

SELF-IDENTITY AND DEATH

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By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Friends, this is one of those very long didactic explanations I like to give and is not recommended for everyone. You have been warned.

Consciousness transference is not just an exotic spiritual concept that refers to some live-long event at the end of life. We can benefit from learning it now, and begin the process of transferring our conscious attachment from what makes up what we call our self to the mind itself, that which we will actually be taking with us when we die. We should all learn the difference.

Putting all our eggs in the one basket of our personal self, thinking of our self as permanent thing is a recipe for despair, because the process of life (and certainly of death) will painstakingly remove our clinging fingers from each attachment to allow us to go free. And it will be heartbreakingly painful. We shall be released, like it or not, sooner or later.

It is never too early to start thinning out the attachment to our self, and the self is nothing but attachment. Some say the Buddhists teach that there is no self, and even the thought appears frightening to many, but that is not a true statement. We all have, have always had, and will always have a 'self'. It is the general secretary of our mind, the one who knows how to drive the car and wash the dishes. We could not operate without one.

To my understanding, what the Buddhists do teach is that there is no permanent self that we take with us when we die, and they give reasons. While we always will have a personal executor (the self), the attachments that make up that self are fleeting and impermanent. They endlessly change as we do through life, and they in the end (at our death) are no more permanent than our body is.

What we refer to each day as our self is nothing other than the sum total of our attachments and labels, likes and dislikes. Attachment is the glue that holds the self together. If we remove or thin the attachment a bit with awareness, it becomes clear that our attachments endlessly change, even month to month. What we consider so essential or are attached to as a child, like a new bicycle, is not how we make up our self when we are thirty years old, and so on. And we do just make the self up.

What IS unchanging about the personal self is 'attachment' itself. That's all the self is, and our attachments becomes the cloak in which we hide and take refuge. Unfortunately, the personal self is not a good place of refuge. It is impermanent and what it is made up of will not last beyond our death. As long as we don't get too attached to our self, it is not a big problem, but if we plan on taking that self with us or mind losing it when we die, that is a problem.

At any given moment, like the perfect conservative it is, the self resists change, and any sudden change threatens or can even shatter the self, at least for a time, until we pick up the pieces and put what I call our 'Humpty-Dumpty Self' back together again. We cling to our self.

I do not mean this blog to be an exposition on the nature of our self, but rather an introduction to thinning out the self, learning to transfer our consciousness and beginning to identify more with the mind itself, that part of us which actually will transmigrate at our death. Our attachment to our personal self with its likes, dislikes, and labels is just a simple mistake, but one with great repercussions for us .

In other words, there are two things and they are different. There is our mind that most of us know little of and then there is the self, something we personally have created, maintain, and have come to know as "us." What would be helpful is to thin out our self-attachments so that the mind can begin to shine through. In other words, the self is a veil or a mask, literally a persona we present to ourselves and the world, and are very much attached to.

Further, as thinning-out the self happens, we naturally (but gradually) transfer (like lifeboats leaving a sinking ship) our consciousness from our attachment to the self that we know so well to our mind, which we then begin to get to know. By transferring our consciousness, we cease to identify so much with our self and begin to identify more with our mind. That is a big transference. It will happen all-at-once when we die, and at that time we will be more-or-less torn away from our self-attachments and plunged suddenly into the mind, with little introduction. Not recommended.

How much better if we can begin to make this transference gradually and consciously on our own. It is not that by thinning out our self-attachments that we will have no self, but rather that our self (which will always remain with us) becomes more transparent, and shining through the now-thinning veil of the self will be the light of the mind. Instead of exclusively identifying with the self (as we always have), as it thins out and we can begin to see through and beyond our self, we begin to know that we are not just that self, but rather the mind that uses a self. We are mind and the self is just our persona, our means rather than an end or 'the' end in itself. I understand; this is complicated and words do not describe it well.

Once we identify and transfer our consciousness to the mind, the self becomes the tool it always was, rather than the self we think we are, which self is impermanent and perishable, meaning: when we die, it dies too. It is this perishable quality of the self that makes so many think reincarnation is not a fact, and that, as the beer commercial tells us, we only go around once. I have given the following analogy many times before. I learned it from my first real dharma teacher, who drilled it into my head using this analogy.

There are two kinds of peaches, he would point out, the Cling and the Freestone. With the Cling, the pit has to be torn out of the flesh, while with the Freestone, it just naturally pops out. We have this same choice with how we view the self. If we cling to the self as to a lifeboat, it will

be torn away from us, and our exclusive identification with it will cause us enormous pain. That ship eventually sinks.

If we have transferred our consciousness and identification from the self to the mind, and managed to thin out the attachment to the self, letting go of that self will be relatively painless because we then know we are the mind, and not just the self. This absolutely is going to happen, ready or not. We can each decide whether we want to get ready for it or have it come upon us whenever it will, thus the image of the Grim Reaper.

Like a muscle we have never used, few of us know how to transfer our identification and consciousness from our habitual self (for self is a habit) to knowing the mind from which the self (and all things) arise. Up to now, we have only known the self and mistake it for all that we are. Distinguishing the two (the self from the mind) is what we are discussing here. And they are different and the difference is crucial to us.

The personal self is an ever-changing kaleidoscopic montage of everything we like and dislike, the sum total of our attachments. Because it is ever-changing, it is whatever we happen to care about at the moment. If the self is shattered and suddenly seen as empty, like when tragedy strikes close to home, we then discover its impermanent nature, at least for the time it takes to reestablish itself. The self does not like to be nakedly empty and scrambles to reanimate itself.

On the other hand the mind has no beginning and will have no end. From it everything, including the self, arises, and returns. We begin to discover the mind when our self goes void or we loosen our attachment to the self. We are the mind and not just the self, in a permanent way. When we discover this, we begin to identify with the mind more than the self, and the transfer of our identity and consciousness begins.

We can learn to exercise our ability to transfer our consciousness from impermanence to permanence, but it takes effort and practice. And most of all it takes awareness, at least enough to begin to distinguish what is important and will last from the unimportant.

For many, the self is a hot-potato, an enigma and mystery, the altar at which we worship. On the one hand we are told to be and love our self, and on the other not to be selfish. So which is it? This confusion is at the heart of this 's problems and right now, it rules.

For my own two cents, I learned first to tolerate myself, then to like and love myself, and finally not to take myself too seriously. I began to see through it. Long ago I spoke of treating myself as I would any other person, and of putting myself out to pasture (like to a nursing home) in some kind of perpetual care, gently disarming it, polishing away the attachment, and watching it become more transparent and obvious for what it is, a means, not an end.

Punishing, lecturing, hating the self is not any more useful than loving, adoring, and worshipping the self. Either way, it is simple misdirection, a distraction from getting to know the true nature of the mind itself. As my teacher used to say, and I have shared this with you before, "If you spend

all your time in the sideshow, the main tent will be gone.” The self is part of the sideshow. Here is a useful analogy.

Most of us use computers. Home computers have two kinds of memory, RAM and ROM. ROM contains the operating system and is there every time we turn the computer on. RAM is what we fill with whatever we want, programs, email, etc. However, when we turn the computer off, whatever is in RAM memory is lost. That is analogous to the self, and we lose its contents when we die.

But the ROM memory is permanent and comes back every time the computer starts up again. It is permanent. That is analogous to the mind. Just an analogy, but it could be helpful.