

Teaching Old Selves New Tricks

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Our sense of self is basically a strategy for finding happiness, and there are lots of senses of self in the mind. They're usually composed of a sense of the self as the consumer, the person who's going to reap the happiness of the actions; then there's the self as the producer, the one who does or doesn't have the means for bringing that happiness about. On top of that, there's the self as the observer who passes judgment, that decides whether the producer is skillful or not, or whether the desires of the consumer are worthwhile or not. This is the self that passes judgment, saying, "I don't like them," either seeing that the producer is not really capable or at least doesn't have the skills needed for true happiness, or that the consumer has been sloppy, unobservant, willing to put up with a lot of things it shouldn't put up with.

Now this observer—critic—can be helpful if it's trained. It can also be very destructive if it's not, but when you say you don't like your self, it's not so much that there's one self there to like or not. It's simply that you look at the various strategies you've used in order to find happiness and they don't seem to work well. No matter how hard you may try, you seem to keep falling back into these unskillful patterns, and there's a sense of frustration. But you have to keep reminding yourself that it's not the case that your self has a certain pattern and that everything coming out of that self is going to be following that pattern. You can reshape the self by learning new skills, i.e., skills that are not determined by the kind of selves you had in the past, or at least they don't have to be. It is possible to teach an old self new tricks.

This is a lot of what the practice is about—learning the Buddha's tricks. The first one, of course, is knowing how to talk to yourself: that process of verbal fabrication that the Buddha says lies so close to the very beginning of the processes that lead to suffering. Think about how the Buddha himself would teach people. He would instruct, rouse, urge, and encourage. Three of the four have to do with getting motivated, getting you confident that this is something you can do.

The instruction there, of course, is to make sure that your self-esteem is based in reality. You do have to point out to yourself that there are ways in which you've been looking for happiness in the past that really have been unskillful. You don't pretend that they're not there, and it doesn't help to pretend to yourself that you don't have anything unskillful inside. You want to be clear-headed about where you've been making mistakes in the past so that you don't repeat them.

This is why the Buddha placed honesty as the first principle in the practice. Without honesty, he says, you don't have the quality of a true contemplative, someone who's really on the path.

So you have to instruct yourself, and the Buddha gives you instructions as examples for how. Our past selves, the ones that are unproductive or at least the ones that get us frustrated, were trained in unhealthy environments, and to survive in those environments you needed to develop some qualities that in the long term were not all that skillful. They were probably useful in the short term, but here we're looking at the long term, and so to look at the long term, you need some patience and you need the qualities of mind that can help strengthen your patience.

This is one of the reasons why we work on the breath. The breath is always there. It's right next to your verbal fabrication. It's bodily fabrication, and the fact that it's a fabrication means that you can tell the breath to do different things: for instance, to breathe in a way that calms you down, keeps you nourished, so that you're not so desperate to get quick results. You've got some goodness. You've got at least some sense of well-being right here, right now, that you can tap into.

Then you work on the three bases for merit, because that's the Buddha's program for developing a healthy sense of self. You work on being generous, which of course means not only generous with your material things, but also generous with your time, generous with your forgiveness, generous with your knowledge, generous with your energy. Of those, the hardest seems to be forgiveness. It's the cheapest, requires the least energy, and yet why is it so hard to give? You have to look into that. This is where you have to instruct yourself and then rouse yourself, so that you can overcome whatever resistance is there.

As for virtue, you try to behave in ways that are harmless, following the precepts and also looking at other ways of being skillful not covered by the precepts. We mentioned this the other day. There are a lot of areas in life for which no one can formulate a precept, because the lines between skillful and unskillful are a little blurry, but when you're really honest with yourself—and this is where you would lay down the law for yourself—you can look at individual situations and decide: what the most harmless thing would be in this situation.

Try to follow that and then check on the results again, because when you're looking at your own behavior, it's not a matter of rules that are true for everybody. You're looking into areas that do have a little bit of gray, sometimes a lot of gray, but when you're really honest with yourself you can say, "Okay, in this particular situation, it's okay to say something a little harsh. In that situation, no."

Admittedly, this is forcing you to feel your way, but this is the kind of thing you want to get sensitive to, so that you can tell when the particulars of a situation require extra vigilance and other cases where things are not so demanding.

Then, finally, lots of goodwill. When the Buddha talks about development in those three bases for merit, he ties it again and again with the development of goodwill, wishing that all beings be happy. This means that when you're looking for your own happiness, you want to make sure it doesn't interfere with other people's, doesn't cause them harm. There may be some people who are unhappy with the fact that you're practicing, but you're not really harming them. To harm people, you'd have to get them to break precepts. You'd have to want them to give rise to passion, aversion, and delusion. But here you're doing none of that.

So be careful as you look for your happiness, and treat everybody with goodwill, even the people you don't like—*especially* people you don't like. Think of that case of the bandits sawing off your limbs with a two-handed saw. The Buddha says when you spread thoughts of goodwill in that situation, you have to start with the bandits, because you don't want to get fixated on how horrible they are or how cruel they are or how much you might want to get revenge, because who knows when you might die, and you don't want to die with those thoughts in your mind.

So, first order of business: goodwill, goodwill. Then as you learn how to look for happiness through virtue, through generosity, through development of goodwill, you find that you develop new skills. You look at your actions and you can be proud of them. Your sense of self will change.

So remember it's important that you don't think that you have a certain kind of self that always has to look for happiness in a certain way. Let your sense of self be the product of skills you develop, and work on developing good skills. That way, you get around what seems to be that impasse—which is that if you don't like yourself, you don't trust yourself, how can you trust yourself to change yourself? You realize the way around that is understanding that you have many selves, so use the good selves. Develop more good selves. Then you can let the unskillful ones fall by the way.