

Self & Soul IV
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Good evening, bodhisattvas!

Six weeks or so ago we were having a conversation about self and soul, and then a bunch of other stuff happened, but I'd like to go back and pick that conversation up and keep going with it a while longer.

When I'm talking about self and soul, just to remind or tell people who weren't there then, I'm speaking in particular ways and meaning particular things by that. By self I mean that thing which we're most vividly aware of as the voice in our heads, the one who's telling the story, all the time, and not only telling the story but doing the exegesis in the margins, all the judgments and opinions and evaluations of things as the story unfolds. Mostly that's the way we relate to it, although there are other things the self does that I want to talk about tonight.

When I'm speaking of the soul I'm speaking of a particular thing, which is a kind of storehouse or repository of all of our experiences. In our psyches there is a place where everything that's ever happened to us, everything that we've ever experienced, comes in like a leaf, and the leaves float in and float in and pile up and pile up and pile up. As each one comes in, it perfumes the storehouse with the quality of that experience, whatever it was. And, in contrast to the self, which is wanting to put things in a narrative and give things meaning and value, none of that exists in the soul. The soul makes no meaning. The soul, in the way I am using it, doesn't value things. It doesn't accept or reject. Things just pile up and juxtapose and perfume the storehouse with their qualities.

Often in the spiritual life, and particularly if we're doing meditation practices, the self is that thing we think we need to fix. Often we can have a kind of adversarial relationship with the self, or feel that the self is oppressive, and one of the things we hope meditation will do is quiet that self down and give us some peace every once in a while from its constant wanting to make sure we understand what is going on and what it all means.

What caused me to take up the themes of the self and the soul really were two things. One is where we ended up last time, which has to do with the brilliance of the Mahayana Buddhist descriptions of the heart-mind and the psyche. And while it is brilliant and precise and has endured a very long time because it says something we apparently think is true about the nature of being human, it lacks a certain warmth. So one of the things that attracted me to this was the thought of bringing in a more non-buddhist idea of soul, which has a kind of warmth inherent in it. And to see what would happen when we brought those two things together.

So one impetus was a quest for warmth in our understanding of our own heart-minds. And the other was just being sick and tired of the way the self gets dissed all the time, the way we're always having a negative view of the self, and an assumption of the problematic nature of the self. So the second impetus was a project to see if the self could be redeemed in some way, so that it wasn't just this Big Problem we have.

One way to do that, which we talked about in earlier times, is to look at what a self does, and what a self does well. What are the parts of the self that we're actually pretty glad we have? And where are the ways in which the self has overstepped those bounds, and when did that become difficult for us?

The self gives us a coherent sense of who we are, and a coherent sense of what the world is, so that when I wake up in the morning, in the instant it takes for my eyelids to open, the self reassembles the world for me. So I open my eyes and, most mornings, I wake up in the same bed I went to sleep in the night before, and the room is the same and the world beyond the French doors is the same. That's all the work of the self, to instantly make that available to us so that we don't have to get up every morning and say, "Who am I? Where am I? What is this?"

We get out of bed and hit the floor, and the self does its job so beautifully and invisibly that we don't even think about the fact that we know that when our feet hit the floor they're not going to keep going; they're going to stop there. The floor's going to hold us up. And we're going to walk into the bathroom and know what a faucet is for, and what toothpaste is. And, for my own self, know that just yards away there's this black ground substance that if I mix with water and heat up I'm going to get this one last, beautiful cup of the night, cup of darkness, that paradoxically is going to propel me into the day with its joy and happiness for life.

That's all the gift of the self. That's the good stuff the self does for us. And, even further, if someone shows up — all of a sudden Desdemona is there — the self lets me know about that self, the self has a sense of other selves, and says: Oh, Desdemona! This is our history with Desdemona. This is how we feel, this is what's it's like to encounter her. I don't have to ask: Who are you? Who are you to me? What's happened between us? All of that is there and available.

