

DREAMING OURSELVES INTO EXISTENCE

Of the many teachings of the Buddha, *anatta* or selflessness may be the hardest to understand. While we can all relate to the experience of impermanence and can begin to understand the First Noble Truth of *dukkha*, the ultimately unsatisfying nature of changing phenomena, the idea of no-self is counter-intuitive to our usual lived experience of ourselves in the world. For most of us, our lives revolve around the strongly conditioned idea of and belief in a self center, with much of our energy devoted to gratifying it, defending it, aggrandizing it, sometimes even disparaging it - all without quite knowing even what it is. The great surprise of deepening insight is that the self is not something that is there, but rather that the felt sense of it is something we are creating moment to moment. As the writer Wei Wu Wei expressed it, believing in the self is like a dog barking up a tree that isn't there.

An example that I have been using for many years is that of the Big Dipper. On a clear night, we can look up at the sky and quite readily pick out that constellation of stars. It's almost as if that particular pattern jumps out at us. However, it doesn't take too much investigation to realize that there really is no Big Dipper in the sky. Rather, what we are seeing are points of light - stars - arranged in a certain pattern. We then create an image and concept in our minds, Big Dipper, as if in some way it is really there. This points to the profound and commonplace conditioning of reifying patterns into things.

Although we may downplay our own tendencies of attachment to the Big Dipper, go outside one night and see if it's possible to *not* see it. This is not easy to do. *Self* is like Big Dipper: a convenient concept, but one that has no intrinsic reality outside of our own mental constructs. And if it is difficult to not immediately overlay the concept of Big Dipper when we look up at the night sky, we can understand the much greater challenge of not overlaying the concept of *self* onto our moment to moment experience.

This is our task: realizing that the self is not something that we need to get rid of, but rather of understanding how the felt sense of it is created in any moment of identification - identification with the body, feeling tones, thoughts, emotions, or consciousness itself. As the great Tibetan Master Dilgo Khyentse wrote, "The idea of an enduring self has kept you wandering helplessly in the lower realms of samsara for countless past lifetimes. It is the very thing that now prevents you from liberating yourself and others from conditioned existence. If you could simply let go of that one thought of "I," you would find it easy to be free, and to free others, too."

Although in the beginning of practice, we may find ourselves lost in and identified with many different elements of our experience, it usually does not take too long to realize that bodily sensations, thoughts and emotions are all part of a passing show. Even though we may continue to get lost in the stories of our minds, in the various reactions and judgments that arise, still there is some place of wisdom within us that begins to see the ephemeral nature of all these changing phenomena. The more difficult challenge, though, is to see the selfless nature of consciousness itself. How can we experience the great mystery of awareness without overlaying the concept of self onto it, without identifying with this innate capacity to know, to cognize, to be aware?

Sometimes confusion arises because words like *mind*, *consciousness*, *awareness*, and *mindfulness* are not always precisely defined or delineated, and different Buddhist schools may use these terms in different ways. Each tradition also has its own philosophical underpinnings, not always in agreement with one another. But each of them offers a range of practices that help free us from the constricting limitations of *self*-centeredness, that help us, in the Buddha's words, to "disentangle the tangle". What I've found so helpful in my own practice is to understand and apply these different teachings as skillful means for freeing the mind rather than as metaphysical statements of some ultimate truth. Then, the only measures are, 'Do they work? Do they help cut the Gordian knot of the view of self?'

There are many ways to investigate this radically different way of seeing and understanding. In traditional vipassana practice, one of the early insights on the trajectory of understanding is called purification of view. At this time, we begin to experience every moment as a pair-wise progression of knowing and object, both of which arise and pass away together in each moment. As insight further unfolds, the dissolution aspect becomes predominant and we can then know for ourselves the impermanent, continually dissolving nature of consciousness. It could be likened to the endless rushing flow of water over a waterfall. Nothing lasts long enough to be 'self,' although we might use that concept to conveniently describe the whole process of momentary change, even as we use the word 'river' to describe the ongoing flow of water.

In the Anguttara Nikaya, a collection of discourses of early Buddhism, the Buddha describes the liberating power of deepening our insight into impermanence:

In one who perceives impermanence, the perception of non-self becomes firmly established; and one who perceives non-self achieves the elimination of the conceit "I am" and attains Nibbana in this very life.

Another way to understand the selfless nature of consciousness is to investigate the causes and conditions that give rise to it. The Buddha described the conditions necessary for a particular kind of consciousness to arise. For example, in this particular model, hearing consciousness requires four conditions; an ear in working order, a sound, a medium through which sound waves travel (air or water), and attention. If any of these four conditions are absent, hearing will not occur. We can test this to some extent for ourselves by a simple thought experiment. As you're reading this now, or perhaps on a walk outside, be mindful of the experience of hearing. Then imagine for a moment that you had no ears, would hearing consciousness still occur? Of course, there might be internal sounds that depend on other conditions, but if you take any one of those conditions away, there would then be the same absence of hearing consciousness. Sometimes even simple thought experiments can help us intuit a more profound truth, namely, that consciousness itself is an impersonal, conditioned phenomena.

