

Seeking the Seeker

Jack Engler

*I once asked my teacher, Anagarika Munindra-ji, "What is the dharma?"
He said, very simply, "Dharma is living life fully."*

When we practice mindfulness meditation, many things arise in awareness. We typically turn our attention to each thing in turn—different thoughts, feelings, body sensations, states of mind. We often don't turn our attention to that which is doing the observing, that which seems to be doing the thinking, that which is aware. This is what I want to do today—to actually seek, in a very practical way, who it is that is doing the seeking, who it is that is practicing. Of course, you say, I am seeking, I am practicing. But who is this I? Can you show it to me? When we turn to look for it, what do we find?

The Buddha said he taught one thing and one thing only: suffering and the end of suffering. What did he mean when he talked about ending suffering? What kind of suffering? He wasn't talking about the suffering we bring to a therapist's office. He wasn't directly talking about conflicts in relationships, or difficulties in communicating with our spouses or teenage children. He wasn't talking about finding a better direction for our life. He was interested more in the great existential suffering we all experience by virtue of being alive. The world is on fire, he said. The mind is on fire. And the only thing that matters is quenching that fire, putting it out. To do that we have to find the source of the fire and the fuel that feeds it, which he identified as a certain kind of ignorance or culpable not-knowing. We burn because we don't really know who we are. Today we will try to get closer to knowing who we are.

This article is drawn from a daylong course offered by Jack Engler at BCBS this past April.

The seeker is seeking liberation from suffering. Yet meditative inquiry reveals that suffering is largely self-generated. More to the point, at the core it reveals that suffering arises from grasping or clinging to notions of a self. The technical term for this in Buddhist thought is *ahamkāra*, which literally means "making a self." If we want to do something about it, we must get to the root of how we make ourselves into a self that can be grasped.

The only thing that matters is stopping the grasping. It doesn't really matter how we do it or what the point of leverage is. In traditional Buddhist practice, there are said to be three doors to liberation: impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*) and non-self (*anattā*). A profound enough experience of any one of these fundamental marks of existence can catapult the mind into finally letting go. It cannot continue to hold on to the view of self as something that can be grasped once its transitory and illusory nature has been revealed. At a certain stage of formal practice, this is exactly what happens, though it can happen outside meditation as well. The scriptures are full of accounts of individuals awakening as the result of a direct, profound encounter with one of these realities. Each of us, it turns out, will have a predilection for one of these doors as our passageway to awakening.

Of the three doors to liberation, the most difficult one to grasp in direct experience is *anattā*. I'm not sure what your own experience has been, but it's not so hard to experience the moment-to-moment flow and change of things. The constantly changing nature of experience is apparent every day, every moment actually. Neither is it particularly hard to experience the discomfort inherent in just being alive—the underlying discontent, the

unease, the nagging restlessness which we can't pin to any one thing, the insecurity of life. Approaching liberation through the door of *anattā*, emptiness of self, however, is more difficult, in part because we are so thoroughly conditioned to construct our experience around some sense of I, me, and mine. It's the most deeply conditioned impulse in us, the hardest to see through, and the most difficult to relinquish.



The idea for this workshop arose two years ago when I began to wonder if there was a way to get at the experience of *anattā*, this experience of emptiness of self, more directly than the way it comes up in normal vipassana (insight meditation) practice. Today is still something of an experiment. I'd like to suggest we enter into it in that spirit. We'll start with the question, "Who am I?" It is the great question of spiritual inquiry. It's not asking, "Who do I take myself to be?" but "Who, really, am I?"

We could talk about this for hours, but I suspect that by five o'clock we'd be no further along than we are right now. I suggest we try to get at it by doing a series of short meditations to try and generate some actual experience of *anattā*. Then perhaps we'll feel like something has actually shifted in our sense of self by the end of the day. We'll come at this issue of the self like a jewel with many facets. We'll start each segment with a practice period structured around a question for meditative inquiry, follow it with reflection and discussion of our experience, then turn the jewel to another facet and pose another question for meditative inquiry.

This practice will involve using vipassana in a somewhat different way than you may be accustomed to. Those of you who have practiced here in Barre know that basic mindfulness practice involves being a silent witness or observer of all that arises and passes away moment by moment, without reaction or judgment. Here we will

use mindfulness to mount a focused and active inquiry into a series of questions about the self. We will still be allowing whatever arises into awareness with openness and acceptance. But we will investigate each moment of awareness for what it may tell us in response to a question we put to it about the self. The great Japanese Zen master Dogen, who brought Soto Zen from China to Japan in the thirteenth century, was uncompromising on this score: "Great questioning, great enlightenment; little questioning, little enlightenment; no questioning, no enlightenment." So we're going to take Dogen at his word and engage in great questioning.



