

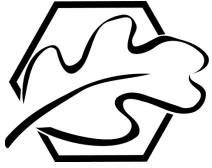


Selflessness 2: Dissolving

Rev. Doug Kraft

Sunday, October 2, 2011

Unitarian Universalist Society of
Sacramento
2425 Sierra Boulevard
Sacramento, CA 95825
Phone (916) 483-9283
FAX (916) 483-4934
E-mail: office@uuss.org
www.uuss.org



Douglas C. B. Kraft

Unitarian Universalist Society • 2425 Sierra Blvd. • Sacramento, CA 95825
(916) 483-9283 • doug@uuss.org

Selflessness 2: Dissolving

<Silence>

I love the few empty moments
before I speak. ...

If I stretched it out for several
minutes, you might wonder, "What's
going on?" But for a few moments we're
content with emptiness – just present,
attentive, open, relaxed, silently waiting
to see what happens next. ...

And it's lovely, isn't it?

And I bet, after the service, none of
you say, "There was this lovely, quiet
moment before he spoke. It was
delicious."

We tend not to notice emptiness
because there is nothing to pay attention
to. It's hard to focus on a blank wall –
there's nothing for the eyes to focus on.
It's hard to hear silence – there's nothing
to listen to. It's hard to notice when our
minds are quiet – there's nothing in
them to think about.

So we slide over emptiness and latch
onto the next thing to come along. It's
how we're wired: we notice things more
than space. Lao Tsu wrote:

*Thirty spokes share the wheel's hub;
It is the center hole that makes it useful.
Shape clay into a vessel;
It is the space within that makes it useful.
Cut doors and windows for a room;
It is the holes which make it useful.
Therefore profit comes from what is there;
Usefulness from what is not there.¹*

¹ *Tao Te Ching*, verse 11 translated by Gia-Fu
Feng and Jane English (Vintage Books, 1972)

Selflessness

This morning is the second in a
series of sermons on selflessness. We're
not interested in selflessness as a thing –
an idea, belief, philosophy or
metaphysic. We're interested in
selflessness as a healthy absence of self-
consciousness. Clever *ideas* about
selflessness may help sell a book. But
the *experience* of non-self can transform
our lives with lightness, ease and joy.
Not much profit. But very useful!

Last time we noted how most of the
major problems in the world are fueled
by over-developed egos run amuck. The
environment is stressed by self-centered
exploitation. Governing systems get
hogtied by childish egos. The economy
is compromised by legalized greed.

On a personal level, fear, stress,
depression or desire or habit can darken
sense of self until it becomes a pair of
foggy goggles. It keeps us from seeing
life with depth and clarity. It distorts
our thinking and makes us act stupid.
Neither profitable nor useful.

For the rest of this series, I want to
shift away from *why* selflessness is
important to a more subtle, practical
and useful topic: ways to cultivate the
experience of healthy selflessness.

There are three realms of experience:
(1) inner life – the subjective inner
world; (2) relational life – relationships
with other beings and life itself; and (3)
objective life – dispassionate rational
observation of the world around us.

This morning we'll look at the inner
life and how a sense of self can shift

from highly personal to dissolving. I'll use advanced Theravadan Buddhist meditation as an example of how this can be cultivated.

In two weeks we'll look at a relational practice and the following week we'll look at an objective practice.

From What to How

Cultivating selflessness through inner practice is tricky. If someone asks us, "Have you stopped beating your partner?" the question presupposes we've been abusive. If we ask, "When I look inside, do I see a self or not?" the question presupposes an "I" who is doing the looking. The question creates the self we are questioning.

It's subtle and tricky.

The secret is shifting attention from *what* the mind sees to *how* it sees; from *what* we perceive to the *process* of perception itself; from *looking for answers* to *looking at how* we arrive at answers.

To do this we need a mind-heart that is relatively quiet. If the mind is cloudy, stormy and windy, a branch can hit us in the face without us seeing it coming. But if it's calm and clear, we see things coming from a long way away.

I had a bike accident several years ago. For several months afterward, every time I moved my head it spun as if I were rolling down a hill. So I spent most of the summer unmoving in a lawn chair gazing at birds soaring through the clear sky.

One day I was sitting outside in a red T-shirt when a tiny speck of a bird came over a distant tree. It flew toward me. It got larger and larger. When it was ten feet away it suddenly realized I was not an over-grown flower. It spread its wings to brake its momentum, fluttered and barely managed to turn aside before

ramming me. Then it flew off into the distance.

Had I not been so quiet, I wouldn't have seen it coming until that feathered fluster.

But when the mind is quiet, patient and attentive, we can see how experiences arise from faint nothingness, intensify into something that feels personal, and then dissolve into the impersonal distance.

So to cultivate selflessness, we need a quiet mind.

Dropping

Quieting the mind for half a minute is not difficult. We do it every Sunday without fanfare.

