

Self-view, Personality and Awareness

By Ajahn Sumedo

A talk given by Luang Por Sumedho in July 2003.

When I was a teenager in the United States, to say that someone didn't have a personality was considered the biggest put-down. If you said, 'Oh, she doesn't have any personality,' it was a real insult. Because personality is terribly important if you're an American, to be a charming, intelligent, attractive, interesting person. A lot of social conditioning goes into being that, trying to become 'personality-plus'. But now, if I heard someone saying, 'Ajahn Sumedho has no personality,' I'd be flattered, honoured.

When we hear of the Buddhist teaching of letting go, people might think, 'If I let go of my personality what will be left? Will I be just a zombie? If I don't have any personality, how am I going to relate to anybody? I'll just be a blank, a totally empty form that sits there. No matter what happens, there will be no kind of emotion, no kind of language, or reaction.' It's very frightening to think of no longer being a real person, a personality of some sort.

We conceive that without a personality we would be nothing, and that's rather frightening. Even a negative identity would be better than that: like, to be able to say, 'I'm a neurotic man because I had abusive conditions in the past; because of misunderstandings and unfairnesses I have a lot of emotional and psychological problems in the present.' That would make someone interesting in a way, wouldn't it? Even with a negative identity, I could still take an interest in myself as a personality. So, to think of letting go of one's personality would probably be rather frightening. If suddenly all those views and opinions that make me into an interesting person or a fascinating character or a charming gentleman or whatever... or a famous monk, a great teacher, a meditation master.... These are the things you get faced with when you're in my position. People have even called me 'Your Excellency' or 'Your Highness'. Somebody once even called me the Pope. So these honorific titles and superlatives are meant to show politeness and respect. But if someone thought they might suddenly become nobody, it could be rather frightening.

However, the Buddha's teaching on anatta, was to point out the reality of non-self in very simple ways. It wasn't a practice where your personality totally disappears for ever, where you no longer have any emotional feelings whatsoever and where you're just a total blank forever. Anatta is a practice for ordinary everyday life in which you notice when personality arises and when it ceases.

When you're really observing it, you'll notice that personality is a very changeable thing. Are you the same person all the time? You might assume that you are. But in observing the actual nature of personality, you'll notice that it changes according to who you're with, the health of the body, and the state of mind. When you're at home with your parents, when you're in a Sangha meeting, when you're chairman of a committee, when you're just a junior member of the Sangha, when you're the chores officer or the work officer or the guest officer, what happens? Personality of course adapts itself to those roles, those situations and those conditions.

So then, what is awareness of personality? I ask, because my personality can't know my personality. There's no way this person can know.... I cannot as a person know my own

personality. To know the personality, I have to abide in awareness, in a state of openness and reflectiveness. There's discernment operating. It is not a blank kind of vacuous zombie-like mental state. It's an openness, intelligent and alive, with recognition, discernment and attention in the present.

I used to make it a practice to play with personality rather than merely trying to let go of it as the cause celebre of practice. To think 'I've got to get rid of my personality and not attach to my emotions' is one of the ways we grasp teachings of the Lord Buddha. Instead, I would become a personality quite intentionally, so I could listen to and observe this sense of me and mine. I would practise bringing up the thoughts, 'Me, what about me?' 'Don't you care about me?' 'Aren't you interested in what I think and how I feel?' And 'These are my things, this is my robe, my possessions, my bowl, my space, my view, my thoughts, my feelings and my rights.' 'I'm Ajahn Sumedho,' 'I'm a Mahathera' and 'I'm a disciple of Luang Por Chah', and on and on like that. 'This is what makes me an interesting person, a person that has titles and is respected and admired in the society.' I would listen to that. I would listen, not to knock it down or criticise it but to recognise the power of words, how I could create my self; I would more and more find the refuge in awareness, rather than in the conditions of my personality, in the fears or self-disparagement or megalomania or whatever else happened to be operating in consciousness.

In communal life one's personality is constantly being challenged in some way. The structures that we use, monks and nuns as well as the hierarchical positions - being ajahns, or majjhima monks or navakas or samaneras or anagarikas, anagarikas, siladhara - are positions we can take very personally. We can make them into personal property. If we're not mindful and developing wisdom, then the life here becomes one of developing an ego around being a monk or a nun.

So when the Buddha pointed to awareness, sati-sampajanna, he was pointing to the reflective capacity. For this I use the phrase 'intuitive awareness.' Although 'intuition' is a common enough word in English, I myself use it to refer to the ability to awaken and be aware, which is a state of reflection. It isn't thought; it's not filling my mind with ideas or views and opinions. It's an ability to receive this present moment, to receive both the physical and mental conditions as they impinge on me through the senses. It is the ability to embrace the moment, which means the embracement of everything. Everything belongs here, whether you like it or not. Whether you want it or don't want it is not the issue. It is the way it is.

