

Wisdom Week 3: The Wisdom of Not Selfing

One of the more challenging wisdom teachings of the Buddha is “not-self”, that nothing is to be clung to as I, me or mine. This week we explore how to begin to work with this teaching and its relationship to freedom from suffering.

Excerpted & compressed from the first chapter of *Selves and Not-Self* by Thanissaro Bhikkhu:

Usually when we hear the teaching on not-self, we think that it's an answer to questions like these: "Do I have a self? What am I? Do I exist? Do I not exist?" However, **the Buddha listed all of these as unskillful questions**. Once, when he was asked point-blank, "Is there a self? Is there no self?" he refused to answer. He said that these questions would get in the way of finding true happiness. [...] To understand it, we have to find out which questions it *was* meant to answer.

Discernment begins with this basic question about which actions are really skillful: "What, when I do it, will lead to long-term welfare and happiness?" The Buddha's teaching on not-self — and his teaching on self — are, in part, answers to this question. To fit into this question, **perceptions of self and perceptions of not-self are best viewed as [...] actions: actions of identification and dis-identification**. In the terms of the texts, the perception of self is called an action of "I-making" and "my-making". Thus the question becomes: When is the perception of self a skillful action that leads to long-term welfare and happiness, when is the perception of not-self a skillful action that leads to long-term welfare and happiness?

It's as if you have a committee inside the mind, and the committee is rarely in order. That's because it's composed of selves you've collected from all your past strategies for trying to gain happiness, and these strategies often worked at cross-purposes. [...]

If you watch your sense of self during the day, you'll see that it continually changes its shape, like an amoeba.

"I seem to be a verb." --Buckminster Fuller

From Chris:

Buddhist practice supports and strengthens the qualities that Western psychology associates with a healthy self: having integrity, being embodied, centered, grounded, flexible, honest, aware, open to the full range of our inner experience and feelings, confident, acting from an inner sense of morality, at ease with other beings, *here*. As these wholesome qualities become strong enough to be a reliable

part of our natural functioning, we can relax our constant grasping at concepts, images, descriptions and worries about ourselves. We no longer need to define ourselves in those fragmenting ways, in comparison with others, or based on what others think of us. Embodied awareness gives us a much more stable sense of being "at home", at ease in the core of our being. And that permits an "unentangled participation" in the world.

We see that clinging to, fixating on, repeatedly thinking about, dwelling on experience as "I, me, mine" actually increases our vulnerability to suffering. When your team loses, when someone insults your opinions or your flag, when your hair thins or goes gray, if you should lose a job, a relationship or a body part, the more identified you were with these perceived "things" as being essentially (not just conventionally) I, me or mine, the more you will suffer.

Much of our identity consists of patterns of bodily constrictions, emotional triggers and beliefs ingrained early in life. The more we can hold our ideas and senses of ourselves with lightness, compassion and curiosity, in a way less personally, the easier it is to allow these patterns to shift and change in the direction of more freedom. For example, it's much easier to allow sadness to come and go if we're not holding on to the idea that "I'm a sad person".

Many of our mental habits of worrying, wanting, disliking etc. may never go away entirely. But if we can see them as just old self-protective patterns somehow still encoded in our nervous system, not me, not mine, not who I am, then they can just arise now and then, do their little dance, but not dictate our actions or give rise to so much guilt, shame and frustration.

Becoming freer of the need to define ourselves in categorical terms also implies being freer of the need to project definitions on others. This can lead to feeling less judgmental, angry, blaming, fearful and isolated.

As we mature in this way, we begin to see people and events more clearly without the constant overlay of memories, anxieties, expectations and associations that spring from that deep habit of mind that needs to spin everything into the story of "me". We also can explore the expansive perceptions of deep states of concentration and experience the boundless qualities of loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity.

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Watching the moon  
at dawn,  
solitary, mid-sky,  
I knew myself completely,  
no part left out.

