

Karma & Not-self

April 20, 2005

There's that old question you hear every time people hear the Buddha's teachings explained, and it's this: Given the teaching on not-self, how do you explain the teaching on karma? If there's no self, who does the action? Who receives the results of the action? There are two problems with that question. One is that the Buddha never answered the question of whether there is or isn't a self. The second problem with the question is that it's got the context 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.

On the night of the Buddha's awakening, the second knowledge in the second watch of the night was about karma, about how people's views shape their actions and how their actions then shape what happens to them, now and into the future. 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 them in the context of what's done. And 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 in dependent co-arising, starting with ignorance, you hit intention—which is karma—way before you hit attachment to self. You have intentions that lead to actions, the actions then condition your experience at the senses, and then around experiences you develop clinging. And 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 of pleasure and pain. Acting as a doer, you try to create more pleasure and get rid of pain. Acting as experiencer, you try to enjoy the pleasure, escape the pain.

So your sense of who you are is a strategy. And 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, and all the factors of the path. You're sitting here meditating: Who's responsible for the meditation? Well, you are.

Ajaan Fuang once said that the one thing you have to believe in when you meditate is the teaching on karma, that what you do is what 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 with action in 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 about the breath, what happens? When 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 out your eyes, suppose you're down in the chest: What happens then? Or instead of thinking that you're watching the breath in front you, what happens if you think of the breath surrounding you?

In other words, change your sense of location, and then notice what happens as a result. This is the Buddha's basic teaching to his son: You 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? You focus in another way, what results? Learn to be sensitive to the movements of your mind, and the sensations they create. That way, you become more and more skilled as a meditator.

One of the things you begin to notice as you meditate is that thoughts come up in the mind totally unintended. It's important to realize that you have the choice to get involved with them or not. That choice is the present intention. It takes a thought on and moves with it, or it chooses not to. An important lesson always to keep in mind is that you don't have to identify with everything that comes up. There can be a movement of the mind, and you can decide not to go with it. You watch it. 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." If you go with them, you give them a 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 comes in from the very beginning. You have choices in the outside world. 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 the choice to create a sense of self around your ideas. 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. They'll go a little ways and then die. That's the beginning of how you use not-self.

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, self and not-self, 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 exercise inside, and the issue gets a lot more refined. But it's the same basic principle. As soon as you see that something is unskillful, you drop it. 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 or not get higher and higher.

In this way, you peel off unskillful things and label 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 at this point in the practice. Once its job is done, 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 judgements. 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. You can travel light. That's when it's really good.