Karma & Anatta (outdoors)

July 10, 2022

There was once a time when the Buddha was teaching about how the five aggregates are inconstant, stressful, not-self. And there was a monk in the gathering. He thought to himself, “Now when these things are not-self, what’s going to receive the karma done by things that are not-self?” Of course, that line of thinking, you know where that leads. There’s nobody there to do the action, nobody there to receive the action. So it doesn’t really matter what the action is. You can get away with doing anything. The Buddha was able to read his mind and criticize him. He said, “There are some foolish people who think they can get past the teaching this way.” And even today we have people asking that kind of question. They’ll start out by saying, “When the Buddha says there is no-self, who does the action, who receives the results of the action?” You have to stop them right there. But the Buddha never said there is no-self. When you’re taught anatta, it means not-self. It doesn’t mean no-self. And there’s a huge difference. Not-self is a way of disidentifying with things that you’ve been holding on to. And as the Buddha said, it’s because we’re holding on, it’s because we’re clinging to things, clinging to the aggregates, that we’re going to suffer. And so we think of things as being inconstant, stressful, not-self. That’s a way of loosening up our clinging. But that’s not the first step in the practice. Because the Buddha also talks about self. The self has its own mainstay. The self has a governing principle. As you adopt the practice, you have to realize that you’re the one who’s going to do it. You’re the one who has to be responsible. You’re the one who has to develop the abilities to do it. And you’re the one who’s going to benefit. If someone were to take all the leaves and twigs and branches here in the monastery and burn them, would you say that they’re setting fire to us? And the monk would say, “No, of course not. Those things—leaves, twigs, and branches—they’re not us. They’re not ours.” In the same way, the Buddha says, “Whatever is not yours, let go of it. When you let go of it, it will be for your long-term well-being and happiness.” You are how to define yourself. The Buddha doesn’t tell you to define yourself. Just work on being capable, being responsible, and the ultimate happiness will appear. Because his most basic teaching is not lack of self. His most basic teaching has to do with karma. That’s the context. There was one time when a student of the Buddha was confronted by some sectarians. They asked him what the Buddha’s position was on what were the big issues of the day, whether the world was eternal or not eternal, finite or infinite, whether the soul was the same thing as the body or something separate. Those kinds of issues. In each case, the student said, “Well, the Buddha doesn’t take a position on any of those at all.” They said, “Well, this Buddha of yours, he’s a nihilist. He doesn’t teach anything.” The student replied, “No, that’s not true. He teaches that skillful action should be done and unskillful action should not be done.” In other words, he points to the power of human action. The student later went to see the Buddha and told him what he had said. The Buddha said, “That’s right. You answered correctly.” So when you encounter any of the Buddha’s teachings, you always have to ask yourself, “Where does this fit into that category of either skillful action or unskillful action?” And it turns out that the concept of self and the concept of not-self can both be. They have their skillful times and their unskillful times. And you don’t want to let go of the aggregates right away, because they can also be used in a skillful way, too. Think of the image of the raft. You’re on this shore of the river. It’s a dangerous shore. The Buddha says it’s self-identity views. You want to get over to the other shore where it’s safe, which is nirvana. You can’t wait for the nirvana yacht to come and pick you up. You have to take the things you have on this side—twigs, branches, leaves. You bind them together and make them a raft. Then, holding on to the raft, you get over to the other side. The twigs and branches stand for the five aggregates, which ultimately you’re going to let go of. But before you let go of them, you have to use them to get across the river. So you bind them together and make the path. Particularly, you make concentration. Like right now, you’re focusing on the breath. That’s the aggregate of form. You’re trying to give rise to a feeling of pleasure. That’s the aggregate of feeling. To do that, you hold in mind a perception of what the breath is like in the body, where it goes, how it comes in, how it goes out, how it can flow along the different nerves of the body, the different blood vessels of the body, out to every pore of the skin. That’s a perception. You hold that perception in mind as you breathe in, as you breathe out. And if there’s any way in which the breath is uncomfortable, then you think about it. That’s thought fabrication. You evaluate what you’re doing and then try to make improvements. Try to figure out the best way to breathe. Once there’s a feeling of ease, how you maintain that feeling of ease by the way you breathe, then how you let it spread through the body. Thinking about that, that’s all thought fabrication. That’s an aggregate, too. And finally, the conscious is an aggregate, which is your awareness of what you’re doing right now. So these are the twigs and branches. You’re putting them together as a raft, and then you hold on. I’ve heard some people criticize the practice of concentration, saying that it teaches you to be attached to your object. But there are good attachments and bad attachments. As the Buddha pointed out, if you don’t have the pleasure that comes from concentration, you’re going to go back to your old pleasures, the pleasures of the senses. That would put the mind in a very precarious position. People kill, steal, cheat over the pleasures of the senses. You’ve got something and people want to take it away. The image the Buddha has is of a hawk that’s caught a piece of meat. It’s flying away, and other hawks and crows and other birds come and attack it because they want the meat, too. The central pleasure, as the Buddha said, is like borrowed goods. You borrow somebody’s goods, you ride around making people think that you’re wealthy. The owners find out and they take it away. So many of the pleasures we have in life depend on other people taking things from other people. And they can take them back any time. Whereas if you’re looking for pleasure in simply the way you breathe, you’re a lot safer. And it’s a lot better for the mind. It makes you intoxicated. The pleasure of jhana actually makes you clear-eyed. You can see what’s going on in your mind much more clearly. You understand yourself much more clearly. So this is a pleasure that’s worth building and it’s worth holding on to. As long as you don’t have anything better, hold on. It’s the same as when you’re crossing the river on the raft. As long as you haven’t reached the other shore, hold on to the raft. Don’t try to make a show of how much you’re able to let go, dancing on top of the raft, because you can easily slip and fall into the river and drown. So you’ve got this good rift raft. You’ve got the breath coming in and going out through the body. It feels good to be right here. Hold on. And then use this as your means for letting go of other things. And when other things fall into the background, then you can focus on this. So this too is inconstant, stressful, not-self. Because, as you heard, there’s something better. There’s an end of suffering that can come when you totally let go. As you get closer and closer to the shore, then that’s the time to let go. And then you can leave the raft there. You don’t need to hold on to it anymore. That’s when you use the teaching, anatta, all around. That’s the skillful way of using self and the skillful way of using not-self. There are lots of unskillful ways of using these concepts, like an unskillful use of self while you’re meditating. If you start thinking, “Well, my concentration is better than this person’s concentration or that person’s concentration,” that ruins your concentration right there. That’s an unskillful self. Unskillful not-self. Suppose you hit somebody, and the police come and ask, “Who hit this person?” You say, “It wasn’t me,” because there is no me. So it’s important to realize that karma comes first. There’s skillful karma and unskillful karma. And thoughts of self and thoughts of not-self are also a kind of karma, and they can be skillful or unskillful. When you get a sense of when is the skillful way of using self and when is the skillful way of using not-self, then you’re going to go far in the path.

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