

“No Ego, No Problem”—Pat Yingst 05/03/2014

Good morning, dharma brothers and sisters. Even the new ones! Good to see you.

So I'm very pleased to be able to be sitting up here, it's a sort of agony and ecstasy kind of thing, doing a talk. When you first confront it and feel like you have nothing to say (or at least I feel like I have nothing to say), and then things start to come together and we'll see if I have something to say.

I'm just a practitioner here, but I have practiced for a long time, so I hope that translates into something helpful. My talk today is called *No Ego, No Problem*, based on the title of a book by Anam Thubten called *No Self, No Problem*. Anam Thubten is somebody I just met recently (in words), who is incredibly articulate and a wonderful writer. He wrote another book called *The Magic of Awareness* which the book group was using a while ago, but this book *No Self, No Problem* is more recent.

So this idea of Ego has always been really big in my mind around this practice. Starting from when I first came into this practice, quite a long time ago, in 1988, when I was 42, what dragged me into this practice sort of “by the throat” (it was very visceral, I will say that!)—and I must have just been ripe for this, but I saw the first sentence of a commemorative book on the Rinzai tradition, and it said something like “We practice Zen to annihilate the Ego.” And I cannot tell you the effect that little sentence had on me—it was like a thunderclap! It was two-fold: first of all, somehow it made me realize that all of my suffering and my problems, my misery, was all tied up with Ego, and I'd never thought of it that way before. But boy, it just came together. The second part of the importance of this statement was that there was something I could do about it, and I had no idea that there was anything you could do about this stuff. I was woefully ignorant about spiritual practices, even at the age of 42. So I didn't come to this practice having done a lot of reading and preparation and thinking about it before I came. I just got dragged into it by my suffering.

So, I think that I had a tremendous amount of bad mental habits going on that I had never investigated. I just knew that I had a lot of feelings about who I was, many of which were very arrogant, and many of them on the other side of the scope, being very self deprecating, which I suppose is where some of the arrogant thoughts came from. It was just so painful to see that other people just didn't seem to see my gloriousness, my brilliance—they just didn't seem to get it! Something was wrong and it caused a lot of pain. I'd not thought of those problems as being related to the Ego, but anyway, when I heard this phrase it did bring me into this practice and I will say that I have been a practitioner ever since then. I don't think that sentence should be taken literally—that we annihilate the Ego—I don't even think the teacher that said that even meant it literally—because an Ego is probably not a good thing to annihilate. If we were just little spirits walking around without Egos we probably wouldn't be able to keep our body alive very long because the Ego protects us. We

know to look both ways when we cross the street because of our Ego. It keeps us together in one piece.

But, that said, the annihilation of the Ego does come in the moment—we can sit on the cushion and escape from this Ego that has such a strong hold on us. We can feel the spaciousness that is really our true make-up.

So, what is Ego the way I am talking about it? Ego comes from the Greek word for “I” and it means self or identity. And I’d like to propose a little bit of a different definition for how we think of our self, but maybe even more “Buddhistically” (if there is even such a word). Our Ego is all of the thoughts that we use to create our self, because in the Buddhist way of thinking we do create our self and the Buddha taught that there is actually no self (meaning: no actually separate self). That can be really hard to see a lot of the time because we have these bodies that we walk around in and seem very separate. But in the spiritual sense, there is no separate self, but we make one up. We feel that we have to. And we make ourselves up and it is rather surprising to really see how much time we spend creating our self. We spent most of our waking hours creating, identifying with, defending, and reifying our self.

Of course, you may be the exception to that, I don’t know.

So the fact that we spend so much of our time creating ourselves is to say that in a very literal sense we all are self-centered. Our thoughts swirl around and around and somehow this sense of self seems to arise in the middle of the swirl. And when the thoughts can be turned down a little bit (in the same sense that one turns down a light), then we can relax a little bit. This manufactured sense can relax and even begin to dissipate a little, and that happens from the work that we do on our cushions really looking at our self and understanding and seeing firsthand this creation and reification of the self going on. Of course, there’s a lot of obvious self-centered thoughts that we have, things like “Oh, that dress would look so good on me” or “I’m going to look good today” or “Am I making a good impression on so-and-so?” or “Am I making a good impression on you with my talk?” and so on. We all have these kinds of self-centered thoughts, but there are a lot more subtle kinds of stuff that goes on that has to do with our creation of the self.

