

SELF CONSIDERATION: PERMANENT IMPERMANENCE

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The Buddhist teachings point out that we don't have a truly-existing or permanent Self. What is that all about?

They do not say that we don't have a self; of course we all do. What they say is that the self that we do have has no true existence (as in: permanency), but rather is like a patchwork quilt made up of whatever we have drawn around us and are attached to. Here is an example.

For most of us our self is the literal and figurative center of our existence – home base. Our self as center is inviolate and around that center most of us arrange our life. And while the center of our self is always with us, what that center is made up with is constantly changing. In other words, while the center is more or less permanent, what we consider central to us at any time in our life changes.

As a kid that center might be our first bike or a new video game. In our teens it could be sports or our current girlfriend, and as adults we may find our wife, husband, or child as most central. The idea of a center stays, but what we consider central changes. As the Buddhist point out, what we consider as comprising our self is not permanent, but always in flux. And there is more.

The aggregate of attachments that we refer to as our self is not always coherent. It does not always hang together in one piece. As we all know, our self too has ups and downs. For many of us it does not take much to depress or threaten our self and once in a while some singular event manages to completely shatter that self and make it go empty - void. We lose all sense of self. That is scary.

This is the emptiness of the self that Buddhists point out but for most of us this is not an experience we look forward to or consider enlightening. In fact, most of us do everything we can to avoid losing our sense of self. That naked loss-of-self experience is anathema for most folks. When it happens, we move heaven and earth to put our fragmented and shattered self back together again, Humpty-Dumpty like.

In summary, the self is permanently with us but what it consists of is a miss-match of whatever we are attached to or interested in at the moment, a collection of likes and dislikes that has no permanent meaning, no permanent anything. It changes as we do. We could say that we each permanently have a self that is impermanent. Make any sense?

Moreover, through the process of meditation we gradually pick through our self like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, piece by piece. Under or behind it all, as mentioned, is nothing but the impermanence of an ever-changing collection of whatever we like at the moment. It is completely empty of any true or permanent existence, but at the same time it is filled with all our distractions. That's not so hard to understand, is it?

Taking our self too seriously, calling it "Ego" or bad and then doing battle with it only makes it stronger. You can't weaken a self by drawing attention to it, good or bad. Since the self will always be there for us, our perpetual secretary telling us when we have a dentist appointment and what not, it is better to get to know our self a little better.

I find that being kind to myself is a good first step. At least I try to treat myself as I would treat any other person, perhaps no better but yet not worse. And what I really find useful is to put myself out to pasture like we would an old cow or bull. Give it what it needs; allow it to be content. The self is really nothing to be afraid of and likes to be taken good care of. It wants to feel safe. We can do that for our self.

And I am not ashamed of myself, either. I know myself well enough to be understanding to its demands (what it wants), which is not to say I encourage it to puff up and swagger. Not at all. But I am not afraid of myself either. I don't let it run my life. Self-control is something we all have to learn and a good thing too. And we control our self with kindness and compassion.

The bottom line as I understand it is simple kindness and consideration to anyone, including ourselves.

As mentioned, the self is made up of all manner of things we have become attached to or feel are important. You can't remove them all in a day and you can be sure that in time they will be replaced by still other attachments. It is far easier to feed ourselves with better attachments than it is to attempt to tear out whatever we currently have. Time will do that quite naturally.

So my advice to me is to relax. Go easy with yourself in this regard. Years ago, when I finally began to understand myself a little, I just turned it out to pasture, gave it enough of what it wanted (mostly a little attention) to be content and gradually replaced what was not good for me to be attached to with better alternatives. It is much better now than it was and no violence was done along the way.

And I am not offended when I meet someone who obviously likes and cares for themselves too. This is totally understandable to me. For the most part, I also like myself. No harm done. Here is a little poem I wrote last year about this:

ME AND YOU

The fact that,
I like 'me',
Does not mean,
I don't like,
You.

There is room,
For you,
In me.

And,
You can like,
You too.

You too,
Are,
Like me.

I like you too!

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