If I get caught in preferences, views and opinions about what I need for my practice, I'm coming not from intuitive awareness, but from an ideal: 'It has to be like this, quiet and subdued. I have to control the situation. I have to calm myself. I have to make sure that the things around me aren't challenging me in any way, and aren't disrupting or irritating me.' So I become a control freak.

Having an ideal of what I want, I try to make it an experience for myself. I feel that if those conditions aren't present, I can't possibly practise. Then I could start blaming: 'Too many people here, too much going on, too many meetings, too many things to do, too much work, ba ba ba!' Then I go into my, 'I want to go to my cave'. I have this troglodytic tendency, wanting to be a recluse in a cave, to go off somewhere nice and quiet, somewhere protected from the dangers of life, somewhere where there's no challenges; because people are challenging, aren't they, when living in community with them. It's always a challenge, because we affect each other all the time in one way or another. That's just the way it is; it's nobody's fault. It's the way communities are.

In the Buddhist tradition, the third refuge is in Sangha, which for us means this community. Sangha is the Pali word for 'community.' Then you might say, 'Well, that means only the Ariyan Sangha: the sotapannas, sakadagamis, anagamis, arahants. So I need to find a community where I'm only living with sotapannas at least; and if there's sotapannas, hopefully a few arahants will be around too.' But then, try to find a community where that exists... With a grasping mind, even if you found it, you wouldn't recognise it, because even arahants can be irritating. So instead of trying to find the ideal community, I use the community that I'm in.

When living in this community, people affect me; thus my personality arises, together with various emotional reactions. The refuge, however, is in the awareness of this, in trusting our ability to be aware. When we are committed to awareness, then whatever happens, it belongs. When we are confident in awareness, there's nothing that can be an obstruction except ignorance and forgetfulness.

The style of practice that we use here points us always to the present. It is about learning, recognising, exploring and investigating. What is the self? What is personality? Don't be afraid of being a personality, but rather, be conscious of it. Personality arises and ceases in consciousness. It changes according to conditions. But awareness is a constant thing, although we might forget it, getting lost in the momentum of emotions and habits. So it's helpful to have ways of reminding ourselves, like the mantra 'Buddho' that we use. 'Buddho' means 'awake', 'wake up', 'pay attention', 'listen'.

In practice I've used the listening faculty. I listen. When I listen, I listen to myself, and I listen to the sounds that impinge on my ears: the sounds within and the sounds without. This attentive listening is very supportive to intuitive awareness. So I listen to the rain, I listen to the silence. When I listen to the silence, I listen to the sound of silence.

If you consciously notice this awareness, and appreciate it, you move more towards being nobody, towards not knowing anything at all, rather than being someone who knows everything about everything, and having all the answers to all the questions, and knowing the solutions to every problem. To be nobody knowing nothing is scary, isn't it? But this attitude helps to direct us, because there is a strong desire in us to become, to attain and achieve. Even with the best of intentions, if that kind of desire is not recognised, it will always control you, whether it is the desire to become something, the desire to control things, or the desire to get rid of annoying things or bad thoughts or irritations around you. So trust in this awareness, this openness, this receptivity, attention, listening. And question the personality. For instance, I bring up my own personality, 'I'm Ajahn Sumedho. These are my robes, and these are my spectacles.'

Somebody sent me a lovely card the other day. It had a quote that says 'There is no way to happiness: happiness is the way.' Simple as that. Happiness is the way, or mindfulness is. Mindfulness, how do you become mindful? And then we can give all kinds of advice on meditation techniques, developing mindfulness in this and that, and yet you can still have not a clue what mindfulness is, even though you've got it all figured out. So stop trying to figure it out. Trust in it, in your awareness in the present, even if you feel you're someone who can't do it; you think you're a heedless person with too many emotional problems, and think you have to get this level of samadhi before you can possibly attain anything. Listen to that. That's all self-view, sakkaya-ditthi operating. No matter how intimidated you are by your thinking, trust in the awareness of it and not in the judging of it. You don't need to get rid of it, but recognise: thinking is like this, views, opinions, attachment to views and opinions are like this. Then you'll begin to see what attachment is as a reality, as a habit that we've developed. And you'll see personality, when it arises and when it ceases, when

there's attachment to it and when there's non-attachment.

Personality is not the problem; the problem is the attachment to it. So you're always going to have a personality, even as an arahant; but an arahant has no identity with it and no attachment. So we have ways of speaking and talking and doing things that might seem very personal or unique or eccentric or whatever.

But that's not a problem. It's the ignorance and attachment that the Buddha was always referring to again and again as the cause of suffering.