Since I've been contemplating this material I've been doing a little practice with myself, which is to notice the gifts of the self as my feet hit the floor, as I'm walking to the bathroom and know what a faucet is for, as I make that coffee and a friend comes over. And I've been saying, *Thank You. Thank you for the floor. Thank you for the faucet. Thank you for Desdemona.* It seems kind of silly, but I've been amazed at how soft that makes my relationship with the self, and how much kindness has come into it. And how the self seems to enjoy that, and be quite willing to go on providing things in a simple, non-explanatory way — if the simple, non-explanatory things are appreciated. Just a thought, but consider thanking the self as you go through the day for all the small things, all the small gifts of the self — the way it makes life so much easier.

One of the ways we talked about the difficult aspect of the self is like this : Here is its great beauty. We are this organism. We've evolved into this incredibly complicated organism and we can get into a lot of trouble. You know, it's a complicated world, there's a lot of stuff going on; it's not always warm and friendly. Within the human psyche, the self is the thing that has stepped forward and said, "I'll take care of that. I'll manage survival." When it is doing that, when it is telling you what a floor is for and all of that, it's tremendously helpful and important. It keeps us, actually, alive and physically coherent as beings.

Where it becomes problematic is when a shift happens somewhere in our evolution — which probably has to do with how complicated our consciousnesses are — and the self made this tremendous error where suddenly it began to think of itself not as that which supports the existence of an organism, but that the organism was that which supports the existence of the self. It reversed the roles and began to see the human person it had volunteered to keep alive as being the thing that kept *it* alive, and the important thing is that the self persist.

But before that, and still — simultaneous with this grave error — there is the part of it working for our benefit. This seems particularly important to me these days as I think about the nature of soul. I stand in awe of the soul's capacity to accept everything. The soul rejects no experience, rejects no feeling, rejects no event, rejects no thought. It accepts everything. That is, to me, awe-inspiring : that there is a place in us, in our human beingness, that doesn't reject anything, that accepts everything, that allows everything to enter and perfume the storehouse.

Just for a moment feel your way into that, into that idea that there is a place in you that has never once rejected anything — for the entire span of your life has accepted everything that's happened. This a very powerful and, to me, beautiful thing, and, it's also true that's it's a complicated, gnarly, bumpy world. So, it's maybe good to also have a self which says, "Lovely. Accept everything, if you wish. That's a good thing." The soul stands in the middle of an open field and a leaf falls down, which is the experience of standing in the open field, and that's good. And the soul stands on railroad tracks and there's a train coming at it. And the leaf of standing on the railroad tracks with the train coming at it falls down, and the soul says that is good. That's where the self comes in. The self says, "Let's not stand on the railroad track with the train coming at us. Let's stand in the open field."

When I think about the self and the soul in collaboration that way, that is also to me very beautiful. It lets the soul be the soul. It lets the soul accept. And it lets us have access to that part of ourselves which accepts everything, because it's taking care of the discriminations between railroad track and open field. There's a great wisdom in the self.

An image I've always loved that seems similar to that is the poet Rilke's image of the universe as a vast blind angel who can't see herself, can't see inside herself to the things of the world. He thought that part of our job as creative human beings is to take that blind angel by the hand and say, "Look : Floor. Altar. Ceiling. Light. Person." To show the blind angel herself. That seems similar to the sense of self I'm describing now, that the self takes the soul by the hand and makes sure that it navigates, makes sure that it survives, makes sure that it can go on accepting and being perfumed by experience.

When I hold the self that way, I feel a tremendous warmth towards it. I feel tremendous gratitude. And its mistakes, its oversteppings, its relentless chatter, its seemingly bottomless desire to make meaning and value out of everything almost becomes endearing. Not so

oppressive if that's not my main relationship with it. If my main relationship with it is this other one I'm suggesting tonight, then all that other stuff just doesn't seem so important. I notice that as it doesn't seem so important, it quiets down on its own. It takes up less space, it's less insistent. I'm fine with it; it's okay with me, and I'm not paying that much attention to it because I'm having this other kind of gorgeous relationship of gratitude for the self and warmth about it.

