

## Self-view, Personality and Awareness

When I was a teenager in the United States, to say that someone didn't have a personality was considered the biggest put-down. If you said, 'Oh, she doesn't have any personality', it was a real insult. Personality is terribly important if you're an American, to be a charming, intelligent and attractive person. A lot of social conditioning goes into being that: trying to become 'personality-plus.' But now if I heard someone saying 'Ajahn Sumedho has no personality', I'd be flattered, honoured.

When they hear of the Buddhist teaching on letting go, people might think, 'If I let go of my personality what will be left? Will I just be a zombie? If I don't have any personality, how am I going to relate to anybody? I'll just be a blank, a totally empty form that sits there.' It's very frightening to think of no longer being a personality of some sort. Even a negative identity would be better than that, to be able to say, 'I'm a neurotic man because I suffered abusive conditions in the past; because of misunderstandings and unfairness I have a lot of emotional and psychological problems in the present.' That would make someone interesting in a way. Even with a negative identity, I could still take an interest in myself as a personality. So, it is difficult to think of letting go of your personality. If suddenly all those views and opinions that make me into an interesting person were to disappear and I become nobody, it could be rather frightening.

However, the Buddha's teaching on anattā presents the reality of non-self in very simple ways. It's not a practice where your personality totally disappears, where you no longer have any emotional feelings whatsoever. Anattā is a practice for ordinary, everyday life; you notice when personality arises and when it ceases. You can see that personality is a changeable thing. Are you the same person all the time? You might assume that you are. But in observing the actual nature of personality, you'll notice that it changes according to who you're with, the health of the body and the state of mind. When you're at home with your parents, when you're in a sangha meeting, when you're chairman of a committee, when you're just a junior member of the sangha: what happens? Personality of course adapts itself to those roles and those conditions.

So then what is awareness of personality? I ask because my personality can't know my personality. To know the personality, I have to abide in awareness, in a state of openness and reflectiveness. It is not a vacuous, zombie-like mental state. It's openness, intelligent and alive, with recognition, discernment and attention in the present.

I used to make it a practice to play with personality rather than merely trying to let go of it as the cause célèbre of practice. To think, 'I've got to get rid of my personality and not attach to my emotions', is one of the ways we grasp the teachings of the Lord Buddha. Instead, I would become a personality quite intentionally, so I could listen to and observe this sense of me and mine. I would practise bringing up the thoughts, 'Me, what about me? Aren't you interested in what I think and how I feel? These are my things; this is my robe, my bowl, my space, my view, my feelings and my rights. I am Ajahn Sumedho. I'm a disciple of Luang Por Chah', and on and on like that. I would listen, not to knock it down or criticize it but to recognize the power of words. And how I could create my self and, more and more, find refuge in awareness rather than in the conditions of my personality – in the fears, self-disparagement, megalomania or whatever else that happened to be operating in consciousness.<sup>[1][2]</sup>

In communal life, your personality is constantly being challenged in some way. The structures that we use, being monks and nuns as well as the hierarchical positions – being ajahns, majjhima monks,

navakas, samaneras, anagārikas, sīladharā – are positions we can take very personally. If we're not mindful and developing wisdom, then life in the community becomes one of developing an ego around being a monk or a nun.

When the Buddha pointed to sati-sampajañña, he was bringing attention to the reflective capacity. For this I use the phrase 'intuitive awareness.' Although 'intuition' is a common enough word in English, I use it to refer to the ability to awaken and be aware, which is a state of reflection. It isn't thought; it's not filling my mind with ideas, views and opinions. It's an ability to receive this present moment, to receive both the physical and mental conditions as they impinge on me through the senses. It is the ability to embrace the moment, which means the acceptance of everything. Everything belongs here, whether you like it or not. Whether you want it or don't want it is not the issue. It is the way it is.

