

## *The Identity Crutch*

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We all know that one of the goals of the Buddhist practice is to get beyond the limitations of your self-identification, your sense of who you are. But that doesn't mean you drop it right from the beginning. After all, self-identification does have its uses. If it didn't have its uses, we probably wouldn't have invented the idea to begin with, and we wouldn't find it so hard to let go. And as it turns out, it's actually a useful thing to have in the practice. It's a useful tool if you learn how to use it well.

So instead of being embarrassed about it and trying to deny it—which means that it goes underground and you never get much use out of it—try to bring it more out into the open.

There's that passage where Ven. Ananda is teaching a nun, saying that the conceit "I am" is something you want to overcome in the practice, but that that particular conceit also helps you along the way. You hear that other people have attained the goal, and you stop and think: "Those are human beings, I'm a human being. They can do it, I can do it." In other words, you see yourself as potentially equal to them. They started from the same place where you are, and you have the potential for going to the same place where they are now. That's a healthy use of conceit.

There are many other healthy uses for the sense of identification. After all, what is that sense of identification? You draw a line between the things that are yours and the things that are not yours—the things that lie under your control, the things that don't; the things that are worth fighting for, the things that are not. We need to make these distinctions in order to function. It's a basic prerequisite for our ability to find happiness in the world—which is why many people don't like the teaching on not-self. They think they're going to be deprived of their strategies for happiness. But that's not how the Buddha taught it.

Actually, the concept of not-self is something inherent even in having a sense of self. Whenever you have a sense of self, there's going to be an area that's not-self. But that area changes, the boundary lines change.

You see this from the very beginning of your life. Say you have a big brother. There are times when you have to draw the line very clearly between yourself and your brother, especially when you're fighting over something. If he has a toy truck, and you want the toy truck, he's very much not you at that point. But say someone down the street comes and starts beating up in you, you go running to

your big brother to help you. After all, he is *your* brother at that point. The lines have changed. And you find even now that if you look at yourself in the course of the day, your sense of who you are changes over time. It's very mercurial, like an amoeba: It sends out a pseudopod here, another blob there, and then it pulls back and moves someplace else.

What we're doing as we're on the path is not so much trying to erase those boundaries as trying to be more deliberate in figuring out where are the useful things to identify with, and where are the useful things to not identify with. That's what the not-self teaching is all about. You're looking at things that you're identifying with and seeing that they are causing you to suffer, so you learn how to let go. Simply that as the practice progresses, you get a more and more refined sense of how to draw the line and seeing how there's less and less territory that you really want to lay claim to as your self or your own, until finally you get to the point where you find a happiness that doesn't require a sense of self anymore. That's when you let it go totally.

But as long as your happiness requires a sense of self, you have to learn how to use it, and to use it wisely.

For instance, how many times have you heard the idea that when you become a meditator, you shouldn't build an identity around being a meditator? Well, there *are* some areas where it's unhealthy to build identity around being a meditator: You think, "Here I am, I'm a meditator. I've been meditating all these years, but my mind can still crash. There's something wrong with me." That's an unskillful use of that identity.

A skillful use is when you come up against a problem and you find yourself reacting to it in an unskillful way: Remind yourself, "Hey, I'm a meditator. I've got some tools I can use with to deal with this problem—things I've been learning in dealing with the breath, learning how to focus on the breath, learning how to spread a sense of ease through the body, learning to develop that sense of ease in a way that's not dependent on things outside. That may be a useful skill to bring into this particular situation. My ability to examine my thoughts, to step back from my thoughts, and look at them simply as processes in the mind: That might be useful to bring in here."

The qualities of endurance you've learned as you've endured pain sitting here: We learn to endure these pains not because this is the only place where endurance is necessary. When other situations come up, you learn to put your preferences aside and just do what needs to be done. Stick with what needs to be done, endure the situation, and don't get entangled in your dislike of suddenly having to take

on that particular role, to do that particular task that's going to take a long time, or to stay in a situation where things are going to be difficult.

If you've learned endurance as a meditator, bring it out and use it. If you find yourself slipping back into your old habits, your old emotional patterns, tell yourself, "I've got some tools now that I can use that I didn't have before. I don't have to be that old person. I can be a new person—somebody who's got a few tricks up his sleeve or her sleeve."

This way, your identity as a meditator becomes a useful tool. It may be a crutch, but when you need a crutch, use a crutch. Otherwise you're like a person who's got a wounded foot: He's on crutches, and someone says, "When you get well, you don't need to use your crutches anymore." So he throws the crutches away so he'll be well. But it doesn't work that way. You use the crutches as long as you need them. When you don't need them anymore, then you can drop them.

We're not here trying to clone awakening. We're following a path. The path doesn't look like awakening. It bears some seeming resemblances now and then, but it's something radically different. The process of following the path develops your skills in a sense of making you more sensitive, more alert—all the skills you're going to need for awakening. But you don't need to have a clearly articulated idea of awakening in order to follow the path.

That's one of the reasons why the Buddha didn't talk about the goal that much. He gave a few teasers to get you interested. But by and large, he was more concerned with how to get you there. Once you've got there, you don't need to have it described. You know it. What needs to be described are the various skills you need to get there: how to judge when something is useful, when it's not. Again and again, the Buddha kept saying, look at the results. If the way you're using your identity as a meditator is making you miserable, you're using it the wrong way. Drop it for the time being. Or look for the positive ways you can use it. That helps to remind you of some skills, helps to remind you that you're not the person used to be before you meditated.

There are lots of things in the path that you have to hold on to. That's why we have the path. Think of the simile of the raft. We all know the part where you let go of the raft after you've gotten across the river, but while you're crossing over the river, hold on. Sometimes you're warned about not getting attached to concentration, but you've got to be attached to concentration if you're going to do it well. You have to see the pleasure of concentration as something you really like, something you really are interested in. That way, you put in the energy you need in order to master the concentration.

So don't throw away your crutches until your foot is healed. Learn how to use them skillfully. As Ajaan Lee once said, a person with discernment can take anything and use it skillfully. So before you start throwing things away willy-nilly see if they have any uses left to them. Think of the Buddha's image of a bird. The bird's wings are a burden. They have some weight to them. When the bird's just sitting around not doing anything, the wings weigh on its back. But the wings can enable it to fly. So be willing to have a few burdens, and be very careful to choose only the burdens that can help you soar.