

## Healthy Identities

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So the last two days, especially yesterday, I've been teaching day-long retreats on the topic of identity. And so it's still fresh in my mind. And it's such a phenomenally important topic to address, to become wise about, because it follows us everywhere we go. In all situations, down through times, people have struggled and caused a lot of pain through the topic of their identity and their identity in relationship to other people.

And so to have some sense of some focus on it, I think, is this focus in one of the core human dimensions of being a human being. And so yesterday, my co-teacher for Vanessa Abel read this poem by David White. And so I'd like to start with reading it.

The sound of a bell still reverberating.  
or a blackbird calling from a corner of the field, asking you to wake into this life, or inviting you deeper into the one that waits.  
Either way takes courage.  
Either way wants you to be nothing but that self that is no self at all.  
wants you to walk to the place where you find you already know how to give every last thing away.  
The approach that is also the meeting itself, without any meeting at all.  
That radiance you have always carried with you as you walk both alone and completely accompanied in friendship by every corner of the world crying, alleluia.

One of the reasons I like this poem, for at least for now, is David White is going back and forth with different ways of understanding the self, different times of identity. At times identifying with everything, at times being nothing, there's nothing here to identify. And we find that the whole topic of identity is really a fluid phenomenon that comes and goes and disappears and arises and exists in so many different ways as we go through our day. And any attempt to solidify it and make it into this is how it is, is bound to dissolve at some point or crack and break. And so...

The other thing about this topic of identity is what we'll do today is talk a little bit about how the Buddha addressed this issue because the topic of identity was very big in his time as

well. And there was a lot of suffering around it that he wanted to address. And the way he addressed many things, including this topic, could be understood to be both spiritual, from the Buddhist point of view, which is pointing towards a possibility of some kind of profound deep liberation, but also he addressed it ethically. And over and over again, you see him pointing to living an ethical life as being at the heart of it all. And it comes together with liberation. Liberation itself is a source for an ethical life for people.

And so in these last with what's happening in our world. I kind of feel like I've been wanting, inspired to replicate what the Buddha did, and really to emphasize ethics, the Buddhist approach to ethics over and over again. It seems like this is really a key time to emphasize it as a response, as a way of responding to what's happening in the world, where there's so much of it which is unethical. Where there's so much cruelty and hostility, and so much creation of us versus them, which has to do with identity, in a way that is creating more suffering than it's alleviating. And so this topic of ethics is addressing the issue of how we cause harm.

Or how we stop causing harm. And that's the kind of simplest definition of ethics from a Buddhist point of view. Ethics is the study of how not to cause harm in any kind of way. So in the time of the Buddha, there was a class of people who called themselves Brahmins. And Brahmins considered themselves to be the superior class. And it wasn't just that they were off by themselves, happily thinking about themselves as being superior.

They also had all kinds of ideas. Everyone else was a lower class than them. And they had various classes that was distinguished in their time. And they had a hierarchy of it. And at least from the Buddhist texts, how the Buddhist describe it, sometimes when the Brahmins wanted to be critical of the Buddhists, Buddhist monastics, they put them at the very bottom of that hierarchy and had various not-so-kind things to say about them. So, but there was a topic of the issue in the Buddha's time, and it was an issue among the Brahmins themselves.

And there was a debate between two friends, who were Brahmins, and one of them made the claim that one becomes a Brahmin by birth. That it's a hereditary phenomenon. It's a biological thing. You are a Brahmin, and then you somehow pass on that Brahminhood to your children, to your children. In other words, superiority in society is a genetic thing, is a biological thing that gets transmitted through birth only, meaning anybody who's not born as a Brahmin does not deserve to be in that superior class. So that was one of the friends was claiming that.

And the other one was claiming, no. One is a Brahmin by action, by how one lives one's life,

what one does. And so if it's by action, then anyone can be a Brahman. Even the people who would be considered to be the lowest class, sometimes the Buddhist maybe. Even they could be Brahmans by what they did, how they acted. So they were having this debate and they couldn't come to an agreement.

So they went to the Buddha to ask him. And what is interesting to me, one of the interesting things about that, is the Buddha took sides. He was very clear and quite strong in taking the stand that one is a Brahman by action. He did not stay above the fray. He did not stay somehow detached from it all without taking sides and somehow taking some kind of other third position. In this kind of situation, he took a clear stand.