One thing we don’t want to be is dead! We don’t want to be dead! So, it’s important to us to have a clearly defined sense of our self so we do a lot of tricky things in here to generate this self. We create opinions, or decide that we have opinions, and we use these opinions to define us. And we also have beliefs—I guess a belief is kind of an opinion about something that you can’t ever know the answer to. We use these opinions and beliefs to define us—we don’t believe they are self-centered, though, and depending on how tightly held they are, we might even take them for the Truth. It’s in that realizing of the “tightly-heldness” where the play is, because we’re always going to have opinions and probably have some beliefs too, although the more you do this practice the fewer beliefs you have. But we’re always going to have opinions

and we're always going to be thinking up a self. We can't really annihilate that. But it's how much we can see it happening that makes us free from it. How much we can step back a little bit and give it some space, and let that space in and step back from our opinions and understand that that is all they are—they are just thoughts. And what is a thought? It's a pretty ephemeral thing. I mean, a thought is—well, I don't know! It's pretty much “vaporware” and yet we get so identified with our thoughts.

In our desire to define ourselves and make it very clear to everyone that we're not dead and that we ARE this person, we're somebody to be reckoned with, we tend to freeze our experiences. When something really wonderful happens we tend to want to hold onto it, so we freeze it into some kind of generalization. It's kind of like eating something really good so you want to save some of it so it won't all be gone. So you save a little bit, put it in the freezer, and it sits in there for a long time and then a year and a half later you pull it out and it's become pretty nasty. But we do this with our good experiences too—we try to freeze them and in that freezing we can make something that can get pretty nasty because we maybe have ideals about who we are. If we really attach to this ideal and make it part of our self-identification, it can be rather harmful—or it can at least create a lot of suffering.

So we come up with ideals such as “I'm a person who loves my country” and we know that people who identified this way got used by Hitler. And when we take something as complex as our relationship to our country—which is an unbelievably complex relationship—and we try to fit it into a simple, frozen idea that “I love my country!” then we're not very open to what's going on in the moment. And we're not very open to change. When did we start loving our country? Did we love it in the 70s? 80s? Our country has undergone quite a lot of change in the last 40 or 50 years, and we can't be adaptable to that if we have set ourselves up as someone who loves a certain frozen time.

We also freeze or somehow make very solid the things that we don't like. You know, “I don't like Bill. Never have, never will.” (Oh, is there a Bill here!? It's not you!) But we do that, right? We take somebody as complex as a human being, who according to the Buddha is someone that is full of wisdom and compassion just like us, and we close the door on him or her. We do this because it seems so nice and neat. It's “neat” to have a defined idea of somebody and it plays into this desire to define our self. So this need to be very clear about who we are leads to “Well, I don't like Bill.” And, once we decide that we don't like Bill, it's going to be very difficult for Bill to show us his lovable side even when part of us knows that it's there. So it's important to realize that when we completely close the door on another human being, we are just putting one more nail in our coffin which separates us from other people. Keeping that door open is something that I've been working on a lot—I used to be a big “door closer”—you know, crossing names off my list quite easily. I found that there was a little bit of “glee” in doing that, which I think comes from that need to be so “well defined.” Once I started seeing that I did that a lot, it lost its allure.

I realized halfway through preparing this talk that I am talking about exactly the same thing that I talked about last time! Last time I talked was about “Life is but a dream”—and I don’t expect anyone to remember that, if you’re like me you don’t remember dharma talks. But I talked about the dream and the dream is nothing else other than this self. This body of thought that we create around our self, that creates our self, actually. So that’s another way to look at it. It brings to mind the idea that all dharma talks are really the same they’re just using a different set of words to say the same thing over and over.

So...space. We want to let space in. I wanted to bring up one of my favorite books, a life-changer for me, entitled “Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism” by Trungpa Rinpoche. Anybody read this book?

He’s such a visceral writer, and he writes in a kind of mythological kind of way that kind of gets under your brain and into your muscles and bones. But he has a chapter in that book called “The Development of Ego” and it’s not how you’d think—you know, you start with a little baby, and then the parents teach it to cry when it wants something, and so on—it’s not like that at all, it’s very mythological. He starts by saying “Fundamentally, there is just open space. The basic ground, what we really are. Our most fundamental state of mind before the creation of Ego is that there is basic openness, basic freedom, a spacious quality. And we have now, and have always had, this openness.” And then he goes on to talk about when we become conscious of this space, we panic, because it’s very scary. We’re actually very vulnerable and open, so we’re scared and we start to get really busy. And we get busier and busier and we rush around and try to fill the space up. He calls this a dance, we dance and whirl around faster and faster until things start to solidify around us. There arise walls and limits, and these walls are our creation. They protect us from all this open space, and they are what he calls Ego. We start to see our self as somehow separate from this space that we are a part of. Then, he says, there’s kind of this “black out” which is why we never remember this space that we started out as a part of. We “black out” and don’t remember this lovely spaciousness.

