

Selfless Practice

by Rodney Smith

Recently at a Buddhist conference a fellow Vipassana teacher asked a group of his peer teachers how they worked with students who had a sudden realization of selflessness. He said he had noticed that a few of his students were so shaken by this revelation that they temporarily lost their ability to function in the world. They could not return to the old view of themselves and felt unable to move their lives forward from the self-emptiness they had discovered. A couple of us responded that that degree of disorientation might be due to how we teach the practice. Perhaps if we taught selflessness from the beginning, the student would be expecting this revelation when it did occur and would have a context within which to meet and hold this insight.

This question lies at the heart of a new form of practice that may allow the student to meet potentially disorienting realizations with the casualness of more mundane insights. If we are taught from the beginning that an authentic spiritual practice has to go through the door of selflessness to mature, and if we are given sufficient preparation through exercises and investigations, which are meant to ripen that understanding, then perhaps even the most profound revelation would have an existing context to season quickly into normalcy.

Skillful teaching attempts to expose the struggles that occur within the false view of separation. As each of us work through the profound difficulties of our isolated position, a revelation often follows that reveals a very different paradigm of interconnection. This new paradigm does not contain an “I” center, and therefore is breathlessly infinite. Once glimpsed this new paradigm can create disorientation as we attempt to fit the new view into our old life. But if the teaching has been encouraging an integration of a few key factors of this new paradigm all along the way, I have found this disruption to be minimal.

Essential to this undertaking is to keep the Buddha’s teaching very simple so that the mind does not create a complex terrain to navigate. The teaching is pared down to the

essential continuum of struggle and the ending of struggle and all activities are gauged by their place along this continuum. We begin to notice as we struggle less, there is an accompanying feeling of greater space (less “me”), and as we struggle more, there arises contracted sense of “I, me, and mine.” At this point we are beginning to understand selflessness, as equivalent to space that is the same as non-struggle.

Next we very gently reconfigure our life in terms of interconnection even though we have not fully realized this truth. We do this in a number of ways: first we learn to embrace all experiences regardless of their emotional appeal, we re-own our projections through radical accountability, we question the truth of our narrative that infuses each object with ownership, and finally we validate the space around the content rather than the content itself. Practicing each of these begins to prepare us for the full impact of the new paradigm even as we dwell predominantly in the old.

After a threshold of steadiness is obtained, often through strong volitional effort, allowing our attention to stay on an object, we begin to question the value and limitation of our will on our spiritual journey. We begin to understand that as we try harder there is greater struggle (and more “me”) and as we relax and surrender there is less inward tension (and less of a sense-of-self). Wise effort is the ongoing monitoring of this relationship and adjusting our practice accordingly.

This journey is a journey of the heart, and the heart is quiet serenity. The heart does not create struggle by overcoming problems but by assimilating them within the ease of well-being. Finally we hone our intention so that we feel the urge toward non-separation by discovering the benefits of an undivided mind while seeing the limitations of pursuing individual objects.

Each of these issues need to be fleshed out much more, but the point here is to demonstrate there is practice that is in alliance with the freedom pointed to by the Buddha as long as it is aligned with the paradigm of selflessness. We back our way in to freedom by encouraging an orientation to practice that has the end accessible in the beginning.