The first question for the first sitting will simply be, "Who am I?" In the midst of this arising and passing away, who am I? Who is the I that is witnessing this arising and passing away? Let's try to really go after it and seriously try to find it, and we'll see what we find.

Begin mindfulness practice as we usually do, paying attention to the breath as it comes and goes, making no effort to control it. Letting each breath be.... Gradually turning your attention to whatever arises in awareness and letting it be. If it calls for attention, turning your attention to it. Just allowing all, accepting all, rejecting nothing.... And now begin to put that question, that great

question, in the midst of all this coming and going, arising and passing away—breath, thoughts, feelings, body—Who am I? Not trying to think about it, not analyzing it. Just holding it as a question. Letting it guide your attention in a penetrating way. Repeating it to yourself from time to time.... Keeping it fresh and focused. Who am I? Investigate. Who am I?

Silence for 20 minutes.
"Who am I?"



One way to understand what we are doing here is that we are using our mind to go beyond mind. That's what these great questions do. They engage us on a certain level, but that level keeps deepening. The result is that you are eventually forced to go beyond mind in a way your mind cannot describe. We are using these questions, not to come up with verbal or conceptual answers, although some may suggest themselves to us along the way—that's fine. We are using these questions to push deeper and deeper into the nature of our own experience. What is the nature of the self? Let's see if that has something to do with ending suffering.

I'm aware of the breath. Is there somebody breathing? Am "I" breathing? See if you can find out who it is that's breathing. I'm aware of thoughts. Try to find the thinker. Who it is that's thinking? The same with everything that arises—every feeling, body sensation, sound, sight, taste, smell. Who is feeling? Who is sensing? Who is hearing? Who is seeing? Who is tasting? Who is smelling? Let's put that question to every experience that arises. Remember, great questioning, great enlightenment. Who is thinking?

Silence for 20 minutes.
"Who is breathing/thinking/sensing?"

We are so used to formulating these questions in a subject/object framework. If there is intentionality, there has got to be someone who is intending, right? I'm inviting us to investigate to see if that is really the case. It certainly feels like that is the case. We've lived our whole life on that assumption. That's why pursuing these kinds of inquiries can be deeply unsettling. We are here to challenge the whole structure of experience, the whole way of organizing ourselves around the core belief that we are somehow separate from what is happening.

So let's turn the jewel to yet another facet. The next inquiry comes at this same issue in a slightly different way. In each moment of experience, ask, "To whom is this happening? Or, "Who is experiencing this?"

Silence for 20 minutes.
"To whom is this happening?"
"Who is experiencing this?"

One thing this process of inquiry helps us do is notice what we identify with as our own, what we take as defining who we are. We have all kinds of internal representations of ourselves, some conscious and some unconscious. These are notions of who we are, or who we aren't but we would like to be or ought to be, or who we are and shouldn't be—it can get to be quite a complex mix of views about ourselves. We have all sorts of fearful and self-limiting identifications. "I" can't do this. "I" am stupid. "I" am unattractive. No one likes "me". Of course we have positive, inspiring, sometimes grandiose views of ourselves as well, which are limiting in their own way. I'm really good at what I do. I get this, my colleagues don't. That was a great piece of work—I hope I get some recognition for it. Look Ma, no hands!

The next meditative inquiry brings these identifications to the surface. In inquiring into them, you realize that in my normal "I"-mode, I identify with all of those attributions, and many more. Most of the time I'm not even conscious of it. I take it for granted that that's simply who I am—the sum total of all these representations of self—all these attributes, traits, behaviors, personal history. As you persist with the inquiry, you may begin to see that you are none of these things in any final or definitive sense. Maybe who you really are is not in the mix of identifications at all. Put the question to each moment of experience: Is this who I am? Or conversely: Is this not who I am? They are actually the same question. Each gets at the root of how we construct self.

Accepting nothing, taking nothing for granted, accepting nothing as final, this deep questioning can lead us towards ending our self-grasping and our imprisonment.

Silence for 20 minutes.
"Is this who I am?" "Is this me?"



Energy is usually low after lunch. It's hard to rouse the same level of commitment to inquiry. To reenergize us and turn the jewel to still another facet, we'll do an interactive mode of inquiry this time. We'll break into pairs and use the repeating question method that is central to the Diamond Approach of the Ridwan School of Hameed Almaas, where it is also used as a method of meditative inquiry. One member of each pair

puts the question to the other. After the other finishes responding, the person putting the question thanks him and gently puts the question again. I think you'll find that repeating the question again and again drives the inquiry deeper and deeper. After fifteen minutes, the pair switch roles. We are continuing the inquiry into self-identifications with the repeating question, "Who do you take yourself to be?"

Repeating practice. 30 minutes.
"Who do you take yourself to be?"

