

Dharmette: Being Somebody and Nobody (3 of 5); The Skillful Self

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So one of the things that mindfulness begins to reveal is how many different versions of ourselves appear throughout the single day. You know, there's a self that maybe feels confident in the morning, and the self that's lying awake at 3 a.m., replaying a conversation. You know, or a self that feels very generous and is very giving, and the self that wants credit for being generous and giving. The self that wants to meditate every day, and the self that would rather snack, distract ourselves, have a different life.

One way that the self has been described is as if it's made up of many committee members. You know, depending on conditions, different members tend to dominate. You know, maybe the controller, the perfectionist is at play, the pleaser, the critical parent, the judge, the fearful one, the playful child, the bratty child, the angry one, the smart one. There's so many of these different selves that can show up. And one of the great gifts of practice is that we begin to see them not as fixed identities, but as habit patterns. Habit patterns are conditioned ways that the mind organizes itself.

And when we notice these patterns, we see that the self is not a fixed entity. The bratty child doesn't seem at all similar to the controller. You know, but something is being continuously created, continuously changing. And because of that, it can be shaped. You know, we call *neuroplasticity* that ability to shape, to recondition the mind, not shaping it perfectly, not permanently, but skillfully. We can cultivate a self that's more compassionate, less reactive, or less driven by conceit and fear, more capable of wisdom and more capable of love.

The healthy self, the wise self, is not the perfect self. It includes our contradictions or foibles or unfinished places. And this practice allows us to discover in a very real way that freedom never comes from creating this perfect identity, but from learning how to hold all of this just

a lot more lightly, and to cultivate the things that are helpful in our lives and to discourage the things that are harmful to us.

You know, in psychological systems, a common one these days is internal family systems. They speak about there being a wise self underneath all the various parts, kind of a compassionate presence that can hold all the different voices without completely identifying with any one of them. And mindfulness lets us discover something quite similar. You know, we may not call them by those exact names, but we notice, oh, fear arose instead of I am afraid. Judging arose instead of I am judging. Striving, comparing, hurt.

And as we see this process more clearly, we gradually stop assuming that any passing state is who we are, just the voices of the fearful committee member or the judging one. And as wisdom begins recognizing these passing states, we can begin to relate to them with kindness instead of hostility. Kindness instead of something to fix. Because even these difficult parts are usually trying in some confused way to help keep us feel safe, loved, or protected. The perfectionist wants safety. The controller wants certainty. The comparing mind wants reassurance.

And you know, many of us were raised with fairy tales like Cinderella. You know, "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the prettiest one of all?" And of course, there's only one winner. And we're conditioned into comparisons so early, into this idea that our worth depends on being smarter, prettier, more handsome, more successful, more spiritual, better than others, better at Monopoly than others. And that creates so much tension in the heart.

You know, there was one time in decades of practice and retreats, but there was only one time in all the retreats I sat that I ever left a retreat early. And I think it was my fifth retreat. It was a 10-day retreat with a Tibetan teacher whose teachings were translated. It was a completely new method for me. You know, and on the eighth day, the Dharma talk was on faith. The teacher kept saying, "You need faith to do this practice."

Ironically, one of the reasons I came on the retreat was because I had doubts about my practice. I thought maybe trying a different approach would help. So I asked to meet with the teacher privately. And through the translator, he kept repeating, "You need to have faith to do it." And finally, I thought to myself, well, I guess I don't. So I left the retreat.

Many years later, I had a chance to meet with the teacher again, who now finally spoke pretty good English. And I discovered the translator had left something essential out. What the teacher actually meant by faith was much closer to confidence, to trust, to trust in the practice itself. And over the years, I've really come to appreciate the *Pāli* word *saddhā*. Oops, last

night. Last night. That, at least not my head. Okay. So sorry about that.

It's often translated as faith or confidence, but literally it means to place the heart upon. The trust Sylvia Boorstein calls trusting your own deepest experience. Not a blind belief, not becoming a perfect meditator, but learning to trust that we can meet this moment, just this moment, even when it's challenging.

Many of us learned a version of confidence based on success. If I'm doing well, I'm confident. If I'm struggling, I'm failing. But practice teaches another kind of confidence, the confidence to meet difficulty, to say, yes, this too. I can know this. I have room for this. And when we stop fighting our experience so much, struggling with it, something in us begins to relax very deeply.

So confidence in practice is not so much about succeeding. It's the confidence in not needing to cling. A confidence that when fear appears, insecurity appears, grief appears, restlessness appears, that it's actually safe to stay present, safe to feel what's here. I remember Jack Kornfield used to joke about the restless mind. He said, "I'll be the first meditator in the world to die from restlessness."

But sometimes it takes courage to be present for suffering. I mean, I know the experience of just being with an itch and feeling like I cannot stay with it. It's insufferable. I cannot stay with it. But staying with it and seeing it to the other end of it and opening to it. Ajahn Chah said, "Where you experience suffering, you can also find freedom from suffering."

Because usually when suffering appears, the self mobilizes almost immediately. It wants to fix it, escape it, become something else, protect the identity. But the practice teaches us to turn towards the suffering, the uncomfortable, the unwanted, with curiosity, with courage, and with kindness. And so often it's not the deep, very painful states that trigger our desire to escape. Sometimes those are even interesting, but the restless, unsatisfied mind.

Now, we often might judge it, oh, that's not worthy of my attention, not worthy of showing up for it. It's too trivial. Much of my life, I had a regular yoga practice. I had a pretty severe injury some years back, you know, decades back, and I became really discouraged because so much of what I used to do physically no longer worked well. And a friend of mine who was a yoga teacher told me, "Don't stop doing yoga. Just focus on what you can do, not what you can't do."

And I did that. Though it wasn't much at first, it changed everything. Instead of organizing my mind around the loss, I began organizing my mind around participation, around intimacy with the body, just as it was. And that's part of practice, not becoming perfect, not becoming

invulnerable, but trusting that we can meet life as it unfolds, not as we want it to be, one breath at a time, one moment at a time.

And over time, confidence becomes less about self-image and more about just being available, available to life, to joy, to sorrow, to uncertainty. There's a kind of healthy self-esteem that can be equally at ease being nobody, going nowhere, or winning the Nobel Peace Prize. Because confidence no longer depends so much on who we think we are, but on trusting awareness itself, trusting in presence, trusting in the capacity to meet what arises.

And as the self becomes healthier, more wholesome, it becomes less rigid, less defended, more compassionate, more playful, more transparent. Our personality doesn't disappear. It's just held a lot more lightly. The point of practice is not to create a particular kind of self, but a self that is less burdened, less burdened by comparison, by fear, by the need to constantly prove, defend, or become, a self that can be honest and tender and strong without becoming rigid. The skillful self becomes the unburdened self, not because life becomes perfect, but because we stop carrying so much extra.

And I'll finish this with a short poem by a 13th-century Zen master, *Wúmén Huìkǎi*.

Spring has its hundred flowers, autumn its moon. Summer has its cooling breezes, winter its snow. If your mind is not clouded by pointless things, this is the best season of your life.

Thank you.