In some Zen and Tibetan traditions, there is another way of exploring the selfless nature of awareness. This way of investigating points us to the empty, unfindable, nature of awareness, succinctly encapsulated in a well know Zen dialogue between Bodhidharma and Daizu Huike, who was to become his Dharma heir:

Huike said to Bodhidharma: "My mind is distressed. Please pacify it." To which Bodhidharma replied, "Present me your mind, and I will pacify it." Huike said, "Although I have searched for it everywhere, I cannot find it." Bodhidharma then said, "There, I have pacified it."¹

Although often in hearing this story, people will chuckle at what appears to be Zen wit, it's more helpful to hear the story as a profound teaching instruction. What happens when we look for our own minds? As an experiment, the next time you hear a sound, you might ask yourself, 'Can I find what is knowing the sound?' ... and then look. Clearly, the sound is being known, we're aware of the sound and that hearing is occurring, yet when we look for what is knowing, there is nothing to find. In Tibetan Dzogchen teachings it is often said in this regard, 'The not-finding *is* the finding.' Once we have explored this teaching for ourselves, sometimes simply bringing the phrase 'already pacified' to mind can free us from entanglement with our thoughts and emotions. Feeling distressed - we can remind ourselves that the unfindable nature of mind is already pacified; nothing more to do, at least in that moment.

Building on this insight, I have found a simple technique for recognizing this empty, spontaneous nature of awareness, and that is re-framing our experience in the passive voice. In most languages, we reinforce the belief in self through the grammar of language: subject, verb, object, with the acting subject very often being "I." But in the passive voice, the subject is not the actor, e.g. "Sounds are being known." In this simple construction, we have taken the actor of self out of the picture. The Austrian-born British philosopher Wittgenstein spoke to this when he said, "The sense of a separate self is only a shadow cast by grammar." I've found that mentally re-framing experience in the passive voice can cut

¹ Gateless Gate, Case 41.

through this 'I-making' habitual tendency, and revealing at the same time different aspects of the mysterious nature of consciousness.

The first somewhat startling insight is that when we're present it doesn't take any effort to know our experience. As mentioned earlier, knowing arises when the necessary conditions are present. Right now, a simple experiment would be to simply move your arm - nothing special at all, just a simple movement - and to see whether it takes any effort to know that you're moving it. (Please take a moment and do this!). The nature of the mind is to know, and so when we're not distracted in thought, we see that the knowing of the movement is arising quite spontaneously. As a meditative exercise, you might take a few minutes and simply hold the question, 'What is being known moment after moment?'. Sounds, sensations, sights, thoughts - all arising and being known, quite without someone commanding it to be so. It's so simple that we can easily overlook this most basic nature of consciousness.

As we settle into the effortless ease of experiences being known, we can then ask ourselves the illuminating question, 'Known by what?', and then really look to see if there is anything to find. This is the great mystery: there's nothing to find, no observer, no witness, and yet knowing is happening. In some Tibetan traditions, this is called the unity of clarity and emptiness.

Although there is a profound simplicity to this realization, it is difficult to abide in the ease of 'already pacified'? What keeps us from it is the endless flow of thoughts and images arising and passing in the mind. Through practice, we may have become somewhat adept at being aware of the dramatic thoughts, the ones with a particular emotional charge. But much more frequent are the very light thoughts that are not particularly troublesome, that may last just a few moments, and that hardly leave any wake. These are the ones that are mostly unnoticed, and yet in the moments that we are lost in this almost subliminal stream of mental activity, we are re-creating and strengthening the felt sense of self.

On one recent retreat, during walking meditation, I began to pay particular attention to these very light and quickly passing thoughts. I saw that many of them, in one way or another, were referencing a sense of self: a memory, a plan,

a comment, a judgment. And so each time I was lost in one of these very ephemeral thoughts - which was quite often, precisely because they were so quick and not very obviously impactful - it was the on-going and unnoticed strengthening of a felt self-center. This reminded me of the experience we all probably have of sometimes waking up in the morning, and then, perhaps, falling back into a dream state for a few moments before becoming fully awake. Being lost in the play of light, unobtrusive thoughts is like falling back into the dream. And so I began to remind myself during the day, "I'm dreaming myself into existence," and this remembrance became an inspiration to stay more fully awake.

Through a deepening recognition of selflessness, there is a surprising and growing sense of connection and intimacy, because on the deepest level we realize that there is no one there to be separate; love and selflessness become the same thing. Here, love is not necessarily a particular feeling but, rather, an activity, a compassionate responsiveness to ourselves and the world we live in. As Dilgo Khyentse expressed it:

When you realize the empty nature of phenomena, the energy to bring about the good of others dawns uncontrived and effortless.

Because the nature of emptiness is inseparable from compassion, when the nature of emptiness is realized, a great loving compassion naturally manifests without having to be sought. The key point here is that emptiness and compassion are indivisible in our basic nature.