

CLARIFYING THE LOSS OF SELF

Let's take a timeout from this stroke discussion to clarify what we mean by the shattering and loss of Self. It seems that some readers of this blog are having trouble understanding what is lost when I say that with my stroke my Self was shattered, vacated, voided, and otherwise not there or functional. Let's see if we can clarify this concept.

If anyone reading this has lost someone they love, had a death in the family, been fired or laid off from a job, and right on down the line of shocks, you may have been subject to the kind of shock being referred to here, that of being bereft to one degree or another. And what is lost is the stability of what we popularly call the Self. When in shock, we can simply find us beside ourselves, destabilized, and the Self shattered and in tatters. It's all about having the desire and attachment knocked out of us. It's like having the wind knock out. It takes time for the Self to pull itself back together again. With a stroke, I find that is quite a long time indeed.

I find that it helps to remember that the Self has been with us our entire life. And as the dharma points out, our Self is mostly made up of our whatever we become attached to. It could be a new bicycle when we are a kid, a girlfriend or boyfriend when in our teens, and a family and kids when we are an adult. And, also about everything else under the sun, a hobby, new car, sport, not to mention endless likes, dislikes, prejudices, and on and on. In short, everything we have become attached to.

Some folks refer to this loss as a life-shattering experience, while others say they lost their self-composure, stability, confidence in their self, and on and on. These events can be temporarily devastating and, as mentioned, they require some time before the self can reanimate and put itself back together again. Those times of loss often are difficult times for many of us, but spiritually-inclined folks can also find them of great value in seeing the nature of their own mind and how it works without an intervening Self weaving and dodging and being a pesky obscuration.

As sentient beings we function physically, psychologically, and spiritually. The problem as I see it (and as I understand the dharma presents it) is that after a sudden shock to our system, while our body or emotions or awareness still function, our sense of self (and cohesion) can be disrupted, even shattered, and most of our attachments and fixations lost or vacated, at least temporarily, thus leaving temporarily naked of our attachments or desires. We may just not give a damn for a while.

This is especially true in those areas where we have exaggerated our self and "gilded the lily," so to speak, laid on a patina with our own erroneous version of the truth, i.e. where we have enhanced reality more than truth would justify. And we do this all the

time. To remind us of what I am pointing at here: most of us exaggerate and flatter ourselves, etc. That's what I am talking about.

In other words, we augment reality with what we would like to believe it is or we are. The correct word is reification. We reify or attempt to make something more real than it in fact is. We puff ourselves up. The so-called Self is filled with our reifications, our attachments and fixations, likes and dislikes, prejudices, and etc. And we drag this entourage around with us wherever we go like a dead weight. This is the nature of the Self.

An "attachment" as defined here refers to clinging to something beyond what it merits. We may not realize it, but others can clearly see where we go beyond the truth and blow-up or puff-up the value or merit of ourselves or something we like or dislike. This is common knowledge.

We all know what is meant by a puffed-up Self, so I leave it to readers to know what is being looked at here. It seems we all like to buffer or cushion and surround ourselves with what most pleases us, even if it goes beyond reason or truth a bit. However, all of that exaggeration piles up and serves as a drag on reality for us. It won't accompany us beyond the grave, for sure, so it might be good to get used to what in fact is real now rather than depend on false security. I found that out in my stroke! There was no comfort there and I had to bone up and get used to not having my baby-blanket with me.

Whatever we have done or opinions we hold in excess of their actual reality are lost when our Self (with its desires and sense of attachment) is shattered, lost, or vacated. If our desires are vacated and we no longer are magnetized or fixated, things then are no longer attractive. I say this on the understanding that our attractions are the glue that hold the Self together. When in shock, our desires bottom out and that sense of Self (and its stability) is often abandoned -- shattered.

And it was very clear after my recent stroke that much of my Self had been vacated at least as being desirable any longer for me. I was mostly nauseated or repulsed by what apparently I used to wallow in or indulge. Either way, what was my Self was no longer accessible to me. If it was there, I didn't desire it anymore or feel attached to it. I no longer fit to it or it to me. I was suddenly a free agent, which was more (than less) scary. That state is out there waiting for us. I, for one, want to get ready for it. I have seen what it can do and did not like it one iota.

The immediate impression after the stroke (and for some time) was of having no sense of my Self or what was remembered as "me" before the stroke event. Nothing of my historical and habitual me, call it a cocoon or baby blanket or whatever, was available any longer. My favorite fan club "Me, myself, and I) was nowhere to be seen. Any buffer

between me and reality had (at least momentarily) been removed. I was stark naked as far as my own perceived sense of support. I felt like a sore thumb. From a spiritual point of view, this is a good thing, but the suddenness of it through shock can make it VERY difficult.

I had been thrust beyond the comfort of my habitual Self into the stark light of reality. At the same time, like outgrowing a pair of shoes, I could no longer see myself fitting back into the Self I used to be. It was no longer me and I increasingly found it false; I could not see myself in that old Self and was even somewhat repulsed by it. That's not me! What then am I?

In fact, I spent many days struggling between the stark reality of the stroke and the previous Self I had identified up to then. I characterized that period as a form of temporary schizophrenia during which I was unclear which of these two "sets of Self" I identified with. After many days, that struggle was settled in favor of my new changed-sense-of-Self and the old Self was then seen as history. From that point onward I identified with my new situation and the previous Self faded into history. Yet, as mentioned, that was a struggle.

I can remark that something similar is said to happen in the bardo shortly after death, as our previous life is gradually abandoned and our future rebirth begins to take form. The outcome is always resolved in our identifying with our coming rebirth. Look to the change to be the reality.

And I will comment (again) that I did OK with all of this until I realized that my former attachment to the dharma, my practice of it, and forty years of habit was also abandoned just as my non-dharma Self had been shattered. The truth is no lover of attachments, be they good, bad, or indifferent. That fact that I was attached to the dharma was no exception. The built-up patina of my attachment to the dharma was voided completely in the same moment of the stroke. Like a tornado came through, I didn't recognize the self that remained, such as it was.

It was like I was a stranger to the dharma and at that time I had no attachment to the dharma other than on the merits of my realizations (such as they were), meaning none of the accumulated comfort of my practice remained. It was like I had to start all over again to generate any attachment for the dharma.

I found this a bit terrifying, that my previous attachments to the dharma were not grandfathered into my post-stroke self, but instead were treated as any other attachment and just voided without my knowledge or consent. That to me was some tough love. I suffered over that one.

Fortunately, that situation was relatively short-term and I began to recapitulate my dharma-evolution fairly quickly, probably based of some good work done in the past by me and instead of repeating stock prayers verbatim, I began to recreate the essence of the prayers from scratch earnestly. I was soon comfortable again with my practice even though it was based on the requirement that I did everything from the beginning, from the heart. That means, instead of reading a prayer, I had to find the meaning of that prayer within myself (as if for the first time) and go from there. I was VERY grateful to find that earnest, heartfelt prayers coming from my heart not only put me back in the game, but was a better kind of practice than I had before. I am learning as I go.

What you can take away from all this is up to you, but there is information in this account that should make at least a few things clear.

[Photo by me yesterday.]

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“As Bodhicitta is so precious,
May those without it now create it,
May those who have it not destroy it,
And may it ever grow and flourish.”