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EGOLESSNESS OF SELF

At this point, we turn to discussing the actual insights that arise on the path to enlightenment. The first of these is egolessness of self, or the absence of self.

Let's first clarify what we mean by "self." Self is a feeling that there is someone inside us that is who we are, someone who does our thinking, feels our emotions, runs our life, and is the center of our world. We most easily recognize it by its wanting; it wants incessantly, much like a baby consumed by its own needs.

Self is what feels discomfort or uneasiness when entering a group, seeking a job, or being made fun of. We can experience it quite clearly in conversations with certain types of people, who talk exclusively about their own successes or problems.

“Self” is often used synonymously with “ego,” and hence the topic of this chapter refers rather awkwardly to the selflessness of self. “Self” can be used in other ungainly ways as well. For example, in some spiritual disciplines, “self” denotes the self inside us in one context, and the totality of insight in another. This double usage leads to statements like, “One must transcend the self to understand the Self.” To promote clarity, “self” is better confined to the sense of something inside us, and other words used for spiritual revelations. Discussing gnosis is difficult enough without using the same word to describe contrasting experiences.

Egolessness of self is simply the realization of the absence, or nonexistence, of self. That absence manifests as a new space inside of us where ego used to be, and that space, once experienced, never leaves. The sign of egolessness of self is that we no longer experience any entity having our thoughts, emotions, or any other of life’s experiences.

Egolessness of self can appear in an instant, as happened to me in my late thirties, when, quite stressed over work, I sat on my bed and asked myself, “What are you going to do, Fred?” Looking at whom I was addressing, I was surprised to find no one.

Fortunately, I had been introduced to Zen Buddhism and had met a teacher, studied the teachings, and

meditated, so I recognized what had happened. As to how it happened, I sometimes addressed myself for various reasons. If I felt threatened by life, I would tell myself to be courageous, and if things were going well, I might congratulate myself for my successes. I never realized that what I said to myself was not nearly as important as looking inside for the respondent.

Looking inside is a practice in Buddhism. Sitting meditation has an element of it, and there is also a more explicit tradition of directing practitioners to look for who is having their thoughts and emotions. Most of us believe it's "ourselves," but if we continue to search for the source of mind's occurrences, we may one day realize that they come not from ego, but from nowhere. That is the experience of egolessness of self.

Another enabling factor for the insight was my own total lack of expectation. Most of the time, I paid little attention to self; it had always been there, and I had no reason to expect it would suddenly leave. If I had been seeking self's absence, it never would have happened, because the seeking would have been ego-driven. Looking does not involve ego unless we are looking *for* something—or for nothing—so when we look, we must do so simply, without expectations.

Lastly, on this occasion I had relaxed right before looking inside, and that relaxation played a role as

well. Whether it made my mind clearer, loosened my sense of self, or both, I don't know, but it helped.

Egolessness of self is not always a single, sudden epiphany like mine. Some students have the experience over a longer period, a process that has been likened to wearing out a shoe by walking in it. Still other practitioners realize non-self through direct contact with a master. The Zen literature contains many stories of teachers bringing students to the understanding of no-self. In one instance, a master asked a student, "Who is it that carries your corpse around?" The student looked, and saw what I saw. This, and other Zen questions like it, are intended specifically to encourage the acolyte to look inside and see that no one is there. Another Zen method is to give students a mental chore that exhausts their intellect, like a koan to ponder or a saying to repeat. Masters might answer a question like "Why did Bodhidharma come from the west?"—meaning "Why did Bodhidharma bring enlightenment here?"—with "The cypress tree in the garden," or the query "Does a dog have Buddha nature?" with "Mu!" These koans exhaust students' intellectual searching, and cause them to give up and see the nothing that is left.

Like all insights, egolessness of self is difficult to realize. One reason for this difficulty is that ego arises as a series of extremely rapid steps that solidly

establish its existence. These steps are the five *skandhas* (Sanskrit, “heaps”): *form*, *feeling*, *perception*, *formation* and *consciousness*. We experience them because of the aloneness and anxiety we feel when nothingness, our true state, emerges. Our immediate reaction to that feeling is the first skandha, *form*, a “negative miracle” of mind that manages to freeze limitless space into form. Next is a *feeling* of what form is, which reinforces its existence. Next is an attempt to create order in the new world of form and feeling with *perception*, which categorizes experience into names.

The first three skandhas are instinctual. Now, with the fourth, we volitionally begin the *formation* of reactions to what we perceive—for example, disliking the color purple—further strengthening our sense of the perceiver or ego. Finally, to keep what has been created entertained, we play it mind movies, the *consciousness* of thoughts and emotions. That is how self is formed in a split second, as a response to our discomfort with nothingness.

Situations enhance and strengthen ego, as well. As we mentioned in the fourth skandha, we take stances on the world’s occurrences. Instead of simply recognizing them as events occurring in limitless space, inseparable from mind, we now make them reference points that reinforce ego’s credibility. Also, languages contain words like “I” or “me,” and may be (like English) very ego-oriented in their grammar,

all of which subtly reinforces the speaker's sense of self. Similarly, children learn early on about their self, and how smart, beautiful, or adorable it is. Later on, the media chips in to remind us that we are not attractive, successful, or productive enough. For these reasons and many others, seeing the nonexistence of ego is a challenge.

These challenges notwithstanding, when we do realize egolessness of self, the newfound freedom brings a sense of great joy and power. The joy comes from feeling as though the dictator that has ruled our life is deposed, and that we no longer have him or her looking over our shoulder. The power originates from the energy previously siphoned off for ego's needs being set free. In my case, the sense of power was so great that I sat on a levee in New Orleans and considered if I should destroy a bridge with my mind. I decided it would be cruel to do so, and dropped the idea. (To be clear: No, I couldn't have.)

These initial fireworks of non-self dissipate over time, and eventually the insight makes relatively little difference in our lives. We do not, for example, simply stop and stand gazing vacantly into space like the Energizer Bunny without a battery, as some suppose. In fact, we act much as we did when we had an ego. This is due partly to old habits, and partly to the fact that, even though we are different, the world remains the same. Our attentiveness to others and

to life itself does improve somewhat, because self no longer diverts our attention. We also begin to realize that we are not our reference points, and that having a name, a job, or a car no longer defines what is no longer there.

By realizing egolessness of self, we take the first real step on the path to enlightenment, by seeing the first in the string of absences that will eventually become limitless space. Moreover, with this insight we enter the Dharma experientially, and discover that what we have heard is unquestionably true. We see what the Buddha saw 2,500 years ago, and what has been passed down to us through the lineages to the present day. We now know in our bones that the Dharma is valid, and that everything we've read and heard has a basis in experience. Furthermore, what we have seen can never not be seen, so it will always be with us.

Non-self is not a big step, but it is a critical one, because it takes us from the realm of belief to the realm of direct experience, the *sine qua non* of Buddhism. It also prepares us for egolessness of other, the next step on the path to enlightenment.