Skillful Selves

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The Buddha once said that wisdom or discernment begins with a question. You go to find what he calls a Brahman or contemplative, in other words, someone who’s practiced and gotten somewhere solid on the path, and ask that person, “What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” Notice the “I do it” and “my long-term welfare and happiness.” A lot of people are surprised by that, given the teaching on not-self. But the Buddha doesn’t begin things with not-self. That comes toward the end of the practice. In the beginning, he has a lot to say about yourself, what you can do, what you’re responsible for. When he has you take apart the concept of self, one of the reasons he points out is because you realize that in the ultimate sense you have no control over the things that you identify as you or yours. But you do have provisional control. That’s how we can practice a path. It starts with the concern for your long-term welfare and happiness. In fact, all the good qualities of the Buddha—not only discernment, but also his purity and his compassion—come from wanting to pursue happiness in a wise and harmless way. Those two concepts go together, the wisdom and the harmlessness. Because if you pursue your happiness in a harmful way, you’re going to destroy your own happiness. It’s always interesting to notice how the Buddha taught children. He tells you an awful lot about the path. There are two cases where he runs across young boys tormenting animals. In one case, some boys are beating a snake with a stick. In another case, they’re off catching little fishes. And he asks them, “Are you afraid of pain?” And the boys, of course, say yes. So why are you inflicting pain on somebody else? If you inflict pain on them, it’s going to come back and get you, even as you’re trying to run away. So compassion here begins with a concern for your own well-being and the realization that you do have a choice in how you act. This is really important. In other words, you do have some control over what you do and say and think. The practice of virtue and the practice of generosity are ways of developing a healthy sense of self around controlling your actions in a way that is compassionate. Again, think of the Buddha teaching his own son. Another case of teaching a child. Anticipate what the results of your actions are going to be. And if you see that they might cause harm, you don’t do them. If you don’t foresee any harm, you go ahead and do it. But then you watch while you’re doing it, what’s coming up while you’re doing it. If you’re causing any harm, stop. If you’re not, you can continue with the action. When you’re done, you look at the long-term results. If you realize that you did cause harm even though you didn’t expect to, go talk it over with someone who’s more advanced in the path. And the result is not to repeat that mistake. If you don’t see any harm, then take joy in the fact that you’re progressing on the path. So there’s a lot of selfing going on in all of this, but it’s selfing that’s a healthy kind of self. This is one of the reasons why virtue and generosity are, if not part of the path—generosity is not mentioned in the path, but it’s one of the precursors. Virtue is part of the path. So when you get to the point where you’re beginning to take apart your sense of self, you’re not doing it out of neurotic hatred of yourself. You’re doing it because you’ve seen that your selfing has taken you as far as it can go, in a good direction. And the only thing that could be better is the point where you let go of that. Hopefully up to this point you’ve had some experience in realizing that your sense of self is not a solid thing. It’s something you create. And it’s something that changes from desire to desire. And the aspects of your body, the aspects of your mind, the things around you that become you or yours, are relevant to that particular desire. If you have a desire for food, certain parts of your body are going to be involved in getting the food, fixing the food, eating the food. And then when you’re done eating it, you pretty much forget about it unless you get sick from it. Then you move on to something else. If you have some mental work to do, the body becomes pretty irrelevant at that point and everything is in the mind. If you have work that involves other people, your social skills suddenly become relevant. When you’re working alone, you put them aside. And a lot of this has to do with what powers you have to control the situation so you can get what you want and then who’s going to be receiving the results of the actions. Those are the two types of self we create, the producer and the consumer. And the producer is the one that you’re really interested in terms of control. And so the Buddha teaches you that you do have choices that you can make. You can control your actions. You can learn how to be generous. In other words, look for happiness in a way that’s harmless, that actually increases the happiness of other people. It’s not just selfish and narrow. The same with his instructions to the young boys. If you’re looking for happiness, don’t cause suffering to others. You begin to see that your happiness gets tied up with the happiness of other people. This is a healthy sense of self. Nowadays we call it altruistic. It’s not that you don’t have a sense of self there. You have a healthy one. You realize that your well-being is not all that separate from the well-being of others. There are some things that are separate. The food that you eat doesn’t go into their stomach. It doesn’t get them full. But the way you get the food is going to have an impact on other people and other beings. So you want to be compassionate. Wisdom comes from wanting to be careful and wise in how you act so as to find long-term happiness. Compassion also comes from that desire for long-term happiness and purity. When the Buddha was talking to Rahula, he was talking about developing purity by checking your actions to make sure they really are harmless. All this is motivated by, “What I want to do will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness.” That’s where wisdom begins. So don’t throw away your sense of “I” right away. Don’t think that it’s always a bad thing. Try to develop different senses of self by acting in skillful ways to confirm to yourself that, yes, it is possible to look for happiness in a way that’s not going to harm anybody else, and that you can learn how to say “no” to your unskillful desires. Teaching on not-self is not saved totally for the end, because there are times when you learn how to dis-identify with unskillful impulses that come up in the mind. The ones that want to break the precepts are the ones that don’t want to be generous. You have to learn how not to identify with them. It’s like you’ve got a whole stable of animals in here. Some of them are well-trained and some of them are not. And you don’t want to keep on feeding the ones that are going to cause trouble. You let them go. Keep and feed and look after the ones that are going to be helpful. As long as they can help you, you feed them. And you’ll discover that even when you get to the ultimate point in the path when you don’t need any sense of self, in fact, the only thing that’s standing between you and total awakening at that point is that you’re identifying with something going on in the mind, still making choices about this and that, there comes a point where you really do have to drop the choices and you don’t need a sense of self. It turns out that those animals, even though you don’t identify with them anymore, the skillful ones are still around to help you. It’s not like when the Buddha gained awakening he was suddenly rendered incapable of making choices. It’s just that he didn’t have to build up a sense of self around anything because he’d found the happiness that doesn’t require control. And so, as long as the animals were still alive, he still fed them and used them as his range of skills and teaching. But it’s just that he didn’t identify himself with the animals anymore. But while we’re on the path, you find that having a good, solid health and healthy sense of self, or healthy senses of self, is very, very useful. Because, after all, we’re working on a project that’s not going to show all of its results right now. So you have to have a sense that you are going to benefit from this. You also have to have the sense that you have the ability to develop the skills, even though they may not be all that apparent right now. That’s another healthy sense of self. That’s a kind of conceit, as Ananda pointed out to that nun one time, that we’re trying to get rid of conceit ultimately, but you have to use it on the path. The sense that if other people can do this, they’re human beings, I’m a human being, why can’t I do it? There’s a pretty strong sense of “I” there, but it’s a healthy “I.” So don’t be too quick to throw away your sense of self. Train it. Get used to watching the process of how you create a sense of self around things. And you’ll find that your various skillful senses of self will take you far away on the path.

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