In that open field of awareness, we next want to see how pervasive the "I" actually is. We normally have little idea because it's the air we breathe, invisible to us. This time, try to see directly how most moments of experience are structured as some sort of "I" experience: I am doing something—thinking, observing, breathing, worrying, judging, feeling. Or something is happening to me: there is pain in my knee, this person won't leave me alone, lunch isn't what I expected. In or behind what is happening, I implicitly take myself to be the doer or the done-to, the agent or the recipient. Whatever I am experiencing tends to refer to "me" in some way. It's unnerving to actually see, moment by moment, how self-referential so much of our experience is.

I had a psychotic patient tell me once, "I am the sun and all of you are planets who orbit around me." That delusional belief is not so different from what we all tend to assume all the time. Somewhere in the moment of experience is a sun called I or me, around which everything else is orbiting. Let's take a few minutes to observe this particular facet of the jewel. See if you can pick up this pervasive I around which everything implicitly orbits. No judgment about it. Just see if you can pick it up.

Silence for 20 minutes.
Notice how pervasive the I is, explicitly or implicitly, in most moments of experience.

You often hear people talk about transcending the ego or getting rid of it: "You have to lose your ego to be free." That's actually a mistaken way of thinking. The ego was never there to begin with. You can't lose what you do



not have. This ego, this I, this self, is not a thing. It's not some entity. It's a mental construct that comes into play under certain conditions. The two main conditions that evoke it, that bring this sense of being a separate entity into play, are conflict and anxiety. When we're anxious or feel conflicted, we contract into this sense of being separate, and the full catastrophe unfolds from there.

The Buddha never denied that we have personalities. Of course we have a personality. The person you are is different from the person I am. We each have a particular history, a particular set of attributes, interests, capabilities, defenses and so forth, and each of us is on a unique trajectory. All that is fine. It's when we start attaching that to some fixed entity called the self that the problems start because then we have to protect it, defend it, secure it, worry about it, try to impress others with it, hold on to it for dear life. Our practice is not about getting rid of personality; it is about letting go of the grasping that builds up around mistaken notions of personality.

This brings us to the next meditation. Having seen how pervasive the sense of I is, the crucial question now is, what are the consequences of holding that particular belief and acting as if it were real?

What we perceive are not things in themselves, not objects "out there", or states "in here". It only seems that way, because we tend to confuse what we perceive with what we think about what we perceive. It is our thinking that creates "things" or "objects". When we perceive something "out there", object to our subject, we are actually perceiving our own thinking, our concepts of things. Now this has its utility in everyday life, but deep down it creates enormous problems. Self, for instance, reveals itself to be just such a concept. But it is probably

the most potent one of all, since it creates such problems for us. This is the empirical and experiential question we will be sitting with next. You have to be convinced about the consequences that ensue from your own deep experience, or you'll continue to create your world the way you do. Understanding the idea, which is difficult enough, won't do it; only deep realization of the actual cost/benefit, moment by moment, of organizing our life around this concept will begin to change things for us.

So I encourage you in this next sitting to really go into, to really pursue the inquiry that lives in, the question: "What are the consequences of constructing my experience around I, me or mine?" Follow that process, moment by moment, as you find yourself constructing your experience in that way. You'll be able to detect and experience the impact directly on your body and mind. Repeat the question from time to time. Let it guide your inquiry. Again, not thinking, but directly observing the consequences on body and mind as you experience them.

Alternatively, you can also ask of each body and mind state that arises with a self-referential quality—which will probably be most—"Does this make me happy?" "Does this bring me peace of mind?"

Silence for 20 minutes.

*"What are the consequences, moment by moment,
of bringing in I, me, or mine?"
"Does this bring me peace of mind?"*

The Theravada Buddhist tradition has a particular way of describing the awakening that comes from the practice of vipassana. Awakening is said to occur in four distinct stages or path-moments. What distinguishes them is not the subjective experience—that is described as basically the same. The difference is the set of unwholesome mental factors called "fetters" that are said to be extinguished at each stage. These mental factors are termed fetters because they bind us to *samsāra* as the root causes of our suffering. There are ten fetters in all, and once they are extinguished from the mind, it is said they will never be experienced again. According to traditional Theravada teaching, one's rebirth status also changes as a result of each stage of awakening. Asian teachers actually see this as the most important outcome, but this cosmology is still pretty alien to us so we tend to focus on how awakening roots out the sources of suffering. What is so interesting about this model, in light of the kind of practice we are doing today, is that

one of the very last of these obstacles to freedom is the subtle, deeply-ingrained tendency to compare self with others. That is, to behave as if there were a self separate from, independent of, and competitive with others, even after belief in such a construct has been abandoned as a result of first awakening. That's how deeply rooted the attachment to self is—it's the last thing that gets extinguished. Once it takes root it is very hard to uproot, but it is inspiring to know that, in principle, this is possible.