If I get caught in preferences, views and opinions about what I need for my practice, I'm not seeing it in intuitive awareness but instead I'm seeing it as an ideal: 'It has to be like this, I have to control the situation. I have to calm myself. I have to make sure that the things around me aren't challenging me in any way.' I become a control freak. Having an ideal of what I want, I try to make it an experience for myself. I feel that if those conditions aren't present, I can't possibly practise. I could start blaming: 'Too many people here, too much going on, too many meetings, too much work.' Then I go into my, 'I want to go to my cave.' I have this troglodyte tendency, wanting to be a recluse in a cave. People are challenging when you're living in community because we affect each other all the time in one way or another. That's just the way it is; it's nobody's fault. It's the way communities are.

In the Buddhist tradition, the third refuge is in Sangha, which for us means this community. Sangha is the Pali word for 'community'. Then you might say, 'Well, that means only the Ariyan Sangha: the sotāpannas, sakadāgāmīs, anāgāmīs and arahants. So I need to find a community where I'm only living with sotāpannas at least, and if there are sotāpannas, hopefully a few arahants will be around too.' But then try to find a community where that exists ... With a grasping mind, even if you found it you wouldn't recognize it because even arahants can be irritating. So instead of trying to find the ideal community, I use the community that I'm in. And in this community, people affect me; my personality arises together with various emotional reactions. The refuge, however, is in the awareness of this, in trusting my ability to be aware. When we are committed to awareness, then whatever happens, it belongs. When we are confident in awareness, there's nothing that can be an obstruction except ignorance and forgetfulness.

The style of practice that we use here always points us to the present. It is about learning, recognizing, exploring and investigating. What is the self? What is personality? Don't be afraid of being a personality, but rather, be conscious of it. Personality arises and ceases in consciousness. It changes according to conditions. But awareness is a constant thing, although we might forget it and become lost in the momentum of emotions and habits. So it's helpful to have ways of reminding ourselves, like the mantra 'Buddho' that we use. 'Buddho' means 'awake', 'wake up', 'pay attention', 'listen'. When I listen, I listen to myself and I listen to the sounds that impinge on my ears: the sounds within and the sounds without. This attentive listening is very supportive to intuitive awareness. So I listen to the rain. I listen to the silence. When I listen to the silence, I listen to the sound of silence.

If you consciously notice this awareness and appreciate it, you move more towards being nobody, towards not knowing anything at all rather than being someone who knows everything about everything. To be nobody knowing nothing is scary, isn't it? But this attitude helps to direct us because there is a strong desire in us to become, to attain and achieve. Even with the best of intentions, if that

kind of desire is not recognized, it will always control you whether it is the desire to become something, the desire to control things, or the desire to get rid of bad thoughts or irritations around you. So trust in this awareness, this openness, and question the personality.

Somebody sent me a lovely card the other day. It had a quote that says, 'There is no way to happiness: happiness is the way.' Simple as that. Happiness is the way, or mindfulness is. How do you become mindful? Maybe you still don't have a clue what mindfulness is, even though you've got it all figured out. So stop trying to figure it out. Trust in your awareness in the present even if you feel you're someone who can't do it. You think you're a heedless person with too many emotional problems or you think you have to get this level of samādhi before you can possibly attain anything. Listen to that. That's all self-view, sakkāya-diṭṭhi. No matter how intimidated you are by your thinking, trust in the awareness of it and not in the judging of it. You don't need to get rid of it. Just recognize: thinking is like this; views, opinions, attachment to views and opinions are like this. Then you'll begin to see what attachment is – as a reality, as a habit that we've developed. And you'll see personality: when it arises and when it ceases, when there's attachment to it and when there's non-attachment.

Personality is not the problem. The problem is the attachment to it. You're always going to have a personality, even as an arahant; but an arahant has no identity with the personality and no attachment. So we have ways of speaking and doing things that might seem very personal or unique. That's not a problem. It's the ignorance and attachment that is the cause of suffering. Sati-sampajañña, intuitive awareness, is not something that I can claim personally. If my personality started claiming it, then it would just be more self-view, sakkāya-diṭṭhi again. If I started saying 'I'm a very wise person', then it would be self-view claiming to be wise. So when you understand that, how could you claim to be anything at all? Of course, on a conventional level I'm willing to play the game. When they say, 'Ajahn Sumedho', I say 'Yes?' There's nothing wrong with conventional reality either. The problem is in the attachment to it out of ignorance.

