



Selflessness

Selflessness is central to all Buddhist traditions. Without tapping selflessness all other aspects of Buddhist teaching and practice are peripheral; you may talk about compassion, you may talk about wisdom but if selflessness is not in the center of the whole thing then these things are just peripheral. From the beginning of Buddhist teaching and practice the teaching of no self and the practice of no self has been central, without selflessness there can be no genuine compassion or genuine wisdom. That is very clear as far as tradition is concerned.

In earlier times in the West people couldn't connect with this idea of no self and took it as a very negative idea, an idea of self denial or something like that. In those times Buddhism itself seemed to be very negative. Of course as long as our ideas or practice are based on the self or on a strong sense of ego then when we hear something about selflessness and no self it clashes with that, goes against those strong ideas of self and seems very negative. The tendency then is for us to try to grasp selflessness or no self as a kind of idea or understanding and we end up with difficulties - you just can't get it! So again we have a kind of clash, from this point of view we can't get it and we can't grasp it but we make a tremendous effort to try to figure it out. People generate ideas about it and start to talk about it and once again it's not true selflessness it's just peripheral.

How do we overcome this? We're not actually interested in ideas or in the concept of selflessness, what we are interested in is how that is possible, how to actually do it, that is what's most important. Trying to understand by words, trying to figure it out by definitions or through somebody else's experience is very difficult. We may get some good ideas about it and gain some knowledge about it but those ways will never get into the core of it, to the heart of it.

So how are we to overcome this dilemma? We put ourselves into practice, we engage with practice and in this way this central point is directly pointed out. We need to understand, however, that human beings are 99% selfish! You are selfish. I am selfish and as soon as you forget this there are problems.

So the approach that we take to the practice of selflessness is very important. What kind of approach? Of course, any attempt to get into the practice of selflessness or no self can only start from consciousness levels. This very self is what your consciousness is, you don't need to worry about getting totally unconscious about it. But as long as you remain in the domain of consciousness you never get out from self: self-seeking-self or self-affirming-self. You may have good intentions but it's always I. I that's doing it. I'm doing it. I have a good heart. I do that. Of course this doesn't work and sometimes people get upset. In this approach self is always the doer, it's always self that is doing and it's very, very difficult. The question is how do you overcome that difficulty?

The point is to learn about ourselves, to recognize that we have limitations, we are 99% selfish. You know, as soon as we become conscious of what we are doing our egos start operating, our activities become ego orientated but even so, we can come close to selflessness, near to selflessness or no

self, near to it, not exactly 100% but near.

It's interesting at the Buddhist Summer School a Tibetan teacher from Denmark, the Venerable Tarab Tulku, was talking about nearness and that is usually something that a human tries to do, we try to do - to get close, to get near, but as long as you have some kind of understanding, some kind of idea about what selflessness is, as long as we are operating from that basis then you never get into the nearness, it is just the self operating. It is your own self moving forward against reality. Thinking "this is selfless action" or "I am practicing selflessness," is no help either, thinking like that is just delusion.

Nearness. If we can point to a deeper place in practice, not at consciousness levels but more toward the level of the breath then nearness occurs. In just taking a breath, in that moment the ego that abides in consciousness levels is removed. The natural act of taking a breath is outside of the cycle of consciousness. It's a very simple thing when you think about, in the sitting meditation, in practice, you may be thinking "I'm doing good" or "No, I'm doing bad" and so on but when you just rest your mind, just breathe naturally and if you're able to do so, suddenly some sense of peace, some sense of quietness arises in your body and mind even in the midst of the pain. And because this natural sense of peace feels like something is happening, that you are getting some sense of what practice is, then sometimes you push harder, thinking that you are somehow near but expecting more and pushing harder does not bring you to nearness. On retreat you notice when you sit for seven days all you can do is work the breath and all that the breath can offer is nearness but you expect more than that and push it. That is - you forget that the breath functions as nearness naturally and you push away from that nearness.

Finally, selflessness becomes clear, if you're able to just sit, just do it then no self becomes actualized and breath goes deeper. Actually, in sitting you don't consciously know what you are doing but if your spine is clearly aligned, back straight, and your hands are making a circle with thumbs joined, resting easy, naturally, then breath goes deeper to the body level, to physical action. Through that practice selflessness is already there, at this time the notion of ego is not present and ideas of good and bad are dropped.

Sometimes you are distracted in practice and sometimes more elevated realms of consciousness appear and you think "this is not what I'm supposed to be doing" and you return to the breath, to the spine, but at other times it feels too exciting, too good, "this must be enlightenment!" "I'm getting close!" "I must push harder!" As soon as this happens it is ego operating, as soon as you start to feel good about it, it is the "I" operating but if you don't follow that then you are already perfectly practicing no self.

So in the midst of consciousness arising if you continue practicing with no self at the center then things are slowly integrated. So how we are meditating, how we are approaching the sitting is very important. If you are meditating to solve some problem you are totally in the realm of the selfish, this belongs to the 99% and you have very little chance to be selfless but as soon as you drop this, take a deep breath and start to breathe naturally then nearness comes and nearness has nothing to do with good and bad this is just the way it is. Just here, just breathing, there's no why or how involved just nearness.

From the beginning everyone is already gifted, everyone has the full potential to actualize it but very few people see that selflessness is a kind of treasure that we have, that is the source of freedom, freedom from self clinging. Everybody without exception works on self. So when we talk about selflessness first we need to talk about what it means to you as an individual person then this sitting practice starts to make sense. The relationship between self and selflessness doesn't get mixed up and you don't get confused "Am I being compassionate by sitting like this?" When you

clarify what it means to you as an individual person you don't mix things up. This individual sitting space of absolute value is like your own home, your home, you can relax you can be yourself, relax settle down. You don't need to say I, I, I. At home you don't need to say anything but out there you have to say "Shall I do this? Do you want me to do this?" and so on.

