

Being Somebody & Nobody (1 of 5): The Action of Selfing

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So thank you for sharing this wonderful sitting together. This week, I'd like to explore the interplay of self and not-self. And one way to understand the Buddhist practice is to understand Buddhist practice is not that we're trying to get rid of the self, but that we're learning to understand the activity of selfing. It's easy to think of the self as a thing, a solid entity, someone fixed inside here. But when we look carefully, we notice that the self that's maybe doing the taxes is very different than the self that's playing with the dog. The four-year-old who threw a tantrum because their toy was taken away is quite different than the self giving a Dharma talk right now.

The Buddha often steered people away from rigid views about whether there's a self or not a self, a permanent self. He called any of these ideas, any metaphysical positions about what a self is, what a soul is, a thicket of views, a bramble of views. Instead, he invited us into direct observation. What's happening right now? What's the mind doing? What leads to contraction, to suffering? What leads to freedom?

And one of the things that we begin to notice is that the mind is constantly organizing our experience around me, mine, for me, against me. So it can be very helpful to think of self not as a noun, but as a verb. Not self as a thing, but selfing as an activity, a process, a strategy, something the mind does. So, for instance, when we compare to others, we might notice that somebody's taller than we are. That's just a natural thing we notice. We're observant human beings.

And those of you who sit with Gildas in the mornings might know he's six foot two, and I'm five foot six. It's a noticeable difference when we're standing. But difference doesn't require me to be somebody. We just notice the difference. It doesn't require me to say, oh no, he's so much taller than me. It's so much better to be taller. He can reach top shelves. People who are taller have more authority.

All these ideas can create a self, a self that wants to be somebody. But in the moment, it's just, oh, he's taller, I'm shorter. So we self, we compare ourselves to others. Or maybe when we replay an argument or imagine what we should have said, we completely believe in the self that has to justify our argument. Or when praise arises, boy, that Dharma talk was great, do we inflate a little? Or criticism arrives, that was the worst Dharma talk I ever heard, and we contract.

And it becomes my opinion, my meditation, my success, my failure, my reputation. We have all these ways that we create these false senses of self. And that process is easy. It's helpful to call it selfing. It's something we do, something we actively do with our minds. And this process of selfing is not inherently bad. A functional self helps us keep our appointments.

If you're a parent, you're the one caring for the children. You're the one who might remember to brush your teeth, not somebody else's teeth, and respond when someone calls your name. The Buddha was not encouraging us to erase a conventional personality or healthy functioning. But he invited us to notice how easy it is for this useful self, this very useful, wonderful self, to become the clinging self, and how easily self-awareness becomes self-absorption. My pain, my discomfort, my poor concentration. Or how careful attention can quickly become painful self-consciousness. What do they think of me? Just like that.

Often suffering doesn't come from the experience itself as much as from the self that forms around it. A painful comment, it hurts. But then we add to it, how could they say that to me? Or a success becomes, oh, I need to keep being that person. And as you might have noticed in meditation, my practice is going well, oh, this is great, I'm really doing good. Why can't I meditate like other people?

It's so easy to turn paying attention into this sense of selfing. There's two parts. There's the experience and the interpretation of that experience, the way we relate to it, the way we make a self around it. There's a story. I know some of you have heard me tell this before, but it had an effect on me, so I'll share it.

Early in my practice, my husband and I had been discussing attachment all week. We'd listened to some talks, and I was also considering giving up coffee, but I hadn't decided yet. It was a big deal for me to give up coffee. I thought it might be better for my health at the time. And so the next morning, I was happily about to take my first sip of coffee. A beautiful morning, the sun was out, everything was quiet and crisp, and I was taking that sip.

And suddenly my husband grabbed the mug out of my hand and said, you can't have this. And instantly all three defilements appeared: wanting, aversion, delusion. Because at that

moment I really believed he meant it. I was angry. But then I saw the grin on his face, and it was this way of continuing our conversation about attachment. And it just struck me how quickly the mind went from enjoying the coffee to my coffee.

