

Not-self Is a Value Judgment

October 16, 2015

When the Buddha taught breath meditation to his son Rahula, he prefaced his teachings with some contemplations, groundwork for breath meditation. One of the contemplations is not-self, which may seem surprising because we usually think of the not-self teaching as something designed for the last stages of the path. And it is true that when the Buddha taught people to let go of everything, to learn to identify nothing at all as self, he was speaking largely to people who were on the verge of becoming arahants—people who'd followed the path, all the activities of the path, and now were ready to let go of those activities and any sense of self that lingered around them, to reach a state of mind that was beyond activity.

But even at the beginning of the path, it's useful to learn how to apply the reflection on not-self in a more selective way. In brief, the Buddha's trying to get us to see our sense of self as an activity. We do identify with things and our sense of identity changes all the time. We pick up something and identify with it and then we drop it to identify with something else.

The dropping, which is an act of not-selfing, is also a type of activity. You want to learn how to see how it happens while it's happening. All too often we don't see it because we're so intent on moving on to the next sense of self and then the next. What happens in the process of letting go of something you used to identify with: That's something you want to look into. And take advantage of that as you meditate.

Because as you're sitting here, you could take on lots of different identities. The identity you want right now is the identity of a meditator. An earnest meditator. You're here really trying to get some genuine results from what you're doing. But there are a lot of other identities lurking in the background of the mind. The identity of you at work, the identity of you at home, the identity of you as a feeder, as an enjoyer of sensual pleasures: all kinds of identities that you could take on right now.

For the time being at least, you have to learn how to not-self those identities. See that they're not worth taking on. That's what the whole idea of self and not-self is based on. It's not so much a metaphysical issue for most of us. It's a value judgment. And that's how the Buddha wants us to see it: as a value judgment. Is this

particular self worth taking on? Or is it not? Is a particular identity something that's really worth following through? The same questions apply to the actions that you take on when you assume that identity. Are they worth it?

This sort of calculation is something we're doing all the time, whether we're conscious of it or not.

I was talking this morning with someone who was commenting on how the not-self teaching seemed very rarefied. I told him, "Look, you're not-selfing all the time." As you take on an identity, say at work, you take on your work identity and drop the identity you take on at home. Even when you're at work, you can drop your work identity as you start thinking about other things that are not related to your work. Then, when you realize you've got to get work done, you take your work identity back on again, along with every issue of craving and clinging which this sense of self is tied up in.

When the Buddha talks of the third noble truth, he says he wants you to see the mind as it lets go of craving and to realize the good things that come about when you let go of that craving. But ordinarily, when we let go of one craving we get wound up into moving on to the next and the next that we don't see the process of letting go.

So as you meditate—and this is why this is a preliminary contemplation—you want to get good at that ability to realize you've taken on an identity and, if it's not something you want, you can not-self it. You have better identities to choose from. If you find yourself suddenly wandering off into the past into a little thought world, well, pull yourself out. This ability to pull out of an identity is a lot of what not-self is about: pulling out of those thought worlds. You see that the thought world, and your identity in the thought world, isn't worth it. And of course there'll be a voice in the mind that says, "Yes it is." This is where you need a sense of values that enables you to decide whether you can trust that voice or not.

Gaining a sense of values is one of the main points of the not-self teaching. What is your sense of values? What's important for you? What identities do you want to develop? Which identities are worth developing? This is why the Buddha has us look at the arising of a sense of self and the passing away of a sense of self and also at the allure of a particular sense of self and then the drawbacks of that sense of self, so we can get beyond it.

That's the same pattern of inquiry that he has us adopt for every activity, skillful and unskillful. There are times when you drop

unskillful activities for the sake of skillful ones, and then you drop certain skillful activities because you want to move onto something even more skillful. When you gain a sense of awareness and fluidity around this, you learn how to do it more skillfully. If you find yourself stuck in a bad identity, you know there are ways of getting yourself out.

So when the Buddha's teaching not-self as a preliminary activity, it's like the first step they teach you Thai boxing. Before they teach you how to hit or kick, they teach you how to back away from your opponent without exposing yourself to his kicks. In other words, retreat is the first thing you want to learn.

And the same principle applies in meditation. You're going to be sitting here meditating, focused on the breath, and all of a sudden the breath seems far away and you're in some other thought world. You want to be quick to recognize that and quick to see the disadvantages of staying with that thought world. And then letting it go.

There are other identities, of course, that you want to develop. Sitting here as a meditator you want to be a good meditator. When you're at work, you want to be a good worker. If you're a part of a team, you want to be a good member of the team. In other words, realize that the identities you take on are choices you make. And you want to ask yourself, "What choices will be for my long-term welfare and happiness?"

When you start thinking of selfing as an activity, you realize that it fits right in with the Buddha's teachings on kamma. Basic wisdom around kamma starts with the question, "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" Well, insert the term "selfing": "What way of selfing will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? What way of selfing will lead to my long-term harm and suffering?" That's the beginning of wisdom around the issues of self and not-self.

So learn to see the choice to self or to not-self as it happens, as you take on or drop an identity, either as the potential consumer of some happiness or as the person with the skills and abilities to bring that happiness about. See all that as a type of activity, as a type of kamma. Then ask yourself: "When is it skillful? When is it not? What types of selfing are skillful? When is it worth doing? When is it not?"

Again, not-self is a value judgment. The Buddha's not asking you to draw conclusions about whether there is a self in the larger metaphysical sense or not.

Even when he was talking to people on the verge of becoming arahants giving them that questionnaire, notice how he phrased the questions:

“Form, feeling, perceptions, fabrications, consciousness: Are they constant or inconstant?”

“They’re inconstant.”

“If they’re inconstant are they easeful or stressful?”

“They’re stressful.”

And then the final question is not, “Then is there a self?” No, the question is:

“Are things that are inconstant and stressful worth holding onto as self or as being claimed as me or mine?”

The answer is, “No.”

It’s a value judgment.

So get your values straight as to which of your identities you want to take on and which ones you don’t. Learn to see your identity as something fluid, moving and changing its shape all the time like an amoeba: sometimes looking like a horse, sometimes like a human being, sometimes like a deva, sometimes like a mouth with lots of fangs and teeth.

Years back when I was in Japan, I ran across a cartoon character called “The Children’s Police,” a little tiny fat guy with an extremely malleable face. He seemed to be just pure id. Whatever emotion was going through him would change his shape of his face. If he was angry, his nose would turn into a gun. If he was feeling lust, his nose got obscene.

Inside, we’re not all that different. Our nose doesn’t change shape that much as we go through the day, but if you could look at your sense of self, you’d find it changing shape all over the place, extending little pseudopods here or there.

We tend to think of ourselves as just being “us,” which leaves us stuck with whatever “us” we find ourselves it. So it’s good to see your sense of self as a fluid activity, and then ask yourself, “How can I mold it in a way that’s going to be helpful for long-term welfare and happiness?”

When you learn how to think in these terms: That’s what eventually will get you to the point where you don’t need a sense of self anymore. That’s when you’ll get to the that ultimate level where you’ve found a happiness that doesn’t need to do anything or require anything more to be done.

But in the meantime learn a good sense of values around self and

not-self as they apply to the path. Because having that sense of values will really help you on your way.