Malcolm Martin
You Can't Be Yourself By Yourself
Week One: "Structural Selfishness, Collective Karma"
June 4, 2022

For me, and I think quite likely for you too, it was my pain and suffering that brought me to practice. And yet our practice is oriented towards the suffering of all beings of the whole world. How do we relate those two? One way would be simply to talk in terms of transcendence: "When I become a great bodhisattva, when I become a buddha, then I'll be invulnerable, then there will be no more problems for me and there will be no more suffering. Then I can help the rest of the world." Or we could frame it slightly differently. We could say, "What's the relationship of my suffering to the society in which I live, the society of which I'm a part?" I think this is a more practical way of addressing this question. Suppose I'm a woman. Suppose I'm Black. Suppose I'm Muslim. A lot of my everyday suffering and my deeper suffering is going to have a social and structural component. On the most extreme end, I might find myself spat at in the street or on the subway. I might find I don't get that job that I was the best candidate for. Or I might find I didn't have the best qualifications, but why didn't I have the best qualifications? Because of the education that was available to me. Or I might find that people clearly have a certain instinctive reaction to me. If I'm a Black Muslim woman who wears a headscarf or dresses modestly, I might find myself criticized by white feminists for suppressing my womanhood and subscribing to patriarchal values. And at the same time, I might find myself criticized by some of my co-religionaries for being far too westernized and promiscuous and out there.

How does that play with me and how I see myself in terms of who I think I am? One traditional Buddhist answer to that kind of suffering and that kind of problem would be to look for transcendence. We could say that at the level of the absolute, there is no man, there is no woman; there is no Black, there is no white; we are all one in the dharma, which is universal. We could strive for some kind of equanimity in that sense, some kind of personal release from that suffering, stepping away from it altogether. And yet in terms of addressing the suffering of all beings, that does nothing. That does not succeed at all. If I turn my back, if I don't address this inequality, this discrimination, this structural racism, misogyny, and Islamophobia, it continues.

And if I'm not going to address that, who is going to? Equally, if I don't address it as being a problem out there in the world, how do I come to think of myself as a failure, as second class, as second best or become angry? How does that relate to the self-hatred that at some level most of us feel, but that then I really will have quite a good cause for feeling?

That's actually not an entirely different problem. If I'm old, if I'm white, if I'm a classic white guy brought up to believe that he should be master of the universe, wondering why people don't treat him as the superior and entitled being which he knows himself to be: What did I do? Where did I go wrong? Am I some unique failure? Have I failed as a man? Have I failed my family? Or is there somebody to blame? And I can look around for the somebody to blame. Actually, a lot of these talks are going to concern themselves with this somebody to blame, this process of othering. We'll come back to that.

Traditionally, Buddhism has usually conceived of karma, or cause and effect, in individual terms. There are a few teachers—in particular, Thich Nhat Hanh—who have begun to talk about collective karma, what it would mean that as a group, we have this inheritance. We live in these particular sets of circumstances where these particular conditions and dependent conditions arise. How does that facilitate possibilities and close down possibilities at the same time? I think it's really in this sense that we can talk about structural selfishness and structural selfing. Let me explain a bit more. In a way, the personal focus of Buddhism plays very well with politics. It makes it possible to turn everything back on individual responsibility. If we see karma, action, and consequence as purely personal affairs, then there's no point addressing the status quo. There's no point addressing structural aspects of racism, misogyny, and so on. But if we begin to think in collective terms, then we get a very different picture emerging.

The last 100–200 years have given us really deep tools of critical thought. Over that period, it's become natural to think that society will change instead of seeing the world as absolutely right

the way it is. There is development which needs to happen. Tomorrow can be better, and that has to do with society as a whole. It seems to me that this is really the first moment in history as we know it when we can bring the powerful analytical tools and practices of Buddhism together with modern critical thought. We can think differently, we can practice differently, and we can work towards a different kind of society—a kinder kind of society.

I think that there are two sides that we can approach this from, one of which we could call intimate and the other of which is more straightforwardly structural. On the intimate side, I can begin to look for, become aware of, and understand the connections between the way that these structures of selfishness that are present within our society show up in my own everyday interactions, my relationships, the things I hear, the things I see. And then again, in a wider sense, I can actually begin to study, research, and open myself to awareness and a wider understanding.

I grew up and have lived my whole life in overwhelmingly white neighborhoods. It's quite astonishing, really. Black Lives Matter was a huge wake-up call. Since then, I've really begun to look and try to understand what on earth is going on, relate that to my own experience, and incorporate that in my own teaching. This all comes back to misperceptions. One of the misperceptions that I want to address, which is massively common in the way that we think and talk within Buddhism, is that selfishness is somehow biologically programmed within us. There's Richard Dawkins's book, *The Selfish Gene*, where it all comes down to Darwin: we have to struggle; this is what it's all about. If we can see the way that our society generates the structures of selfishness, explains to me how to be selfish, and facilitates my selfishness moment by moment by moment, we can see how this structural selfishness comes to be. I can see how my structural selfing comes about.

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I'd like to suggest that in no sense is selfishness simply our nature and that alongside the selfishness, underneath it, exceeding it in every direction, is caring. In the womb, as infants, as children, we are infinitely vulnerable, infinitely dependent. We are totally reliant on the care of others. And it's through that relationship of being cared for that we come to be the beings we are and that we learn to care. We learn caring, and each and every one of us exercises care in a multitude of different ways every single day, whether that's professionally, as a parent, as a sibling, as a friend, or as a coworker. We care and we care and we care. And beyond that, there's an infinite web of interrelationship, interbeing, interdependence that supports me in each moment and that I contribute to in each moment. Ultimately, it comes down to this question: Do we see ourselves as separate beings separate from each other, completely individual, or do we see ourselves as nonseparate? Do I see myself as a self apart from all other selves? Or do I see myself as simply a part of this world worlding?

Next time, I want to explore two metaphors of Charlotte Joko Beck's for what we might think of as a self and different ways of understanding what a self is and how I show up in the world in the way that I do. I'll ask the question, are you a whirlpool or a billiard ball?