

## *A Separate Self*

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The early Romantics had the belief that the root of all evil was a sense of separate self. That attitude has carried over into modern Buddhist Romanticism, where the root of all evil, the root of all suffering, all our troubles, is our sense of separate self. They tell us if we could only erase that sense of separate self, we'd be happy, but unfortunately we're taught that sense of self by our society, so we have to unlearn it.

But that's not what the Buddha taught. The source of all our trouble, he said, is our heedlessness, whereas heedfulness is the root of all skillful qualities. And in the very beginning, to be heedful, you do need a sense of self. You think about yourself as an agent who's going to be acting and as the recipient of those actions. It's because you see that your actions will have an impact on you as an individual, and will be determined by the quality of the intention, the quality of the action: That's your reason for being heedful, your reason for being careful in what you do.

So as the Buddha teaches in mundane right view, you are responsible for your actions, and this sense of responsibility is something you really have to develop. It's an important part of the path. Of course, this self that he has you assume is not radically separate. In other words, it's not totally immune from influences from outside. In fact, your actions will be largely determined by the kind of people you choose to hang out with, the people you choose to listen to. As he says, those who act unskillfully tend not to listen to the noble ones. Those who act skillfully do listen to the noble ones.

This is why the Buddha said that the whole of the practice is admirable friendship. Having admirable friends lies at the beginning of many of his maps of how the practice progresses. Those admirable friends can't do the work for you. As he says, no one can purify you; you can't purify anybody else. You don't go to heaven because of other people's good actions; you don't go to hell because of other people's bad actions. It's your actions that determine that. So there is that sense in which you're separate. And of course you're the one who chooses your friends to begin with. So in that way, the separateness of our selves comes first.

You see this even in our relationship with the Buddha when he says he's our most admirable friend. It's because of him that we have this practice. Without him, where would we be? Certainly not sitting here with our eyes closed, watching our breath. At the same time, he says that he only points out the way. It's up to us to actually follow the way.

He gives the analogy of someone who knows the route to Rajagaha and can tell it in a lot of detail. It's not the case that everybody who hears those instructions will actually get to Rajagaha. Why? Because they don't follow the instructions. In that case, what can the person who's giving the instructions do? So even though we are interconnected to that extent that we can benefit from the Buddha's teachings, still ultimately it's up to us as individuals to decide what to do: whether to follow his teachings or not.

There was a person who came to see the Buddha one time and said basically that if someone has found the way, he shouldn't go telling it to other people because everybody's kamma is separate. The Buddha replied that that's the same as saying that if someone has wealth he shouldn't share it with other people. In saying that, you're causing a lot of harm. So again, we're not so radically separate that we can't benefit from listening to one another and emulating one another's good habits. Sometimes that emulation is subconscious. But still, *we're* the ones who make the decisions about what to do, what to say, what to think.

This is what the concept of a separate self is useful for: a sense of responsibility, the belief that the buck stops here. If meditation is not going well, part of it may be due to the fact that you've got the wrong instructions or you're staying in a bad environment, but primarily you have to look at yourself: What are you doing? Some people get the best instructions and they misunderstand them and misapply them. Suppose you drove a car into a telephone pole, and someone asked, "Why is the car smashed?" Would you say, "Well it's because of a long line of interconnected, impersonal interactions"? Who would take that as an acceptable answer? If you didn't take responsibility for what you'd done, if people didn't take responsibility for what they'd done, what kind of world would that be? We couldn't live with one another.

But it's not just in the outside world: In our own practice of the Buddha's teachings, if we don't take responsibility for our own actions, how are we going to get anywhere? Remember the Buddha's instructions to Rahula. When you do something and the results are not good, you turn around and look at your actions. What did you do wrong? You go to others for help to get some idea of what you might have done wrong. But then you have to go back and make the correction yourself.

So this sense of responsibility—which is linked, at least to some extent, to a sense of a separate self—is an important strategy on the path. Without it, we would have no way of learning, we wouldn't know where to look to improve our lives, we wouldn't know where to trace out cause and effect. And if we can't see that, what are we going to see? Where are we going to gain any discernment?

Because that's what discernment is. We suffer because of our ignorance. Our ignorance has nothing to do with how we define ourself. It has to do with our understanding of how craving and ignorance and particularly the craving and ignorance in our own minds leads to suffering. You don't go looking outside for craving and ignorance. You have to look inside. You have to take responsibility for what you've done. When you know where the problem is coming from, that's when you can clear it up.

So the problem comes from within. And, fortunately, the solution comes from within, too. We get from the Buddha ideas about how we can go about solving the problem, but it's up to us as individuals to do the work. And to gain the benefits. Again, when the benefits come, they don't spill out on the person sitting next to you. They may reverberate, but the actual experience of the deathless that comes as a result of the practice is *paccattam*. That's what we say every day as we chant the virtues of the Dhamma: "It's to be known by the observant for themselves." No one can know this for anyone else. We can't even show it to other people for them to look at. When the results come, they are yours. And as Ajaan Lee says, no one else has to know. In fact, when no one else knows, that's when you're really safe.

Of course at that point, the use of a separate self is put aside. Especially with final awakening, they say, there's no longer any need for a sense of self as a strategy. Here we're using it as a strategy for assigning responsibility so that we can fruitfully solve the problem of suffering. When this problem is solved, we don't need the strategy. In fact, at that point we don't even need the strategy of not-self, either.

So as long as we have this sense of separate self, learn to use it wisely. Realize that your self is going to benefit from the good influence of other people. And it's because we can have an influence on one another that we've been exposed to the Dhamma. We learn the Dhamma from what the Buddha taught, as all the many generations between us and the Buddha have done. But it's up to us to take that influence and make the most of it. That's when your sense of separate self, instead of being a curse, is actually a strategy for true happiness.