

Not-self for the Sake of Happiness

January 22, 2021

Our sense of self comes from the measure of control we have over our environment, over our bodies, over our thoughts. Your sense of yourself meditating right here comes at least from the fact that you know you can focus here or you could focus someplace else. You have the choice—and you're choosing to stay here. You can change the way you breathe. You can change the perceptions you have around the breath and how you're relating to the body. Whatever sense of "you" you have right now comes from control.

We exert this control to find happiness, and it's in this way that we develop the three main roles of our sense of self. There's the sense of self as the producer that has the ability to exert control. There's the self as the consumer, the part that's going to benefit from the control. And then there's the reflective self that watches the other two to see how well the producer's producing, and whether the consumer is satisfied, and where improvements might be made. This is where your sense of self begins to develop more in the abstract as you think more in the long-term.

Most common animals are confined to the first two. But they do have a sense of self.

I remember reading a Zen teacher one time saying that animals don't suffer because they have no sense of self. But you look at animals. They're suffering a lot. Even though they may not have an articulated sense of self, they do have a sense that they want to control their environment—and they're very upset when they can't.

I remember reading of a penguin researcher one time who was talking to a journalist. He was doing an experiment on penguins to see what kind of diet they had. It required picking them up, turning them upside down, and shaking their food out of their stomachs. He said he hated doing the experiment because it violated their sense of self. The journalist thought that he was exaggerating, that he was getting a little crazy from being around penguins too much, reading too much into their behavior. But as she got to know them, she realized that penguins do have a sense of self. They have the sense of their own territory. Every animal has a sense of territory. What's that if not a sense of self? "This belongs to me. Don't violate this." And some of the more advanced animals do have a more reflective self as they try to figure things out.

So the sense of self is everywhere in beings. As the Buddha pointed out, it's made out of five things: the five aggregates—form, feelings, perceptions, fabrications, and consciousness. Your sense of self as the producer, for instance, lays claim to the body and all your mental functions to do the actions that need to be done.

Then you notice how much pain is involved in doing whatever needs to be done. The self as a reflector is going to take note of this. It has to apply perceptions and thought fabrications in order to figure things out. And it's conscious of what's going on.

The sense of self as a consumer may focus on the body being satisfied with the food that it's found. It very much identifies with the feelings of pleasure or pain, and will tend to fabricate a lot of thoughts and perceptions around feelings, the pleasures and pains that have come from your actions. This is where we may tend to exaggerate how wonderful something was, as a way of motivating the producer to produce more. And of course, the consuming self identifies with consciousness, its awareness of the feelings.

The reflective self may not identify so much with the body, but does employ a lot of thinking, perceiving, and consciousness as it figures out, "Is the producer doing well? Could it do better?"

So we employ all these aggregates as our strategies for happiness—and we cling to them as a result. And because they're strategies for happiness, abstract arguments saying that there is no self really have no real force against them.

Even the people who say that you're just the body, that there's no self in there, are actually saying, "Okay, you are your body. Your self is the body." And, of course, they employ all the aggregates in just the same way as everybody else to find happiness on a day-to-day basis.

So even those who say from the abstract that there is not self, that the idea makes no sense, that's illogical—they end up going back and trying to exert some control over their environment, using their various senses of self as strategies. The only way we would be willing to let go of these strategies would be if someone could convince us that there's a better way to find happiness.

That's precisely what the Buddha does. As he told the monks one time, "What isn't yours: Let go of. That will be for your long-term welfare and happiness." That's the motivation for using the not-self perception, the not-self strategy.

The four noble truths are basically an explanation for why you might want to let go of your sense of self. As the Buddha defines suffering, suffering is clinging, and clinging to a particular idea of self is one of the forms of suffering. This

analysis goes against the grain. But depending on how insightful your reflective self has been, you'd be more or less inclined to listen to his arguments.

This is one of the reasons why he gives the graduated discourse, to point out that even the best forms of happiness that can be found as you practice generosity, virtue, thinking of long-term happiness, and being in a position where you can gain long-term happiness for yourself, will have their drawbacks, their "degradation," as he says. When your reflective self agrees, that's when you're ready for the four noble truths and their teaching that goes against the grain: that clinging to a sense of self is suffering.

In the case of the Five Brethren, when he first taught them right view, he made no mention of self. He got them to an experience of the Dhamma Eye, where they actually saw the deathless from accepting his teaching on right view. That way, they could see for themselves that, yes, by letting go of the clinging, letting go of the craving, you do find a happiness that's a lot better than anything else you've had before.

It was only then that he taught them not-self. Some people say that when you gain stream entry, when you gain the Dhamma Eye, that's when you see that there is no self. But if that were the case, the Buddha wouldn't have had to teach the Five Brethren not-self afterwards. He taught them not-self afterwards because they needed to have right view first before the teaching on not-self would make sense. Right view gives the strength we need to counteract our deep-seated assumptions that it's through clinging to an idea of self that we're going to be able to find happiness. In their case, he had shown them: No, it's by letting go that you can find the deathless. And the deathless is much better than anything else you could attain.

That's when they were willing to look back, to see whatever lingering sense of self they had around the aggregates was really not worth holding on to. They'd let go of the idea that, "I am this," but they still had a lingering "I am," which another monk once later compared to the scent of soap. You've washed some clothes, the dirt is gone from the clothes, but there's still a lingering scent of soap in the cloth. That's what had to be taken care of in their case.

But the important point is that the Buddha's teaching on not-self is not something that's simply a logical argument that would hold in any logical forum where you can prove that because of x , y , and z , there is no self. It's more a value judgment.

Our sense of self is a value judgment. There are certain things that are worth holding on to for the sake of happiness, and the Buddha's having you—the reflective you—change your value judgment, to see that actually you're going to

do better learning how to let go in degrees. He doesn't have you drop every sense of self immediately. You apply the new value judgment skillfully first to developing a passion for the path. Ultimately you have to let even that go because you find that there will be a greater happiness through letting go of the path. But you can't do that until the path has done its work in clearing up a lot of confusion in your mind.

So this strategy will work only if you're willing to take the Buddha at his word that, yes, there is a better form of happiness that can be found by letting go, that suffering is clinging, that it's caused by cravings and not by things outside. It's not caused by your inability to find control over other people that you should try to control, which is the way most people approach the issue: You're suffering because so-and-so is out of your control, and you're going to do what you can to get them under your control. That's what most people think.

It's only when you accept the Buddha's analysis of how true happiness is found, and what true suffering is, that the not-self teaching will make sense—and will have power within the mind.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha is so adamant about focusing on the negative side of worldly pleasures to let you realize that what you're holding on to is suffering itself. He's saying this not to bad-mouth your pleasures. It's because he's got something better. He's saying negative things, but he has a positive purpose. There really is a true happiness, a happiness that doesn't change, a happiness that harms nobody, that's to be found by comprehending your suffering as clinging and abandoning your craving.

An important part of comprehending and abandoning is learning how to use that perception of not-self, and to apply it to all the different aggregates that make up your self as a consumer, your self as a producer, your self as a reflecting agent.

So take these teachings as a strategy, realizing that your sense of self was a strategy, but that not-self is going to be a better strategy. That's when you have a chance of finding what true happiness is.

That's what all these teachings are for. They're for the sake of happiness. It's when you understand how not-self relates to true happiness: That's when you can really understand it and get the most out of it.