The Tibetan Mahamudra tradition takes advantage of this ability. It recommends dropping all thinking for half a moment hundreds of times a day.

For example, when I drop my hand, drop all your thoughts – just let them all go.

<Raise hand. Drop it to the pulpit. Remain silent for 20 to 30 seconds.>

For many of you, the mind went silent. It may only last for a third of a breath. But for a short time, the mind was naturally empty.

Let's do it again.

<Raise hand. Drop. Silence.>

Because there are no thoughts or feelings, we may not remember or even notice or that little break in the flow of mind stuff. But if we pay attention, it's easy to see.

Let's do it one last time.

<Drop hand. Silence.>

Stopping the mind for a moment is easy. Holding the mind still for longer is difficult. Anyone who has ever tried to meditate for more than a few minutes

can attest that stretching out the inner silence seems wildly impossible.

And if we tell our mind, "Sit down, shut up and stop yammering!" it just gets more agitated.

The Buddha had a different strategy. I won't go through it all. I'd like to jump ahead to an advanced phase where selflessness arises prominently. You can try it even if you don't meditate regularly. It may not be as stable, but it offers a taste of what's possible with a little patience.

Here's how it works:

Radiate Wellbeing

There are two practices that fit together seamlessly. In the first we give the mind-heart something wholesome to do. A lovely task is radiating wellbeing to others. It's simple. We've done it here before. I'll guide you through it:

Close your eyes if that's comfortable – this cuts down on visual distractions.

Now remember what it's like to feel good. If you don't feel great now, remember what it felt like. Send the feeling out in all directions to everyone around you.

If you're feeling mellow, broadcast mellowness in all directions.

If you're feeling anxious, remember what it feels like to be safe and secure. Send a wish that others feel safe and secure.

If you are feeling nothing in particular, send out any uplifting state: peace, love, kindness, spaciousness. Smile and radiate it in all directions.

...

Don't worry about whether others actually feel it. That's not your business. Your business is simply to send it out to any and all who might receive it.

...

This is the first practice. It's nourishing. In formal practice, we first send it to ourselves so we don't fall into self-neglect. Then after ten minutes, we send love and light to others so we don't get stuck in self-absorption.

The Wandering Mind

If we did nothing but continually sending out wellbeing and kindness for a day, we'd probably become enlightened.

However, after a short time – maybe just a few breaths – the mind is rehashing an old episode of Oprah Winfrey, solving the Palestinian crisis, writing poetry, bemoaning the stupidity of an in-law or rummaging through fears and flaws. I spent two days on one retreat designing a desk lamp. It's amazing how gleefully the mind traipses off on silly expeditions.

When it does, we're not doing the first practice. So we shift to the second. It has several phases.

When we recognize that the mind has wandered, the first thing we do is to recognize that the mind has wandered. That's simple. There's always some wisdom in what drew our attention. We may never know what that wisdom is, but we don't want to develop the habit of throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

So we don't tell ourselves, "You idiot, you'll never do this right" and yank the mind back to loving-kindness. We just recognize where the mind's attention went: "Ah, fear." "Ah, thinking." "Worry." "Day dreaming."

To recognize clearly, it helps to step back. So the second phase is to step back and release the thoughts, feelings or images. We don't try to stop them. We just let the mind do what it will without holding on or pushing away.

Releasing thoughts or feelings helps us relax. So the third phase is to relax: relax the body, the emotions, the mind. The mind never wanders unless there is excess tension in it. When the attention wanders, it's a sign of too much energy. So we invite relaxation.

As we recognize, release and relax, we may find ourselves smiling. It's a smile of relief. Or it's a smile of good humor – taking ourselves lightly. Last month I did a sermon on this phase called "Smiling Buddha." It's on our website if you're interested.

So there are these four phases: recognize, release, relax and smile. Now, from this lighter place, we return our attention to the first practice: radiating wellbeing. And we repeat this process over and over whenever the attention drifts away.

Putting it Together

If all of us meditated, I'd offer an example of how this can come together in meditation. But we don't. So let me offer an example from everyday life – we all have an everyday life.

I love to hike in the high Sierras. Above eight or nine thousand feet, with wilderness, huge mountains, clear air and boundless sky, the issues and strain in my life seem trivial compared to the bliss of just being alive on this lovely planet.

A few weeks ago I was driving through the foothills toward the mountains. I was feeling some of that bliss as I was just present with the road and the forest.

Ahead I noticed a stoplight. There were two lanes going in my direction. The three cars ahead of me stopped in the same lane. So I pulled into the empty lane – I didn't want to get caught behind a slowpoke.

Waiting at the stop line I noticed the two lanes merged a quarter of a mile ahead. So, when the light turned green, I gave my car a little extra gas to get ahead. The first guy in the next lane had the same idea. His foot was heavier than mine.

I was annoyed to see him get ahead of me. But I thought, "If he wants to be childish, I'll let him have his way." I felt elevated in my forbearance.

