

The Last Stronghold of Self-View

by Gloria Taraniya Ambrosia

I find Buddhist practitioners to be quite good at establishing skillful intentions. We endeavor to keep the precepts, to rise up to the demands of daily practice, and to diminish sense desires. And this can be inspiring to witness. Our resolve is undeniable.

Still, the thing I hear most often as a Dhamma teacher is how frustrating it can be trying to stay on course once we establish our intentions. We are constantly faced with patterns and habits that that run contrary to our aspirations.

Certainly, we may have some degree of success following through on skillful intentions. We are highly motivated, and so can muster the wherewithal to stay on task—at least for a little while. But it seems no matter how hard we try, we often fall short of the mark in one way or another. It can be frustrating trying to control the thing directing the action, that is, our intention.

Fortunately, the Buddha offers help in this regard. In his teaching on intention, he points to a very subtle urge felt at the beginning of action. The Buddha tells us that intention is active not only in the things we do and say, but also in what we think. It is the force that drives action through body, speech and mind. It's like the rudder of a ship. It even directs our attention, determining what we attend to.

According to Buddhist teachings, intention is very subtle and almost entirely unconscious. It is present in every moment of our experience. Nothing happens without this volitional activity. It can be an unskillful intention/volition (greed, hatred, and delusion) or one of the three skillful intentions (renunciation/non-attachment, kindness, and harmlessness). The quality of intention in each moment determines our state of mind and heart—whether we feel uplifted and light or heavy and dark, whether we live in a heavenly state or a hell realm. Seen this way, one can see how intention is directly linked with what we experience in each moment.

Not only does intention affect our experience in the present, it also has much to do with how our future unfolds. There are results or outcomes of what we choose or intend. How we act now influences future intentions and experiences. There is a certain momentum that takes place. When we choose well in the present, we are likely to do so in the future. When we fail to choose well in the present, the same is likely in the future. Our current actions and choices condition future experience and future choices. It is not that we are bound to that pattern, but we have set a course that is highly conditioned. There is always the possibility to change direction if we relax and pay attention, but that's a big IF! You may have noticed that mindfulness and concentration can be hard won. They can be difficult to establish and difficult to sustain, especially when we are caught in one of our grooves.

Given all of this, the teaching on intention gets our attention!

We might say, well it's easy: All I have to do is really, really focus, and really, really try hard, and really, really stay on course. All I have to do is get in one of those skillful grooves and avoid the unskillful ones. And clearly, that is what right effort is all about. But you may have noticed that it does not always play out that way. One can see where the frustration comes in.

What makes matters worse is that, when we seem to lose sight of our intention (as we inevitably do), too often we tighten the screws and beat up on ourselves. "What's wrong with me?" "Why can't I stay on track?"

Well, there is nothing wrong with us. It is just that we do not understand intention and how it operates. We do not understand that self is not the driving mechanism for change in our lives. Intention is. And intention is not driven by self.

Here is what the Buddha encourages us to see for ourselves: intention is not under the control of self. We do not have the control we think we

have. This can be a hard one to get, because we all have this feeling there is somebody in here running the show—"I put on my shoes." "I brush my teeth." "I lift up my cup and bring it to my mouth." There's a little person sitting at the control panel, managing things. That's me. It is simplistic, but I think we all have a sense that there is somebody sitting inside our heads driving this machine. But the Buddha's teaching states that it is simply not that way. And he encourages us to see this for ourselves. It is not good enough to accept it as a teaching, as an idea. One has to see it directly.

One of the best ways to see this is to turn to the teaching of the five aggregates. The Buddha explains five aspects of our experience—body, feeling, perception, mental formations (which includes states of mind as well as intention), and consciousness. In Pali these are *rūpa*, *vedanā*, *saññā*, *sankhāra*, and *viññāna*. The Buddha tells us that, while these constitute our experience, they are not who we are.

In one of my favorite suttas, the *Mahāpunnama Sutta* (*Majjhima Nikāya* 109), The Greater Discourse on the Full-moon Night, the Buddha encourages us not to regard the five aggregates as self.

Some say it gets harder to experience these five aggregates as not self as we go through them, and that seeing intention as not self may be the hardest. This has certainly been true for me. We might see that form, sensation, perception and even types of consciousness (eye-consciousness, etc.) are not self, but intention/volition seems like "me." In fact, I call "intention" the last stronghold of self-view.

The body is not self

Once you have practiced for a while, you begin to get some semblance of detachment from the body as self. You get some sense that this body is operating according to its own laws and is not under your control.

Mindfulness of the body in the four postures (sitting, standing, walking, reclining) is one of the best ways to see this. This can take some effort, because we tend to zone out as we change postures. There is a strong sense that

we are going somewhere, and this overrides the capacity to stay where we are. But if you pay attention to the body as it changes postures, you cannot long hold on to the view that you are doing that. The body moves in ways that are clearly not consciously directed by an inner CEO. It is more that we are along for the ride. So we watch and collect data. Eventually we collect enough data and it becomes evident: actions are not being driven by self.



