

Wholesome Fabrications

Health Food for the Mind - Thanissaro Bhikku

We know that the Buddha often talked about not-self, but he also talked positively about self. He said that the self should be its own mainstay, that it should observe itself and reprimand itself when it's gone astray, and that there's a need to learn not to harm oneself. Here are some passages from the Dhammapada that speak positively of the role of self on the path.

“Purity and impurity are one’s own doing.
No one purifies another.
No other purifies one.”
— Dhp 165

These passages show that a sense of self is an important part of the practice — especially a sense of self that encourages responsibility, heedfulness, and care. The question is: Why would it be necessary to create this skillful sense of self? If ultimately you’re going to develop the perception of not-self, why spend time developing a perception of self?

The short answer is that the path is a skill, and, as with many other skills, there are many different stages in mastering it. Sometimes you have to do one thing at one stage, and turn around and erase it at another. It’s like making a chair. At one stage you have to mark the wood with a pencil so that you can cut it properly, but when you’re ready to apply the final finish, you have to sand the pencil marks away.

The long answer begins with a fact that I mentioned last night: that the path to the unconditioned is conditioned. In the Buddha’s terminology, it’s fabricated. The fact that it’s a fabricated path leading to an unfabricated goal means that you have to develop some fabricated qualities along the way that you’ll have to let go when you arrive at the goal. Too

often we focus on the goal without paying attention to the path, but it’s only through focusing on the path that you can arrive at the goal. If you focus all your attention off in the distance, you won’t see where you’re actually stepping. You may trip and fall.

So when you focus on the fact that the path is fabricated, the first thing you have to notice is that it’s something you have to put together through your own voluntary efforts. The path involves actively developing good qualities and letting go of bad qualities, and you have to will yourself to do this. To motivate your will, you need a healthy sense of self, realizing that you’ll benefit from fabricating the path and that you have within you the capabilities that the path requires. Only at the end of the path, when you no longer need these forms of motivation, can you let go of every possible sense of self.

In his first noble truth, Buddha identifies suffering as the five clinging-aggregates. The word “clinging” here is the important part of the compound. The five aggregates offer opportunities for suffering to the mind because out of ignorance we cling to them. Without the clinging, they would not be a burden. Now, the word for clinging, *upādāna*, also refers to the act of taking sustenance or food. The aggregates are things that we feed on, feeding both in the physical sense and in the mental sense. For example we find mental nourishment in feelings and perceptions and fabrications. So the Buddha’s basic analogy for the process of suffering is the act of feeding.

He says that we feed on the aggregates in four ways. The first way is through passion for sensuality. Here “sensuality” means your obsession with sensual resolves and intentions. In other words, you cling to thoughts about sensual pleasures. You can think for hours about a sensual pleasure and how to get it — as when you plan to go out for an excellent meal — even though the actual

pleasure of the meal itself may last for only a short time. The obsession with thinking about sensuality is what constitutes the clinging.

The second way that we cling to and feed on the aggregates is through our views about them — our opinions, our theories about how the world works and what issues are important to hold opinions on. The most extreme form of clinging through views believes that simply holding a view can take you to heaven or whatever, but the act of clinging to and feeding on views works in subtler ways as well.

The third way we feed on the aggregates is through our attachment to certain habits and practices. We believe that things have to be done in certain ways in order to be right. The extreme form of this clinging is ritual: The idea that simply performing an action properly, regardless of your motivation, carries a certain magical power that bends the world to your will or makes you better than other people.

The fourth way of feeding on the aggregates is through our ideas about what the self is and whether it exists or not. As we saw last night, when we cling to ideas of what we are, we get entangled in all sorts of complications.

Now, even though these four ways of clinging cause suffering, they do provide some nourishment, some strength to the mind. Otherwise, we wouldn't bother feeding in this way. We see that the energy put into clinging is repaid by the strength we get from these activities. But as is the case with physical food, mental food can be either wholesome or unwholesome for you. Even though unhealthy food can give you some strength, it can also cause you health problems over the long term. The same principle applies to the mind.

One way we can think of the path is as health food for the mind. We need this nourishment to give the mind strength, for otherwise we wouldn't be able to engage in the fabrication needed for the path. Ultimately, the path will bring the mind to a level of strength where it no longer needs to feed. But in the meantime, we need mental food to develop the strength and stamina needed to bring us to that point.

So the Buddha's strategy is to use some of these forms of clinging in a skillful way as steps on the path. We have to hold to right

views. We have to hold to the precepts, which are habits, and the practice of jhāna, right concentration, which counts as a practice. We also need to develop a healthy sense of self, which is self-reliant, responsible, and heedful. So we need to feed in these three ways. As for clinging to sensuality: This is the one type of clinging that has no role on the path, but we do require external conditions conducive to training the mind. We need a certain amount of sensory pleasure provided by food, clothing, shelter, medicine, and the pleasures of a peaceful, quiet place to meditate. We're advised not to obsess over these things, but if we haven't yet gotten to the point where we can maintain our mental center everywhere, we have to hold to the principle of searching out surroundings conducive for the practice whenever we can.

To wean the mind off its usual habit of feeding on sensuality, we have to train it to enjoy the genuine health food provided by the other means of skillful clinging. This is one of the main reasons why we have to feed it with meditation. The pleasure and rapture of a calm mind help provide the sense of well-being we need in the here and now to be willing to change our diet. And the practice of jhāna, in turn, needs to be well fed with right views and the healthy sense of self-esteem that comes from the habits of generosity and virtue. Otherwise we won't be able to endure the difficulties inherent in getting the mind to settle down and stay there.

At the same time, as concentration develops, it provides an even greater sense of self-esteem, which ensures that when you finally do apply the perception of not-self to all phenomena in an all-around way, you don't do it with neurotic self-hatred. This is an important point because sometimes the teaching on not-self is used as an excuse for self-hatred. In other words, "I don't like myself, so I'll deny that my self exists." This is not healthy. But when you develop a healthy strength of concentration, you understand that you've taken your healthy sense of self as far as it can go. At that point you're ready for the next step in spiritual maturity. You let go for the sake of greater health. It's only then that you no longer need to feed.
