

## **I, Aggregate: Using The Non-Self to Manage Craving, Anger, and Desire**

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While studying philosophy in college, one of the concepts I found troubling was the Ship of Theseus; as an artifact of the warrior king, the ship was preserved and put on display for all Athenians to revere. Little by little, pieces of the vessel grew old and weather-worn, and over time they were replaced. Since every original part of the ship was ultimately removed and discarded, the great thinkers of Athens wondered “Is it still truly the Ship of Theseus? If so, what makes it that? If not, does the boat still have cultural value?”

Similarly, human beings are constantly changing—physically, psychologically, and spiritually. Like the Ship of Theseus, the parts that make me an “I” have been replaced over the years. The 40-something “I” is vastly different from the 20-something “I.” But if I am not the same “I” from the past, and this version of “I” will not persist in the future, what exists of “I” that can be meaningfully identified? If nothing can be identified, what does that say about who or what I truly am?

I was troubled by this because, as a twenty-something in America, I already felt as if I were a non-entity. I was a young adult in a culture that valued wealth, beauty, and natural ability. I had none of those things in abundance, and little resembling a plan for how to go about building a happy life. I wanted to believe that I was *not* a non-entity. I wanted to be reassured that I had something that was uniquely me that I, and most importantly *others*, could objectively recognize as worthwhile. The Theseus Paradox suggested the possibility that my desire to “be somebody” was pointless.

Despite earning a Bachelor of Arts in philosophy, I never came up with a satisfying solution to the Theseus Paradox. One becomes accustomed to disappointment when studying philosophy, however, and so I wrote the whole thing off as a question that was designed to be unanswerable. I *felt* like I had a self, a unique and persistent “I,” and that *feeling* was good enough to function in the world. I didn’t need to intellectualize my identity, and so I didn’t think about the Theseus Paradox until recently while revisiting my studies of Buddhism and the aggregates.

The Five Aggregates are a set of conceptual templates outlined in Buddhist psychology to characterize all of individual experience. They are to me, my identity, or to the “I”, what the mast, anchor, rudder, etc., are to the Ship of Theseus—a collection of parts that

we think of as a single unique entity. Also called *skandhas*, the aggregates consist of physical form, sensation, perception, mental formation, and consciousness. For those interested in the nitty-gritty, I encourage you to research the aggregates on your own, as the details are not necessary towards the purpose of this essay: to explain how the concept of non-self is useful to cope with craving, anger, and desire.

Fully realizing the significance of non-self is arguably the keystone of Buddhist practice towards the goal of liberation, but it also has a much more practical use for us in day-to-day life. We can understand this by the technique of searching for the self in meditation. While it seems absurd for me to ask the reader to search for something I've just said isn't there, this "pointless endeavor" underscores an essential understanding of the Buddhist path: that you take nobody's word for it, but instead experience it for yourself.

One of the ways I sometimes find myself dealing with stress or somber feelings is by binge-eating a pint of Ben & Jerry's Chocolate Fudge Brownie ice cream. More often than not, however, I am aware of the signs of my mind moving towards this undesired behavior. At this stage of craving, the gremlin within tries to justify needing and/or deserving the sweet pick-me-up. Meanwhile the more friendly health-conscious version of my mind attempts to explain that I don't need it, and will likely regret it afterwards. The two aspects of self typically duke it out as an inner narrative obsesses over the craving until I either give in to the gremlin or buckle down and remain disciplined. But what if, instead, I try to find the "I" that's doing the craving?

The reasoning behind this self-searching technique is this: I have assumed that "I" am craving ice cream and that satisfying that craving would make me feel good. But if there is no "I", then it should follow that there isn't anything to crave ice cream. So the wanting of ice cream is just there as a matter of circumstance, and the craving gremlin isn't actually attached to me in a fixed way. It is only when I put energy into the obsessive narrative that the craving persists. In other words, if I don't feed the gremlin, and simply watch it, it goes away.

On the surface this may seem like some kind of woo-woo mental trickery that couldn't possibly dispel the actual sensation of craving, but I urge you to try it with one caveat: this is a mindfulness technique, and so becomes more effective in conjunction with a normal daily meditation practice and with consistent repetition. It is not a one and done approach, and you should not expect that a single five minute session will have much effect.

The technique is as follows:

Close your eyes and begin to follow your natural breath as you would for normal meditation. Do this for a minute or two until you feel relatively focused and relaxed.

Leaving the breath in the background, focus on your craving and all the physical sensations that go along with it. Attempt to note the following:

- The physical sensations of what craving feels like in your body
- A physical location of craving in your body
- The physical location of your self
- A physical place where your self is connected to your craving

Continue to try and locate craving and self for several minutes. If it seems like you have found it, sit with it for a few minutes longer to see if it remains.

Now, with your breathing still in the background, think about all the mental descriptions or labels associated with your craving. Attempt to note the following:

- A mental representation of your craving
- The relative mental space where the craving lives
- A mental representation of your self
- The mental link between the craving and your self

Cycle through all of these a few times and, again, if you feel you might have located any mental representations of craving or self, watch it for a few moments to see if it changes.

After five minutes, or once you are satisfied with your search, check in with yourself. Do you still feel the craving? If it is no longer present, be sure to note how that feels.

If your experience is similar to my own, you will have difficulty locating craving and the self in either a physical or mental form. If you think you have located either of them, they will typically dissipate once you attempt to observe them.

Why does this technique work? When you cannot locate craving or a self to which it is attached, the sensation of craving tends to lessen if not dissipate completely. Also, by way of your mind and body being unable to locate the craving or the self, both become

conditioned to their absence, and become more accustomed to being able to experience pleasant objects without becoming attached or fixating on them.

The technique is not limited to use with food and substance cravings. I first encountered it in a Buddhist studies course where it was used in conjunction with memories of experiences when mild irritation was present. It is a technique to demonstrate the non-self, but as I experimented with it I discovered it could effectively shed cravings. I believe it is also effective in coping with recurring anger over past and present issues, as well as with sexual desire or any other strong attachment or emotion that we have become conditioned to link with the self.

I want to emphasize that this is not a permanent fix for craving, addiction, or any diagnosed mental health issues. It isn't a matter of whether or not the craving or emotion will return, it is a matter of *how soon* it will return. It could be hours, minutes, or seconds. But if the technique is used frequently, and in conjunction with a regular daily meditation practice, you may notice that you get longer periods of freedom from your mind's conditioning.

I suppose that, even though it took 20 years, I did ultimately come up with an answer to the Theseus Paradox: it *is not* the same ship. In fact, there never was a ship. In understanding that, I've also come to terms with being a non-entity. In fact, I have embraced it.