And given how the Buddha often teaches, I suspect it was very much because the approach that your Brahman by birth was causing a lot of harm. And he saw that harm that was being created in his society. And then he went on to say that a Brahman, the word Brahman, is simply a verbal designation. It's just a word. It's a word that's applied or defined in a certain way. There's nothing inherent and absolute about the word.

And it's just, you know, it's a convention. And the Buddha felt quite free with these conventions. So he simply redefined it. And so, and he defined, so he used the title Brahman, but he said, let me tell you who is really a Brahman, because he's going to talk about it from the point of view of action. Before he does that, he did go through when responding to these two Brahmans with their debate, saying in human life, among humans, there is no kind of biological... visible way to really distinguish people from each other human beings. We're all human beings together in common kinship.

And so that, you know, so he first made clear in his view that's what he believed. And then he went on to say, well, now I'll tell you who a Brahman is. So, so I'll, um, So, and this is, he does this in a series of, I don't know how many, 27 verses. And these verses are then kind of canonized or held up in high respect in Buddhism. They appear at different places because they're so important maybe in it. And one of the places in the *Dhammapada*. It's in the end of the *Dhammapada*. It's kind of, but here it is in this other text.

having given up violence towards living beings, both timid and strong, whoever kills nor causes others to kill, I call a Brahman.

Whoever speaks what is true, informative and not harsh, who harms no one, I call a Brahman.

Whoever endures abuse, assault, and imprisonment without animosity. and who has

forbearance as one strength, as one mighty army, I call a Brahman.

Whoever is wise of profound wisdom, understanding what is and is not the path, and who has attained the highest goal, I call a Brahmin.

So he goes on, there's a lot of verses like this, and he's ending, I call a Brahmin. So he's not shying away, from using a term that implies an identity, a Brahman. He's defining it in a way that fits a life of not causing any harm. Some of you might not agree with that strategy to use an identity to apply that to people, the way he chose to do, but that's what he did. But it's a definition of identity based on action, what people do.

And then he goes on to say, or in the same context, he says, that just like Brahman is a verbal designation, based on what a person does, we call someone who farms a farmer. We call someone who is involved in commerce, a merchant, someone who is a craft person, does craft a craft person. So people get identity based on the activity that they do, which has functional value. If your neighbor ordinarily works as fixing cars and is known as a car mechanic, and your car doesn't start one morning, and you need to get someplace important, you know, it might be useful to remember, oh, there's this car mechanic next door. And that's a useful identity at that time. You could not have that word, car mechanic, because you think it's kind of oppresses people, to be narrowed down to such a thing.

You could just kind of do say, more complicated to yourself, there's a person next door who's able to fix cars. But in shorthand, you do everyone a favor sometimes to have a single word for what's going on. But it's also understood to be contextual. It's a verbal designation that has a functional role, that is not necessarily who the person is. So that was the Buddha's preferred way of seeing identity. If you behave a certain way, live a certain way, then that's who you're called.

And if you change, you change, you become something else. So each of us probably has many identities in the course of a day. Some of them are applied to you by others, and some of them are ones you happy to have for yourself. If you're driving on the freeway and maybe you drive a little funny on the freeway, then someone comes home and says to their friends, There was this driver on the freeway he drove funny. So you were a driver for that purpose. That was your identity that you applied to you at that time.

If you were buying food in the supermarket with very ethically, very careful choosing exactly what to do for the best possible thing, someone else might be watching you being so careful and slow, choosing what you're going to buy, they go home and say, there was a shopper at the store. You become a shopper. And if you're at home cooking, you're a cook. You might

not be thinking of yourself that way, but functionally, you're maybe behaving that way. It becomes more relevant if you're with your children, you're a parent. If you're with your parents, you're kind of a child. or son or a daughter or something sibling.

And so identity, how we're seen, how we're related to, changes many times through the day. And sometimes they have to do with roles we play. Where we earn our living, we have one role and one identity. And then you might leave there and be a coach for the high school volleyball team. And now you're, all the kids in high school think of you as a coach. And that's your identity there, which is useful in that context.

When I'm here with you, I'll drawing my best to give a talk, I'm a teacher, Dharma teacher. Now, if I keep that identity with me, like this is really who I am. Boy, is this, and people need to know that, and I go home, This is not good. When I first started to teach a lot, you know, many, many years ago, a couple of times my wife would look at me and said to me, Gil, you're using that voice again. So, you know, I couldn't be a teacher at home. So we pick up and we put down.

