

A Sense of Yourself

August 6, 2016

In the sutta we chanted just now, the Buddha teaches not-self to a group of monks who are on the verge of becoming arahants. But it's not a teaching just for people on the verge of awakening. When he taught his son meditation, even before he taught him breath meditation, he taught him the perception of not-self. Right at the very beginning when you sit down, even before you look at the breath, think about not-self.

This teaching is used in different ways at those different stages of the path. If you're on the verge of becoming an arahant, your main duty is to let go of everything, anything that you might identify with in any way at all. That's the last step. But at the beginning, you use it to disidentify with things that are not useful to identify with as you're trying to settle down in concentration. And we have a lot of them, even before we let go of everything. There are a lot of things we should let go strategically. There are other things you want to hold on to strategically. After all, the path is both letting go and developing. The developing is what we have to hold on to. And it's good to notice what that perception of not-self is, so that you can use it properly in both stages.

The Buddha's not saying that there is no self. He's simply saying that when you identify as, "This is me. This is my self. This is what I am" anything that's going to cause suffering, it's not really worth it. That's the conclusion he has the monks draw. Not that there is no self, but simply that if things are inconstant and stressful, why lay claim to them? Usually, we lay claim to them because we don't have anything better, at least we don't think we have anything better. But at that point, at the end of the path, there's nothing that would require you to hold on. Still, to get to that point, there are other things we do have to develop, that we do have to hold on to.

Notice that: It's not only there are things that you should not identify as self but not identify as, "This is me." or "This is what I am." Often you hear people say that there's a difference. "The Buddha taught there is no self, because nothing is permanent," they say, but then they go to answer the question: "But what are you?" The traditional answer, which a lot of the commentators came up with, was that you're just the five aggregates—which is precisely what the Buddha is saying are *not* you.

This gets back to that passage where the Buddha notes that if you try to answer the question, "What am I?" you get entangled in a thicket of views. It's either, "I

have a self” or “I don’t have a self.” However you express it, it’s not a technical point of language, where everything depends on how you define “self.” It’s just the simple fact of clinging, clinging to things that cause suffering. Whatever you cling to—permanent or not—is going to cause suffering. So even the question, “What are you?” or “What is the Buddha’s idea of what a person is?” gets put aside, because any answer to those questions would lead to clinging.

But at the same time, though, he does say that you need a sense of self to get started on the practice, a healthy sense of self. He talks about the self as a healthy form of conceit, in which you think about how other people can follow the path. They’re human beings, you’re a human being. They can do it, why can’t you? That kind of conceit is something you actually *need* on the path to keep you going.

There’s also the point where the Buddha recommends the self as a governing principle, where you tell yourself, “I started this practice because I wanted to put an end to suffering. And if I abandoned the practice, I’ll be going to go back to where I was before or maybe even worse”—the implication being, do you really love yourself? If you loved yourself, you wouldn’t give up on the path.

Even when the Buddha talks about the reason for why you would apply not-self to something that you’ve been holding on to, it’s that it’s for your long-term welfare and happiness. The “your” in there implies that that sense of self is part of your motivation. So don’t be too quick to let go of things that are actually useful.

When the Buddha does talk about having a sense of yourself, it’s not measured in terms of your race, your gender, your body, or a lot of the things that we tend to identify ourselves with. It’s more taking stock of where you are on the path, what your strengths and weaknesses are.

There are six qualities in all that he talks about for developing a proper sense of yourself. One is conviction; the others are virtue, learning, generosity, discernment, and quick-wittedness. These are all skills you can develop. You want to have a sense of where you are, where your strengths are, where your weaknesses are in these areas, so that you can use your strengths to make up for your weaknesses.

So: How’s your conviction? Are you really convinced that you *can* follow this path? Are you really convinced that the Buddha knew what he was talking about? We’re all going to have doubts. As the Buddha said, you don’t get past doubt until stream-entry, at the point where your conviction gets confirmed.

In the meantime, though, you learn how to encourage yourself. After all, the teaching is a very reasonable teaching. The path is a reasonable path. And it’s a path that asks only good things of you. There’s nothing that you have to do that’s going to be underhanded or low or something you’d be ashamed of afterwards. It’s

all noble. So learn how to strengthen your conviction if you find that it's weak.

Look at your virtue. How are you in the way you act and speak? What are the aspects of speech that you need to work on? This is directly related to the meditation, because the way you talk to others is the way you talk to your mind, the way you talk to your own mind is the way you talk to others. The influence goes back and forth. For a lot of us, there's very little filter on our speech. Things that come into the mind go out the mouth right away. You've got to work on that filter.

There's a passage where the Buddha says, "We're born with an ax in our mouths, the tongue." We can use it to harm other people and we can use it to harm ourselves if we're not careful. At the same time, however, an ax, when you learn how to use it properly, is very useful. So have some respect for all the effort that went into becoming a human being and acquiring a human mouth. Learn to use your mouth well.

Be careful with your speech, because that translates into directed thought and evaluation. Even before you're going to speak, you have to direct your thoughts to things and evaluate them. That's when you come up with something to say out loud. All too often, though, we don't put too much energy into evaluating things properly. Whatever pops into our minds, whatever comment goes running through the mind, that's the extent of our evaluation and it comes right out. If you're more careful about how you evaluate things—what should be said, what shouldn't be said, how to say things—then when the time comes to sit down and meditate, you'll have that skill inside. You can talk to yourself in ways that actually improve your meditation, that direct you in useful directions, to useful topics, useful issues. You learn how to evaluate what's going on in your mind and in your body with some finesse.

