

DHARMA TALK (GIVEN ON APRIL 18, 2004)

THE TRUE I

It is said in monastic culture, that monks and nuns should become simple people, uncomplicated, without pretension and airs. Actually, this is true of every human being. We don't have to try to become this way. We arrived this way into the world, and have simply become fouled up. Most of you understand the concept of the "I am" self: The self we identify closely with all day as, I want, I need, I like, I must, I love, I hate, I dislike, I I I I I, from morning to night. In Zen we say this I-am-self is illusion, since it has no real substance, since it was learned and developed by things outside of you: how to learn, how to act, how to do this or that... In certain circles this I-am-self is more sophisticated than others. In eastern culture, even England, cultural training or conditioning is deeply inbred. So, here in North America, we've been somewhat fortunate.

According to Buddhism, our life difficulties are caused by attachment. In other words, the belief that this I-am-self you so care for all these years actually has a substance, or makes any difference. We all know of someone who blows themselves up bigger than life, with a self-styled importance. As human beings, we all have a level of this behavior. The more closely we identify with this self-ish-ness, ignorance, or you could even say happiness, then the more time we need to spend making this self comfortable. It seems people take vacation, typically, to escape usual routine, maybe to escape their partners or problems. To "go away" is to try to leave things behind. And, to some degree, this can make the I-am-self feel a bit better. Even some breathing practices, perhaps yoga or t'ai chi, are viewed as ways to make the I-am-self feel better. I'm not saying you should never do these things. We need to know how to relax our selves, to breathe deeply and settle down. When anger

overtakes you, you must calm the I-am-self to a sensible level. But, such ability to attain a “good feeling” state must not be mistaken for attainment in spiritual practice.

I hope this following explanation will be clear, even to those with little experience with Buddhism. While it is simple in theory, it is harder to experience and follow in your real life. Imagine this I-am-self as a circle. Around this circle is an enormous circle, encompassing the first circle. So, in Buddhist philosophy, the more we identify with this small, I-am-self circle, the greater will be our suffering and disappointment. The truth is that our I am circle is so often the only circle we have much experience with, yet it is only a small part of our “all encompassing” circle, called True Self. Some may call it Buddha, God-nature, Dharmakaya, the Great Cosmos, or, the Truth of Human Existence. This large circle is you. It is your true nature, which is your seed as a human being. All beings possess this seed, at varying degrees of development. I like to remind people that, as a human being, your seed is as a human being. So, the only thing you can realize is the truth of human existence. This is your kind of consciousness and capacity. A tree seed can only become a tree. A human seed can realize true self.

You may be thinking, “I have to learn all kinds of things, that’s an awfully big circle. Look at all the things I had to do, think, etc., just to come up with this teeny I-am-self.” But, in the same way as a tree seed doesn’t have to learn to become a tree, a human being doesn’t exactly need to learn how to be it’s true self. Our problem is that this I-am-self has become so overblown, it literally blocks our view of our true nature. We remain connected to this nature by way of intuition, *knowing without knowing*, hunches, spontaneous action.

So, what do we do now? This I-am-self can seem to be in the way all the time. When all you try to do is sit and breathe, you can’t. I-am-self takes over. At least when we’re writing a paper or cooking a meal, you can get something done despite the I-am-self. That self saying, “this is

boring...how come I'm the only one cooking...how come I'm cleaning out the garage alone?". It seems to interfere at every step unless you take perfect care. In Zen, we talk about *eradicating* the I-am-self. We aren't trying to destroy our I-am-self, only melt away the boundaries and illusion of being separate from realizing your true nature. To overcome this I-am-self centered way of life, we must negate it. We must learn to see these endless cravings of the I-am-self as simply waves on the ocean, holding us back from reaching a life unfettered, and free as a bird.

I remember a time I went skiing. I was out west and didn't know how to ski very well. My friend and I took a class, and the instructor said, "Ski down this hill. I need to see you ski so I know what I'm working with". Well, I did my best to get down. He turned to me after and said, "You're chopping the hill to bits. What on earth are you doing"? There I was hearing this, in front of my friend and total strangers in the class. I was so shocked, utterly shocked, that I didn't get angry. In another time, I might have thought, "How can he talk like that? I'm paying good money. He could have been nicer. But in fact he had negated my I-am-self. Whether he was right or wrong (I think he was right), he had shocked and stunned my I-am-self into non-action.