Here's another way to see this. No matter what we do to ensure that the body stays healthy, it still gets sick. You might have a good exercise program and eat your sprouts, but you still get sick. If there is a lot of attachment to the body, you can go nuts trying to find the best diet plan or exercise routine in order to avoid illness. These are all good things to do; we want to be good stewards of the body. But if we think it's all under our control, we may be very disappointed. There are many factors operating here that affect what happens to the body—environmental factors, *kamma*, the actions of others. If we do not take these into account, if we think the body is under our control, we suffer enormously.

We can also watch the body as it ages. For some of you, this may not be on the front burner yet . . . you are too young . . . but give it time. Sooner or later, we all have to come to grips with our lack of control in this regard. As we age, everything goes South . . . and East and West! It falls down and spreads out. If we do not get this, aging can be a very stressful time of life. This is particularly unfortunate because old age can be a great support to practice—one is just too old and tired to long for a different body, to resist anymore, so we let go.

We are wearing ourselves out trying to control feelings so things are always pleasant.

A number of years ago, a friend called me to ask if I would be interested in going to



Indonesia to get plastic surgery. She had done a lot of research on the internet and discovered that Indonesia has some of the best plastic surgeons on the planet. She found a number of packages wherein one could combine a holiday with plastic surgery. You check in to a posh hotel and enjoy a few days on the beach. Then you have your procedure and return to the posh hotel to recover. Nurses attend to your every need while you recuperate. My friend was very excited to have discovered these packages, because the total cost of the procedure and holiday was less expensive than doing it in this country. She was noticeably disappointed when I did not jump on the idea. “What’s the matter? Don’t you want your chin back?” she asked. Well, I miss my chin as much as any sixty year-old, but I was not quick to agree because I had not yet determined for myself whether one can do this kind of thing without delusion. I still don’t know the answer and am not inclined to go along with it until or unless I do.

Recently, I was telling one of the monks from Abhayagiri Monastery about my foray into the skin care aisle at the pharmacy. It may just be my sense of things, but it seems to me that the skin care aisles have gotten longer and longer as baby-boomers reach middle age. The lower shelves seem to contain the most inexpensive products—things like lanolin and mineral oils. These are probably all one needs to care for drying skin as we age. But as my eyes scanned the higher shelves I noticed that the products became more complex, the tag-lines became

more attractive to middle-aged consumers (age-defying, wrinkle remover, anti-aging, rejuvenating), and the promises become more absurd (reverses aging).

We can smear on all the age-defying lotion we want, but our skin still sags. If we observe all this with some semblance of impartiality, we start to see clearly: The body is not self.

Feeling is not self

We begin to get a sense that feeling, too, is not self. (*Vedanā* is often translated as “feeling,” although “sensation” is probably better. This is the rapid, usually unconscious reaction of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Emotions are more complex mental events.) We can spend most of our lives in an endless quest to make everything all right, to be comfortable once and for all—to experience pleasure and avoid pain. But as the years of practice unfold, we see how exhausting that is. We are caught in it night and day, and are wearing ourselves out trying to control feelings so things are always pleasant.

As the practice unfolds, we begin to see that feelings (pleasant, unpleasant and neutral sensations) happen. Sometimes we feel good; sometimes we feel bad. There is nothing to be done about that. We might as well let it go. We cannot control it anyway. All of the fidgeting and fussing is not bringing us to a place where we are comfortable once and for all.

Besides, with time we see that our happiness does not depend on experiencing the pleasant and avoiding the unpleasant. It is okay if the pleasant ends, and we can bear with the unpleasant. These are not who we are. They do not define us. Feeling is not self.

Perception is not self

We can notice the same thing about perception (*saññā*). There are many ways one might examine how we attach to perception as self. Attachment to two areas—memories and imaginings—looms particularly large in the unawakened mind.

Memories come up and we cannot help but breath them back into life—especially if

they have a lot of charge around them. Ideas about tomorrow arise in the mind as we dream and make plans. Both these activities give us a visceral sense that we have a past and future. We set up house and move in.

Over time, however, one begins to feel the pain of being so identified with yesterday and tomorrow. One sees the apparent bias in the mind against NOW. As practice matures, we begin to relinquish the grip we have on the past and future. We see these as thoughts in the present moment—that arise and pass away. They begin to lose their apparent reality. We can sit back and watch them come and go—along with the pain and suffering associated with attaching to them. As we see this, we develop a very different relationship with our apparent past and future. One can let thoughts arise and pass away. They do not have the reality that we think they do. Perception is not self.

Consciousness is not self

Now consciousness (*viññāna*) gets a little tricky to see in this unattached way. What we see when we meditate is the constant arising and passing of consciousness—now seeing, now hearing, now smelling, etc. We observe the constant and steady stream of consciousness.

In the early years of practice, we may find ourselves trying to control consciousness—and this can drive us crazy! We think our job is to still the movement of consciousness. But once we realize that we just want to see this movement, rather than suppress it, the mind can settle down. From this more impartial vantage point, the movement of the mind is okay. It doesn't matter. The constant parade of consciousness does not need to be a cause for restlessness. We can actually observe this parade from a detached perspective and be quite still in the presence of it.