So, like when I was talking before about “freezing” ideas that we want to hold onto or use to define ourselves by keeping permanently pushed away, he talks about this concept of solidifying things and freezing them in a more poetic manner than I did. He says, “Of course, space does not mean just bare space, for it contains color and energy. There are tremendous, magnificent displays of color and energy, beautiful and picturesque, but we’ve ignored them and instead there is just a solidified version of this color, and this color becomes capture color, and the energy becomes captured energy, because we have solidified the whole space and turned it into the Other.”

So it’s kind of like we make plastic flowers. We try to preserve things that are beautiful. I don’t know about you, but I don’t like plastic flowers at all. I mean, once I find out that it’s a plastic flower—I might walk into a restaurant and see that there is this really beautiful flower in the corner and think “Oh, it’s gorgeous!” but then if I

discover that it's plastic and it's just "Blech!" I always wondered about this—what is it that turns me off so about plastic flowers? I think it's that when you look at a flower it's not just the beauty you see right in front of you that holds you so—the little perfect spots, and the seed pods lined up in a circle, and so on—all that is wonderful. But it's that nature somehow wondrously produced it. It came from a seed and that whole idea is what is so wonderful about a flower, not just its physical beauty, and the plastic flower doesn't have any of that.

But the point is that we make plastic flowers in our minds. We generalize a lot and define ourselves in generalizations, as I mentioned earlier. We identify with fixed ideals that we can't ever really recapture.

So by relaxing a grip on these concepts about ourselves we will be able to be in the moment. And when we're in the moment, we are seeing all of the details that make up our life. So you know the phrase, "The Devil is in the details"—I suppose he is, but God is also in the details. In fact, all that is real is details! Anything else is just a conglomeration of details. But so much of our culture seems to think that details aren't so great. The people in the company that do the real work are the peons, while the people that oversee them have more status. Why is that? Why do we tend to want to move on and get past details and feel more important if we're not so detail-oriented? When really, everything that there is is in the details.

So that's one of the things that happens when we sit still on our cushion. We see the details. We become aware of our heartbeat and the little tiny sensations in our body that we miss most of the time. Yesterday I sat outside and there was a big leaf in front of me. You know, Turk's Cap, that native plant that isn't real highly esteemed. But I noticed how beautiful this leaf really was—it had little ridges all around it and it had little veins but they seemed to be gathered as if a seamstress had made little puffy green things in the leaves. It was pretty awesome. Those are the kinds of things we become aware of as we sit in a quiet place, and these details open up to us. We can let go of that "selfing" we do—that trying to hold onto this made up person that we like to do.

I wanted to read a quote from Anam Thubten, the guy that wrote the book I named my talk after. It doesn't exactly fit with what I'm saying right now, but I really like this. He says: "Whenever we feel that we are suffering, tormented, or challenged, we should always look into our consciousness. Immediately we discover that we are having a very evil affair with a very evil thought." Isn't that cool? That's all there is—it's just that thought.

When I was talking about how we harden our thoughts or our opinions of other people (like saying "I don't like Bill"), there's another side to that too. When we also harden our observations about other people, like if we were to say "Bill doesn't like me," when we think that way that's another way of hardening and making a generalization out of a complex relationship. When we say "Bill doesn't like me" we close up any hope of a relationship with that person. We do that a lot—and we can't

really know if someone likes us, can we? When we think about how complicated our feelings are about people, we know that there is a kind of “flow” that is changing all the time. Whenever someone makes an absolutely statement like that: “I don’t like him/her, they don’t like me, I love my country, I love my wife, I love my family”, and so on—when we make these very general statements, we hide the detail underneath. People that meditate a lot tend to start to lift up the corners of those little thoughts and we look under them and see what it is that is really going on, and discover where those thoughts come from. And a lot of times we can help them to just fall apart and see that space and see ways to approach situations that we simply cannot see if we think only in generalities.

There’s some time left, so we can have some discussion. But I would like to close with another quote from Anam Thubten: “When we rest in the present moment, a space reveals itself. It is an inner space that is unoccupied by the cloud of thoughts. Without witnessing that space it is hard for the mind to see beyond its own interpretation of reality. The mind fabricates something and then tries to seek it! The mind creates suffering, and then tries to get rid of it. But the mind does not know that the suffering is its own creation.” I thought that was amazing.

I’ll let you guys do some talking now.