And it's fluid now it goes. Or we don't. And some of the identities we have, we need to have somehow or stay close to them because of how society identifies us, it sees us a certain way, and treats us through the lens of that identity. And sometimes society causes a lot of harm to people. There are people right now who, for how they live their lives and conduct themselves and... the current administration has extreme hostility towards certain category of people. And so those people who are living their lives now are afraid because they're being identified and searched out by people who don't like them.

And so those people who are living their lives now are afraid because they're being identified and searched out by people who don't like them. And so those people now have to kind of live in the wake of that, live under that. So it's kind of... they might have an identity of their own, but now they're forced to kind of relate to it in a much more solid way and carried with them just to be safe, to think who they are. So harm is being caused when we have identity and create us versus them. And so action.

So the... So that's kind of nice that our actions define us or identify us, but it feels inadequate because it can feel like who we are as a person is much more than a role, much more than an activity. And it feels almost like we're reduced too much. And certainly we're something else, we're something more, something greater, something more intimate and deeper. And there is a word that I believe the Buddha used for this kind of sense of self, sense of identity. And I translate it as personhood. He called it *attabhāva*. And personhood. And personhood

is made up of the sum total of all the things that come together to give us a sense of feel for who we are.

And in some ways, it's a sum total of all the actions. Not just what we do with our bodies, you know, the work we do or the activities we engaged in, but also the feelings we have, the emotions we have, the attitudes we have, the mental activities, the mental actions that we do. And there was an idea in the time of the Buddha, in the Buddha's teachings, that people could also be recognized by what they were attached to in their mind. And that something about being attached clinging to something, and some activity of the mind, some belief, some attitude, clinging to some identity, the clinging created something that had a certain... Which is an action... created something that you could say that person is clinging. It's a clinger.

And not everyone could see that, but in the mythology of Buddhism, there was a mythological figure called Māra. And Māra is kind of like a demi-god or a demi-Satan or some hybrid of those two. We don't quite know what this person is. But the primary activity that Māra wants to do a stop in the world is to stop people from getting enlightened. Because Māra really likes it when people cling. And so the last thing Māra wants is anyone to stop clinging.

In this mythology, Māra identifies people by the clinging in their minds. And Māra gets confused when Māra sees a liberated person because there's no clinging. And you can't see the person in the sense. So this points to another important topic around identity. It's one thing to have an identity. It's another thing to identify with the identity.

There's one thing to have an identity. It's another thing is how we relate to that identity, how we hold it, how we are with it. And so if we have some sense of personhood... It's one thing to have it. It's another thing, how we relate to it, how we hold it, how we participate in it. And for the Buddha, personhood is something we contribute to, and we help co-create.

It's not something that we're passive recipients of just because we were born some way. And what the Buddha wanted us not to not have any identity, Some Buddhists think that if you're Buddhist, you're not supposed to have an identity. And harm is caused in Buddhist communities. When people have said, oh, you know, there's no self, and therefore you're living in your world from the perspective of your identity should be overcome. Should be let go of. And you have a problem here.

And I think this is unfortunate that this not self-teaching has been interpreted that way. Right. The way the Buddha talked about identity and talked about, especially personhood, he said there's a healthy way of doing this and an unhealthy way of doing it. That's my language. His

language was more, there's a wholesome way of doing it than an unwholesome way. In other words, there's not a categorical rejection of identity.

There's not a categorical rejection of some inner sense of a person there, my personhood, but rather... Are we in the activity of personing, the activity of selfing, the activity of identifying, is it done in a way that creates health for us, that creates wholesomeness in us, creates goodness in it, is being done in a way that is ethical? And there's one word that covers all these things I've been saying, health, wholesomeness, ethics, and that's the word *kusala*. Some of you might know it. That is probably the closest Buddhist word to our English word ethics. But it also means wholesome, which kind of means healthy, but I love it that it means belonging to the whole.

The issue around identity sometimes is the way in which we select out of the whole a piece of who we are that we hang on to or limit the perspective on. And what Buddhist liberation is talking about is dropping the limiting ideas of identity in certain situations so that we can have experience of the whole. So that that sense of the whole and that freedom of non-clinging then becomes a reference point for understanding how we participate in identities and personhood. Where we hold it as functional, useful designations that have a role, but we hold them lightly. We don't get attached to them. We don't cling to them.

