

Oneself (1 of 5) Self-Respect

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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This week, the theme will be oneself – our relationship to oneself. I was a little surprised that this came up as a theme. I thought perhaps loving-kindness, compassion, or generosity might be a better theme as we go into the holiday season. Then I thought a focus on oneself – to come into a better space, a better way of being, with oneself – could help prepare us to be in the social world of the holidays.

Oneself might seem to be a surprising theme for Buddhists because of the sometimes excessive emphasis on not-self. It seems like we shouldn't talk about self at all. But if you look at the teachings of the Buddha, he often used the word "self" (*atta* in Pali) in a positive way. I believe he did that without any fear or concern that it would be misunderstood as being a metaphysical self, some kind of permanent self, or a

permanent existential self. The ordinary idea of oneself can be a valuable and useful reference point for understanding ourselves and our lives.

To some degree, there is a wonderful interaction and balance in the ancient teachings of the Buddha between a kind of individualism and collectivism. There is an emphasis on personal agency and what we can do, as well as an emphasis on being open, receptive, and connected with others in the world. The combination of those is a fascinating way of living this life. I will say more about that in a few minutes.

I want to read a passage from the *Dhammapada* where the word *atta* is used. Here it is being translated as “oneself”:

If one knew oneself to be precious, one would guard oneself with care.

The sages watch over themselves in any part of the night.

I think that sages often stay up and meditate through the night, so they are caring for themselves. The idea is that “If one knew oneself to be precious, one would guard oneself with care.” It goes on to say:

Oneself indeed is one’s own protector.

What other protector could there be?

With self-control one gains a protector hard to obtain.

So we have the agency to be our own protector. “What other protector could there be?” Many of us are hoping others will protect us and keep us safe. If only other people would behave in a certain way, then we would be safe.

It is common these days for people to say that they are not safe and then insist that others change how they are in order to make them feel safe. There is some value to that. We don't want to discredit the importance of doing that at times, but there is also something very important about learning how to be one's own protector – learning to find safety within. It says here that through self-control, “one gains a protector hard to obtain.”

One of the ways I would like to present this idea that each of us for ourselves is precious and dear is through the notion of self-respect – respecting ourselves. Respect has a wonderful combination of agency and openness. We are doing something in combination with openness or making space. We are letting go of conceit and self-concern for that which we respect. We give care or deference to it.

Generally, we think it is easier to understand other people or some other parts of reality if we have respect for them. When it is done wisely, respecting someone is a powerful act that we generate from inside of us.

At the same time that we are taking agency for this respect – having respect for someone – there is a putting oneself aside, hopefully in a healthy way. There is deference to another. There is making space for the other person that we respect. It is like hospitality. It is one of the things where there are these dual activities. On the one hand, we are the agent offering hospitality to someone. In offering hospitality, there is a kind of forgetting of oneself. There is a kind of putting oneself aside to support, help, and host someone else.

I think generosity also has this dual action of agency that we do, but also a giving away. Perhaps compassion is the same. We can generate compassion and care for others, and at the same time that we are caring for others, we put our preferences aside in a healthy way.

It is the same way with respect. This dual relationship can be towards oneself. We can have agency in deciding to have respect for ourselves, and at the same time, let go of conceit. We are letting go of preferences for what we should do so that we can know and feel ourselves better. We are present for ourselves in a bigger way.

The idea is that we are important and valuable enough to be an appropriate object of our own respect. We can respect everyone. We can value and see the worth of

every human being. We should not leave ourselves out of that. We can also have respect and care for ourselves.

The movement of love in Buddhism is not a movement where everyone is loved but oneself. It is a movement of love that includes ourselves. I think of the heart, the emotional heart, as being like a light bulb. When you turn on the light, the room quickly fills with light. First, the light shines on ourselves, and then it shines on what is around us. The love, care, and respect first go through us, and then into the world around us.

It is my hope that if we have self-respect, we will have more substance in ourselves for respecting others. We can show up more fully when we have self-respect. The more fully we show up, the more we can care, love, and be friendly, supportive, and kind to other people. We have self-respect that allows us to live and to be. We don't have to apologize for ourselves. We don't have to be self-effacing or not count. We are allowed to count so that we can let everyone else count better. We are allowed to be worthy and full so that we can offer the gift of attention, presence, and space to other people as well.

We consider this idea of refuge:

Oneself is the refuge of oneself.

What other refuge can there be?

Again, we are considering the idea of being our own protector, our own refuge. How do we make ourselves a refuge for ourselves? How do we become the protector of ourselves? It takes some agency. It is not just trusting that we are innately good or everything about ourselves is wonderful. Some people are so eager to feel that because they experience such a low, negative self-image. It acts like a balm, a kind of medicine, to hear that they are worthy and wonderful.

The way to give substance to the idea of refuge or becoming a protector is through agency. The Buddha shared several ideas. One is to live ethically. The more we can live ethically, the more self-respect there can be. We can create the conditions to have self-respect. It is not that we are automatically ethical, but rather we make a commitment or vow to live as ethically as we can. We learn from our ethical mistakes and try to do better in the future. That kind of attitude warrants more self-respect. The idea of making a commitment or a vow is a very powerful thing to do.

The other thing that supports making ourselves a refuge or developing self-respect is to develop mindfulness. When we have enough self-awareness to see how we undermine, criticize, or doubt ourselves, we don't believe it so much. We can see ourselves clearly and fully enough that we begin trusting the seeing, knowing,

and perception of this habit of self-negating. “Wow, there it is again. But I see it.”

The word “respect,” as many of you know, comes from the Latin word “to see again.” The idea of mindfulness is to be able to see clearly. We see with care, kindness, and a certain kind of openness. We are not caught in the negative self-talk. We begin having respect that we can do this. We can meet our negativity with kindness, care, and with openness. That is respect-worthy.

The last one I want to read is a fascinating verse by the Buddha:

*A person should not give oneself away,
Should not give oneself up.
Beautiful speech should be released.
Malevolent speech should not.*

When we have self-respect, we never give ourselves away. We might allow the dual action where there is self-respect and we get out of the way and let go of our conceit. We powerfully respect this agency by putting aside our own preferences for the benefit of others. We are not, however, giving ourselves away. We are not giving up on anything, and we are not giving up on ourselves.

The theme for this week is oneself, and the topic for today is self-respect. I suspect that few of you have

thought about this in relation to yourself. Some of you probably have, but maybe for today, you can reflect on this idea of self-respect.

What does it mean for you? Talk to friends and family about what it might mean. How can this idea of self-respect be beneficial, significant, and even powerful for you? How can we live with greater self-respect? How do we find and tap into self-respect? Reflect on this topic. Look at it and live with it for the day. Tomorrow we will go on to other aspects of focusing on oneself.

Thank you.