

A Good Independent Self

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There are people who say that the idea of an independent self is the root of all evil. As long as you have the idea that you're somehow separate, that you're not totally dependent on everybody else, you're going to be selfish. You'll try to amass as much as you can for yourself and push other people away unless they can serve your interests. But that's not always the case.

When you realize that your true well-being lies in acting in skillful ways, acting on skillful intentions, then even if you have any idea of an independent self, you'll want to act on impulses for generosity, virtue, the desire to train the mind.

At the same time, you avoid a lot of the problems of the idea of an interdependent self.

For instance, if everybody were interdependent, nobody could gain awakening through his or her own efforts. That would mean that the Buddha never gained awakening; we'd all have to gain awakening together. You know how long that would take.

When the Buddha was asked whether the whole world would gain awakening, only half, or a third, he refused to answer, because it's going to depend on each one of us deciding independently that we want to take up the path and follow it all the way through.

The idea of an independent self also reminds you that if you're going to look for goodness in the world, you can't always depend on it coming from outside. You want your goodness to be independent of the ups and downs of the world. After all, look at the world we live in: It's not 100% pure, not 100% compassionate. And when you look at interdependent systems in the world, you can see that it's not the case that they're designed for the well-being of everybody.

We're having a heatwave now. Someplace somebody's having good weather, and if we weren't having our heatwave, they wouldn't be having their good weather. There have been times in the past when we've had good weather that's caused other people to have bad weather.

So it's not the case that interdependent systems are reliable. In fact, it's because they're unreliable that the Buddha said we've got to get out. Each of us has to make that decision for him or herself, and follow the path him or herself.

So we have to learn how to make our goodness independent. It's a good practice when, for example, you're suffering from a disease, and there are a lot of things you can't do. You can still

think thoughts of goodwill.

Think of the case of the Buddha. Devadatta had rolled a stone down a mountain trying to kill the Buddha. Fortunately, the stone crashed against a rocky promontory and so was diverted. But it broke into some slivers, and one of the slivers pierced the Buddha's foot. It was very painful. They were able to get the sliver out, and he had to lie down and rest. Mara came and taunted him saying, "You sleepyhead, why are you moping here?" The Buddha said, "I'm not moping, I'm lying down with sympathy for all beings." That can mean two things: One is that he looked after himself so that he would be able to continue his work of teaching. But also while he was lying there, he was thinking about all beings, not just thinking about himself. When you do that, it lifts the level of your mind.

Remember the image of the salt crystal. If your mind is expansive, then whatever painful results you're experiencing from past karma are going to be greatly reduced. Just as when you throw a salt crystal into a large river of water: Even though you've put some salt in the water, there's so much more water than there is salt that you can still drink the water, and it won't taste salty at all.

So look inside yourself for the sources of goodness. They're there. They start with the desire to find true happiness. Around that desire you're going to develop a sense of self, and you'll find that your sense of self will start out with a lot of the bad habits of your old senses of self. Every becoming has a sense of self.

The self is the agent who's going to do the work that needs to be done to find the happiness that that particular state of becoming is centered on, or the desire it's centered on. Then there's the self who's going to enjoy the results. Then there's the self who comments on how well the agent is doing its job, and offering recommendations for how it might improve.

We're still going to use those three senses of self as we practice, but we have to train them so that the self as the consumer raises its standards, the self as the agent gets more energetic and skilled, and the self as commentator knows how to talk so as to spur the agent on to do good things. It'll have to offer criticisms when it's necessary, but not in such a way as to kill your motivation, because you've got to keep that desire going. As long as you're working on concentration, there has to be the desire that acts as a center, as a kernel for the state of concentration, and you don't want to snuff that out.

So you've got to train your inner critic to be a useful critic. You read so much about how you should try to get rid of the inner critic because it's toxic. But then who's going to make

recommendations? Who's going to be able to look at what you're doing and give suggestions? Teachers can't step into your mind and give suggestions. You've got to absorb their values, and learn how to use them yourself.