It might help to remind ourselves of all of those moments, and there are many of them, when we have "lost ourselves" in something. It takes only a bit of reflection to realize that we actually function pretty well when we surrender the need for a separate self directing the show. We can lose ourself in a piece of music, a work of art, a sport, a prayer, an experience of love. In a state of absorption the sense of being separate from our experience, the director behind the scenes, just drops away. "We" aren't there; there is just there-ness. Actually not even there-ness or here-ness. Just is-ness, or suchness.

And, surprise of surprises: "I" am not even missed! Because "I" am not needed or necessary. Everything is going along just fine, thank you very much. Better, in fact. Buddhist and other practice traditions call this non-dual awareness. It ranges from very ordinary moments, when we respond spontaneously to some situation without any thought of self or self-consciousness reflection, right up to the most profound and transformative level of non-dual awareness, which is enlightenment, which is freedom. We have experiences like this all the time, but we somehow put them aside,



forget about them... and then come back to our normal mode of self-conscious awareness organized around a sense of self that is separate from its experience with all the ills that attend it.

I remember the way the tennis player Arthur Ashe described his experience of winning Wimbledon in 1975. He called it “being in the zone.” It’s a phrase that athletes use all the time now. As he described it, for two weeks he was in a zone of awareness in which “he” wasn’t there. Everything that was happening took place in slow motion—himself, his opponent, the flight of the ball, all in a perfect dance. The ball looked as big as a grapefruit as it came across the net. Returning it was effortless. The racket just went to the ball without conscious intent or purpose, but with perfect pace and timing “He” wasn’t directing it. “He” wasn’t “hitting” the ball. The ball was just coming into contact with the racket. That’s a state of non-dual awareness, when self just kind of drops out. Dogen called the most profound level of non-dual awareness “the dropping off of body and mind.”

We actually function more efficiently in those states, don’t we? If we look closely, we will find that we “make a self” only when we’re anxious in some way. The self is the owner of anxiety. It’s when we’re anxious that we become self-conscious or feel we need to be self-assertive, or want to impose our will on others. In Circe du Soleil, they say, “Self-consciousness is something you have to let go if you expect to take flight.” The self by nature is fearful. By nature it’s selfish. This entity, separate from what is happening, causes a lot of conflict. Because it has to protect, defend and aggrandize itself in a world full of other separate selves who are doing the same thing. No wonder friendship, love, and collaboration are hard. But when we’re just there, completely intimate with experience, this self drops away. We experience without an experiencer. Let’s see if we can get a taste of that, “The dropping off of body and mind.

So let’s do one last short sitting. Let’s take the inquiry one last step—not that it’s the very last step, but it is our last step together for today. The inquiry this time comes from Ajahn Chah, a wonderful teacher in the Thai forest tradition who taught many Westerners. He used to say that stopping the grasping-after-self was like putting down a rock. It’s as if we’ve been carrying this huge rock on our shoulders all the time, and he is inviting us to consider what it might feel like to put that rock down for a moment. Let’s try sitting quietly for a bit, just putting that rock down, and see what it feels like. I don’t mean throwing the rock away and all it stands for—just

putting it down. In Tibetan practice they call this a “glimpse”—a glimpse of what it would really feel like to put down the burden for good.

So sit comfortably, relax your body, and breath deeply but normally as mindfulness becomes established. Now try putting down the burden of being a self for a few moments. Just cease holding on to yourself, defining yourself, judging yourself. See what experience feels like without self-grasping. Notice the moments of calm, spontaneous awareness that arise when there is no grasping at self. Let yourself take that in... feeling what it’s like.... Moments of just being, without being someone.

Silence for 15 minutes.

“What does it feel like to ‘put the burden down?’”

Very early on in my path, thirty-five years ago in Calcutta, I asked one of my teachers, Nani Barua, whom most of us know as Dipa Ma, the sort of question that can only occur to a beginner: “When you become awakened, doesn’t everything become sort of grey and blah? If you’ve eliminated strong feelings, sense desire, and all the rest, where’s the *chutzpa*, where’s the juice?” Instead of answering, she broke out laughing. She laughed and laughed. Eventually she said that staggering under the burden of grasping after self is what is so bland and repetitive and boring. When you put that rock down, when you relinquish your hold on all the baggage of self-attachment, every moment is new and vividly alive. As I came to know her and spend time with her, I saw this aliveness and zest in everything she did. Everything. It was so obvious. No answer she could have given would have been as convincing as her laughter and delight at my question.

Jack Engler teaches and supervises psychotherapy trainees at Harvard Medical School. He is the co-author, among other books, of Transformations of Consciousness.