

Selflessness 101

The heart of Buddhist philosophy is its famed doctrine of emptiness—that all beings and phenomena are empty of inherent self or essence. It's not an easy view to accept—it contradicts everything we normally perceive and believe—so it is taught through carefully constructed reasonings, analogies and meditations. ANDY KARR offers some of the key arguments.

IMAGINE YOU ARE WALKING in the woods at dusk at the end of a summer's day. Suddenly you see a shape on the ground just ahead of you—it's a snake! You're scared, but as you stand there stock-still, you begin to notice that the snake is not moving. Tentatively, you bend closer. It's not a snake after all. It's just an old piece of striped rope. After a chuckle at your mistake, and with a sense of relief, you move on.

On one hand, this is just a little story. But on the other, it's a metaphor for one of Buddhism's most profound insights into the human condition. This story of the snake and the rope is a classic Buddhist illustration of what our belief in a solid, unchanging self, or ego, is like. Just as we fail to see the true nature of the "snake," we fail to see the true nature of the "self." Believing it to be real, we cling to the self and are constantly wracked by hope, fear and anxiety. When we realize the "snake" is just a rope, we relax. In the same way, as soon as we recognize the self doesn't really exist, we stop clinging to it. Our fear and anxiety evaporate.

Here's another illustration that may be closer to our everyday life. Think about going to the movies. If the movie is good, we get totally engrossed. We completely lose track of the fact that we are sitting in a movie theater watching light projected on a screen—we think we are looking at real people and places. If the story gets scary, we feel fear. Unless we remind ourselves, "This is only a movie," the fear can get out of hand. But reminding ourselves that we are watching a movie only works for a few minutes, and then we're sucked back in again. It's only when the credits roll and the lights come up that the illusion ends.

It's the same as the rope and the snake: when we don't know the true nature of our experience, we are frightened; when we recognize the way things really are, the fear dissolves. What if our movie is a comedy? In that case, the illusion can make us happy for a lit-



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tle while, but the happiness too dissolves when the illusion ends.

Because we take "I" and "mine" as real—as permanent, ongoing entities with their own core or essence—we ride an emotional rollercoaster, constantly tossed about by hope and fear; passion, aggression and ignorance, jealousy, hatred and all the other emotions. This is the understanding the Buddha arrived at when he sat so patiently under the Bodhi Tree: he saw the difficulty and suffering caused by believing in a solid self, and how freedom comes from seeing through the illusion.

Of course, a few analogies will not suffice to convince us that this seemingly solid self is an illusion and the source of all our difficulties. We need to look into the situation carefully and arrive at our own conclusions. We need to investigate whether we exist in the way we think we do, or not. We need to look into this "self" and examine it carefully, as if we were students in a biology lab looking at a specimen under the microscope.

Before we can begin to see what the self actually is, we need to take a closer look at the way the self appears. Consider the

fact that sometimes we say, "I am sick," and at other times we say, "I have a headache." In the first case, it seems that the self itself is ill. In the second, the self and the head seem to be two different things, with the self possessing the head. Sometimes we even say, "I was not myself the other day," as if I and the self were two different things.

So this is the first thing to note: while it seems obvious that there is such a thing as the self, when we try to pin it down, the whole thing becomes elusive and vague. Sometimes it seems to be one thing, sometimes another. Look carefully and see if you can find one unchanging thing that is your "self."

What else can we say about "I"? This word must refer to something, but to what? The Buddhist tradition says there are four characteristics of what we call the self: it appears to be one thing, it appears to be independent, it appears to be lasting, and it appears to be important.

The first characteristic is often called *singularity*, meaning that we feel the self is a single thing, not multiple things. Except per-

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haps when we experience extreme psychological states, we don't think that we have multiple selves to cycle through or choose from. We think we are the same person all the time. We might have different personalities in different situations, but this is like the self putting on different clothing, not changing selves.

The second characteristic is *independence*. We think the self makes choices; for example, we can decide to clean the house, or watch television, or go out to dinner. We don't think that these situations arise due to causes and conditions over which we have no control.