Avijjā is the Pali word for spiritual ignorance. It means not knowing the Four Noble Truths. In the investigation of the Four Noble Truths, avijjā ceases. The awakened state takes you out of ignorance immediately, if you'll trust it. As soon as you are aware, ignorance is gone. So when ignorance arises, you can be aware of it as something coming and going rather than taking it personally or assuming that you're always ignorant until you become enlightened. If you're always operating from the assumption that 'I'm ignorant and I've got to practise in order to get rid of ignorance' and you grasp that assumption, you're stuck with it until you see through the grasping of that view.<sup>[P]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>

I encourage you to develop this simple immanent ability. It doesn't seem like anything and it's not an attainment. Maybe you conceive of it as an attainment and think you can't do it. But even if you can't do it, be aware of the view that you can't do it. Trust in whatever is going on. Because when I talk like this, people accuse me, 'Oh, Ajahn Sumedho's been practising a long time; he always had good samādhi and so he can talk like that.' They go on like that, thinking that I'm a highly attained person and that that therefore justifies their position. They compare themselves to their projection of me without seeing what they're doing. They don't know what they're doing and are lost in views about themselves and about others.

Trust in the immediacy, to give enough attention – not an aggressive wilfulness but a relaxed openness, a listening and a resting. More and more through practice you learn to recognize it rather than passing it by or overlooking it all the time. Then you can focus on whatever you like, on the breath

or being aware of what's going on in your body for instance. If this awareness is well established, you can decide what to focus on in any situation, being aware of time and place. If I want to be aware of just bodily experience in the present and I do that in the wrong place it doesn't work. Right now giving this talk, I might want to go and do my sitting practice but I know it's not the right time and place. When I get down from here and go back to my meditation mat, it might be a good thing to do: to be aware of the physical sensation, the tensions or the breath – without judging or criticizing but just noticing, 'It's like this', allowing things to be what they are.

Once you see through self-view, the development of the path is then very clear. Trust in this awareness, in non-attachment; attachment is like this, non-attachment is like this. When you attach to things, do it consciously and really attach, so that you get the feeling of what attachment, upādāna, really is. If you just grasp the view that you shouldn't be attached to anything, you get attached to the view not to attach. So do it knowingly, be really attached to being this or to having a view. But observe the attachment and be aware of the power of attachment: the upādāna of ambition, wanting to get something, or wanting to get rid of something. And then, once you really see attachment, you can inform yourself to let go of it. Let go. Let it be. You are more accepting of things and they fall away. You can't keep anything; things are always changing. Even if you delude yourself that you can keep something by holding on to it, you'll eventually see that that's impossible.

Finally, in practice we're left with the existential reality of our humanity. We've still got these primordial drives but now we know better than to make them personal. With sakkāya-diṭṭhi, we're always judging our sexual desires, aversion and fear and making them very personal. But now we can look at them for what they are. They're energies; they're a part of being human, of having a human body and being in a sensitive and vulnerable space. We begin to see and understand the nature of lust, greed, hatred and delusion because we have taken the sakkāya-diṭṭhi out of it. We see that these energies arise and cease according to conditions. However if you still haven't seen through sakkāya-diṭṭhi, then your whole life you'll be celibate and feel guilty about sexual desire, anger and hatred. You'll become neurotic through identifying with those energies and forces that are in fact part of human reality and are not personal.

We all have these primordial drives as human beings. They are common to all of us. They are not a personal identity. Our refuge is in awareness rather than in judging these energies that we're experiencing. Of course, our religious form is celibate so that when sexual energies arise, we're aware of them and don't act on them. They arise and cease just like everything else. Anger and hatred arise and cease. When the conditions for anger arise, it's like this – likewise fear, the primal emotion of the animal realm. But the awareness of lust and greed, the awareness of hatred and fear – that is our refuge. Our refuge is in the awareness.

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