

## AT TIMES LIKE THESE

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There was so much I was going to tell you these days, like that the Solstice was here (Friday) and the Sun is now moving northward, bringing more light each day, or about the so-called Mayan calendar deadline that came and went, yet the world did not end as predicted.

But in the midst of all of that, some part of my world here at home did end with the unexpected death of a very close friend of the family. I write so often in these blogs about how the death of a loved one can shatter our carefully-groomed sense of self and we suddenly find ourselves, once again, contemplating impermanence, the second of the Four Thoughts that Turn the Mind Toward the Dharma, and so it was.

When the self gets shattered and I find myself out there on my own, just staring at the void, the ever-practical Buddhists point out that at such times our attachments naturally thin out and, if we look, we can see beyond our self into the nature of the mind itself. Certainly my linear projection as to where I think my life is going is altered by events such as these. Life is not a straight line. And I can't just protect everyone I love and everyone in the world out there from harm. I wish I could.

I know something is wrong when I wonder what that strange liquid is on my desk and figure out I have been crying and did not even realize it. As for the Fourth Thought that turns the mind, the fact that I will never get my ducks all in a row, no matter how hard I try or how long I work at it, well, at times like this, how true that is. I am not the boss of this life as my 'self' likes to think.

This whole 'self' thing is so much with us that it is no wonder that we all tend to fear death to some degree. Our self, ego, personality, or whatever you want to call it is, in the end, going to fail us. That's a fact. At the time of death, to the degree we are still attached to the self, to that degree we do (and probably for good reason) should fear death. I have gone on and on in these blogs, pointing out that what I call my 'self' is nothing more than a significant (to me) collection of my likes and dislikes, call it my coat of many attachments. I wear it at all times.

And while I always have a persona, what makes up that coat changes with life's seasons. Against what the poets sometimes do write, we all get intimations of mortality, a whiff or two of impermanence every once in a while, like when something tragic happens around us like happened in my family just now. It upsets my appplecart-self and scatters it all over the place. And I (whoever "I" am) am left to pick up the pieces and glue my 'self' back together again by reattachment.

This must be why dharma practitioners and Buddhist monks are busy transferring their consciousness, not at the end of life, but right here and now, transferring their identification from

these impermanent self-attachments to a more unattached view. I don't want to go down with the ship-of-the-self and personality if it is doomed. It is just common sense that once we determine that the self, by its very nature, has no permanent existence, we stop over-investing in it. Once understood, we would be fools to make permanent investments in our self and its image, if it is by nature just a sinking ship. We all use a self, but should not encourage it too much.

That's the whole idea of dharma training, to discover what is real and what is unreal, and to begin to transfer our attention from the impermanent to what is permanent and real, to wake up.

This whole idea of fighting down one's ego, of push-back and struggle with, and futile efforts to discipline, the self make no sense to me. Again, awareness is key. Once we are aware (I mean really aware) of the nature of the self or ego, its power over us just lessens naturally. Why would I choose to invest in failure? The dharma is no different than any good business sense. It is in my best interest (and also a good investment) to begin to transfer my conscious identification away from my self-ish interests and toward something more permanent, something with a future, that part of me that does not die, and that would be the mind itself.

Battling with our ego goes nowhere. It just makes things worse, the ultimate tar baby. Even a little investigation of the self will make us aware that it has no pith or center. There is no wizard behind the curtain. My favorite quote from the philosopher Hegel in his masterpiece "The Phenomenology of the Mind" is "We go behind the curtain of the self, to see what's there, but mainly for there to be something to be seen." That is downright Buddhist.

When we look at the nature of the self, all we find is our own self looking, and we are still no wiser as to who it is that is doing all this looking. The 'Self' is like that old game of Pick-Up-Sticks. Take all the sticks away, one by one, and there is nothing in the center. With the self, the same is true. Take away all our attachments, one by one, and what is left? Nothing permanent, that's for sure, but there is this:

When we thin out our self-attachments, or they are thinned out for us by a tragic reality, there is one thing we discover and that is that 'we' are still here. It is like a magic trick. We take away all of our self supports and yet we are still standing. We go on. "Look ma, no hands."

At times like these I begin to identify more with my mind, rather than myself, and this process of the transfer of consciousness I am talking about here kicks in. Our day-to-day self is empty of any permanent quality other than impermanence itself. It is permanently impermanent, but still present. Yet here I am, nevertheless, supported by the mind itself. Even without myself, I am still here.

This reminds me of the Christian Bible where there is a quote to the effect that angels "will lift you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone." Only here, we discover that the mind lifts us up and supports us when we begin to thin out and spontaneously deconstruct our self-attachments. The mind is the mother of it all, and remains when attachment to the self just naturally dissolves

with change through too-real events or mind training. What's the point of this?

The point is that all of the traditional admonitions against selfishness are not just meant to ruin our good times and spoil the party. They are simply pointing out the insight that the self, by its very nature, is impermanent and ends when our body ends at death. The death or loss of the self we SHOULD fear or at least note. At that time our attachments are released all at once or at least soon after death. And then what?

And then, freed of attachments, our self becomes transparent, and we discover we are still here anyway, more or less. The conscious thinning of the self-attachments before death through meditation training allows us to begin to be acquainted with the true nature of our mind, at least to some degree, and not suffer quite such a large shock at death. And there is this classic story of the great Buddhist Mahasiddha Lord Marpa, who when his son died wept bitterly.

When one of his students approached him and asked, "Master, why are you weeping? You teach us that death is an illusion." Marpa responded, "Yes, death is an illusion, and the death of a child is an even greater illusion."

Self-detachment does not mean that we no longer feel or that we no longer have a self. That is not the dharma and would be a big mistake. Of course we feel. We are also human. We fully experience loss, but with awareness. We always have a self, but it is transparent when we thin out attachments. We can see through it to the true nature of the mind itself. But do we live and are we human? Of course.

Years ago, when I was first learning to program computers, every once in a while I would make the dreaded "operator's error," meaning I would mistakenly and irrevocably delete a whole day's or week's work with the touch of a key. This was shattering at first. I would cry and storm and curse my fate. Yet, sooner or later I would sigh and set about rewriting the code from scratch. At my age, when this happens now, and it still does, I don't even sigh. I just gently start rewriting the code.