So this is where I'm beginning the work for myself of redeeming that self, and what I want to turn to in coming times is something that we touched on the last time we were talking about this. That is, when you take these ideas of self and soul and you put them next to Mahayana psychology or the Mahayana understanding of the nature of consciousness, something interesting happens. In that Mahayana understanding, there are eight levels of consciousness. The first five are the sense consciousnesses: our sensory organs and the experiences that those organs have — seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, and smelling. And then the sixth consciousness is the mind. There are two ways of understanding the mind consciousness. One is that it receives the sensory information that comes in through the first five consciousnesses and makes a kind of sense out of them. The other that's quite interesting to me is that the mind is also a sensory organ whose object is thoughts. So the mind is perceiving thoughts in the same way the eye is perceiving what is visible, or the ear is perceiving what is audible. The mind is perceiving thoughts and doing something with them.

Underneath those six is the seventh consciousness, which I'm suggesting relates to the self as I'm describing it. And the poor seventh consciousness in a lot of the Mahayana texts gets called bad names. It gets insulted, you know. It's the "defiled consciousness" or the "corrupted consciousness" or the "deluded consciousness." I want to suggest that maybe we just think of it as the mistaken consciousness. See what happens if you make that shift.

In the traditional Mahayana system the mistake that that consciousness makes is that it looks at the next consciousness, the eighth level of consciousness, which is the storehouse, the soul, and mistakenly thinks that there is an abiding, permanent self there. It misses the fact that it's just this accumulation, it's just this lifetime of acceptance of experience, and it wants to endlessly impose a story on the contents of that consciousness. That's the mistake it makes.

In the traditional Mahayana view, that storehouse of experience which we're calling the soul is also the seat of what is called the *tathagatagarbha*, which, as we talked about before, is the womb of suchness. It's within the soul, within that place that accepts all experience, that our own buddha nature is inherent, and our own awakening is inherent. That's where it resides, grows, gestates, and out of which it eventually will arise.

In the same way that there is this awakening inherent in the storehouse, in the soul, that will — even if it's after kalpas — eventually emerge into the world, there is something similar to that in what we're calling the self, in the mistaken consciousness. There is a wisdom there that emerges in the same way that awakening emerges from the storehouse consciousness. When we can develop a good relationship, a warm relationship, with the self, we are creating the circumstances in which that wisdom can emerge. As long as we see the self as the enemy, as long as we see it as something that's up to no good that we need to cut down, shut up, shove away, all of that stuff, how can its innate wisdom possibly emerge? I think it can only emerge if we develop a relationship with it that calls it forth. And, fortunately, we have the whole world to help us call it forth in the same way that we have the whole world to help us call forth awakening from the storehouse of the soul.

That's where I'd like to go with this : to continue to talk about how we can have a good relationship with that self and that soul, how we can create the circumstances in which the self and the soul can have a good relationship with each other, and how in so doing we can create the circumstances of our own awakening and our own wisdom, our own good self emerging and finding life in the world, finding life *with* the world in relationship with the things of the world. That's the direction we're headed. I'll stop here for tonight but welcome any comments or questions you may have.

Q : Where does the self fit in with that scheme of the parts of consciousness?

JIS : It's the seventh consciousness, the mistaken consciousness, the one that looks at the soul and sees a coherent, permanent thing.

Q : You said that the storehouse is the bottom, and so is there is a sense of that somehow supporting or upholding?

JIS : Yes, all of the other seven consciousnesses. If you think of it spatially like that, you can also see the possibility of that seventh consciousness, what is now the mistaken consciousness, either acting as obstructor or gatekeeper for the storehouse consciousness. One of the transformations we can make is from obstructor ... It can't obstruct anything coming in, but it can obstruct our having access or relationship to it, or it can act as a gatekeeper and help us develop a strong relationship with the contents of the soul.

