Perceptions of Self & Not-Self

April 5, 2025

Ajahn Suwat used to like to point out a paradox in the Buddhist teachings. On the one hand, there’s the teaching that, as we chanted just now, form, feeling, perceptions, thought fabrications, consciousness, are all not self. The six senses are not self. The eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind. But then, as he pointed out, there’s the phrase that we chant again and again, “I am the owner of my actions.” It’s how to resolve the paradox. We have to note, one, that it’s there in the Buddhist teachings as well. Like the passage we chanted just now. But then the Buddha also talks about taking the self as your mainstay, as your refuge. Take the self as your governing principle. Remind yourself that if you’re ever tempted to leave the practice, that you got onto this path because you loved yourself. You didn’t want to suffer. You wanted to put an end to suffering. If you abandon the path, is it because you want to continue suffering? If you have any concern for yourself, you want to stick with the path. There’s also a passage where Venerable Ananda says to have a sense of conceit, which basically means your sense that “I am.” And even though we’re here to put an end to conceit, we use conceit to do it. The sense that other people are capable of following this path. They’re human beings. I am a human being. If they can do it, why can’t I? You need that in order to practice. So what’s going on here? First, we have to remember that the Buddha never taught that there is no self. You can’t find that statement anywhere in the Canon. He talked about not-self, and he described certain things as being not-self. Secondly, he never called it a characteristic. Sometimes we hear that the Buddha taught the three characteristics of inconstancy, stress, not-self. But he never called them characteristics. He called them perceptions. That should alert you right there. Something is up. Because self is a perception. Not-self is also a perception. And it’s not the case that one of those is a conventional truth and another is an ultimate truth. Everything you say is a convention. And these conventions have their uses at different places in the practice. It’s good to see the perception of not-self or the perception of self as value judgments. In other words, is something worth holding on to, worth identifying with? If so, when and where? How about things that are not worth identifying with? Again, when and where? Because not all the Buddha’s teachings are meant to be used all the time. There are only two teachings, he said, that are categorical. One is the principle that skillful actions should be developed and unskillful actions should be abandoned. And the other is the four noble truths. There’s suffering, which is clinging to the five aggregates of form, feeling, perceptions, fabrications, consciousness. And there’s a duty with regard to that truth, which is to comprehend it. In other words, to understand it. To understand it to the point of having no more passion, aversion, or delusion around suffering. The second noble truth, the cause of suffering, or the origination of suffering, which is three kinds of craving. Craving for sensuality, for becoming, for not becoming. The duty there is to abandon it. In other words, to develop dispassion for it. The third noble truth is cessation of suffering. And when you abandon the cause, the duty there is to realize it. In other words, have a direct experience of it. And finally, there’s the path. The path that allows you to abandon craving. That’s the Noble Eightfold Path. And the duty there is to develop it. So that’s a truth. Those are truths that are true all the way across the board. It’s when do these perceptions of self and not-self fit into those truths that are true across the board? When and where? And you notice that the definition of suffering is those five aggregates that we chanted about. When they’re clung to. When they’re not clung to, they’re not going to create a burden on the mind. That’s the issue. It’s the clinging. And the passage we chanted just now was delivered to a group of monks who had already heard that first sermon the Buddha gave describing the Four Noble Truths and their duties. So they were alert to the fact that the problem was the clinging. The problem was the craving. They still had some clinging. They still had some craving. To the purpose of the second sermon, which is what we chanted just now, is to help undo that clinging. Undo that craving. Look at all the things that you might cling to and realize they’re not really under your control. They change. They’re uncertain and inconstant. Sometimes that word, anicca, is translated as impermanent. But it’s not precisely what it means. It means to be inconstant. It’s unreliable. And so your body is unreliable. Your feelings, your thought constructs, your perceptions, your consciousness. If these things are unreliable, why do you want to continue to cling to them? The answer usually is, what else is there? If you can’t hold on to them, what can you hold on to? And the response to that, of course, is, well, why do you have to hold on to anything? As the Buddha said, when you see that these things are not worth holding on to, you let go. Then there’s an experience of the deathless. And all those monks who listened to this discourse had had that experience. They’d had their first taste of awakening. But there was still some residual clinging. So they had to be taken care of. So the Buddha went over these five aggregates again. He said, even in their subtle forms, you have to let them go. But as for the question of whether there really is or is not a self, that was a question the Buddha put aside. He had a policy. There were four ways that he would answer or respond to questions. One was to give a categorical answer to some questions that deserved it. In other words, an answer that’s true across the board. Second would be, there are questions that deserve an analytical answer. You had to redefine the question before you could answer it. Third was cross-questioning. You examine the understanding of the person asking the question before you give the answer. And then the fourth was questions you just put aside because they’re not worth it. You probably know that passage in the Canon where the Buddha compares certain questions to the questions that a person might ask a surgeon. This person has been shot by an arrow in a battle. They carry him to the surgeon who’s going to take the arrow out. And the patient says, “Wait a minute. Before you take out this arrow, I want to know who shot the arrow. I want to know what feathers it was made of, and