With significant intensive practice, we can actually see consciousness isolated against the backdrop of the rest of our experience. Moments of consciousness can be experienced directly. When this happens the one who sees drops away, and that which is seen drops away. The dominant feature of our experience is the direct

experience of "seeing." It is clearly not the seer. It is clearly not that which is seen. It is not the subject; it is not the object. It is the linking between the two—seeing. This is the direct experience of consciousness.

When one experiences consciousness in this isolated way, it becomes easier to see how we make consciousness into self. We notice how there is an owning of "seeing" such that it becomes, "I see." The Buddha recognizes this as a distortion. There is no "I see." There is only "seeing." Often meditators get tripped up here—because in the direct experience of "seeing," the sense of "I" drops away. Suddenly, we feel like a verb instead of a noun. One might think one is having a "no-self" experience, but it is just the direct experience of consciousness and the awareness of that direct experience. If we can sustain looking in this way, we realize that consciousness changes from moment to moment. It is insubstantial. Soon, we realize that consciousness, too, is not self.



Mental formations are not self

Now we come to mental formations (*sankhāra*). These include both patterns and habits of mind, and volition or intention.

As we practice, we come face-to-face with our patterns. We all have highly conditioned tendencies. Patterns dominate the way we organize our experience. Do you tend to be greedy, wanting this, that, and the other thing? Do you tend to be aversive, pushing things away all the time and defining your world by what you don't like about it? Do you tend to be deluded and out-to-lunch most of the time? Whatever the dominant tendencies, with practice we see them impartially. In so doing, we get some distance from them. Even something as intimate and personal as our own habits of mind can be seen impersonally. This can only happen when we get tired of getting lost in them, hating them, and not seeing them.

If freedom depends on my capacity for ease and relaxation, well, I can do that.

One time I saw one of my entrenched patterns in this impersonal way. I said to myself, “Ah, there’s that thing I do.” In that moment, the pattern became something that I was noticing objectively. This is what the third foundation of mindfulness is directing us to see. We see the states of mind (mind affected by greed, for example; by arisen *sankhāras*) without having an opinion about them. As we do this, we realize we are not making our habits of mind happen. They just seem to be highly conditioned. We might have the realization, “If this habit was who I am, I could control it better!” Often we have to go through the very painful process of trying to control it before we arrive at this realization. Mental formations change—moment to moment, as conditions change—and after a while, the insight starts to sink in: Mental formations are not self.

Intention is not self

I am walking through these five aggregates and reflecting upon how we awaken to their impersonal nature because it can help us reason that intention operates in the same way. I think the Buddha’s teaching here is quite clear. He is saying that intention—the force behind all actions through body, speech and mind—is a mental event that operates like all the other physical and mental events. It is not occurring on the promptings of some self. It is an impersonal act arising out of conditions. There is no self in it.

If we can see that the body and feelings and perceptions and consciousness arise out of conditions, it is not too big a leap to reason that intention behaves in the same way. All mental and physical phenomena behave in the same way; they have the same characteristics. As we get this, it frees up a huge amount of energy that is being tied up trying to control things and beating up on ourselves when we cannot.

Understanding intention and how it operates can get us to a place where we are more relaxed and honest about the impulses that arise in us. We witness first hand our kammic patterns and habits—including the habitual arising of skillful and unskillful intentions. We witness our

kamma. We see the impulses go this way. We see the impulses go that way. What are we going to do with that—hate it, clobber it, force it? That does not make sense; nor does it effect change. It just serves to lock us into the behaviors.

The only thing that makes sense is to find a way to make peace with our kammic patterns so we can do what we need to do to purify intention. The Buddha’s formula for freedom is to pay attention before, during and after actions through body, speech and mind. Then we see and experience what serves us and what does not. And the system rights itself. We are hard-wired for freedom. We just need to relax, look, and above all, be kind to ourselves.

If the prospect of waking up feels heavy or burdensome, it is probably because self thinks it has to do it. But this isn’t a job for self. Thank goodness. It is a job for meditation—ease and awareness. Cleaning up our act, moving our behaviors in the direction of the three skillful intentions (non-attachment, kindness, harmlessness), is dependent on our ability to relax, pay attention to what is happening, and notice how it feels. If the behavior is skillful or unskillful, we will become sensitized to it. The mind will directly see what is, and is not, a pleasant abiding. Buddhist practice makes full use of the propensity to move towards what is pleasant and away from what is not. But this is being activated towards a higher purpose than simply self-gratification.

I find this all very liberating and a tremendous relief. If my freedom depends upon Me cleaning up my act, the outlook is bleak. But if it depends upon my capacity for ease and relaxation . . . well, I can do that. It is incumbent upon me to find out what it means to relax, to find out what it means to pay attention, and to engage these two—mindfulness and concentration—in the direction of liberation.

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