This awareness, *sati-sampajanna*, intuitive awareness, is not something that I can claim personally. If my personality started claiming it, it would just be more self-view, *sakkaya-ditthi* again. If I started saying 'I'm a very wise person,' then it would be self-view claiming to be wise. So when you understand that, how could you claim to be anything at all? Of course, on a conventional level I'm willing to play the game. So, when they say 'Ajahn Sumedho' I say 'Yes'. There's nothing wrong with conventional reality either. The problem is in the attachment to it out of ignorance.

Avijja is the Pali word for spiritual ignorance. It means not knowing the Four Noble Truths. In the investigation of the Four Noble Truths, *avijja* ceases. Awareness, the awakened state, takes you out of ignorance immediately, if you'll trust it. As soon as you are aware, ignorance is gone. So then, when ignorance arises, you can be aware of it as something coming and going, rather than taking it personally or assuming that you're always ignorant until you become enlightened. If you're always operating from the assumption that 'I'm ignorant and I've got to practise in order to get rid of ignorance,' then grasp that assumption, you're stuck with that until you see through the grasping of that view.

So I encourage you to develop this simple immanent ability. It doesn't seem like anything. It's not an attainment. Maybe you conceive of it as an attainment, and so think you can't do it. But even if you can't do it, be aware of the view that you can't do it. Trust in whatever is going on. Because when I talk like this, people accuse me, 'Oh, Ajahn Sumedho's been practising a long time; he always had good *samadhi*, and so he can talk like that.' They go on like that, thinking that I'm a highly attained person, and that that therefore justifies their position. They compare themselves to their projection of me, without seeing what they're doing. They don't know what they're doing. They're lost in views about themselves and about others.

So I recommend that you trust in the immediacy, to give enough attention, which is not an aggressive wilfulness, but a relaxed openness, a listening and a resting. More and more through practice you recognise it, rather than pass it by or overlook it all the time. Then you can focus on whatever you like, on the breath or being aware of what's going on in your body for instance.

If this awareness is well established then you can decide what to focus on in any situation; but of course, you have to be aware of time and place. If I want to be aware of just bodily experience in the present and if I do that in the wrong place it doesn't work. Right now giving this talk, if I say, 'I'm going to do my sitting practice. Everybody shut up!', you know it's not the right time and place. But when I get down from here and go back to my meditation mat, it might be a good thing to do, to be aware of the physical sensations or the tensions or the breath, without judging or criticising, but just noticing, 'It's like this', accepting, allowing things to be what they are, rather than always trying to change or control them.

Once you see through self-view, the development of the path is then very clear. You trust in this awareness, in non-attachment. You are able to see that attachment is like this, non-attachment is like this. There's a discernment.

When you attach to things, really attach, so that you get the feeling of what attachment, upadana, really is. Don't just grasp the view that you shouldn't be attached to anything, because then you get attached to the view not to attach. So really be attached to being this, or to having a view; but observe attachment, really notice the power of attachment, upadana, of ambition, of wanting to get something, wanting to get rid of something. Make it fully conscious. And then once you really see attachment, you can inform yourself to let go of it. Let go. Let it be. So you are more accepting of things until they fall away. Of course, you can't keep anything, because things are always changing. Even if you delude yourself that you can keep something by holding on, you'll eventually see that that's an impossibility.

Finally in practice, we're left with the existential reality of our humanity. We've still got these primordial drives, sexual desire and anger. But now we know better than to make them personal. With sakkaya-ditthi, self-view, we're always judging our sexual desires, and our anger, hatred, aversion and fear, and making them very personal. But now we can look at them for what they are. They're energies, they're a part of being human, of having a human body and being in a sensitive and vulnerable space. We begin to see and understand the nature of lust, greed, anger, hatred and delusion, because we have taken the sakkaya-ditthi, the self-view out of it, the attachment to it on a personal level. We see that these energies arise and cease according to conditions. However, if you still haven't seen through sakkaya-ditthi, then your whole life you'll be celibate and feel guilty about sexual desire and anger and hatred. You'll become neurotic through identifying with those energies and forces that are in fact part of human reality, and are not personal.

We all have these primordial drives as human beings. They are common to all of us. They are not a personal identity. Our refuge is in awareness rather than in judging these energies that we're experiencing. Of course, our religious form is celibate, so when sexual energies arise, we're aware of them, and don't act on them. They arise and cease just like everything else. Anger and hatred arise and cease. When the conditions for anger arise, it's like this; likewise fear, the primal emotion of the animal realm. But the awareness of lust and greed, the awareness of anger, the awareness of hatred and fear, that is your refuge. Your refuge is in the awareness.

Forest Sangha Newsletter: January 2004, Number 67

Source : <http://www.forestsangha.org>