

The Karma of Self & Not-self

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One of the questions the Buddha has monks ask themselves every day, and it's a useful question for all people to ask themselves: "Days and nights fly past, fly past, what am I doing right now?" The purpose of the question is to remind you the importance of your actions, and the ephemeral nature of everything else. How much longer are you going to have time to do the things you want to get done? And what *are* the things you want to get done? The Buddha says that true happiness is possible. Are you working toward it or are you working away from it? And are you doing what you can for that purpose or are you just wasting your time? The Buddha was the sort of person who never wasted time. Once he had set his sights on awakening, on finding the answer to the question of whether there's a true happiness, a happiness that's not dependent on conditions, he focused all of his efforts in that direction. That was the question to which he gave top priority in his life.

After he gained awakening, that was the question he had his followers take as having top priority in their lives as well. He defined wisdom as beginning with the question: "What will I do that will be to my long term welfare and happiness?" That question emphasizes several things. One, the power of your actions to make a difference. And, two, the question: Do you want short-term happiness or long-term happiness? Short-term happiness is all around you, but is it worth the effort? Everything you're going to gain in life comes through effort, comes through your actions. And so you want to look at your actions. Are they getting good results or not? And what can you do to get better results? You can learn from your past mistakes, resolve not to make them again.

But it's also good to have a picture of what's possible. Some people complain that there's not much room for imagination in meditation. Actually, the Buddha asks you to imagine a lot of things, to open up your imagination to the possibility that there could be an end to suffering and that it's something you can attain through your own efforts. Can you imagine that? Try to get your head around that idea and think about what it means for your life. Then examine everything you do. Look at your experiences to see exactly how much you're responsible for what's happening.

As the Buddha pointed out, there are two sources for what you're experiencing right now. One is past actions and the other is present actions. Past actions you can't do much about, but you can do a lot with present actions. That's why he has

you ask: What am I doing right now? That's why he has you keep on asking that question every day.

You may feel surprised that the question has the "I" in there. After all the Buddha taught there is no self, right? Well, he never taught that. There's no place in the Pali Canon where you can find him endorsing the statement, "There is no self." What he does describe is a process of I-making and my-making. Selfing is something we do. These are actions you do here in the present moment. You take the potentials that come from your past actions and you turn them into an actual experience, and part of that usually includes creating your sense of who you are, either as the creator of an experience or as the consumer of the experience.

But the "I" is something you do. The "me" is something you do. The "mine" is something you do. In some cases, they're useful concepts. It's good to know the difference between your wallet and somebody else's wallet, your possessions and their possessions, your body and their body, your actions and their actions. If you don't have a clear concept of this, you're going to get into a lot of trouble.

But it goes deeper than that. You have to have a sense of your own responsibility, and what you're doing right here, right now. You're the one who intends your actions. You can't depend on anybody else to do that for you. If you're not skillful in the way you react to your experiences, you're the one who's going to have to learn how to be more skillful. So having a good healthy sense of self in areas like this is necessary. It's how you function and how you progress along the path. You look at an experience and ask yourself: What am I doing to make this experience worse? Sometimes you'll find that there's greed involved, sometimes aversion, sometimes delusion. Who's responsible for those things? You can't go blaming your parents, you can't go blaming society, because if you do you get nowhere. If you look for what you're doing in terms of your greed, anger, and delusion right now, though, then you can make a difference. You can do things differently.

So it's in areas like this that a good strong sense of self is necessary. It's skillful; it gets results. Because, after all, your sense of self is a strategy for happiness. And the Buddha is asking you to make it a strategy for long-term happiness. That's what we mean by a healthy sense of self, the sort of person who sacrifices short-term happiness for long-term happiness, where you're responsible for your actions and develop skill.

However, there are areas where having a sense of self is actually counterproductive. This is what the not-self teaching is for, to point out what those areas are. If the Buddha had said that there is no self, one, it would've been a waste of time. He would have been entangled in all kinds of arguments. If you

make the statement that there is no self, then immediately the question is: “What do you mean by self? Define your terms.” And that’s a set-up for a long, involved argument that ultimately gets nowhere. The Buddha once said if you try to take a stance on either side of that question, “Is there a self? Is there a no self?” you end up siding with extreme forms of wrong view, because you’re assuming that the whole idea of a self is a thing. You either have it or you don’t have it, willy-nilly. And when the Buddha says that the things we claim as self are inconstant and stressful, you could say, “Well, I’m satisfied with those things because that’s just the kind of self I’ve got. I can’t find any better self than that.” And the discussion ends there. Nowhere.