And so this idea of relating to our personhood, relating to even the activities of our mind, and assessing, evaluating them, is what I'm doing healthy for me? Is it wholesome? And as it contribute to wholesome cultivation, growth in the wholesomeness, do I grow to become a better person? Do I grow with my mind, my heart is kinder? More generous, more loving, more caring for others. Is it freer? Isn't it more peaceful? Is it more at ease? Or not? Which direction are we going?

And sometimes when people attach to identity to their own or sometimes in their projection of that onto others, it's clearly causing harm to the person who does it. Some people hold on to identity for dear life in a way that actually harms them. Some people acquire or take on identities that are identities of hostility and hate. Identities of us versus them. And that creates alienation that is bad for the person who has it. And so the question is, how do we hold identities? It was what the Buddha was most interested in.

And is it inethical or unethical? Is it wholesome or not wholesome? Is it healthy or unhealthy? Where all three of those categories are talking about the same thing. And so this is where Buddhist practice comes into play, especially a meditation practice, because as we sit and meditate, we become more and more sensitive to what is healthy and what is unhealthy. What is

wholesome, what is unwholesome.

What is, in a sense, ethical and not ethical. What is harmful? What is not harmful? What brings stress and what doesn't bring stress? And the clearer the mindfulness becomes, the more stable and subtle we are in the moment, the more we see this movement, sometimes very subtle, sometimes not so subtle, of the impact, the effect, the influence the mind has on itself, or the mind has on the heart. And in some ways, we're shaping our personhood by the very nature of what we're choosing to be involved in.

And in ordinary life, we don't track ourselves so much. We don't even track ourselves not only what the mind is doing to make a choice, but we're not tracking the influence it has on us. But not a few people are ruminating and thinking over and over again bad thoughts about themselves, critical thoughts about themselves. Seeing it as being, this is what's the true nature of the universe, that I'm a bad person. It's making them sick, making them depressed. It has a tremendously negative influence on them.

But when we sit in meditation and get quiet enough, we can start seeing these thoughts operating. And if we're lucky enough, we come to a place where we see we have a choice to either continue with those thoughts or put them down. And we can even feel at some points that having no thoughts as harmful as they might be, self-critical thoughts, just having them is tiring. And it's just nice to take a rest. And that applies to positive identities as well. You might have done a lot of kind things in your life.

And it might be reasonable for you to think of yourself as a kind person. You're sitting peacefully in meditation, and you start remembering, yeah, I'm a really kind person. Yeah, I'm a kind person. Yeah, I'm a kind person. Yeah, I'm a pretty good kind person. I've been kind person in a long time. Yeah, I'm a kind person. Isn't it great that I'm a kind person? And after a while, it's going to occur to you, hopefully sooner rather than later, but unfortunately, many times it's later, because these kinds of things are almost subconscious. Right. This is tiring.

You know, I got the message the first time. I have better things to do than repeating this kind of thought. And so even good identities, at some point, it's just good to put them down. You know, it's nice. And then there's also deeper senses of personhood, deeper senses of identity that we have, you know, not involved individual thoughts, but kind of a gestalt of it all. The whole... And it's fascinating to watch as that shifts and changes too.

And one of the places I think some of you maybe have had this experience of it changing is

on meditation retreats, those of you have been on them. And maybe those of you haven't, maybe there's situations where you've experienced yourself in a totally new way that you've never had before. So on meditation retreats, people in the course of a longer retreat, will get softer, kinder, less attached, less preoccupied with thoughts, less remination, and cut up in the usual things. And there's a softening of the personality. There's a, there's a feeling of greater kindness and care and preciousness and intimacy with life that happens. That people feel they have a whole different persona, a whole different personality, whole different sense of self.

That feels so much healthier than how they live their life usually, where there's a lot of stress. And some people will say, this is it. I'm home. This is what home is in myself. This is how I want to live my life. And then they leave the retreat, and their personality returns before they leave the driveway of the retreat center.

You know, the personality starts coming back. And after a while, we know it's back, but we've seen it coming back. But... After a while, we just forget that we could be different because we're so lost in that world of this new person, the old persona come back. It's just how things are. Sometimes people have that shift of something, when their ordinary life stops in some way.

I've known people for whom had serious illness or injuries. And there was something about how much their life changed that they came to terms with, that the whole sense of how to be a person shifted, sometimes in a better way. And wow, I'm a different person than I was before. I was so caught up in my previous identity. I was so angry all the time. I was so ambitious all the time. And I'm a whole different person now. This is phenomenal.

