

## Dharmette: Being Somebody & Nobody (2 of 5): Comparing Mind

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We've been exploring this week the activity of selfing, the mind's habit of creating a sense of me, mine, and who I am. One of the most common ways this happens is through comparing, what we call comparing mind. The mind compares almost automatically. We look at somebody: oh, you're more organized than me. She's more confident. He's more spiritual. I'm behind. I'm ahead. I'm wiser. I'm failing. I'm not enough. At least I'm not as bad as so-and-so.

But we don't only compare ourselves to other people. We compare ourselves to ideals, to who we think we should be, or sometimes to the past, especially maybe as we get older. I used to be stronger. My memory used to be better. I had such a beautiful retreat experience last time. Why can't I get back there? The mind compares this moment to another moment, and it suffers because this one doesn't measure up.

Ajahn Sumedho used to speak about what he called the inner tyrant. He's a wonderful monk who used to be the abbot of the monastery in England. He said there's nobody in the world who had ever been as critical or tyrannical toward himself as his own mind. No matter what he did, it wasn't enough. Even if people praised the Dharma talk, his inner tyrant would immediately say, I shouldn't have said that. I missed the point. I should have done better.

Many of us know some version of this voice. The voice that compares is not only to other people, but to an imagined ideal. Maybe it's the perfect meditator, the perfectly loving person who never, ever, ever loses their temper, never gets irritated or annoyed, the person who never gets reactive or confused or tired. Because no real human being can live up to an imagined ideal, the comparing mind can easily become a source of chronic contraction.

What's really particularly beautiful about Ajahn Sumedho's reflection is that he never said he defeated the voice or got rid of it. He said he stopped believing it. So those thoughts might arise, but he just stopped giving them a lot of value. He saw it as a pattern, a habit pattern of the mind, a conditioned habit, not the truth. We often hear in this practice, don't believe everything you think. When we do that, the practice begins to shift from the idea of how do we create a perfect self to how do I stop organizing my life around compulsive self-judgment.

Now, comparing itself is not a problem. Comparing can help. Is that taller or shorter? It helps us learn. A musician learns by listening to another musician. They don't have to add, I'll never be that good. A cook learns by tasting someone else's food.

Discernment notices differences. The Buddha himself was extraordinarily discerning. But he distinguished what leads to suffering and what leads to freedom, what brings contraction in the heart and what brings ease. So the issue is not comparing itself. The issue is what we add afterward. For instance, wisdom or discernment says, that person is more experienced than I am. Comparing mind might add, therefore I'm inadequate.

Or wisdom might say, I understand this more clearly. The comparing mind might say, so I'm superior. Discernment notices. The comparing mind contracts around the noticing. Discernment just notices. You can feel it in the body: a tightening, maybe a leaning forward. Or, if we're feeling inferior, a collapse, a pressure.

For some people, comparing becomes competitiveness. I need to win. I need to prove myself. I need to be the best. That can happen spiritually. Who's more mindful? Who's more awakened? Who has fewer desires? Who's less attached?

There's a story I like about a young *Theravāda* monk. *Theravāda* monks are renunciates. They give up nearly all personal possessions. They live with just a few robes and an alms bowl for their food, a big metal bowl. This monk said that when he ordained, part of him imagined that comparing mind would naturally disappear. But instead, he found himself spending an extraordinary amount of time polishing his bowl every day.

Why? Because he wanted his bowl to be the shiniest. Even after giving up almost everything, the mind still found a way to create identity. This is my bowl. My bowl is better. I'm the monk with a beautiful bowl. It's funny, and he found it funny years later as he recognized it as part of himself, but it's also quite profound.

The comparing mind doesn't simply disappear because our circumstances become simpler. It can attach itself to almost anything: possessions, spirituality, humility, simplicity, even renunciation itself. The selfing mind is incredibly adaptive. If I can't be the richest, I'll become

the most spiritual. If I can't be the most successful, I'll be the most humble. It's very sneaky and very tricky, the way we create a self.

In Buddhism, we describe three forms of conceit. The word for conceit is *māna*. It actually means to measure. Usually when we hear the word conceit, we think only of arrogance. But the Buddha included three forms of conceit: I'm better than, I'm worse than, and even I'm equal to. All three—superiority, inferiority, and being equal—still revolve around me, around our concept of self.

What's interesting is that in the teachings there are ten fetters that you let go of in the process of awakening. They sort of release themselves a little bit in order. The first five do so earlier, and the last five do so later. Conceit is near the end of the list. It disappears only near the later stages in awakening. It's such a deep habit of mind, this me, this whole sense of me.

At first, when we practice, we begin to really pay attention to this aspect of our psyches. Comparing is obvious. We're trying to prove ourselves. We try to feel superior or feel inferior. Later it becomes subtler. We might be comparing today's meditation to yesterday's. It was so much more peaceful yesterday.

As I said before, we might compare this retreat to another retreat, this moment to an idealized moment. Even humility can become an identity. There's an old Jewish story about this that I like.

During Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the chief rabbi of the synagogue was standing outside, looking up at the heavens. He was beating his chest, tears streaming down his face. He was crying, I'm nothing, Lord, I'm nothing. The cantor, who sings for the assembly, was so deeply moved. He dropped to his knees behind him, crying, I'm nothing too. I'm absolutely nothing. A janitor sweeping nearby was so touched by their devotion that he set down his broom. He fell to his knees and cried, I'm nothing. I'm nothing. The rabbi leaned over to the cantor, elbowed him gently, and whispered, look who thinks he's nothing.

I love the story because it captures how incredibly sneaky selfing can be. Even humility can become a comparison, a way of creating self. Even the idea of being nobody can turn into another identity. The ego is remarkably creative.

We don't only create self through comparison with people, but we also do so through opinions. This restaurant is the best. I discovered it. This meditation is the best one. My political views are the right ones. The Buddha wasn't asking us to stop having opinions, but he pointed out how quickly these views, these opinions, become identity.

How quickly I prefer this turns into this is me, and it becomes something we need to defend, we need to prove. So the suffering doesn't come from the fact itself. It comes from the self that gets constructed around the experience. So maybe the question is, can discernment happen without tightening, without the tightening of identity? Can we appreciate someone's gifts without diminishing ourselves? Can we recognize our own strengths without elevating ourselves above others?

That's a very different way of being. Then comparison becomes informative rather than imprisoning us. A beautiful thing that we begin to notice is that the comparing mind begins to soften when we become deeply embodied, when the attention settles into direct experience of our senses, of hearing, breathing, feeling, walking. There are times when the whole project of measuring ourselves just relaxes. Then it's simply life happening. There's no need to be somebody, no need to establish rank or defend an identity, just this.

There's tremendous relief in that, not because the self is destroyed, but because it no longer needs to be constantly manufactured. So as we practice this week, you might notice, when does comparing arise? What does it feel like in the body? Can you distinguish simple discernment from selfing, the lightness of discernment, the openness of discernment, and the selfing that causes the world to shrink into me and mine? With mindfulness and kindness, this comparing mind gradually becomes less convincing, not by trying to become somebody, not by trying to become nobody, but by discovering there's nothing extra needed in this moment, just this.

So thank you. Tomorrow I'll continue exploring the theme. May all of you have a wonderful, peaceful day, setting aside any tightening of the self as it shows up.