

# Delusion, Caring for Illusion

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Tips of the Day · 2 min read

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The Buddha's teaching on anatta (not-self) asks us to investigate our sense of self. To each of us, this is precious - our sense of being unique, individual, an entity in our own right. The Buddha doesn't confirm or deny this. But he questions our automatic assumption of self-hood within our body-mind system. He asks us to see can we find any essential self- essence within this, can we locate it, define it, pinpoint it. How about my body – surely that contains me? But when I look deeper, all I find is an array of shifting sensations. And when I think about it, can something so obviously vulnerable as this body represent my essential being? What about feelings? These certainly feel like me! But they change so easily ... same for perceptions, habitual drives, even my subjective experience – all changing, at the mercy of external conditions. Can something so precious as my sense of self really be so unreliable? If so, I'm most unsatisfactory! Instead of drawing such an unhappy conclusion, the Buddha asks us to follow the investigation with a question: Since I cannot find anything in my body or mind that is reliable, permanent, satisfying, should I assume that my essential self is contained within my body and mind? When he asks this question of his disciples they answer 'no'. He approves, confirming that nothing in our body-mind experience, can properly be thought of as 'Mine / Me / Myself'. When we make one of our habitual mistakes, thinking of our bodies, achievements, experiences as 'mine', or get caught up in plans, dreams, arguments, or mistaking this hot and bothered entity as 'me', we've fallen into delusion. But there is a danger of throwing out the baby with the bathwater. The sense of self is central to our life in the world and also to our spiritual life. Just because we keep getting it wrong, mistaking our bodies, emotions, ideas etc. as 'me' or 'mine', this doesn't mean the sense of self is inherently useless and needs to be quelled whenever it arises. On the contrary, the Buddha asks us to spend time directing kind good wishes towards ourselves. We need this kindness to fulfil our unique potential for full liberation. If you cherish yourself, he says, then follow the spiritual path. Cherish ourselves? Cherish an illusion? A mistaken identity? Yes! Mindfully of course. When the sense of self is strong we feel for a moment the pleasure of this – perhaps we think of it as being centred, well defined or happy. But something deep inside wants more. It wants these feelings, this perception of 'me' to be permanent. Gradually the illusion breaks down. We realise it was a mistake. It didn't define an essential, unchanging 'me'. But mistakes are just mistakes. We don't have to despair. We can learn from them. Keeping attention on the experience we feel physical pushing and pulling within body and mind, pulling towards some new definition of 'me / mine' as we push away whatever appears to threaten that. Can we allow all that pushing and pulling to lead us along the path? At times it leads us to new definitions, new understandings. At times it leads us to a simpler experience of sensations and feelings without any conceptual overlay of 'me / mine / you / yours' etc. Then the desire for identity pokes out again, pushing and pulling us into some new definition of who or what we are. The

instinct to identify is strong within us. It won't be quelled just because we've heard the teaching on not-self. Rather than fight with the instinct, we can let it be our teacher, our guide to liberation. Cherish the illusion – mindfully of course!

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