Sitting practice should not be mixed up with something you do, with activity that you do outside. Outside is in relationship. However, if we develop the right understanding about practice and the way that we practice, we practice in this kind of very limited way, settling ourselves, then no self can easily apply to various situations, various activities. The center is being held, the core of it, which is selflessness, is not being missed. But if you are busy with something like "I caused a problem to the other person, I was so selfish" or something like that then you are caught up with that kind of stuff and you always go into the viscous circles of ego driven activity, sometimes you feel good about it "I was very compassionate, I was so selfless" sometimes you feel bad and on and on.

Those are the things that the ego, the self does. We need to know those things and if you are too busy with your own self dealing with mundane stuff then you have very little chance to know about your own self. Dogen Zenji speaks about the way in Shobogenzo Genjokoan "To study the Buddha Way is to study the self, to study the self is to forget the self" So to learn the self we need to forget the self and as long as you are interested in thinking about whether I'm doing good or bad or all those things you will never get to the place where you can talk about these things. This can be overcome by practice, you can come to nearness very quickly if you just learn to yawn. In yawning you are very near, not too far, yes it's that simple! Then the arguments stop, some thoughts may come but no one continues to argue after yawning! It's too silly to do something after it. In that sense animals are much better than us, they know, they put themselves back into position, they tune their position and they can resume their life after taking a nap, on a warm day a cat takes a nap, wakes up, stretches as if nothing had happened, right back in the spot, very near.

So we are not trying to become like a cat but the example of an animal is just to point out that way. If you are not quite sure about the body part, the physical part, then at least you can pay attention to the breath. Breath is important -if we just reach pure breath, just breathing without operating your consciousness then it's wonderful. On retreat, towards the end of three or four days, you start to think it's wonderful to breathe! I feel wonderful just being able to breathe because you are so near to it. Ultimately, if you put your body into practice, if you put the practice forward it doesn't matter what your mind is telling you. When the body acts in accord with selflessness, in a selfless mode everything is revealed.

And so to be truly selfless, even this body is thrown away, this body itself is offered. That is the final thing. Throughout history spiritual teachers have pointed this out and have shown examples of offering their very own bodies in the practice and also in social action. People who don't know anything about spiritual practice see it as a self sacrifice but the practitioner doesn't think of it as his own body, that part is dropped.

Not only in Buddhist traditions but in any spiritual tradition you can find good examples of selflessness in social action. Buddhist traditions tend to go into the meditation room to try to touch selflessness, you know sometimes they don't do much about it but in Christian traditions through social actions they offer their body, they dedicate their body, it doesn't matter what you believe in when that happens it's selflessness in action.

One of the Christian stories that impressed me very much was a novel based on a true story that I read when I was about 20. It was about a ferry boat that sank between the northern part of Japan and the main island. The trip between the islands is very long - 9 or 12 hours and the ferries were huge,

they carried railway engines, trucks and so forth. It was typhoon time and a typhoon struck and the ferry began to sink. Of course the officers were helping people onto the lifeboats but the ship was sinking very fast and they couldn't get everybody. In the midst of that scene there was a Christian priest helping people get into the boats and he remained until the very last, helping, not trying to save himself.

This story had a powerful impact on me. It's the ultimate thing. "Wow! Could I do it?" A ship starts to sink or a plane begins to have problems, "Where's the parachute?" What would I do?

This selflessness manifests when you forget about your body and just act, those kind of things are just dropped and activity takes over. It's very difficult to be completely selfless but we can at least be near and if you become comfortable enough with nearness, if you practice nearness then your breath becomes naturally comfortable because you are not making a conscious effort do this or to do that then you become comfortable in nearness and there is the practice of no self. So put the emphasis on your body, throw your whole self into this posture.

Here, I'm talking about meditation but of course it's different when we go out in the market place or to work, in those situations there are actual relationships taking place but still the attitude is the same. We can't act selflessly if we are operating with calculative thinking, measuring, calculating what's good, what's bad, getting caught up in ideas of right and wrong instead of acting. The sequence in Buddhist practice is not the mind-consciousness breath or speech and then the body but always first the body, speech and then mind/consciousness. We need to understand this, if this is very clear and it is applied then selfless qualities are naturally developed.

This is difficult because we think this and that, we learn to think calculatively. To meet with a person that you had a big argument with yesterday is not easy, today you meet again and you don't feel good about it because you are thinking all those things that happened yesterday but learn to drop it, just be able to meet and shake hands. That simple action already overcomes the ego problem you have. What the mind is doing is not so important, the mind has its own functions, just allow it to have its own functions, sometimes the mind is upset, sometimes the mind is happy but we shouldn't take it too seriously. We can take it like saliva, you know, something the body produces naturally but we don't often see it like that.

Selflessness is an important topic and I hope that you are interested in how to practice it, how to deepen, how to deepen nearness. Ultimately, if a selfless action takes place you don't know what is happening, actually if you are acting selflessly you don't have the slightest idea about how selfless you are, what you did or anything like that, you just forget about it and life goes on. If you had a good sitting or the engagement in sitting was very good you forget about it as soon as the sitting period is over, you know you go from that space on to the next, you don't think, "Oh that sitting was so good I should bring that kind of samadhi or concentration into day to day life" that's not necessary. But our small minds try to fix those kind of ideas. Suzuki Roshi simply said "develop non-gaining ideas." Develop non-gaining ideas and in day to day life we learn to keep the same attitude to give our whole body in action and hopefully the practice of non-gaining, the body and action come together. This kind of body based practice, gives us experience through action and we slowly learn to express what that is and later on we realize "Oh I wasn't that bad."

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