

A Healthy Ego

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The word *ego* has two meanings. There's the ego that's bad, that's selfish, self-centered, cares nothing about other people; and then there's the ego that's a necessary function of the mind, which negotiates between your desires and the things you pick up from society around you telling you what you should and shouldn't do. If you didn't have this second ego, either you'd be totally a slave to your desires or you'd be a person with no independent will at all. The trick is learning how to educate this second ego so that it negotiates well: so that it figures out which things you really should listen to from outside and which desires inside are the ones that you can give in to and which are the ones that you can't.

The training in the meditation—in fact, the whole training that the Buddha offers—is an education for this second kind of ego. On the one hand, in terms of the shoulds, the passage we chanted from the Dhammacakka just now, which was the actual wheel of the Dhamma, talked about the four noble truths and the three levels of knowledge for each truth. In the time of the Buddha, a wheel was like a table nowadays, where you have different sets of variables that you run through their various combinations. In those days, they didn't have diagrams to make them look like tables, so the image they had in mind was that you ran around all the spokes of a wheel. This is why our Dhamma wheel has twelve spokes: $4 \times 3 = 12$. In each case, there's the knowledge of the truth, the knowledge of the duty appropriate to that truth, and then the knowledge at awakening that that particular duty has been completed.

So what are the Buddha's shoulds? You should comprehend suffering, you should abandon its cause, you should realize its cessation, and you should develop the path to its cessation. Now, those are all duties that are for the sake of your happiness. There are other duties out there that society would like to impose on you, some of which are in your best interests and some of which are not. But the Buddha's is the friendliest list of all, aimed directly at taking your true happiness seriously. Again he's not imposing these shoulds on you, but he says if you want true happiness, then given the way cause and effect operate, this is what you have to do.

So when suffering comes up, you don't just push it away. You try to strengthen the mind enough to comprehend it—in other words you develop the path to give it that strength to see: What is the suffering? Why do you keep going for it? Because it is something we go for. The cause for suffering is not something outside, it's inside—it's in the craving. When you can see the connection between the suffering, which the Buddha identified with clinging, and the craving that causes it, you can abandon the cause. In that way, you realize the cessation.

So those, on the one hand, are the shoulds. On the other hand, you have your desires that you have to range through. Some of the desires are in line with the desire to find awakening;

other desires are pushing off in another direction entirely. Greed aversion, delusion, and sensual craving: These are the things that push you away, and they're the ones you have to learn how to overcome. But at the same time, you also learn how to promote the desires that would lead to true happiness. So the function of your ego is to learn how to negotiate between this whole set of desires and those shoulds.

Psychology talks about healthy ego functions, and a lot of them are relevant to the Buddha's path. To begin with there's what they call "anticipation." You anticipate dangers down the road, so you have to prepare for them. In the Buddha's vocabulary, this is *heedfulness*. In fact, the Buddha said heedfulness is the source of all good qualities in the mind. You realize that if you don't train your mind, the mind can create a lot of problems. It's like having a Rottweiler in your house. If the Rottweiler isn't trained, it's going to create a lot of problems.

The second quality is altruism, which for Buddhists is compassion: realizing that if your happiness depends on other people suffering, it's not going to last, so you have to take their happiness into consideration, too, as you act. This is a wise ego function.

Then there's suppression, realizing that when certain desires come up, you have to say No. Or certain ideas come in from outside telling you that you should do this and you should do that, and you realize that these shoulds are not in line with the Buddha's shoulds and they're not in line with your own true well-being. You have to learn to say No to those, too.

The big problems are the things coming up inside and the voices that try to justify them. You have to learn to say No in various ways. One trick they'll usually use is to say, "You're going to give in to me in five minutes anyhow, so why don't you save us both a lot of trouble and give in now?" You have to say to that voice, "Well, I don't know about five minutes down the line, but right now I'm going to say No." And you begin to realize after a while that these urges come over in big waves—they crest and then they subside. If you can withstand up to the point past the crest, then you've won. Because they'll threaten. They'll say, "If you don't give in now, it's just going to get worse and worse and worse and worse and you're going to explode!" And you say "Nope." You don't believe the picture that your greed, aversion, and delusion like to paint about themselves.

But in saying No, you need to have some alternative source of happiness. This is where the meditation comes in. This is why we have to find an object of meditation that's pleasing to the mind—something we feel comfortable with, something we find interesting. The breath is the standard one, because the breath is the function in the body that you can work with most directly to create a sense of ease and well-being through the way you breathe, through the way you think of the breath. That way, you can have a sense of well-being that goes down through the legs, goes down through the arms, goes down through the torso, goes around your head—enveloping the body, permeating through the body.

When you can develop that sense of ease and well-being, then when the tension comes up

—say, with lust or desire, greed, anger—you realize how uncomfortable these emotions are. And when you think about their long-term consequences, you realize, “I don’t want to go with this. It’s nothing pleasant now and it’s not going to be pleasant in its outcome.”

