

When You Don't Like Your Selves

May 28, 2020

There are times when events elicit a very strong sense of self that comes out, sometimes with a lot of greed, a lot of lust, a lot of anger. Afterwards, we regret what we did under the influence of that sense of self. It's all too easy to say, "The big problem in my life is my sense of self. What can I do to get rid of it?"

You have to remember: You don't have one sense of self. There are many. You have a whole stable: everything from common animals up to Brahmas. They're related to different wishes, different desires. We have a desire, and then we need a self as the sense of who's going to be consuming the desired object, or getting the desired thing, or getting the results of the desired action, and then the sense of the self who's going to be doing it. If you're going to act on a desire, you need a sense of self both as a producer and a consumer.

This is how we create states of becoming. The desire requires not only a self but also an object that's going to be in a world. You have to figure out how to negotiate, how to navigate that world. Then you figure out which of your senses of self is going to be useful.

Now, the problem is sometimes that they just come jumping out. We do our selfing pretty willy-nilly, and a good part of the practice is learning to be a little bit more selective, learning how to see these senses of self as actions. They're strategies, strategies for happiness, just as not-self is a strategy for happiness.

Again, not-selfing is something we do all the time. You identify with something and then you decide you don't want to identify anymore. You draw lines between self and not-self, and sometimes these lines are pretty random and pretty chaotic. So we're trying to bring some more order, some more skill into these processes.

This is why the Buddha provides those teachings on the three types of fabrication, because it's through those types of fabrication that we create our becomings, our sense of who we are in a particular world. The Buddha's full of recommendations on how you can learn how to create new senses of self, develop new skills, as part of the path to the end of suffering.

This is one of our problems: We have a limited range of skills. Even though we have many, many types of self in there, each of them has a script. Sometimes the scripts are pretty ill-thought out, and they're put together in a very haphazard way. We're doing a lot of this in ignorance, just grabbing hold of whatever we think we can identify with, whatever would be useful at that time, then finding out later we've grabbed on to burning coals.

So, what are the Buddha's recommendations? He recommends how to breathe, what kinds of feelings to create, what kind of perceptions to hold in mind, and how to talk to yourself.

The sixteen steps in breath meditation are a way to recalibrate your bodily fabrication. When an angry self comes up, what does it do? It seizes your breath and does something weird with it and holds it hostage, “As long as you don’t give into me, I’ll make your breath really miserable.” So you give in, to get it out of your system, and then you’ve created the karma of acting on anger.

So the Buddha’s teaching you how to seize the breath back, getting sensitive to long breathing, short breathing. Learn how to breathe aware of the whole body, learn how to calm bodily fabrication down. Those are the four big steps.

It’s as if the Buddha’s sketching out an outline for you, and then the various teachings we get, say, from Ajaan Lee and the other ajaans on breath meditation, fill in the outline. How to think about the breath energies in the body, how to play with them: These are all instructions on how to do bodily fabrication so that you can create more skillful selves.

The same with verbal fabrication: The Buddha gives you lots of instructions in how to talk to yourself, what things to hold in mind—starting with the basic principle that you want to abandon unskillful qualities and develop skillful ones. Just thinking in those terms resets things, recalibrates things, because it forces you to think about the long term, “When I act in this way, when I assume this particular identity, what will happen down the line?” Simply seeing that identity as an action: That’s one of the most important insights the Buddha had.

People back in his time were talking about the self as something that either existed or didn’t exist, independently of what the sense of self could do. The Buddha said it’s not something you’re born with as a given. It’s something you create, and you can create new ones.

What’s really distinctive about the Buddha’s teachings is the extent to which karma is the basic context for everything he teaches, and here’s another instance. The way you *self* is a kind of karma. And when you think of it in terms of karma, it’s not a question of your true self versus your false self. It’s more a question of which of your selves are skillful and which ones are not. So just thinking in those terms: That’s how the Buddha’s telling you to talk to yourself. He says this is a kind of karma. “Karma has consequences: Do I want the consequences of this particular kind of action?”

Then he has you talk to yourself in terms of the four noble truths. The way you *self* is a kind of clinging. When is it useful and skillful, and when is it not? Because you do need a sense of self to follow the path—a sense of yourself as competent, that you can do this. That’s the self as the producer. Then there’s the self as a consumer: You’re going to benefit from following the path. You want these to be your main guidelines.

Then you start sorting through the whole catalogue of selves that you’ve had, and you try to figure out which ones are useful and which ones are not, which ones you can convert, which ones may not necessarily be useful right away but might be useful down the line. These are ways you can talk to yourself.

Then there are the feelings you try to create, largely through the way you breathe and through the way you think.

And then the perceptions: The Buddha has *lots* of perceptions to recommend. All those analogies throughout the Canon are designed for you to take on as ways of fabricating the state of your mind, fabricating your attitude toward your anger, toward your lust, toward your greed.

For example, with lust: The Buddha has all those images for the drawbacks of lust: a bead of honey on the blade of a knife; borrowed goods; a chain of bones from which all the meat has been boiled away and there's nothing left but the bones to chew on. And as Ajaan Lee would add, all you get is the flavor of your saliva.

The images for the drawbacks of anger: Remind yourself that when you're angry you're ugly. You tend to destroy things that are valuable. You please your enemies, because you do things that you think are to your advantage but turn out to be just the opposite.

So these are some perceptions, some ways of thinking to hold in mind.

The Buddha's teachings are full of recommendations on how to fabricate a new sense of self, new states of becoming as part of the path. Then, of course, as with all fabrications, there will come a point where you let these go, too. But it's not the case where you simply just drop your sense of self. You have to sort through your senses of selves, to see which ones are going to be useful on the path, which ones are not, to get skilled in learning how to draw on the right ones. As the skillful ones do their work, then you can put them aside, too.

So look at the issue of self. It's not as if you're talking about a *thing*. You're talking about actions, skills—or unskilled actions, but we're trying to make them more skillful and to expand our repertoire of skillful selves. As for the unskillful ones, you can slit their throats, realizing that you don't need them anymore.

That requires a lot of mindfulness and alertness and ardency: the qualities we're trying to develop as we meditate to be on top of things so that the unskillful selves don't come back and push the skillful ones out of the way. Your old zombie selves: You don't need them. But it requires mindfulness to protect yourself.

So work on your alertness, work on your mindfulness. And look at your senses of self, as I said, as actions, choices that you're making, strategies. Self is a strategy; not-self is a strategy.

Develop your discernment as to how to master those strategies, so that your sense of self comes out and does the things that would really be helpful. When you can put it away, you can replace it with another one and another one as needed, until you finally get to the point where you've attained the highest happiness and there's no need for these strategies, either self or not-self anymore, at least not for the sake of that highest happiness.

From that point on, your relationship to your actions is very different. You're disjoined from your actions, in the same way that you'd be disjoined from any action that would be a self action or a not-self action. But as far as *your* needs are concerned, you can put all those things aside.

The self and not-self actions that an awakened person engages in are solely for the sake of other people. As the Buddha said, there's nothing that needs to be done, nothing that needs to be added to what has been done. No new selves need to be added, no new not-selves have to be added.

That's where we're headed, but it takes a skillful use or a skillful mastery of your selves and your not-selves in order to get there.