what wood it was made of, and who made it.” As the Buddha pointed out, if you try to answer all those questions, you die first. The questions that simply get in the way of putting an end to suffering. And it turns out that of those four types of questions, the question of “Is there a self or is there no self?” Buddha put aside. It wasn’t worth answering. He did that twice. Once when he was asked directly by a wanderer from another sect. Another time when he was talking to a group of monks, saying that the question of “Who am I? What am I? Do I exist? Do I not exist?” These are all not worthy of attention. Then the question, of course, is which questions are worthy of attention, and the ones that come down to the four Noble Truths. What is suffering? What’s the duty with regard to it? What is its cause? What’s the duty there? And so on. So those are the questions that the perceptions of not-self and the perceptions of self are supposed to help answer. There was a time when the Buddha was talking about not-self. And a monk came to the conclusion, “Well, if form, feeling, etc. are not-self, then what self is there to do anything that would affect any self?” There’s no one doing the action, no one to receive the results of the action. The Buddha came down really hard. That was not a time to think in those terms. Instead, the teaching on not-self is to help develop dispassion, help let go of your clinging. We’re not here to decide whether or not there is a self. We’re here to cure the problem of suffering. As long as you need a sense of self to develop the path, you use it. You learn how to dis-identify with things that would pull you off the path. Like you’re doing right now. You are responsible for doing the concentration. You can’t say, “Well, the concentration is not-self, so I’m not responsible. I’m just watching what happens.” You have to do it. It’s something that you develop. That’s the duty there. So you accept that responsibility. The self, along the path, functions in three ways. We mentioned it this afternoon. There’s the self as the producer, who actually does what needs to be done. That’s the agent. Then there’s the self as the consumer, the one who’s going to reap the rewards. Finally, the self as the commentator, who comments on what the producer’s doing. And decides whether it’s good yet or not. These are the cells that you have to rely on, that are your mainstay as you practice. But as you get better and better at the concentration, better and better at discernment, there comes a point where you begin to see that these perceptions of self are no longer needed. And that’s when you apply the perception of not-self. Because both perceptions are strategies for the sake of putting an end to suffering, when you use them right. In everyday life, your sense of self is a strategy for happiness. You already do have a sense of not-self. There are certain things you just don’t identify with. A thought that comes into the mind, something that you wouldn’t want to do, you know, gives bad results. You say, “Well, that’s not anything I want to get involved with.” Okay, that’s a perception of not-self. That’s for things that you do when you want to do and you know will give good results. Okay, you identify with that. That’s a thought I want to take on. I want to adopt that thought. So using these perceptions as you need them. There comes a point, though, where you don’t need the perception of self anymore. So use the perception of not-self across the board. But that doesn’t mean you arrive at the truth that there is no self. True is a perception. Not-self is a perception. It’s something you’ve got to let go of. It’s one of those aggregates, that if you cling to it, it’s going to keep you suffering. So ultimately you let go of both perceptions. There was a time in Thailand, years back, when there was a controversy over whether Nibbana was your true self or not. The controversy started in monasteries. And then it spread, if you can imagine, into the newspapers. It was everywhere in the country. Imagine a newspaper in the United States debating the issue of whether or not Nibbana was self or not-self. The New York Daily News, The Post. That’s what you had in Thailand. So someone asked Ajahn Mahaprabhu about this, whether Nibbana was self or not. And he said Nibbana is Nibbana. When you get to that point, you don’t need the perception either of self or not-self. Because they’re perceptions. You’ve got to let go of them. Or as Ajahn Suwat once put it, when you arrive at Nibbana, you arrive at the ultimate happiness. And it’s so total that you don’t even care to ask the question of is there anybody experiencing it or not. The experience itself is so total. So satisfying. So it puts an end to all those questions. So we’re not here to see that there is no self. Sometimes you have experiences in the meditation where you can convince yourself that you’ve seen that there is no self. But what kind of experience would actually confirm that? What you can see is when you use the perception of self, what happens? Is there suffering? Is there not? When you use the perception of not-self, is there suffering? Is there not? And to what extent do these perceptions help you develop the path? Help you develop, take on the duties of the four Noble Truths? Get rid of the clinging that you would have. No matter how you identify yourself around the aggregates of permanence, a permanent self or an impermanent self, a separate self or a connected self, infinite self, finite self, any way you might identify yourself around those aggregates will eventually cause suffering. But sometimes you have to take on some of the suffering of holding on to an idea of self in order to do the path. But then when the skill is mastered, then you can let it all go. Because that’s what we’re here for. Not to answer the question of whether or not there is a self, but to answer the question of why is there suffering? What can be done to put an end to it? Those are the questions worth asking. It’s through the meditation that you answer them. And you’ll know for yourself when you had that experience, when everything falls away. Outside of space and time. Something that can be touched as you work here in the present moment and opens up outside of the present moment. That can confirm, yes, there is no suffering there. That’s a question you can answer. So, to whatever extent you need the perception of self to get there, use it. When the time comes to put it aside, use the perception of not-self. And then put that aside as well. That’s when we’ve accomplished what the Buddhist teaching is all for.

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