

## *Teaching Old Dogs New Selves*

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All too often, in Buddhist circles, the problem of self and not-self is treated as a logical issue. The idea of self is logical fallacy: Self has to be permanent, but the things that we identify as self are impermanent. Therefore, if we notice that—and it's not hard to notice—we should come to the conclusion that they are not-self. We should let them go.

The problem with that approach is that you didn't arrive at your idea of self as a logical conclusion. It was built bit by bit by bit, based on your strategies for getting what you want, and actually you have many selves, based on what you've learned you can control. There's a boundary—a fuzzy boundary—between things you can and can't control, but when you find things you can control, and they're useful to control, you want to hold onto them. With your body, your thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and especially your awareness, there are aspects here that you can control, and so you say, "They're useful for this or that purpose, and holding onto them in this way or that way I can get some happiness." And you identify with that happiness. So you identify with the tools for getting that happiness as well.

As we go through life, we pick up new tricks, new ways for finding happiness, we stash them away, and they become part of our large committee inside. Now, a lot of those ideas have their drawbacks. And we're going to see this as we start meditating—that there are certain things we identify with that are going to get in the way of following the path, doing the practice.

This is where the idea of not-self comes in handy. We look at some of our old selves, based around our old tricks, and at our old attitude, which is, "Well, I know there are some drawbacks to the way I am but that's just the way I am. I'm not about to change." That's an attitude that can get you through a lot in life—get you through school, your occupation, your family life. But it begins to fall apart as you begin to look more deeply for happiness.

Especially when you hear the teachings of the four noble truths, that it is possible to put an end to suffering, to find a genuine happiness, and that the cause

for suffering comes from inside. It's one of the reasons why the Buddha taught not-self to the five brethren after he taught them the four noble truths. It's from the perspective of the four noble truths that you can begin to look at your selves—all the old tricks you had for finding happiness—and you begin to see that many of them fall under the first or second noble truth, suffering and its cause, and so they're not really worth holding on to anymore.

But at the same time, you don't let go of everything. Your desire for true happiness is something you want to hold on to. Your desire to follow the path correctly is something you want to hold on to as well. So what you're learning is to develop new selves around new tricks. It's like teaching an old dog new selves. When you master new ways of finding happiness, you can look back at your old ways and see that they don't really work all that well, no matter how much you used to identify with them and hold on to them very tightly. You begin to see that the things that they could provide for you are not really worth it. You can begin to admit the drawback of those particular ways of engaging in the world.

So think of the path as new sets of skills, and there are going to be new selves that develop around those sets of skills. In the beginning, they're pretty weak, and your old selves come barging in, and they say, "I want this, I want that. I want the old ways of doing things right now." This is where your conviction in the path will come in handy: conviction in the fact that the Buddha was awakened, that he found a way to awakening by abandoning his old selves.

Now, there will come a point, of course, when you don't need any sense of self. That's when you've found true happiness. But up to that point, you will need new senses of selves. What we're doing here is raising the bar—getting more selective about what kind of happiness we really find satisfactory. And then the ways you used to judge your old selves can be seen as wanting, because the happiness that they could provide does have its drawbacks, and the ways they go about finding it can often have drawbacks, too.

But at the same time, you really do have to develop these new selves, through developing the new tricks, the new strategies of finding happiness—through meditation, through being generous, being virtuous. You want to develop new senses of self around that. And it's going to be awkward for a while.

Because a lot of us are old dogs. And that not only applies to people in their 60s or 70s or 80s. Once you hit 20, you've pretty much—for most people—set up your senses of self. And there are a lot of people who stop growing from that point on. Some people stop growing even earlier than that. It's that attitude: "Well, this is the way I am. I'm not going to change, because I'm perfectly satisfied with the results I get. Even though I can see that they have drawbacks, I'm still satisfied with what I've got."

You've got to raise your standards, raise your sense of what kind of happiness is possible, and what kind of skills are going to be required for that new happiness. And here the sense of self that is confident that "Yes, I can do this" is going to come in handy. I've known people who started meditating in their 70s or 80s and have actually done quite well. So it's not a matter of physical age. It's a matter of the age of your attitude. The old-dog attitude starts whenever you say, "Okay, I can't learn any new tricks. I'm not about to learn any new selves or new ways of doing things." That can develop at any age, but it also can be abandoned at any age. It does get harder as you get older. So the best time to start creating new skills and new senses of selves around those skills is right now.

But see it as that. Don't see it as "This ego is really bad, I've got to get rid of this ego." Learn to take it apart into all the different selves that go into it. See which ones are useful and which ones are not. If you have a unitary ego, it's going to be hard for it to take itself apart. But you realize that, okay, this is a committee job. Different members of the committee have different skills, different abilities. Try to sort through them. See which ones are actually useful in the path.

Back when I was in school, I was studying Augustine for a while. One of the lessons I learned about him was that—once he was converted to Christianity—he decided he wasn't going to throw away the verbal and intellectual skills he had developed prior to his Christian life. He was going to convert them to a new purpose. Centuries later, Voltaire went through the Christian tradition with the same attitude. He said it was like a dung hill strewn with diamonds; he was going to pick out the diamonds and put them to his own uses.

In other words, when you have a new purpose, you can go back and look at your old skills, and choose which ones are actually going to be helpful for the new purpose and which ones are not. It's the way with any conversion process. This

obviously applies to people who are not raised as Buddhist, but often people who are raised as Buddhist suddenly find themselves—when they actually practice—having to throw away a lot of their earlier attitudes.

So you sort through your stable of selves, your closet of different uniforms or different disguises you've been wearing, see which ones are going to be useful on the path, and hold on to those, develop those. Learn how to regard as not-self the ones that are going to get in the way.

And as you learn new tricks, you find that you're not an old dog anymore. You've got new skills, and you've a new sense of who you are around those skills. It's all to the good. There will come a point of course when you don't even need that sense of self. But don't be in a hurry to throw away all your senses of selves. Some of them have their purposes.

But at the same time, learn how to look askance at your old selves that are *not* useful. Realize: "No matter how much I may have identified with these things in the past, no matter how much satisfaction I got out of acting in those ways, I've got to say goodbye. They're not worth holding on to anymore."

That's what not-self is: It's a value judgment. Just as self is a value judgment: which things are worth holding on to, which things are not worth holding on to. You've got to change your standards of judgment. Only then will you be able to make progress in the path.

You might ask, "Who is this for?" The Buddha never really answers that question. He says to let go of what is not yours, and it will be for your long term happiness. There's a paradox in that statement—you let go of your sense of you, but it will be for *your* long-term happiness. But as Ajaan Suwat used to say, once you find ultimate welfare and happiness, it's so complete, so total—because it requires no actions at all—you don't have to ask, "Who did this?" or "Who is experiencing this?" The happiness is sufficient in and of itself. And that's all that matters—which is a value judgment as well.