

Training Your Selves

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When the Buddha lists examples of suffering or stress in the first noble truth, one of them is not getting what you want: frustrated desire. He gives an example: You're a being subject to aging, but you don't want to age. That desire can't be fulfilled simply through the desire. It's not something to be gained just by wanting. You're a being subject to illness, you don't want to be ill, but that's not to be gained just by wanting. You're subject to death, you don't want to die, but that's not to be gained just by wanting.

Some people hear that and say, "Well, you just have to learn how to resign yourself to these things. Accept the fact that this is what aging is like, this is what illness is like, this is what death is like. In that way you won't suffer." That's what they say, but you still suffer. As long as there's clinging to the aggregates, you're still suffering. If you just resign yourself to these things, you may be equanimous, you may be accepting, but it's like that line from Thoreau: people living their lives of quiet desperation. It's equanimous desperation, accepting desperation.

But the Buddha was not the kind of person who would leave you there in desperation. He said that as long as you define yourself as a being subject to aging, you're going to age. So you do have a choice. Why identify with this being that's subject to aging? It's the same with this body. As he said, it's subject to stones and sticks and other weapons, and as long as you identify with it, you're going to make yourself subject to stones and sticks and other weapons. As long as you identify with it, you're going to suffer from the heat, suffer from the cold.

The trick is learning how not to identify with these things. After all, when you take on the identity of a being, it's an action you do, a choice you make. You latch on to something—to form, feelings, perceptions, thought constructs, fabrications, consciousness. In latching on to these things, you make yourself subject to things that you don't want. So there is a way out that doesn't involve just being accepting or resigning yourself to the way things are.

We were talking today about the translation of *dukkha* sometimes as unsatisfactoriness. It's a very unsatisfactory translation. The implication there is that if you could learn to be satisfied with these things, then there wouldn't be any suffering, but again, that's not what the Buddha taught. As long as you identify with these things, even when you tell yourself to accept them, that's basically snuffing out your desire to find something better. But that's what the

teaching offers—something better. Something much better. It comes from learning how to question your identification with things.

I've talked many times about how the Buddha refused to answer questions about whether the self exists or not, or whether you exist or not, or—if you exist—what you are. Those kinds of questions, the Buddha said, get you entangled. He wants you to see your sense of self as an action. Your sense of not-self is also an action—because after all, how does self happen? It's part of becoming.

You have a desire, and then around that desire there develops a sense of the world in which the object you're desiring can be found, and then you as a being within that world.

You take on many roles. You're the being who can find that object—in other words, the agent. You're also the being that will enjoy that object when it's found. That's the consumer. Then there's the "you" in there that's commenting on all this—whether the agent is doing things well, whether the consumer is really satisfied, what might be done to improve things.

Those are all activities. When you see them as activities, you realize when the Buddha's talking about self, he's not answering the question of whether you exist or don't exist. He's answering the question: "What when I do it will lead to my long-term harm and suffering; what when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" It's a question of values—what's worth doing, what's not worth doing.

So when you take your notion of self apart and you don't address it in terms of the issues of what you might call metaphysics—what it is, whether it exists—then what you're left with is a value judgment: Which desires are worth taking on? Which courses of action are worth taking on as your responsibility? Which ones are not?

For instance, while we're working on the path, there will be a sense of self, of you as the meditator. You've got to train this self as the agent, as the consumer, and as the commentator. How you talk to yourself about what you're doing is a really important skill. You can't get past it by saying, well, "I just won't have a sense of self as I meditate." We're creating a state of becoming as we get the mind to settle in, with a world and a sense of you in that world.

The world here, of course, is the world of your experience inside the body as you relate to the breath. As for you, you're the one focusing, and you're the one who's enjoying the sense of ease that comes when you do it right. But you're also the one who comments on when it's not going well, why is it not going well? You've got to train that commentator, because otherwise the commentator can make life miserable.

Sometimes we get tired of the voices in our mind, so we say, “I’d just like to meditate and have them go away.” But that’s like saying “I’m tired of the sound of the crickets. Why can’t they go away?” They’re going to be here, so you might as well just live with them, but the voices in your mind are more yours than the crickets. You can actually learn how to make them useful.

After all, directed thought and evaluation—the way you talk to yourself—is a factor of right concentration. So tend to it: how you talk to yourself, what standards you’re using to judge yourself with. All too often they’re standards you picked up from who knows where.

Why don’t you try the Buddha’s standards? After all, his standards are compassionate. The standards that he lays out for us are not harsh. They’re not the type that would deny our desire for happiness. In fact, they’re there for the *sake* of our happiness. So he talks about having goodwill for yourself, having some compassion for yourself, empathetic joy when things are going well, equanimity when things are not going well at all and you can’t figure out how to get them to go better. That’s when you just watch for a while.

Think of that sutta where the Buddha talks about the various things you can do with the mind: You can rein it in. You can gladden it. You can watch over it. I can’t remember all six. But they’re various things you can do, and they all have to do with how you talk to yourself.