Student: First of all, I wanted to thank you for your talk. It was so visual, and I really appreciate that. Just the words you used...it was very visual for me. I also wanted to ask you: Given what Thubten and Trungpa Rinpoche are saying about open space and the self, what do you think karma is? What is karma? Do you have any thoughts about that?

Pat: Help! (laughter). I don’t know, I was taught early on that karma \*is\* thought. That good things come out of thought, and bad things come out of thought. That’s my over-simplified answer to that question. Does anyone else have something they’d like to say about karma? (Laughter). I don’t want to mislead, so... I know that in Asian cultures karma is often taken to be akin to fate. But it’s also related action, and it’s very complex.

Student: In terms of Zen Buddhism, do you feel that Ego and personality are the same?

Pat: Good question. The Diamond Sutra talks about that there is no personality, it seems to kind of equate it with Ego, but I don’t think it’s that simple. We’re always looking for our true self, and it seems to be that there’s a personality associated with the true self. But I suppose that in a strict sense the personality has to go too, or at least getting really attached to our personality is certainly a problem. I don’t mean to give the impression that Ego is BAD, and personality’s certainly not BAD, but when we become too attached to it that it causes problems. Or when we don’t actually see that we’re kind of just making it up as we go along, that can be a problem. But we don’t really feel like we make up personalities—we feel like they

were kind of just given to us. You know, I was just “born obnoxious” and that’s just how it is, and so on. So we feel like it’s not under our control, but we are just cultivating a feeling that perhaps arose in us very young. This too, I suppose, is very complicated.

Student: I was thinking as you were talking about how we construct our Ego and construct ourselves, that you can really see this in children, like when kids are 3 or 4 and they get into this “super hero” phase where they are modeling a super hero and doing “power stances” and so forth. It really comes from a sense of being quite vulnerable. When children realize how vulnerable they are, as they age, they can in self-defense erect these structures of Ego. You can really see how it develops through watching kids.

Pat: Yes. I like the way that you said that, it was very visual for me, the notion of putting up all these defenses as “power forms” that I’m holding out and so forth.

Student: I wondered if you went along in your practice, if you noticed things you started doing differently because of allowing this spaciousness and noticing your Ego wanting to assert itself (or however you might describe that).

Pat: Well, I think I notice it in teaching. I teach in prison and have done that for a long time, and that has been a real training ground for me because I could feel very threatened by someone who didn’t—well, maybe they looked bored when I was talking, or they looked at me sort of belligerently or seemed to resent me while I was talking—I would take this very personally. To work with this seeing that I was being rather egotistical in my responses, sometimes I would have to remind myself that I was a little afraid to go because I was afraid of a look on someone’s face or somebody maybe arguing with me or “making” me react a certain way. I’d be worried about maybe taking a literal stance on something and then feeling very bad about it later, and this would make me afraid. I’d have to learn to take my focus and not turn it on myself, but turn it onto others. I’m going out there because I really like these guys and when I’d focus on that it’d seem to help. But I worked on that for a long time and it doesn’t seem so much of a problem now—it just rolls off my back a bit. So that’s one example of something that I had to actually work on, and it feels so much better now...well, no self, no problem. It’s a lot more enjoyable now to take the self out of it.

Oh! And here’s another thing—let’s talk about me! (laughter). Well, we could talk about what you think about me, but anyway—when I started practicing (and this happened pretty fast), parties scared me to death. I mean to go to a party and have to be aware of who was paying attention to me (or not), who didn’t care whether or I was there or not, worrying about not being noticed at all, and so on, it was so painful. It was a long time ago but into my practice a while I started to notice that I didn’t really feel that way anymore. It just wasn’t a big deal anymore, I could go there and it wasn’t so painful. I suppose that some of you have had similar types of

learnings. Well, thanks for letting me talk about some of my personal experiences in this regard.

Student: I don't know if this is a question or not, but I've always found that in my life there's been some improvement in that domain. Going off the party thing, that is, I'm at a point in my life where I go to a lot of parties. It used to be really debilitating, and now not so much so, but I'm finding instead that what's still a constant source of trouble is my family of origin. Parents and all that. I mean, oh man, I'm still a little kid with them sometimes. Not a specific question here, just wanted to say that it seems that with people you're really intimate with there's so much more room for subtle things—with a stranger it's easy to see them as a "fresh" but with someone I've known my whole life it's difficult to weave through the delusions and all that.

Pat: I know exactly what you mean, I still have that too. Even if we're ready to be a little bit more open, sometimes they're not, so we have to be open with their close-mindedness about us or whatever box they've put us in. I suppose that's probably very true with most people here, right?