Karma & Not-self

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There’s that old question you hear every time people hear the Buddhist teachings explained, and it’s this. Given the teaching on not-self, how do you explain the teaching on karma? Who does the action? Who receives the action? The problem with the question is that it’s backwards. It should be, “Given the teaching on karma, how do you explain the teaching on not-self?” The teaching on karma comes first. It’s the context. Look on the night of the Buddha’s awakening, the second knowledge and the second watch of the night. It was about karma, about how people’s views shape their actions and how their chances of actions shape what happens to them afterwards and what’s happening to them right then. It wasn’t until later that issues of self and not-self came into the picture. What this means is that when the Buddha looked at issues of self and not-self, he looked at what’s done. It turns out our sense of self is something we create. It’s something we do. It’s a strategy. If you chase things down to Pinnacle Arising, you hit intentions way before you hit attachment to self. You have intentions that lead to actions, which basically are the actions that lead to experiences, and then around the experiences you develop clinging. Part of that clinging is clinging to self. You identify certain things as yourself in terms of the doer and certain things as yourself in terms of the experiencer of feelings, pleasure and pain. Acting as the doer, you try to create more pleasure and get rid of pain. Acting as the experiencer, you try to enjoy the pleasure and escape the pain. So your sense of who you are is a strategy. The question is, is it a good strategy? The Buddha recognizes that, in some instances, it really is. Especially when you think in terms of responsibility. If you have a strong sense of your responsibility for your actions, that’s a healthy thing. The Buddha doesn’t have you let go of that too soon. It’s part of developing generosity, developing virtue. You’re sitting here meditating. Who’s responsible for the meditation? Well, you are. John Fruin once said that the one thing you have to believe in when you meditate is the teaching on karma, that it’s what you do that makes a difference. We’re not just sitting here waiting for some spiritual accident to happen. We’re getting a sense of what it means for us to act, particularly actions in the area of the mind. When you focus on the breath, what happens? When you have a particular idea about the breath, what happens? When you change that idea, you have a sense of the observer inside the body. What happens if you move it around? Instead of being in the back of your head looking at your eyes, suppose you’re down in the chest. What happens there? Or instead of watching the breath in front of you, what happens if you think of the breath surrounding you? In other words, change your sense of location. Then notice what happens as a result. This is Buddha’s basic teaching to his son. Do something and then watch the result. Start with your outside actions and then move on into your inside actions. When you focus in one way, what results? When you focus in another way, what results? Learn to be sensitive to the movements of your mind. The sensations they create, that way you become more and more skilled as a meditator. One of the things you’ll begin to notice as you meditate is that the thoughts come up in the mind, totally unintended. And it’s important to realize that you have the choice to get involved with them and to not. That’s the intention. That’s the present intention that takes a thought on and moves with it. But an important lesson is that you don’t have to identify with everything that comes up. There can be a movement of the mind and you decide not to go with it. You watch it, and when you don’t go with it, it just dies out. It’s like ghosts coming up and telling you, “Go with me, go with me,” and assuming that as long as you go with them, you give them reality. But if you don’t go with them, they wither away. This is where the teaching on not-self comes in. Actually, not-self also comes in from the very beginning. You have choices. An idea comes to your head. To do something you know is wrong, and you can decide not to go with it. That’s the beginning of the not-self teaching. In other words, you have a choice to create a sense of self around your ideas. And when you choose not to create that sense of self, you’ve identified that thought as not-self. Particular habits, particular ways of acting, instead of running along with them, you just stay still and watch them move on their own. And they’ll go a little ways, and then they’ll die. That’s the beginning of how you use not-self. In other words, you create a more and more skillful sense of self by not identifying with the unskillful alternatives that come up in the mind. So the two strategies go together. The important point is the element of choice. Reflecting on both as strategies and seeing which ones are really skillful and which ones are not. And being more and more consistent in identifying with the skillful strategies and just dropping the unskillful ones. Again, you carry this inside, and the whole issue gets a lot more refined. But it’s the same basic principle. As soon as you see something is unskillful, you drop it. And as your inner sensitivities get developed, you find that you’re more and more quick to notice what’s skillful and what’s not. And your standards for what’s skillful and not get higher and higher. And this way, you peel off unskillful things and note them as not-self, layer after layer after layer, like an onion. Once you finish with that, then you turn around and look at the peeler. You see that as unskillful as well. Once its job is done, then it’s no longer needed. That’s when you can drop it. As long as it’s needed to do the job, you still need to hold on to that sense of the observer, the part inside that passes judgment, skillful judgment. You’re training it to be judicious. So both self and not-self are strategies. And the practice is a question of learning how to master both strategies. Once you’ve mastered both strategies, then you can pick them up and use them whenever you need them, and you put them down when you don’t. In other words, you don’t have to carry anything around. That’s when it’s really good.

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