Q2 : How would you describe the relationship between the eighth consciousness and the soul?

JIS : I think they are two different ways of describing the same thing, with different emphases.

Q2 : I understand the eighth consciousness is a repository of not just our experience but of all experience. It doesn't belong to the self. But you are saying it is the same thing, the repository of this consciousness' experience.

JIS : Yes, and there's a place in the storehouse where the particular experiences of this particular human person meet all the other experiences and all the other consciousnesses. It's porous.

Q2 : Where does karma come in? I see that as such a self-propelled thing, but when you talk about experiences and leaves dropping, it sounds like there's a karmic quality to it.

JIS : Yeah. In the traditional Mahayana view, what happens is that some of those leaves of experience, based on the energy or charge they carry, settle down into the storehouse and actually make seeds. That's where karma comes from : the seeds that are created by those experiences. Those seeds will sprout into new experiences either immediately or in the next lifetime or kalpas later.

Q2 : But then, what's volition or intention? How does that affect it? I see volition as where karma can change or where it is created. It seems like volition is part of the self rather than the soul.

JIS : I think that's true. One of the things I want to explore is whether it's possible that as self and soul, seventh and eighth consciousnesses, change, the components of self like volition also change and become not just where we make new karma by our intentions and what we do, but actually can work with older karma. If we can open that storehouse gate and have

access to it, is there a way we can be not just the overseer, but actually participate in transforming? That probably needs a lot more time to talk about.

Q3 : So, you have a collective nature, a soul, that is porous. You envision that there's a collective nature that is two. Is there anything like that on the self level?

JIS : Not so much. In some Mahayana philosophy there's a ninth layer of consciousness, which is the collective consciousness where we meet the rest of it. Some systems have eight levels and some have nine. Some locate the collective in the ninth. I am inclined to think of the eighth as porous and meeting all the other consciousnesses. We've used this image before but for me it works so well; it comes from Rilke. The sense that in every being there is the place where you meet God, and it is the essence of that being. And in one direction — he was talking about a dog — if you *in-see* a dog you see that place where you can sit down with God and enjoy the dogness of it. In one direction it becomes less and less particular and feathers out into the vastness. And in the other direction it becomes more and more *dog*, until you get a bark. Ruff. To me there is something quite resonant about the sense that we're each of us, and everything is, a kind of spectrum, a continuum from absolute empty, vast sunyata becoming more and more specific into "Dave."

Q3 : On the self level, is there a collective "we" that has a story?

JIS : Gosh, I think our experience would say yes, very much so. The stories get together and talk with each other, and make a bigger story. It's tremendously powerful for good and ill in the world.

Q4 : Could you say a little bit more about the "coldness" in the traditional view?

JIS : When I read the traditional descriptions of the mind, it's so brilliant in terms of what they understood about, say, sensory consciousnesses : There's the organ that perceives, there's the thing perceived, and there's the act of perception, and that each perception is made up of those three elements. There's the understanding of the nature of mind in terms of volition and all the other aspects of it. There's what is called the deluded consciousness or the defiled consciousness that is just wrong. And the storehouse is just a storehouse, just a place where stuff accumulates.

The feeling I have about it is that it is so brilliant, so clear, so precise; the maps and descriptions of states of consciousness are so detailed ... What I don't feel in them is a kind of human warmth. It feels like the description of a machine. You know? A very accurate

description in terms of how things technically work, but missing something somehow. What I think we would call "soul." I was kidding about this when we talked before, but an easy way to refer to that is to say : We know what we mean when we say someone has "soulful" eyes, and it's unlikely we're ever going to say : Wow, she really has storehouse consciousness eyes. It just doesn't have the same feeling, although they might just be different ways of describing the same thing.