

go of what may have been a neurotic self, but it turns into an overblown but very vague self.

One of the whole points of the practice is to see exactly where your sense of self comes in—when it’s skillful, when it’s not—and how to train your unskillful self to be more skillful. Of course, the emphasis is not focused on the self, but it’s always there in the background.

Think of the Buddha’s instructions to Rāhula, when he told him to reflect on his actions before, during, and after he did them. In each case Rāhula was to take responsibility for the actions.

“This action that I want to do”: That’s beforehand. “This action that I’m doing”: That’s how you think when you look at the action as you’re doing it. “This action that I have done”: That’s your reflection afterward. The “I” is there in every case because you’re taking responsibility. And this is not just a sop for a little child’s mind.

When the Buddha said that discernment begins with the question “What having been done by me, will lead to long term harm and suffering? What having been done by me will lead to long term welfare and happiness?” there’s still an agent there, there’s still a me and an I. The whole point is to get this agent to take responsibility, to see how to improve his or her actions.

When people deny that there’s an agent there from the very beginning, you might call it “*self bypassing*,” like “spiritual bypassing.” There’s an important element that’s being missed—just skipped over. The path is one of taking responsibility for your actions, reflecting on them, improving them. And in the skills developed as you do that, you cultivate a more skillful sense of self. You don’t let go of your sense of self until it doesn’t have any more use. It has many uses on the path, and you don’t let go of it until it’s been trained to serve those uses.

If you try to let go of it first, before it has been trained, then this untrained self will still lurk around random places in your awareness, and show its ugly head here and there. If you try to let go of it out of fear or loathing: “I don’t like my self. It’s selfish, shortsighted, conceited. I want to replace it with an enlightened self,” well, your enlightened self is basically created out of your preconceptions about what enlightenment might be. You don’t get the genuine article until you’ve taken your

unskillful self and developed it.

It's like developing the body. Your body is weak. "I don't like my weak body. I want to throw it away and find a strong body." That attitude doesn't work. You're still going to have that weak body, no matter how much you may imagine a strong body. What you do is you take your weak body and you exercise it. You feed it properly, look after it, and it gets stronger.

Now, here of course, the analogy breaks down, because there does come a point where you don't need the self anymore. You let go of the self when it's most developed—in other words, when it's very precise, very meticulous, very mature in its ability to reflect on its own actions, so mature that it can see the activity of creating a self as an unskillful action. To get to that point requires patience, requires honesty, requires powers of observation, because your sense of self can hide.

When things are going the way you like, everything is going smoothly, it doesn't seem to appear at all. It's when you meet up with conflict, meet up with challenges: That's when the sense of self will have to come out. This is why a lot of people who say they have no sense of self as they practice, try to practice in a way that's stress-free, confrontation-free. They don't press themselves too hard. They say, "This is the middle path." But remember the Buddha's analogy is victory: The practice is a battle, or the practice is a long course of mastering a skill.

It's going to be challenging, and you're going to have to rely on a sense of self that's reliable to face and overcome those challenges. If it's immature, it gives up and retreats. But if it has a strong sense that this is the one way for true happiness, it'll be willing to fight whatever gets in the way. As the Buddha said, "Let go of things that are not yours, and that will be for your long-term welfare and happiness." Notice the word "your," there, in front of "welfare and happiness." You can use that sense of self as part of your motivation for practicing.

Then as the path matures, you mature. That's when you can start letting go in a very radical way. At that point, you're not really thinking about self or not-self, you're simply thinking about the fact that there's stress, and there's something you're doing that's causing the stress.

You get to the point where there's the path of staying or the path of going, and

in space and time those are the only two alternatives. You look for another alternative, an alternative that doesn't involve your doing in any way. And because you've been very sensitive to what you're doing, you know it for sure: This is something different, radically different.

That's the experience that cuts away at the fetter of self-view. As the Buddha said, there's still some conceit left—the idea that “I am” is still lingering around the aggregates. But the sense that “I am *this*” with regard to any of the aggregates—either, “I am one of the aggregates; or a combination of the aggregates; “the aggregates belong to me”; “I am in the aggregates”; or “The aggregates are in me”: That's cut through, because the experience has shown you that there is an awareness, there is a dimension that has no aggregates at all, and it can be directly experienced.

So you cut through self-view not by willing it away, or by trying to think in a new paradigm. The experience has forced it on you. It's a realization of a truth in a way that allows for no denial.

So up until that point, make a skillful use of your self as you master the craft.

There's a book called *The Craftsman* that talks about how people develop a certain maturity as they develop a craft. You want to take that same attitude toward your practice, so that your self becomes more mature—mature enough so that when the time comes to let go, it *can* let go, and there's nothing left lurking around, hiding behind denial. You haven't bypassed anything. You've followed the path consistently all the way to your first taste of awakening. You don't get there by bypassing anything. You get there by staying on the path all the way.