

An Inside Job

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I was reading a book by a monk a while back that was pretty disturbing. He was saying that if you strive in the practice, it requires motivation, and motivation requires a strong sense of self, therefore, you shouldn't strive. If you want to get rid of your sense of self, then just don't have any goals. That's what he said. And it was very disturbing that a monk could say that.

Right acceptance is not one of the factors of the path. Right effort is. And it does require motivation. One of the central phrases in the formula for right effort is "generating desire": either to prevent unskillful qualities from arising or to abandon if they have arisen, to give rise to skillful qualities, and then once they've arisen, to try to maintain them and bring them to the culmination of their development. Quite a lot of effort that goes into that – not just brute effort. It requires understanding cause and effect, understanding your mind, and understanding how you can motivate yourself. What gets you out of bed in the morning to sit in meditation? What keeps you practicing? What internal goads keep you going?

That's a very important part of the practice and so it requires, of course, that you do develop a healthy sense of self around your practice. Eventually, you let it go. But just like the tools you use when you're building something, you need to keep your tools in good shape. You don't throw them away with the idea that you've got to learn to let go of them someday anyhow, so you might as well let go of everything right off the bat. You have to figure what's worth letting go and what's worth holding onto—and how long to hold onto it. And when things are worth holding onto, you keep them in good shape.

The whole path is something you want to keep in good shape—everything from right view on through to right concentration—with a very strong sense that it's going to be for your welfare. Probably the most important element that goes into self discipline is having a strong sense of heedfulness: that if you don't master the skills, you're going to suffer. If you do master the skills, you can avoid that suffering. And if you don't work on those skills, do you really love yourself? Do you love the people around you? If you consciously do something you know is going to give you a little bit of pleasure right now but a lot of suffering down the line, why do it? Look into your sense of self. What's unconnected there? What's lacking?

I was talking to someone a while back who said before he came to the Dhamma, he had a tendency to criticize and criticize and criticize himself so that he could actually go ahead and do something really unskillful. In other words, he'd tell himself he was a bad person to begin with, so he might as well just do something to show that. He realized, of course, that it was hurting him

So you've got to figure out a skillful way of developing some self respect. We are human beings. There is a certain dignity that comes with being human, and you want to learn how to

take pleasure in that—pleasure in the sense that you're doing something that really will be for your own good and for the good of others. This becomes your internal motivation, your internal compass, your internal gyroscope—all the instruments you need in order to keep it yourself on course, so that when things come up in the mind that are less than noble, you know how to say No and make the No stick. That, of course, means learning how to say Yes to some other things: Yes to the desire to find true happiness; Yes to the desire to do it right.

This is not the empty kind of self esteem that they teach in some schools, where you just puff up the child's sense of capability but without really testing that capability and showing that it really does correspond to something in reality. Here we're working on real skills here, skills that do make a difference.

So you've got to learn that sense of healthy self esteem, and it does involve planning for the future, having an anticipation that you're going to benefit from this. And if that's a sense of self—and it *is* a sense of self—it's a healthy one. It's a good one, a useful one. It's one of those things you need to hold onto as long as you're on the path—because what is it that we're working on as we practice the path? We're working on a problem that's very personal, something within us that nobody else can see, nobody else can sense, i.e., our own suffering. People can sometimes see the symptoms from the outside. They see that we've got problems one way or another or that we show that we're pained through our expression, our words, or our body language. But they can't feel the actual suffering. The pain of the suffering is something that's strictly yours.

It's like that old issue when you were little kids: Your sense of blue, is it the same as anybody else's sense of blue? Do we all each have a different sense of blue? We can point to one thing and say it's blue, but what you see, is that the same as what I see? Thinking about that puts you through a brief sense of dislocation, but then you realize, well, it's not a big problem and you move on. But suffering *is* a big problem. And the Buddha's message is that if you're going to solve the problem of suffering, you have to solve it from within.

One of his big discoveries is the extent to which we fabricate our experience from within, through our intentions. In other words, we're not just on the receiving end of the material world. We actually shape the world we live in. The whole point of the path is to learn how to take advantage of that fact—so that, on the one hand, we can shape it well—and then shape it really well so that we can get beyond these worlds that we ordinarily shape and arrive at something that's really reliable, something really solid.

Yet it is an inside job. You can get advice from outside, but the actual work is something you have to do. This is very different from the materialist's idea, which is that the material world is real and what you experience, your consciousness of things, is what they call an epiphenomenon. In other words, it's just a side effect of the real things, which are atoms doing their thing. And the Buddha's perspective is also very different from the post-modern view that you're just a product of social forces. Everything you do is already determined by some force outside you, they say. The Buddha resisted those teachings in the forms that they took in his

time. Well, we have to resist them again now. We're not here just on the receiving end. This is why the teaching that mindfulness is just pure receptivity is so detrimental, because it teaches you not to look for what the real problem is, which is that you really are shaping your experience.

Sights come in and there are certain sights that you pay attention to and others that you don't. You interpret them in different ways. The same thing with all the other input that comes through the senses—and it's your shaping of that input that makes a difference between whether it's going to cause suffering in the mind or not. And so there are certain dualities built into this. There's the duality of skillful and unskillful, and desirable result and undesirable result, because after all, suffering keeps pushing you. Stress, pain, all these things keep pushing the mind, squeezing the mind. And how long do you want to put up with that squeeze? Wouldn't you rather learn how to shape things in such a way that you don't have to suffer? The choice is yours. So you have to try to figure out ways of motivating yourself, gaining some discipline over your actions.

There doesn't have to be somebody telling you what to do all the time. You can gain a sense of what's right and what's wrong, and you can follow it. The practice of concentration helps in this way because, one, you get the mind to settle down so that you can see things clearly as to what would and would not be skillful. And you get more and more subtle in your ability to see these things. And, two, it gives you the strength to carry through with what you know is right and to abandon what you know is wrong.

So it's not just something you've heard from outside. It's something you see really does happen in your life. And the shoulds that come with this path—that you should try to comprehend stress and suffering; you should abandon the cause, try to realize the cessation of stress and suffering, and develop the path: These are all very friendly shoulds. They're the best shoulds that you can take on because they really are for your own well-being, your own best interest. And what's nice about finding your best interest in this way is that it doesn't harm anybody at all. In fact, it actually helps them.

This is why compassion is another way of motivating yourself: having compassion for yourself, compassion for others, as you practice. The better your practice, the better it is for everybody else. That's one of the best ways of showing compassion right there.

So to whatever extent you need to develop a sense of self in order to take on this practice, to keep going, it's all to the good. If you just decide that you want to short circuit everything—to say, "Well, I shouldn't have a sense of self, therefore I won't have any motivation and won't try to do anything." You just flail around and you're not sensitive to the extent to which you're still suffering because you try to cover it over with an idea of acceptance. And as for the suffering you're causing for other people, you're oblivious to that. But just because you're oblivious doesn't mean that there's not suffering inside and out. You can ignore it only for so long and then it exposes itself; reveals itself. And if you haven't trained the mind, it's overwhelming.

So this is an inside job. The problem is an inside problem, but the solution is an inside solution. You gain guidance from outside, but again, it's up to you to decide to accept the guidance or not. It's not being forced on you. Simply remember that the problem of stress and suffering is forcing itself on you all the time. And you have to decide when you've had enough.