As we came to the merge, the second car began to nudge up. I pretended not to notice. With seeming indifference, I squeezed him out. We fell into single file with me in the number two slot.

Then I realized my spacious bliss had been supplanted by calculations of speed and distance and impressive inner monologues rationalizing my competitiveness.

I recognized all this so clearly that it released. I relaxed and smiled at my foolishness.

Some spaciousness and wellbeing returned ... until the next stop light. I didn't want to get into that competitiveness and rationalizing. But years of practice have grown strong neural pathways in my brain. Like Pavlov's dog, cars and a red light triggered this sequence of thinking, figuring, explaining and rationalizing.

However, the more I observed this inner drama, let it be, relaxed and smiled, the less it felt like I was doing it. It was a mechanical, neural reflex – a conditioned pattern. I wasn't driving along happily wondering how I could make my mind dense and tight. The yammering just arose on its own.

If I had used willpower to stop the yammering, it would have created an even denser self-sense. This thicker version would be even more spiritually pretentious and obnoxious.

So instead, I just observed with openness, curiosity and humor.

If we want the lightness, clarity and ease of selflessness, we neither indulge nor fight our patterns. We simply recognize, release, relax, smile and send out uplifting energy. With patience and kindness, our patterns start to run out of gas. But it takes time. Meanwhile, we're less identified with a conditioned reflex.

Three Levels

Inner practices like meditation work on three levels. The first is what Jon Kabat-Zinn calls "mindfulness based stress reduction." Its secret is shifting our relationship to stress. We don't try to change, fix or avoid stress. We just relate to it with more mindfulness and less identification.

Many of you have taken Gayle Wilson's course here or have trained in other settings. You can attest that shifting your relationship to stress without trying to control it can be quite powerful.

As we stop fighting or indulging our inner patterns, space begins to open up inside. Into this space, insights pop up. We don't consciously try to figure things out. We just spontaneously see things more clearly.

This is the second level of practice. It's called *vipassana* or "insight meditation."

At the third and deepest level, meditation begins to see the subtlest nuances of the processes of awareness itself. Normally we don't see the bird until it's a feathered fluster in our face. But when we're quiet, we see it appear faintly in the empty sky, grow bigger and bigger, flap around and fade into the distance. Normally we don't notice our thoughts or sense of selfhood until they are large and demanding. But as

awareness becomes spacious, we see a predictable series of events as they arises out of nothing and fade back into nothing.

As we see each microscopic event clearly, they look mechanical and impersonal. With this, we see selfhood as an illusion – something arising out of nothing and fading into nothing. The illusion is real. But it's not what we once thought is was.

Driving across the central valley on a hot afternoon, we think we see water on the road a mile ahead. What we see is real. It's just not what we think it is. It's a mirage. We see the sky reflected off the highway as if it was covered by water. But it's hot and cold air reflecting the sky, not water.

Self is real. The thoughts, feelings, sensations and labels we experience are real. But they aren't what we think they are. There's no puddle in the road. There's no enduring, pre-existing, separate, independent self holding them together – just a collection of transient phenomena.

One of the keys to the sense of self is a subtle tension deep in our head. As the mind gets quieter, we notice this tension more clearly. And we can release it and relax and smile. With this, the mirage of self evaporates like a mirage evaporating off the highway.

Self dissolves into the light, heartfelt ease of wellbeing. There is just a flow of phenomena unobstructed by a sense of self. And we walk through our lives with more ease, wellbeing, clarity and wisdom.

Try It Out

Don't take my word for any of this. Ideas and words about selflessness aren't useful. Your own experience is all that counts.

So I encourage you to try it out in your own meditation: recognize, release, relax, smile and radiate wellbeing.

If you aren't drawn to meditation, try dropping your thinking for a moment a hundred times a day or whenever you think of it. Notice the verb is not "stopping" your thoughts – that implies force. The verb is "dropping" your thinking – releasing and relaxing. For a moment, let them go into silence. Every time we create a gap in this flow of mental experience helps us see the mirage for what it is.

If this doesn't appeal to you, at least take the repetitive patterns of thoughts and feelings less personally. They're just learned reflexes.

And if none of this appeals to you, come back in two weeks. I'll approach this topic from a totally different world.

This morning we've been looking at the inner world. In two weeks we'll explore the world of relationship and our relational instincts. These practices

have a very different feel and appeal, though they eventually lead to a similar place.

Closing

The 13th century Zen master, Dōgen Zenji expressed everything I've said in just three lines:

To study the way is to study the self.

He's describing the inner path that explores the experience of self.

To study the self is to lose the self.

As we see the various experiences that make up our sense of self and how mechanical, impersonal and transient. With this, self starts to dissolve.

To lose the self it to be enlightened by all things.

No longer burdened by self-consciousness, everything becomes lighter and clearer. Without the distortion of self sense, everything we see brings lightness, ease and joy.