

The “I” of the Storm

The real problem with humans is language. We talk a lot. We simply say things that often regret later, or pretend it will all go away. Then we make the same mistake all over again. Maybe it’s the way we use words. Maybe it’s the people who simply misunderstand our words.

The Buddha has a very interesting and important teaching about why we often get into trouble with language. In the Arahanta Sutta (S 1.25), the Buddha says that an arhat (a fully liberated saint) may use such words as “I” and “mine,” without giving rise to conceit, or misconceiving that there is an eternal self or soul.

Conceit, in Buddhist psychology, is defined as a measuring of ourselves against others. We tend to compare ourselves as “better than others” (superiority conceit), or “worse than others” (inferiority conceit), or “as good as others” (equality conceit). It is very interesting when we compare “conceit” here with the modern psychological concept of “complex.”

Conceit is deeply rooted in the wrong view that we have a fixed personality, or an unchanging “self,” even a personal soul. This is reflected in such remarks as “I’m like that, I can’t change,” or “He’s always like that,” and so on. This also happens when we tend to notice our weaknesses or those of others, and not notice the good sides.

We even go to the extreme of saying things like “He’s a saint,” or “He’s my hero,” or even, “I think he’s enlightened.” The point is that such persons have made us very happy or proud in some way, especially when they agree with what we think. The danger of putting people on a pedestal is that when we change our minds about them, they fall into pieces – such as when we think that they no more agree with us.

Our self-image, our view of “I,” plays some of life’s worst tricks on us over and over again, often without our ever realizing it. Why is it so difficult to see through the “I” of life’s storm?

The first thing we must know is that it is not natural to have a notion of an unchanging “I,” or even the conception of an “I” itself. We are taught since we are born how to use “I” as against others. Notice how young children do not say, “I want teddy bear.” They tend to use their given name, such as “Bobi wants teddy.”

We are taught to refer to ourselves as “I” by our parents and minders. In other words, this is part of our socialization process. We need to communicate with one another. The problem is that we grow up regarding ourselves not just as “Bobi” but as “I” in relation to others.

Vital as pronouns may be for communication, that is what they simply are: merely pronouns. They are verbal signposts pointing this way or that way. The person that such a verbal signpost points to is not a fixed entity, but a changing and evolving being. “I” will change, “I” am impermanent, “I” can evolve into an awakened being when “I” let go of any fixed ideas about the “I,” about the self or the other.

Here is a simple exercise to remind ourselves of the true reality that there is no fixed “I” or unchanging self. I have a body. And I *know* that I have a body – this is my

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mind. On a bigger scale, whatever exists is either physical (like my body) or mental (what I can think of or feel). The body is changing and impermanent; the mind too is changing and impermanent. Physical things, too, change; mental things, too, change.

Everything in this universe changes, it is impermanent. Without change, there is no meaning. Without change, we can know nothing. It is only through change and impermanence that we can know things. (Notice how the words and letters here change, so that we can make sense of them!) If we reflect on this deeply and widely enough, we are on the way to self-awakening.¹

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¹ Further Reading: “I” the nature of identity, SD 19.1, see: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/19.1-I-the-nature-of-identity.-piya.pdf>