Comparing & Judging

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That’s the sort of question you often hear. If there’s no self who experiences karma, who does the karma? Who experiences the results? Which is putting things backwards, making the anatta teaching and a misunderstanding of the anatta teaching the framework. And then placing the questions of karma inside that framework should be the other way around. Karma is the framework, and questions of self and not-self are placed within that framework. In other words, what kind of karma is it to have a conception of yourself? When is it skillful to hold on to or to use a perception of self? When is it skillful to use a perception of not-self? That’s how the teaching on not-self should be used, looking at when it’s skillful and when it’s not. The Buddha didn’t talk about conventional self or ultimate realities or an ultimate self. In fact, the question of whether there is a self or not is one of the questions he put aside. But he did talk an awful lot about when it’s skillful to have a sense of self and how to use it. His use of the word “conceit” has that simple sense of “I am.” We think of conceit more in terms of “I am proud,” or “I feel I’m better than other people.” But he said it also has to do with any feeling of comparing yourself with other people, as to who’s better and who’s worse. Or even comparing yourself with others. Regardless of the reality, he says, it’s just having that sense of comparing yourself with someone else as better or worse or equal. That’s a kind of conceit. And the main use for conceit is as a spirit of the practice. Sometimes we read of other people’s attainments or hear of other people’s attainments, like hearing people who have psychic powers. Then we look at where we are in our meditation and we don’t see any psychic powers appearing anywhere. All we see is a psychic mess, and it gets us discouraged. That’s the point where you don’t want to compare yourself with other people. The one comparison that’s useful is when you see that other people can put an end to suffering. You say, “They are human beings. I’m a human being. They can do it. So can I.” That’s a useful conceit. Another useful conceit would be when you see that someone else is better at something than you are. Maybe you have something to learn from them. This is why there’s nothing in the early texts saying that you should not judge other people. Or that you should not judge yourself. Years back, I was corresponding with a scholar in Mahayana. She wanted to know where in the Pali Canon the Buddha said not to judge other people, because it’s there all over the Mahayana sutras. I looked around and I couldn’t find any place. There’s nothing but learning how to judge people skillfully, learning how to look for an admirable friend. Learning how to recognize an admirable friend, because after all, as the Buddha said, having an admirable friend is the whole of the practice. Not in the sense that the admirable friend is going to do it for you, but having an example gives you an inspiration. And you want to have the right person to inspire you. There are different qualities of the Buddha that you look for. You look for virtue, you look for generosity, you look for conviction, and you look for discernment. In many of these cases, he said, it takes a long time. You have to look carefully and you have to be very observant. You know a person’s virtue by living with him or her over a long period of time and by being very observant. You learn a person’s integrity by having dealings, in other words, trading things, with that person. You learn a person’s resilience by seeing that person in adversity, to see whether that person gets upset by adversity and can see it in a larger framework. And you learn a person’s wisdom by having conversations, seeing how that person approaches questions, the way that person analyzes issues so they become clear. In each case, it takes time. Once you’ve found somebody that you think is wise and generous, virtuous, and has conviction, you want to emulate those qualities. We learn about these, to some extent, by reading about them. But it’s actually seeing them in action that we begin to pick up a lot of their implications. That’s why it’s good to live in a community or good to have contact with people who are practicing, because it gives you an idea of some of the implications you might not have thought of. Just reading books and practicing on your own, and you see the good benefits that come when a person behaves in that way. So the Buddha does have you judge other people and you do make comparisons. But he’s advising you to be skillful in this, to take your time, to be observant. When we talk about someone being judgmental, it’s usually because they’re not very observant and they come to snap judgments. That’s precisely what the Buddha’s not recommending. So that’s also a good use of conceit, comparing yourself with other people. Particularly when you take that quality of judgment or being judicious that you’ve applied to other people and start applying it to yourself. In some ways, it’s easier to judge yourself because you know what your motivations are, but in many other ways it’s harder, because we have this tendency to hide things from ourselves, to side with ourselves, to make excuses. But when you start getting sensitive to the implications of conviction, virtue, generosity, wisdom, and other people, you can’t help but start looking at your own actions. And if you’re really serious and sincere in the practice, you want to hold yourself to that standard as well. You want to hold yourself to a higher standard than you have been holding yourself to. So these are some ways in which the conceit “I am” is a useful sense of self, as you’re learning how to develop a sense of judgment, how to make comparisons that are actually helpful in the path. If you begin to see a comparison is not helping you, in other words, you’re getting depressed and it seems to be so much more advanced than you are, practice is coming easier to that person, that person seems to have a lot of advantages that you don’t have, that’s a case where conceit is not skillful. Jamma Abba calls this kind of conceit “the fangs of ignorance.” It’s the kind of thinking that turns around and bites you, attacks you. The term the Buddha uses for this is objectification. It’s interesting that objectification starts not by objectifying other people, but by objectifying yourself, turning yourself into an object. “I