

# Meditation and the Self

Everyone has a sense of self. Upon careful investigation we discover that this sense of self consists of ideas and body sensations which arise and fade moment by moment. Such ideas and body sensations might be described as "self-referential" i.e. they are related to producing a sense of self. Most spiritual traditions encourage some kind of letting go of self or ego. Buddhism in particular puts great emphasis on realizing "no self."

Personally, I like to view this as a process of *clarifying* the sense of self. This clarification proceeds in two stages, corresponding to the two meanings of the English word "clarify." Something becomes clear when it goes from being nebulous to being distinct. But also, something becomes clear when it goes from being opaque to being transparent.

Through consistent practice we develop the skill of mindfulness which allows us to detect with great clarity the often nebulous self-referential ideas and body sensations as they arise in each act of perception. We also develop equanimity so that we can allow these ideas and body sensations to expand and contract without suppression, interference or clinging. Eventually contact with the sense of self becomes so continuous that there is no time left to congeal or fixate it. The self then becomes clarified in the sense that it is no longer experienced as an opaque, rigid, ever-present entity, but rather as a transparent, elastic, vibratory *activity*. It loses its "thingness." We realize that it is a verb not a noun, a wave not a particle.

This elastic sense of self can freely contract down to zero. We then realize a state of true peace and oneness with all things. It can also expand as a vibrant, zestful, deeply human yet non-substantial activity of individual personality. The former is no self in the sense of zero self, and the latter is no self in the sense of no fixated thing called a self.

According to this paradigm, in enlightenment the unconsciousness and fixation associated with those ideas and body sensations which produce a sense of self get eliminated. The sense of self becomes a home rather than a prison. You can come and go freely.

But, you may ask, "Who becomes free? What observes the ideas and body sensations?" Such questions arise from two sources. One is perceptual and the other linguistic. These two are constantly reinforcing each other, resulting in deep and pervasive confusion. Ordinarily, each act of perception is accompanied by a new burst of self-referential ideas and body sensations. Because for most people those ideas and body sensations are both indistinct and congealed, they produce a sense of "thing" called doer or perceiver. This perception of doer or perceiver as entity becomes ensconced in the grammatical structure of human speech as substantive pronouns (I, you, who). Thus the perception of "self as thing" is reinforced with almost every utterance we speak.

It is for this reason that questions like, "What does the observing?" or "Who gets enlightened?" seem so natural and yet are so difficult to answer. Grammatically, interrogative pronouns (who, what) must be answered with substantive nouns (this, that). In point of fact no thing meditates or gets wisdom. Rather, the skills of mindfulness and equanimity become so strong and habitual that they "seep around the edges" and soak into the ideas and body sensations that are producing the sense of an "I" practicing meditation.