

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 04-12-2016.

In spiritual circles we are often told to let go of the self and that letting go of self is a sign of spiritual maturity. For instance, in the Theravāda Buddhist model of spiritual development, letting go of self is a hallmark of two of the stages of Awakening. At the first stage, Stream-entry, we are said to let go of self-view, *sakkāyadiṭṭhi* in the Pāli, also translated as Identity-view or Personality-view. At the last stage of Awakening, Arahantship, we are said to let go of all sense of a separate and distinct self. But in the understanding of Theravāda Buddhism what does self mean in terms of our own individual lives, and how does one let go of it, beginning with self view?

To help us understand this, I want to talk in terms of windows. Suppose you were standing in front of a wall that had a window in it. If you were to look out the window you could see many things. But when you look out through a window, your view is also framed by the wall that surrounds the window. So your view is always limited in some ways.

Most of us usually view our world of experiences through the window of self, the window of I, me and mine. So when there are bodily experiences — sensations of hardness or softness, roughness or smoothness, heaviness or lightness, heat or cold, stickiness or flowing, pushing or supporting/upholding — we typically think of them in terms of "I" or "me." For example: "*I* am having this experience" or "*My* body is feeling this way" or, simply, "*I am* this sensation." In other words we view all of these experiences through the window of self.

When there are experiences of pleasantness, experiences of pain or unpleasantness, or experiences that are neither-painful-nor-pleasant, we typically think "*I* like that" or "*I* don't like that," "*I* want that" or "*I* don't want that," "*I* am bored by that," or perhaps "*I am* that pleasantness," "*I am* that pain, but wish I weren't," and so forth.

The same is true with mind-states such as happiness or sadness, wanting or revulsion, confusion or clarity, contraction or spaciousness, and so forth. With mind-states we're even more likely to regard them as "I am," such as "I am happy," "I am sad." Associated with viewing our experiences in this way, we develop concepts, ideas about who "I" am, we develop images of "me", and we develop identities based on these concepts and ideas, such as "I'm a man" or "I'm a woman" or "I'm a meditator" and so forth. We even compare

these concepts, images, and identities with concepts, images, and identities of other people, of other I's and me's, such as "I'm a man and men are like this, so he's not a real man," or "Those men are like this, but I'm not like this so I must not be a real man." You get the idea, I'm sure.

Viewing our experiences in these ways is so natural, so automatic, that we often don't think about it. Maybe we can't even comprehend that there might be another way of viewing them. Because of this we may not see the ways that this window of self, this window of identification with experiences, often leads to misery for ourselves or others. We may not see how it justifies acting in greedy or angry ways. We may not see how it can reinforce painful self-judgments. We may not see how it leads to harm for ourselves and others.

The Buddha discovered and offered us an alternative view, an alternative window onto the world of experience: the window of the Four Noble Truths. When we use the Four Noble Truths as a window onto life's experiences, we drop, at least for this moment, the window of self-view, of identification.

If we pay close attention to the First Noble Truth, we find that *dukkha* is associated with self-view. One of the Buddha's descriptions of the First Noble Truth is:

“Now this...is the noble truth of *dukkha*: birth is *dukkha*, aging is *dukkha*, illness is *dukkha*, death is *dukkha*; union with what is displeasing is *dukkha*; separation from what is pleasing is *dukkha*; not to get what one wants is *dukkha*; in brief, the five aggregates subject to clinging are *dukkha*.”¹

How do we work with the truth, the reality of *dukkha*, without reinforcing self-view? I want to mention some things that I find useful about examining experiences through the window of the First Noble Truth.

First, it needs to be done with mindfulness and with mettā, otherwise one can quickly fall into identification and judgment, bringing more *dukkha* into the world. Related to meeting experiences with mindfulness is seeing them as *events*. "This is simply a sensation, or a feeling, or a perception, or an intention, or a moment of consciousness arising." When we view experiences as events rather than as who we are it really shifts our relationship to life. This is one of the powers of the practice of mindfulness.

Then, when I recognize that there is an experience of *dukkha* I find it really useful to take it as a sign. It is a "Pay skillful attention to this!" sign, not a "Try to avoid this if at all possible!" sign.

Another thing I try to do is to look at it in a way that doesn't deny that I'm having this experience but also doesn't personalize it. One of my favorite ways of doing this is to frame it with the expression "Ah, this is part of what it is like to be a human being on this earth."

Then we have the Second Noble Truth: There is an origin of *dukkha* which is *taṇhā*: thirst, hunger or craving. The sutta description is:

“Now this...is the noble truth of the origin of *dukkha*: it is this craving which leads to renewed existence, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here and there; that is, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for existence, craving for extermination.”²

So getting caught in craving / thirst / hunger, grasping after it, identifying with it, leads to experiences that are unsatisfactory, stressful and sometimes even suffering.

A simple example that we all learn as we do this practice has to do with a sensation with painful feeling arising in the body. If we respond to this with craving for a pleasant feeling to replace it, we often struggle with the painful feeling, tightening up, trying to avoid it. This usually ends up intensifying and prolonging the experience of painful feeling, rather than ending it.

Of course we can crave for pleasant experiences at any of the sense doors. When we do, it leads to a quality of agitation until we get what we crave. Then after the initial bit of pleasantness and satisfaction, that fades away and we turn to something else to give us more pleasantness. So the agitation continues.

Craving for existence is, as I've come to understand it, really about our social needs: our hunger to be acknowledged, to be affirmed, to feel connected to others, to feel useful. These are deep conditioners that drive so much of our activity. Craving these qualities, we may be afraid that we may not get them; we may feel hurt or angry when we fail to get them in the way we want.

Then there is the hunger, the craving for extermination. At its extreme it can be a craving for suicide. But my understanding of it is more broad than that. I understand it as simply a craving, a hunger, to not be in this situation, to not have to deal with these circumstances, to not be seen in the way that I am being seen.

Working with craving arises naturally out of seeing clearly when *dukkha* is present. When I've finally managed to recognize that *dukkha* is present, some of what I've found helpful is, once again, meeting it with mindfulness and *mettā*, and viewing it as events. Along with that I find using an investigative approach to be helpful. I might ask myself "Theory tells me that when *dukkha* is present there is *taṇhā*, craving or hunger lying under it. So what is being craved?" After recognizing what underlies the craving I often ask "Can I simply be open to that hunger without getting entangled with it?"

When we can bring mindfulness, *mettā* and investigation to our experiences of *dukkha* and craving/hunger, then we are on the path of practice to the ending of *dukkha*. That there is a path, that we don't just have to stay stuck in *dukkha* forever and ever, is the Fourth Noble Truth. When we are able to meet our experiences in this way, we can get a taste, or maybe more, of the cessation of *dukkha*. In other words we get a taste of the Third Noble Truth.

Rather than regarding the Four Noble Truths as something to believe, see if you can truly make them the window through which you approach each moment of experience, each moment of your life. When you remember to do this, notice what effect it has on your mind, your heart, your life.

© Philip L. Jones, 2016

Notes

1. SN 56.11, adapted from Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2000./ retrieved from SuttaCentral, <https://suttacentral.net/en/sn56.11>, on 2016-04-08. This excerpt from *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha* by Bhikkhu Bodhi is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/deed.en_US) (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/deed.en_US).

Notes: 1) Dropped the term of address "bhikkhus" to make the text more inclusive.

2) Changed the word "suffering" to the Pāli *dukkha* so as to include the range of meanings of that word.

Text also found at *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, p. 1844.

2. *ibid.*