One moment, a simple, pleasant experience. The mind crystallized ownership around it. And once the self-form surrounds something, defensiveness, fear, protectiveness can follow very quickly. But then I was able to see that clinging so clearly. It just made me laugh. And of course humor is an important part of this path.

So much suffering comes from taking this constructed self so seriously. At the retreat center, we have a little picture of the Buddha with a quote by Suzuki Roshi. What we're doing here is so important, we better not take it too seriously. And just so you know, I'm enjoying a sip of my coffee, which I didn't give up.

Mindfulness allows us to begin to see selfing happen in real time. Not as an idea, the way we're talking about it, but as a direct experience. Because we can easily notice when we're defending ourselves, defending our idea, when we're comparing, rehearsing, wanting to become something, wanting to get rid of something, wanting to change something about us. The mind continually tends to organize experience around a central point called me. And when we see this clearly, something important begins to happen. We stop taking every self-state so personally.

So instead of I'm anxious, it can simply be, oh, this is anxiety. That small shift changes everything. I am anxious easily hardens into an identity, something we have to do something about. What's wrong with me? I shouldn't be this way. I'll always be like this. But anxiety is here leaves room for kindness, curiosity, compassion.

Oh, anxiety, it's uncomfortable, it's painful. And that alone changes from being anxious to being compassionate. Mindfulness does not need to judge what arises. It simply learns to discern what leads to suffering and what leads away from it. If you step on a splinter, the splinter isn't wrong for existing, but discernment says pull it out. There's no need for judgment. If our shoulders are tense, we simply notice tension is here, and perhaps encourage relaxation.

With judgment, it's I'm always tense. I should be better at this. Discernment is simple and practical. Judgment always carries a sense of hostility and identity. But it's really a challenging thing to begin to ease up on our sense of identity or sense of self this way. Ajahn Brahm tells a story about what happened with him as a young monk. He's the abbot of the monastery in Australia.

And so he was building a wall, just pretty young at the time. And after finishing it, he noticed he had two crooked bricks in the middle, just two. But every time he looked at that wall, he saw failure and embarrassment. And this went on for years. He would walk by the wall and try not to see it. But some years later, a visitor looked at the wall, and the visitor said, wow, what a beautiful wall.

And Ajahn Brahm said, but what about the two bad bricks right there? And the visitor said, yeah, but I can also see the 998 good bricks. And Ajahn Brahm realized that the mind had constructed an entire identity around two imperfect bricks. And so maybe this process is familiar to some of you. The mind selectively gathers evidence to reinforce our self-image. That's why kindness matters so much in practice, because any harshness toward ourselves strengthens selfing, whereas kindness and compassion soften it.

Mindfulness can reveal that selfing is not continuous. There are times, perhaps listening to music, sitting in nature, caring for someone else, or meditating, where the usual preoccupation with self might soften, might disappear. Experience can continue, but the layer of what does this mean about me just begins to relax, with no need to defend, no need to prove or compare. Just simple presence. And often those moments can feel deeply peaceful. Not because we destroyed the self, but because the burden of constantly constructing ourselves relaxes for a while.

So the practice isn't, how do I get rid of myself, but rather, can I notice selfing with kindness? Can I recognize when the mind contracts into me and mine? Can I use the functional self wisely without becoming trapped by it? Maybe the process of awakening is not the destruction of the sense of self, but freedom from being trapped inside the activity of selfing. We can still be human, caring, functioning, but without contracting around me and mine, with a little more freedom, more humor, more tenderness, and ease.

And so I'd like to end with a quote by *Dōgen*, the 13th-century Zen master:

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 enlightened by all things.

So thank you. And tomorrow I'll continue exploring this theme. May all of you have a wonderful day without clinging to yourselves too much. May we all be happy, peaceful, and free.