

Self-Esteem

As we develop skillful qualities, we come to recognize our goodness. We feel better about ourselves. We build self-esteem.

As we practice skillful giving, we recognize our capacity for generosity, compassion, helping others.

As we follow the five precepts, we let go of negative perceptions that we have about ourselves; we no longer think of ourselves as somebody who causes harm, suffering.

When we practice renunciation, we feel good about ourselves, realizing we've got the ability to put aside sense pleasure, realizing we don't need sense pleasure to be happy.

When we pin our hopes for happiness on sense pleasure, we're dependent. When dependent, we're in a position of weakness. We don't feel good about ourselves. We don't feel we're good enough on our own.

As we lessen our dependency on sense pleasure, we gain confidence, faith in ourselves.

As we relinquish certain sense pleasures, we come to understand that we don't need these sense pleasures. We see that we've got everything we need, inside us. We've got a capacity for goodness. We've got inner worth.

Most of my life, I've suffered from low self-esteem. I think it's fair to say that most people are afflicted, to some extent, with low self-esteem. It's a pervasive cultural characteristic. We live in a culture, of course, where people depend on external factors, sense pleasures and the like,

for their happiness. Low self-esteem is a widespread malady. And it's a significant malady. Because self-esteem is necessary. In order to find true happiness, we have to have self-esteem. In order to move ahead in dharma practice and in life we have to have self-esteem.

As you're reading, you might be wondering why we're talking about self-esteem. You might be asking: Isn't the Buddha's doctrine aimed at dismantling the self? As dharma students, shouldn't we be concerned with deconstructing the self, rather than building it up? It's important to understand that the Buddha is all for building self-esteem. "Healthy ego development," as Thanissaro Bhikkhu puts it, is a critical element of the path.

Self-esteem, in and of itself, is a beneficial quality. We feel at-ease, uplifted, knowing we're capable of acting skillfully, knowing we have a certain goodness. We feel strong.

Girded by self-esteem, we're able to function effectively in the world. We're able to attend to the different aspects of our lives. In order to navigate the terrain of everyday life, work, relationship, we need self-esteem, self-confidence.

If you're going to practice the dharma, take on the challenges of a spiritual journey, you're going to need an appreciable amount of self-esteem. If you're going to deconstruct the self, you're going to need a strong self, you're going to need strength, fortitude, self-esteem. As noted in the psychological arena, before you can transcend the ego, you've got to have a strong ego. It's not a job for those lacking self-esteem.

Twelve-step programs provide a good picture of the role of self-esteem in undertaking personal and spiritual transformation. Anyone who enters a program such as Alcoholics Anonymous, is invariably suffering a loss of self-esteem. It's a primary symptom of addiction. After years of dependency on alcohol and/or drugs, after engaging in all manner of unskillful actions, the alcoholic usually isn't feeling too good about himself. He isn't a paragon of self-

esteem. In joining AA and undergoing the process of recovery, one of the first things the alcoholic is encouraged to do is practice generosity. Ample opportunities are provided for him to perform service. Making coffee at AA meetings. Setting up chairs. Putting away chairs. Speaking at meetings. Right from the start, the alcoholic is urged to help other recovering alcoholics. If he's been sober five days, he's told, he can reach out to an alcoholic who's been sober four days. Practicing generosity, the alcoholic builds self-esteem. After years of engaging in derelict behavior, he begins to take skillful actions, to help others. For the first time in a long time he starts to feel good about himself.

After helping others, offering service, and allowing himself to be held in the embrace of a group of other recovering people, the alcoholic gets to the point where he's ready to take on the hard work of recovery; he's now strong enough, inside, to practice the twelve steps, begin the process of self-exploration, make a "searching and fearless moral inventory," re-integrate into society as a sober person.

As a dharma student, travelling the road to true happiness, it's imperative that you build self-esteem. The Buddha asks that you attend to some difficult tasks. He asks that you engage in the most daunting confrontation you'll ever engage in: the confrontation with yourself. He asks that you open to the truth of your suffering. The Buddha's way isn't for the faint of heart. It's a demanding journey. You're going to need to be well-equipped. You're going to need self-esteem.

As you develop the skillful qualities, you'll build the self-esteem you're going to need to make the journey of self-exploration. You'll build the self-esteem you're going to need to head in a countercultural direction.

It's one of the most important benefits of developing skillful qualities.

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