— Izumi Shikibu (Japanese woman poet, ~970-1030)  
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From David:

Our body is a collection of systems, a skeletal system, circulatory system, nervous system, organs, all contained within a sack of skin. Our systems are in a state of constant change, breathing, circulating blood, digesting, sensing heat and cold. We are mostly empty space. 99.999% empty space, between atoms.

The body is in mostly beyond conscious direct control. It has to go to the bathroom, gets hungry, thirsty, get restless, needs to move out of any position it is in in a short time, it gets sick, old and dies. We do not and would not choose these conditions.

We often misperceive the surface of the body to be me or mine, and we try to make it as attractive to others as possible. We may paint the skin, paint the nails, beautify our hair, go on diets and exercise the body so it will be attractive. We may look in the mirror and see this surface and hope for the best, confident that "that is me." Yet if a piece of painted skin, a nail, a lock of curled hair, would be seen on the ground, it would probably be more clear "that is not me".

Our minds and emotions are mostly conditioned by human nature and our past experience. Below our consciousness, it is estimated the mind thinks 60-80,000 thoughts a day, an average of 2500-3300 thoughts per hour, and sometimes forming elaborate stories that we think are true. Someone makes a comment or even looks at us and our emotions react in ways we would not wish for ourselves. Yet we claim these thoughts and emotions as me and mine, and often feel ashamed or frustrated that they arise, not seeing them as the result of past conditioning of our human faculties. In meditation, we can learn to not feed our reactivity and to allow the mind to quiet down. When we can directly sense the constantly changing stream of our experience, then we have some intuition about what this life is as it is without always layering the perception of a self onto it.

We call flowing water a river, but it is really water, flowing, hitting up against rocks, spraying up and out, calming and widening when the shoreline broadens, rushing fast when the shoreline narrows, streaming water taking different shapes and forms from moment to moment. We overlay this process of flowing water with an identity. We call it a river. When we look closely, we see our lives are streaming experience, always changing, never the same, without any permanent identity, all conditions temporary conditions and not satisfying. Yet we call it Sue, or John, or Sarah.

We need to be present to see that we are hanging on to what is deceptive. The mind needs to become strong and enduring. If we stay in touch with what is arising and going by, there is less room for the mind to obsess and proliferate and become entangled. There is no need to keep conceiving of a self who is doing the hearing, seeing, feeling, knowing; awareness is simply happening. Mental behavior will reassert itself soon enough, but eventually even the thought or sense of "myself" can be simply noticed with awareness like any other thought or sensation. Then we can examine whether that thought leads to more suffering or more freedom.

Practice: In meditation, when you become aware your mind has wandered off in thought, notice if the thought(s) involved "I-,making" or "my-making". If yes, you can make a mental note, 'selfing'. If your thoughts were not self-referential, make a mental note, 'thinking'. You might also notice if the self-referential thoughts tend to be more "sticky" or tinged with some attitude or emotion. In either case, they were just thoughts or sensations that you are now aware of. Continue with your awareness practice.

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"To study the Buddha Way is to study the self; to study the self is to forget the self; to forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things."

--Zen Master Dogen (1200-1253)

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Just Enough

Soil for legs
Axe for hands
Flower for eyes
Bird for ears
Mushroom for nose
Smile for mouth
Songs for lungs
Sweat for skin
Wind for mind

--Nanao Sakaki (1923-2008)

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Reflections: How have you experienced suffering related to strong identification with possessions, appearance, beliefs, jobs, politics, capabilities, roles etc.? Maybe think of a time when one of these things changed or was lost. Would dwelling on the "me-ness" or "mine-ness" of it make it easier or harder to bear?

What kind of "I am" statements do you habitually say to yourself (eg "I'm so stupid", "I'm always right", "I'll be ok")? Which ones might be skillful and which not?

Is the practice strengthening your confidence, trust and interest in getting to know yourself more completely?

What's the difference between feeling "self-conscious" vs. feeling "self-confident"? How much are you actually thinking about yourself in each case?