The third characteristic is *permanence*. The self appears to be lasting or permanent because it feels like we have had the same self all our lives. While our bodily appearance changes, and our knowledge and experience changes, the self doesn't seem to change. I vividly remember my father-in-law on his eighty-third birthday saying that he didn't feel that he was any different from when he was a child. It was an interesting comment and clearly illustrates this third characteristic.

The fourth characteristic is *importance*. Even if we don't go around thinking, "I need to look out for number one," self-importance is the undercurrent of all our activity. We only have to recall what we feel like when we are stuck in traffic or cooling our heels in a doctor's waiting room. Few of us think, "I don't need to get to work any more than the rest of the people stuck in this traffic jam," or, "I don't need to see the doctor before these other patients." In fact, we might consider ourselves more important than almost all the other people in the world put together!

This is the way the self appears to us—as one thing, independent, lasting and important. Having discussed the way the self appears, we can begin to investigate what it really is.

One way to do this is to ask ourselves some simple questions. For example, is the self the body or is it the mind? Is it both, or is it neither? Most of us would say that the self is both the body and the mind. Yet the body is something tangible

and substantial, while—even though scientists can now correlate mental activity with electrical activity in the brain—no one proposes that thoughts, emotions, consciousness and the other mental phenomena are substances.

So, how could the self be both substantial and insubstantial? We are not discussing some machine with different components, some of which are made out of metal and some of which are made out of plastic. We are asking how one thing—the self—could be made up of two things that have no common basis. How could that possibly work? How could they be connected? If something is not made of any substance, what could possibly attach to it? What could hold on to it?

If we now accept that the self cannot be both the body and the mind, we need to explore the possibility that it is just one or the other. What if the self is just the mind? That leads to the rather absurd conclusion that an immaterial mind could possess a material body. How would that work? A further problem with this arrangement is that if the self is just the mind, how would you know when you stubbed your toe? The body would be something outside the self, like a piece of furniture.

Next, we need to ask whether the self could be just the body. This leads to the absurd conclusion that a material body could possess an immaterial mind. Also, if the self is just the body, how could it know anything, since it is the mind that knows? If the self is just the body, it also follows that a corpse would be a self.

There is one more possibility that we need to look at. If the self cannot be both the body and the mind, or just the mind, or just the body, can it be something that is neither the body nor the mind? If such a self really exists, it should be observable in some way. The problem with this explanation is that no one has ever found a self that is neither body nor mind. A further problem is, again, how could such a self possess both a material body and an immaterial mind?

Let's try a different type of investigation. Let's look at René Descartes' famous conclusion to his own investigation of

the self: "I think therefore I am." There is a traditional Buddhist image that is relevant here. Imagine walking into a pottery studio and seeing a spinning potter's wheel with a half-finished vase turning round on top. Looking at this scene, you would instinctively feel that there must be a potter nearby. This is analogous to observing our thoughts and believing there must be a thinker. Yet if we look, we can't find any thinker. We don't see thoughts and something producing thought. We just see more thoughts.

If we want to follow the Buddha's way, we need to investigate our instinctive feelings that there is a self. We need to ask, "Who am I? Do I really exist? What do I take to be a self?" Perhaps we may come to the same insight as the Buddha, and that insight will leave us in a very open space. Who knows? (Who is it that knows?) ♦

EXERCISE

When you contemplate, sit in a relaxed, upright posture and let your mind settle. You can use a meditation technique if you like, but that is not essential.

When you feel ready, first contemplate the way the self appears. Ask yourself:

Do I have one self or many?

Do I make choices or do decisions just arise in me?

Is the self lasting or momentary?

What purpose does this self serve?

Let your mind settle again. Now contemplate the way the self really is. Ask yourself:

Is the self located in my head, my chest, or throughout my body?

Is the self red, white, gray or some other color?

What shape is the self?

You can come back to these contemplations again and again. Sometimes one of the questions might spark some insight, sometimes it might be another. Sometimes nothing will happen. That is the way it is with contemplation.