Some people, when they become parents, their experience of who they are becomes radically different. And there's a powerful book for parenting called *Far From the Tree*. *Far from the Tree*. And it's children who are born who are very different than their parents. And what's interesting about this book, the author studies different kinds of different people who are born differently, like people who are blind or deaf or different conditions, all kinds of different conditions, prodigies, and then studies their parents. And his observation is that...

Parents of certain kinds of children tend to become better people, especially if the kids have great disabilities. Parents of other kinds of children tend to become not so good folks, more selfish or preoccupied. And that's apparently especially true when parents have prodigies, that that somehow does something to the conceit that is not so good. So, um, So we shape this all the time. It's shaped and changed, and we're actually more changeable than we real-

ize in all kinds of different ways. And you could wake up tomorrow and find yourself radically changed in unbelievable ways in terms of what you consider your identity.

Or it might be slow over a long time. And I had a new identity recently that I said out loud. Okay. I was teaching a retreat at our retreat center for people who are in the 20s and 30s. You might ask what business I have doing that, but I was invited to teach it. So I had a role.

And I look around the room, and I was clearly the oldest person there. When I started in Buddhism, I was like some of the youngest ones there. And so at some point during the retreat I described myself as a designated old person. I had a new identity for that retreat. And I thought it was kind of humorous. So the sense of self, and then when mind gets really quiet, there's a very interesting thing that happens.

There's something that gets simpler and simpler and simpler about identity or about this notion of self. And if you turn your attention to sense and feel where that sense of self is in us, when things are quiet enough and still enough, it might feel like it has a location. There might be a feeling of e-ness. That's all that, what is e-ness? Just that I am. It might be a very subtle feeling of a locus, a center someplace.

It might be a locus or center has a little bit of... pressure or a little nice feeling of tension or nice feeling of vibration or aliveness or something like that. And it can feel, oh, that's who I am. The core, the center of it all, you know, free of all these identities, free of everything, left alone. That's who I am. Now, you can sit there and spend time hang out with it, looking at it, recognizing it.

And at some point, what will happen, you'll feel... that it's a little bit tiring to do this focus on this place. It's a little tiring to keep looking at it and thinking about it, just like it's tiring to keep thinking the same identity. And so in meditation at some point, because it's tiring to have that focus, there's a quieting, relaxing, letting go on that activity. And lo and behold, that sense of emnus, that maybe a sense of locus, the center falls away. Right? It seems that it's the looking at the self is the activity that creates that little sense of activity and energy and vibration or pressure.

It's the seeking and searching for the self in the end that creates just a thing that feels like that is who I am. But there's no looking for it, no searching for it. Where does it go? It becomes an irrelevant question because what's left is very peaceful. Very spacious, very free. It's possible to have a tremendous feeling of ease and peace without any reference to any kind of self, any kind of creation of self, identification of self, a sense of personhood.

Not to negate any of that, but it's just like in context from time to time, it's really good to take a vacation from it all. It's really good to take a break from all this selfing that we live in in our society where selfing goes on all the time. It's really healthy to take that break. Because then we can see much more clearly how selfing is constructed, how selfing is something we participate in, and how it comes together and comes and goes and morphs and changes. And we can hold it lightly. Right. Why? For what purpose? So we can live with it in an ethical way.

So we can live with it with causing less harm in the world, but actually doing the opposite. Live with identity, live with the personhood, live with how we see other people in ways that support them, that is beneficial, that sees them kindly, to seize them generously, that sees them with care, sees ourselves with care. And maybe one of the identities will develop over time is we're a person who cares. We're a care for this world. And that can't be too bad. So I'll read this David White poem again, and then we'll stop.

So maybe you'll, this poem will have a little bit more meaning now.

The sound of a bell still reverberating.  
or a blackbird calling from a corner of the field.  
Asking you to wake into this life, or inviting you deeper into the one that waits.  
Either way takes courage.  
Either way wants you to be nothing, but that self that is no self at all.  
Want you to walk to the place where you find you already know how to give every last thing away.  
The approach that is also the meeting itself without any meeting at all.  
That radiance you have always carried with you as you walk both alone and completely accompanied in friendship by every corner of the world.  
Alleluia.

So I don't know if we want to say alaulia that often these days. Okay. But let's at least be friends. Let's go into the world, ready to be friends with everyone. And may that change the world. If we want to change the world, let's be the change by being ethical ourselves.

And then as we go about trying to make the world a better place, let's find a way to do it that stays ethical, stays wholesome. And that way, we become better people in the process. May all beings be happy. Thank you.