You can tell yourself that this is the time just to be very patient, and watch, and not get frustrated that you haven’t figured things out. Frustration is not part of the path. Curiosity is: the ability to sit and watch things patiently until you can figure them out. Patience also is part of the path. And then you learn how to gladden yourself.

I think I mentioned that case of the Englishman who went across the Northwest Territories back in the 1820s or 1830s. He went with a tribe of Dene. That was one of the first instances of an Englishman trusting his life to some Native Americans. He noticed that the days when the hunting was bad were the days when they laughed the most. They would cinch up their belts and talk about things that would make them laugh, gladdening themselves to compensate for the fact that they were a little bit hungry, but they were confident that the hunger wasn’t going to last forever, and the lack of success in the hunting wasn’t going to last forever. So when things aren’t going well in your meditation, have that same attitude: Learn to lift your spirits; learn to gladden the mind.

If you have trouble figuring out ways, well, read the stories of the ajaans. The autobiographies are more instructive this way than the biographies. The biographies tend to be

more like hagiographies. There's a tendency among the biographies to make it sound as if the different ajaans were almost born arahants. But in the autobiographies, the ajaans are a lot more frank about the past difficulties they had, how they talked to themselves, how they lifted their spirits, how they taught themselves to be patient.

So remember as you're sitting here meditating that you are creating a state of becoming. And you've got at least three senses of self here: You've got the agent who's trying to focus on the breath. You've got the part of you that wants to enjoy the sense of well-being that comes when the mind settles down and has a sense of ease, a sense of fullness. And you've got that commentator who's trying to train the other two, but the commentator itself also has to be trained.

In this way, you can take advantage of a sense of self while you're practicing, without worrying so much about who it is. Just think of it as your way of telling yourself, "Okay, these activities are worth following. These activities when you do them will lead to long term welfare and happiness." As for things that will not lead to long-term welfare and happiness, that's where you apply the perception of not-self.

You gain some practice of this as you observe the precepts. There will be things that will tempt you to break the precepts. The Buddha lists three main things: Concern about your health: There are situations where the only way you're going to get some food is if you steal. You have to say, "Well, I can't steal." Concern about your wealth: There will be cases where the only way you can make money off of a deal is if you lie. Well, you can't lie. Concern about your relatives: You're afraid that, say, if you don't steal, they won't eat. Again, you don't steal. You have to view those things as not-self. Your health is not-self. Your relatives are not-yours. After all, they come and they go. You don't know where they came from, you don't know where they're going to go when they leave.

Think about all the people you meet. As the Buddha said, it's going to be hard to meet someone who hasn't been your mother in the past. Just look around you here at the sala: Everybody sitting here has been your mother at one point, and you've been *their* mother at one point, and so on down with the different relationships: father, brother, sister, daughter, son. These relationships can change so radically.

You don't want to sacrifice your virtue for things that will change on you like this. After all, you're going to lose your health at some point, you will lose your wealth at some point, and you'll lose your relatives at some point. But you don't have to lose your virtue and you don't

have to lose your right view. You're the one who would destroy those things if you're not careful. So you do your best not to harm them, not to sacrifice them.

Those are things you hold on to as self for the time being. Ultimately, of course, we're working on a path that's fabricated but leads to something unfabricated. Which means there will be a point where you have to abandon the path and all your senses of self that go along with it. But don't abandon it until it's ready, until it's fully developed, and it's done its work.

So in that sense, you hold on to this sense of self that's doing the meditation, and you train your sense of self in the doing so that it becomes wiser and more skilful. Then finally you can let go. It's when you let go after the path has been developed: That's when you get beyond aging, illness, and death. You've found something where you don't have to identify with these things that do age, grow ill, and die. And that's a lot better than just saying, "Well, I'll just content myself where I am."

You read about people saying, "When, the mind's stilled, when it's here just observing things patiently with equanimity, it can be equated with the awakened mind." And they have to dress it up pretty much in order to make it that way.

But think of Ajaan Maha Boowa's image. He says, "The mind, even when it's perfectly concentrated mind, is—compared to the deathless—a pile of excrement."

So what these people are doing is that they're taking excrement and they're dressing it up. If they were simply selling it to you, that would be bad enough. The fact is, they're selling it to themselves. That's where you have to feel sorry for them.

Just make sure you don't consume what they're offering to you, because you can find something better. As I said, the Buddha doesn't just leave you with frustrated desires. The problem, as he tells us, is that you've been identifying with things that will frustrate your desires, but you can learn how not to identify with them. But the way is not just by accepting everything. The way is through developing the path.

So you will be identifying with the path for a while, but it's a much better sort of identification. It does have its drawbacks, which is why you eventually have to let go of it, but it's a path that gives you hope. When you identify your sense of self around the path—in the sense of saying, "Okay, this really is worth it. This will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness"—you know you're heading in the right direction. You're making a value judgment that really will pay off.