I know psychologists who say that this kind of stunning or negation is damaging to the ego structure...with this negation you will be messed up. Absolutely not. The death of the I-am-self allows for the birth of a new I-am-self. It's as if it explodes, and gets larger. It reinvents itself, in spiritual practice, based on good information. It is a process of broadening. For example, you come to the Zen Center and think, I don't want to do these prostrations, but, you do them. You broaden yourself. That's called negating your I-am-self. It melts, but it doesn't disappear. Psychologists think, if it is negated, it shuts down. But remember where it is sitting - inside the true self. It melts its way into the true self so eventually there can become no distinction in your mind between them. The duality of "should I do this or not?" or "do I want to

do this or that”? can finally disappear. When this I-am-self melts, you simply act the best way you can. You do the correct thing, whether it’s hard or not.

The I-am-self often says, “I don’t want to do that”. But what happens when you continue to do it. Who is taking over now? We all know when we want or don’t want to do something. Sometimes we don’t tell the truth because we don’t want to hurt someone’s feelings. But in these kind of situations, there is always an appropriate behavior. There is no hard or fast answer, only appropriate behavior for each situation. The true self knows what to do always, without a fuss. It is not busy protecting anything, except the world around it. Given the propensity of Americans, we spend most of our time helping ourselves. We make this I-am-self really special. It seems hard, not soft or pliable. It’s hard to shake. Perhaps you say, “I want to get up in the morning”. But no, it’s so strong, it shuts off the alarm clock, saying, “Not today, I’ll go next week”. That is a hard and fast I-am-self. It’s not that we’re bad if we do this, only we need to *see* it. So you wake up and realize, “It’s 5am. I don’t want to go. I don’t like it but I just don’t want to and I realize completely what’s going on here”.

This teaching is difficult because our usual way of going about things is to do something to get something. So, here I’ve been telling you to negate the I-am-self. So please don’t take the attitude that, “Sunim said it is good to negate the self, so hot diggity I’m going to make 300 prostrations and really crank them out, I don’t care how I feel.” This kind of negation makes the I-am-self rigid and firm. We can become self-righteous, “I can do 300 prostrations... or... I can sit zazen for 4 days without moving.” This is more of the same. We simply do things as they need to be done, without fanfare. Negation of the I-am-self is absolutely moving forward, and making sure that your activity as a human being is done for the benefit of everyone. Imagine that. Rather than, “tonight I’ll have a hot fudge sundae and top it off with a whiskey sour...I can slip out quietly and no one will notice.” Again, I’m not saying you should never do that. Please don’t have a guilt trip if you do.

Only, you could perhaps transform it into, “hey, would you guys like to come over and I’ll treat you for ice cream? I’ve been thinking of having a hot fudge sundae.” Usually you would get a lot of volunteers. Do you have some trouble around? Try that one. It works really well, I’ve done it myself. In this way, we still get the ice cream, but you involve others. You give the benefit to others, too. This is a good way to begin negating the I-am-self. It isn’t so harsh.

We have an example of this in our Zen Center regarding how we work. Usually on Sundays at 4:30 we come together and sweep and mop the floor. We prepare the Hall for Sunday Service. Well, Dharma students and the monks are supposed to come, so they can’t usually miss, but they invite others to participate, and it’s not as attractive as ice cream. But, the principle is exactly the same. I imagine you would really like that experience if you tried. When we operate in harmony with the world around us, the I-am-self naturally breaks down, and melt into its original condition. To get this sense of well-being takes effort. I hope you can get this kind of spirit and apply it in your meditation. When we chant at night, “All beings, one body, I vow to liberate”, we’re offering the fruit of our efforts to all beings, which includes ourselves. We’re not outside of everything; we are very much a part of everything. This kind of principle we practice in simple ways here. Everyone has a similar meditation cushion. Members and students are given the opportunity to make and serve snacks or tea to guests or each other. In this way, they negate their I-am-self, and eventually get to eat the leftovers. So, you see, these things have a way of working out beautifully if you don’t get too excited about that villain screaming, “no, not again, it’s too tough”. Just wink and say, “yes, I hear you, but I’m deciding not to be too troubled by that today.” I’m going to the Zen Center to see all their smiling faces. When I get there, everything will be alright, and I will melt myself into the community, and melt myself into the true meaning of this human existence.” So, I wish you good luck with that.

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