So you think about the Buddha's way of teaching: There was instructing, but then there was also urging, rousing, encouraging—giving you energy. In fact, even when he talks about self—the self is its own mainstay, the self as its governing principle—it's what you might call the idea of self as a performative truth: something that's meant to make you perform well—that rouses you, that urges you on, that yes, you can do this, and yes, you'll benefit from it.

And yes, you do have the resources inside. What have you got? The three kinds of fabrication: You're breathing; you're talking to yourself; you're dealing with perceptions and feelings—but you can learn how to do all three of those things in skillful ways.

You keep on breathing, but now you breathe in different ways. You breathe with the whole body. You think of the breath energy coming in and out from different parts of the body. You explore the nature of the breath energy in the body as a whole. When the Buddha talks about the in-and-out breath, he doesn't classify it as a contact at the body. He classifies it as part of one of the properties in the body itself. So the breath is already there. The air just comes in and goes out; that's what makes contact. But the breath energy in the body, which brings the air in and lets it out, is something you want to explore, and it has lots of potentials.

The same with the way that you talk to yourself. You can talk to yourself in ways that destroy your desire to practice, but why would you want to do that? Your inner critic may be good at putting you down, but you have to ask the critic: What does the critic get out of this? Who's benefiting? There may be some parts of the mind that would rather not practice, and they put on the voice and the appearance of your inner critic. But you've got to take that role back—and make it serve the Dhamma.

So here you're talking to yourself about the breath. Talk to yourself about how well the mind is settling down with the breath. What can be done to fix the breath if they're not settling down together? What can be done to the mind? That's useful conversation, useful criticism.

And finally, feelings and perceptions. We have our old perceptions that we keep plastering onto things, but those can be changed. The Buddha gives us so many useful perceptions to apply. Think of all the different skilled craftspeople that the Buddha has you think about yourself as imitating: a good cook, a good archer, a good soldier, even a good elephant, a good horse, a well-trained horse. You think about the trained animals: They don't start out trained. It

takes a while for them to get used to being trained, but then they develop those abilities. They can do it. If animals can do it, why can't you?

Think about that nun, Dantikā, who spent the whole day meditating in the forest without getting good results. She comes out of the forest and sees an elephant with a trainer. The trainer says to the elephant, "Okay, give me your foot." The elephant lifts his foot in such a way that the elephant trainer can use the foot to get onto the elephant's neck. And the nun thinks, "Even animals can be trained. Why can't I?" She's encouraging herself.

So think in ways that urge, rouse, and encourage you, because you do have the potentials inside. There are potentials in the body in terms of the breath element, the water element, earth, fire. There are potentials in the mind. And this is why that perception of self, when it's skillful, can actually help you along the path.

We hear so much that the five aggregates lie beyond your control, but they're not *totally* beyond your control. If they were totally beyond your control, nobody would have the illusion that they were you or yours. As the Buddha points out, right concentration is made out of the five aggregates. You can control them to that extent, to give rise to concentration and stay there. It is possible. They have that potential. And it's not just the Buddha's aggregates, or Ajaan Mun's aggregates, or Ajaan Lee's aggregates. *Your* aggregates can be shaped as well—they have that potential, too.

So there are times when thinking about an independent self is a really useful idea, especially at times like this when the world is going crazy. You have to remind yourself that there are sources of goodness inside, and they're totally independent of things outside. We owe a debt to the Buddha for having showed us the way, and to that extent we're totally dependent on admirable friendship. But we can take those lessons and use them to find the resources within ourselves, so that our goodness can be independent of the situation around us. And if we want true happiness, that's what we *have* to do.

You can think about the heatwave, but don't make the heatwave an obstacle. You can think about the situation of the world at large, but don't make that an obstacle. You have pains in your body. Don't make them an obstacle. There's a way around all those obstacles and it can be found from within.

Those are some of the ways in which a sense of independent self is useful, so make the most of them.