am the thinker,” he says, “that’s the beginning of all the concepts and classifications that mark objectification.” One of the purposes of his teaching is to get people beyond that, because that kind of thinking attacks the thinker and, many times, will cause the thinker to attack others. It’s through objectification, he says, that violence and conflict come into the world. They start by causing a lot of violence inside the mind as your thoughts attack you and create suffering. But there are cases when it’s useful, especially when you’re getting started in the practice, and that’s the mode of thinking in which you find yourself. You want to learn how to use this concept of “I am the thinker, I am the doer” in a way that’s actually helpful. Another sense of self that is useful is what the Buddha calls the self as a governing principle. There are three of these governing principles—the Dhamma, yourself, and the world. Years back, when I was studying the textbooks in Thailand that they have for monks and nuns, there was a list—the self as a governing principle, the world as a governing principle, and the Dhamma as a governing principle. It’s a list that’s taken out of context. Simply as a list like this, it sounds like the Dhamma is the good thing to have as a governing principle, and the self and the world are not good things to have. There are many ways in which that’s true, but it turns out that in the original context, in the sutta, all three can be used. Taking the Dhamma as a governing principle means that you look at yourself and say, “This is an excellent Dhamma that I’ve found.” It’s hard to find a Dhamma like this, something that leads out of suffering. It’s really worthy of homage and the best homage, of course, is to practice it. The world as a governing principle is a strange one, if you’ve ever thought of it. I think there are people in the world who can read minds. Here I am setting out on a practice. What if somebody’s reading my mind right now? What would that person think? But it is a way of cleaning up your act. If you would be embarrassed to have someone read your thoughts right now, why are you thinking them? The self as a governing principle is when you think, “I’ve come to this Dhamma, I’ve given myself over to the practice for the purpose of putting an end to suffering, and if I settle for anything less than that, it wouldn’t be a sign that I really love myself.” So there are cases when having a sense of self is a useful thing. This sense of conceit, this sense of “I am,” does have its uses, especially at the beginning of the practice. If you can use it to focus on the whole issue of “Where am I being unskillful? How can I be more skillful?” then you can use it in a way that gives yourself encouragement. Both in the positive sense, as I said earlier, thinking, “If other people can do this, why can’t I? They’re human beings, I’m a human being,” and also the sense of self that would be embarrassed to have your unskillful thoughts read by other people. Then it really does have a sense of self-love in a wise sense, in a circumspect sense. What this does is it focuses you more and more on the issue of your actions and less and less on yourself. And if you get more skillful in reading your actions and in learning how to convince the mind every time it feels less than inspired, yes, it just works. For this once, I will do the skillful thing. And the next moment, yes, for this once I’ll do the skillful thing. It becomes more and more of a habit. And you need less and less of that sense of conceit to motivate you, because you begin to see more and more of the benefits that do come from making the skillful choice, even when it’s hard, even when it doesn’t come easily or naturally. That sense of self begins to fade into the background. And as your awareness of your actions gets more and more refined, you start seeing the act of “I’m making” and “my making” as it actually happens in the mind. And that’s placed in that context of karma. You take it out of the context of “me” and “mine” and into the context of “when is this skillful, when is it not?” And you begin to find areas that you have been identifying with ideas or thoughts, actions, habits. That identification is unskillful. It’s causing stress. It’s causing suffering. And you’re in a position to let go. This is when the teaching on not-self comes more and more to the fore. In the beginning, you simply apply it to ways of identifying yourself. You’re obviously unskillful, but as your sensitivity gets more and more refined, your sense of where that sense of self is unskillful gets more refined as well. In a way, this is really nothing new. We operate with many different senses of ourselves. Over the course of the day, we’ll drop one sense to pick up another. And it’s pretty willy-nilly. It’s determined largely by where our desire is pulled. And it can pull in all directions. There’s that image in the canon of a group of animals, six different kinds of animals on six leashes, and you tie the leashes together and then set them off. And then the animals will pull one another in all sorts of different directions. That’s the way the mind is. Sometimes the direction goes towards sights, towards sounds, towards material things, towards relationships, and the self that you concoct in order to get what you want and then to experience what you hope you will like. You pick up that sense of self and you drop some other ones. So we’re picking up and dropping our different senses of self all the time. What the Buddha’s asking us to do is to look very carefully at that. So that when we pick up a sense of self or drop a sense of self, we do it for a reason, not out of random desire. It’s because we see this sense of self is skillful, that one’s not. So even though the not-self teaching is advertised as being very strange, what’s strange about it is simply that we learn how to drop our sense of self consciously, deliberately, and with good reasons. We finally get to a point in the practice where you don’t need any sense of self at all, because the reason we concoct these senses of self is perception of self. It’s through our desire for happiness. When the desire of the deathless is met, you don’t need to concoct those things anymore. So this is how we look at the teaching of not-self in the framework of karma. And that’s how we get the best use out of the teaching, because it is meant to be used. It is a strategy. It’s a skill we can master.

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