Now, you have an alternative source of well-being that you can go for, because the reason we give in to these things is because they promise a quick hit of pleasure, and if you’re feeling starved of pleasure, you’ll go for it. As the Buddha once said: If you don’t have the level of pleasure that comes from the first jhana or something better, then no matter how much you understand the drawbacks of your sensual desires, you’re still going to give in, because the mind wants pleasure. And this is how we go for it. If we don’t have something skillful inside as a source of pleasure, we’ll go for whatever.

So learning how to meditate is actually a healthy ego function: finding an alternative source of pleasure. Psychologists call this sublimation. In other words, you take a desire for a lowly pleasure and you direct it toward something sublime.

Another healthy ego function, one that the psychologists don’t talk too much about, is shame. Here we’re talking about healthy shame, not the shame that’s the opposite of pride, it’s the opposite of shamelessness. When you think of doing something that’s unskillful, think of wise people. What would they say? What would the Buddha say? What would Ajaan Mun say? What would Ajaan Lee say? You’d be embarrassed for them to see. You realize that the action is beneath you. In other words, this kind of shame is actually a part of pride; you have your self-esteem and you wouldn’t want to stoop to something that’s below your level of self-regard. That, too, is a healthy ego function.

And then there’s a sense of humor, the ability to laugh at your defilements, to laugh at the unskillful shoulds that come from outside. The Buddha doesn’t talk about this too much, but there are lots of incidences of humor in the Canon. Especially when they set up the rules. There’s a story that tells about why the rule was set up, and often there’s an element of humor in the story, when you see, ah, this is a common human foible—you can see why they had the rule. And seeing the humor in the situation actually puts you on the side of the rule. All too often when we learn about the rules and precepts, they seem like they’re being imposed and there’s a part of the mind that wants to rebel, but you can get around that rebellious part by making it laugh. Saying, “Yup, that is a human foible and yes I can see why that’s not a good thing to have in the community and why I should not engage in that kind of behavior myself.”

There’s a story of the monk who became drunk. He was a monk with psychic powers. He had gone into a shrine one time. The shrine had a fire breathing naga, and he was able to subdue the fire breathing naga and spend the night in the shrine.

Word of this gets out. People are really impressed and they want to make merit, so they go ask the monks, “What’s something that monks don’t ordinarily get?” Well they ask the wrong monks. There’s a group of misbehaving monks called the Group of Six. So the Group-of-Six monks say, “We don’t usually get hard liquor.”

So the next morning, everybody in town has prepared a little glass of hard liquor for the monk who defeated the fire breathing naga. Well, he can't defeat the liquor. Glass, after glass, after glass... he passes out at the city gate. The Buddha comes along with a couple of the monks. They see him lying there, so the monks carry him back to the monastery. They lay him on the ground, first with his head toward the Buddha, but he's in a stupor, so as he's lying there he twists right, twists left, turns around, and finally he has his feet pointed right at the Buddha—which in India, as in Thailand, is a mark of disrespect. So the Buddha says to the monks, "This monk here, didn't he used to be deferential and respectful to us?"

And the monks said "Yes."

"Is he being deferential and respectful now?"

"No."

"And before, didn't he do battle with the fire breathing naga?"

"Yes."

"Could he do battle with a salamander now?"

"No."

Why is that? Because of the liquor he drank. So that's the reason why we have the rule against monks taking alcohol.

So if you can learn how to laugh at your defilements, that removes a lot of their power. Because they come on and they're puffed up, they try to impress you. It's like those lizards we have out there. When the males try to impress the females, they do push-ups to show how strong they are, to look bigger than they are. And the defilements come on that way as well. They try to look bigger than they actually are. But if you can laugh at them, that punctures their swollen size, and they're a lot easier to deal with.

So these are some of the negotiating strategies you can use to help develop a healthy ego—one that can negotiate successfully between your sense of what you should do and what you want to do. So you put the two together. You take the Buddha's shoulds as the shoulds you're trying to hold to: You should try to comprehend suffering, abandon its cause, realize its cessation, and develop the path that leads to its cessation. At the same time, you use these strategies to get your wants in line with those shoulds, so that you come out winning.

Even the teaching on not-self is a kind of ego strategy. As the Buddha tells the monks, "Whatever is not really yours, let go of it. That will be for your long-term welfare and happiness." He's not saying there's no *you* there. There's the you there that's going to experience long term welfare and happiness. The reason it's not having that happiness right now is because it's holding on to things that are outside of its control. So you're applying not-self to anything that is unskillful in the mind. It's a label that you apply to anything that would get in the way of healthy ego functioning.

Finally, when you've developed the path to the point where it actually does arrive at the cessation of suffering, that's when you can put aside the ego functioning, too—including "self"

and “not-self”—because all these functions are there for the purpose of happiness. Once ultimate happiness is found, you can put them aside. You can pick them up again as a tools from that point on—you don’t really identify with them, but you see that these are good strategies in the mind, and they’re useful for teaching others. And because all your desires at that point are in line with the Dhamma, there’s not much negotiating that has to be done. Still, you know enough, when you’re eating, to put food in *your* mouth and not somebody else’s. But at that point the bad kind of ego is totally gone, and the good kind of ego has done its work. And that’s when you can put all your tools down.