But if you look at the self as something you do, then there’s an immediate logic: You do things for the sake of happiness. There are cases where the sense of self actually does contribute to your happiness, in which case it’s a skillful strategy. There are other times when it causes stress and suffering, in which case it’s an unskillful strategy. It defeats its own purpose, its whole reason for being, the whole reason for why you made it. When you see that, you can stop doing it. That’s the whole point of the teaching.

So once you develop a good, strong body of skills on how to be mindful, how to bring the mind to a good state of concentration, you’ve taken the sense of self and its quest for a good long-term happiness about as far as it can go. But the quest for happiness doesn’t end there. It goes further. At that point you let go of your sense of self, the activity of selfing, because it’s going to get in the way. This is where the Buddha teaches us to look at all fabricated things as inconstant, stressful, and not-self. In particular, the state of concentration you’ve worked on: Once it’s good and solid you can see, “Where is there a disturbance here? What am I doing?” And part of the disturbance is going to be a sense of the “me” or the “I.” And that’s when it’s useful to let those activities go.

What is this “me,” what is this “I” made up of? Five types of things, the five aggregates. The Buddha never says that the aggregates are what you are. He says they’re the raw materials that you use to create your sense of self. You take the potential for form, the potential for feeling, perception, fabrication, and consciousness, all of which come from past actions, and you actualize it. And then you identify with it. But your identity can change from moment to moment. Sometimes you’re focused on feelings, sometimes on perceptions, sometimes on the body, either seeing yourself as identical with these things, or as possessing these things, as inside them, or as having these things inside you. So even a sense of infinite or interconnected self that has a small body of feeling or consciousness or

whatever inside: The Buddha says let go of that as well. That kind of self is also unskillful at that point.

This teaching goes against the grain because the constant theme in the back of your mind is always: What do I do next, what do I do next? And when you're told to stop doing the selfing, who's going to take care of the shop? Who's going to look after things? Well, you look at what it is that needs to be looked after, and you realize: It's not worth it. And the activities that you are trying to do to shore up the situations that you feel you need for happiness, those are causing stress as well. It's when you can see that they're counterproductive, that's when you can let them go.

This takes a lot of skillful looking, a lot of skillful mindfulness, concentration—all the factors of the path. But when you're really honest with yourself, (and that's the first prerequisite for the path; way back in the beginning the Buddha says: "Give me someone who is honest and I will teach that person the Dhamma,") honestly looking at what you're doing and what the results are, the point will have to come where you realize you've had enough. You've got to stop. And when you have sense enough to see how you can stop, and even let go of the intention to stop, that's when you find there's a greater happiness that you've been covering up with all of your frantic arranging, all of your frantic I-making and my-making. This is why it's worth letting go.

This is why the not-self teaching is useful. It's part of that strategy for long term welfare and happiness.

So we have that promise from the Buddha that when you finally let go of these things, after you've developed them, you're not going to be left adrift. In fact, as Ajaan Suwat once said, you find the ultimate happiness, and when there's the ultimate happiness, you won't care who it is that's having the experience. The question just won't occur to you. The happiness itself will be sufficient. And it won't change, it'll always be there—although the word "always" is not quite appropriate because you're outside of space and time at that point, but with a strong sense of immediacy. We're not sending you off to some faraway galaxy. But there isn't even a sense of "here" or "there." There's no sense of location at all, but there is the happiness.

That's the Buddha's promise—and it's also his challenge to you. What are you doing right now? Is it working toward this happiness or not? Because this happiness is what makes everything worthwhile. If you can find this happiness in your lifetime, then the narrative of your life has real meaning, a real sense of accomplishment. You've done the thing most worth doing. Are you up for it? Days and nights are flying past, flying past. What are you doing? Keep that

question in mind, and keep the context of that question in mind. Come up with your best answer through what you do and say and think right now, right now, right now. You don't have to advertise it to anyone else, you don't have to tell anyone else, because when you really do it right, nobody else has to know. It's that good.