

Oneself (5 of 5) Forgetting Oneself

December 17, 2021

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

awakened, dual, Dogen, self-reference, narcissism, self-consciousness, self-preoccupation, self-concern, me myself and mine, attachment, stress, clinging, contraction, baggage, resistance, ambition, vacation, sacred pause, retrospective, anticipatory, present, respect

Gil Fronsdal

We've come to the end of this week's theme: oneself. I'd like to tell you a famous quote by a Japanese Zen master named Dogen. I want to emphasize two sentences that describe the dual nature of Buddhist practice. He says: "To study Buddhism is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self." Then he continues to say something like, "To forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things."

The idea is that one can study oneself and, in the process, forget oneself. One can practice with oneself, observe, and be present for oneself. At the same time, the process is one of forgetting ourselves. The dual nature of this might sound paradoxical or contradictory. But as I've been saying, there are a number of things that humans do that have a dual nature. One example is hospitality, where we act energetically and fully engage in the process of being a host, while simultaneously putting some of our desires aside so we can be a good host and care for someone else.

That same dual movement is present with respect, generosity, and perhaps, healthy love. When we love someone, if we want to express it and act on it in healthy, appropriate ways, there is also a kind of letting go of self in the process. Love is not just about our own needs, desires, pleasures, and feelings. It is also about the other person and caring for that person, so one puts oneself aside a little bit. There is a dual nature of engaging in the practice by studying ourselves and, in the process, forgetting ourselves. I think that is a beautiful expression of the movement of practice.

There are a number of ways that this can work. First I want to say that sometimes mindfulness practice has a kind of self-reference – we are paying attention to our breathing, or paying attention to our body sensations, or our thoughts. In meditation, we often close our eyes, so we're just with our own experience. It is very easy for that to be confused with self-consciousness – in extreme situations, even with narcissism, where there is an excessive preoccupation with oneself. Here, every little detail of ourselves seems so impactful, meaningful, and important. Every detail always says something about ourselves. We are always defining ourselves, judging ourselves, or proving ourselves; we need to be someone; we are always comparing ourselves to others.

So mindfulness practice can be a little bit dangerous if we bring a lot of self along. But we can turn the attention towards doing the practice of mindfulness moment by moment, maybe just being with the inner experience of the breathing, the body, the thoughts, settling on everything, and focusing on it. Doing this well means really giving ourselves over to it, so there is not much room for distractions.

If we sit down lackadaisically, a lot of distractions and concerns can come pouring in. But we can sit down to practice in a really relaxed but dedicated way, like: "This is important. This is clearly what I'm going to do." At the beginning of meditation, we can affirm, "Oh, this is what I'm doing now." We don't sit down casually and just let the mind continue to think. There is clarity in giving ourselves over to the meditation practice, to the present moment. Doing that takes some of the energy of attention away from our self-preoccupations, self-concerns, and self-ruminations.

It is amazing how much self-preoccupation a human being can have. I think many meditators will be surprised by how self-centered much of their thinking is – caught up in distracted thoughts where we are the central character in our thoughts in one way or another. We usually have some role. A lot of thoughts are in relation to ourselves.

But as we give ourselves over to mindfulness of breathing, less energy and attention is going into that self-concern. If we really give ourselves over to it well, there is a forgetting of self, and forgetting of everyday concerns. Just like what happens when we are reading a good book, involved in some delightful craft or art project, or playing music, when we are really absorbed in it, there's a forgetting of ourselves and our daily

concerns. Even though a lot of attention might be given to some aspects of ourselves in order to do the task well, the mental activity of self-preoccupation and self-concern is not there. In simply being able to give ourselves over to the practice, there is a forgetting of self, hopefully in a healthy way.

As practice deepens, we start seeing the deeper forms of attachment, stress, clinging, and contractions around self that are there. One of these can be seen just in the nature of how we're doing the practice. The practice itself brings along the baggage of self, associated with what it means to be the practitioner, the doer.

There is a simplification process that goes on in meditation practice where we start seeing as extra everything that's not needed. It is not only extra but also a little bit stressful compared to the deeper and deeper calm that's being experienced. So we begin to relax the grip of self, the preoccupation with self, which can be quite deep, even subconscious sometimes.

There is a deeper and deeper forgetting of self. That continues to deepen until, at some point, there's no inclination to define or orient ourselves by anything that happens in our experience, to appropriate any of it, or to be against it or for it. We just see it clearly in the freedom of the mind-heart that is untroubled by it, doesn't attribute a self to it – doesn't project ideas of me, myself, and mine onto experience.

We forget, put down, and relax all “me, myself, and mine” thinking and preoccupation. We forget all of it: the tightness, contraction, and fear, or the push, the resistance, or the ambition that comes with me, myself, and mine.

So there is a movement of studying the self in order to forget the self. Forgetting the self is like taking a delightful vacation. Everyone should have a vacation, and it's nice to have a vacation from oneself. This does not mean that you're not going to pick it up again, or that you're not going to take care of yourself. It doesn't mean you have to have a big debate about the philosophical nature of what the self is and isn't. It just means that you've given yourself a radical vacation, a break, a pause – a sacred pause where self-concern and self-preoccupation are no longer present.

This pause was discovered by settling into the present moment and practicing simple attention and concentration on “just this” – just this breath, just this in-breath, just this out-breath, just this sound, just this thought, with simplicity – getting more and more simple. Be with each moment as it arises, as it passes, as it occurs. Be in the flow of the present moment, the flow of what is occurring right now, with no retrospective thinking – not even two seconds before. “What was that that just happened? Oh, that was great” – even that can fall away.

With no anticipatory thinking, we are just absorbed in the flow of this moment, delighting in it, as if we're playing music, just absorbed in the music of the moment, or doing a craft, reading a book, or playing with a child. It is so delightful just to be there in the moment with a child, with no before and after, forgetting the self. Forgetting the self is one of the great pleasures of life. It is one of the great sources of wisdom and freedom as well.

We began this week with respecting the self. The whole movement that we're talking about here is a form of profound respect. We free ourselves from suffering by respecting ourselves enough not to contribute to our suffering, by a healthy forgetting of self-preoccupation. Thank you very much.