Ajaan Lee's analogy is that it's like sifting flour. If you have a very loose weave in the sifter, you get very coarse flour. If you have a fine weave, you get fine flour. The price of the flour goes up, and the uses you can have for it get better and better. So have a fine weave in your filter, both when you speak to other people and when you speak to yourself about the breath, speak to yourself about the body and the mind in the present moment. Bring some refinement to your analysis and you'll find that by paying attention to this, you get better and better results.

Learning: Learning here doesn't apply to your learning in school, it applies to your learning in the Dhamma. The Buddha didn't say that he had sole rights on what counts and doesn't count as Dhamma. There are things we've learned from our parents, things we've learned from people around us that really are useful in training the mind. But it's good to check them against what the Buddha had to

say, to see how they fit in with his principles. You read the Dhamma and think about it so that you have a fund of wisdom to direct you.

You often hear the forest ajaans saying to put your studies aside and just focus on what you're doing. Well, what you're doing is going to be guided by what you learned in the past. Sometimes, when an issue comes up in the meditation, you'll be able to remember, "Oh, there's this passage where the Buddha said *this*, or another one where he said *that*, or the ajaans said *this*." That, too, will help you in your meditation. So provide yourself with a good fund.

Generosity: As Luang Pu Dune once said, "The path is one thing clear through." It starts with generosity and ends with generosity. In other words, you're giving up things, but you're giving up things in a way that's actually helpful to yourself and the people around you. You don't just throw things away. You think about, "What do I have that I don't need but other people could use well?" You think about their needs. That opens your mind and makes it broader, so that it's not just "me, me, me, me, me" and the drama of "me" all the time. It's you as a citizen of the world, you as a helpmate for the people around you.

And again, when you have this habit of being generous—and this is not only with things but also with your time, your forgiveness, with your energy, sharing your knowledge in a way that's actually helpful to other people—you bring a better mind to the meditation. You bring the attitude, "What can I *give* to the meditation?" You're going to have to give some energy, you're going to have to give some time, you're going to have to give a lot of attention to what you're doing if you want to get results.

Then there's discernment. This is directly related to the practice of concentration, to get the mind to settle down so that it's not wandering around as it always likes. You've got to figure out what you can do to interest it in the present moment, what you can do to cut away its interest in things outside, all those ongoing conversations you've had with other people. How can you pull out, at least for the time of the meditation? Ask yourself: What are the hooks? Look for those hooks. And to see the hooks, one of the best things is to just sit down and do the meditation and see what pulls you out. Without the concentration, you can't see these things. You can read about them and have some general ideas, but the general ideas are not going to pry you loose of your particular defilements. It's when you actually see a defilement in action that you can say, "Oh, this is what my mind is doing to me. And I can see myself suffering."

This is where quick-wittedness comes in to help the discernment. What else could you do? Not everything is written down in the books. Not everything is taught to you in Dhamma talks. You've got to figure out how to take the basic

principles and use them, to apply them to yourself. Sometimes that requires cooking up new strategies.

So this is where it's good to have a sense of yourself, where your weak points are. When you sit down to meditate, and things are not going well, just take stock. Is your conviction strong enough? Is your virtue, your learning, your generosity, your discernment, your quick-wittedness? Which of these factors requires working on? Because all this comes into that duty to develop, before you let go.

This is where having a sense of yourself is very important. Notice you're not defining who-you-are. You're just looking at, "What are the talents, what are the skills I have at hand, so that I can actually master this path? And what are the things that are getting in the way?" Those are the things that you apply the perception of not-self to. And it's easier to apply that perception and have it work when you have other things that you *can* identify with that are actually skillful.

You can't create a skillful sense of self if there are no skills to back it up. It's just an empty concept, and you start thinking that you're lying to yourself. But if you actually have some skills—you find that you can focus on the breath and you're better at it today than you were yesterday, or you find it easier to hold your tongue when you might have said something that was hurtful or harmful—it's all to the good. You can see, "I'm making progress." And you can encourage yourself. You've got a new self, a new "me." In the beginning it's just one more "me" in a large stable of me's. But as you strengthen it, it can actually start evicting the ones that are really harmful.

Then when the "me" as the meditator has done all its work, that's when you apply not-self to everything, including the meditating "me." But in the meantime, strengthen it. Have a good strong sense of what skills it has and what new skills it needs to develop in order to get the job done. That's how you use the teaching of not-self in a skillful way.

As the Buddha pointed out, there are a lot of things you have to hold on to in his teachings. But some of the teachings are like snakes. You have to grab them right in order to get the most use of them. If you grab them wrong, they can actually do you harm. The teaching on not-self is one of those snakes. If you grab it right at the tail with the idea that there is no self, you can do an awful lot of harm to yourself. If there is no self, then does anything matter? If there's nobody there, then who's getting harmed? Who's suffering? Who's doing the path? That kind of thinking can just short-circuit everything.

But if you hold the snake right next to the neck with a forked stick, then you can get the venom you want out of the snake and you can use it as an antidote. That's what it means to grasp the teachings properly and to actually use them

skillfully. In this case, you use the teaching on not-self to learn how to dis-identify with things that are actually causing you harm—things that you may have liked or that you hung onto because you didn't see anything better. But now you can use your new skills to develop a new sense of self. And it provides you with a fulcrum that you can use to pry your attachments away from those other things.

When the work is done, you can let everything go. It's like finishing any job. You've worked on a piece of furniture, but now that it's done you can put down your hammer and saws. You've finished the dish that you were making, so you can put down the pan, the spoons, and the other utensils—and enjoy the results of the work you've done.