

The Karma of Not-self

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There's a question that often comes up when people are discussing the Buddha's teachings on karma, which is: If there is no self, who does the karma? If there's no self, who experiences the karma, or the results of the karma?

This question is misguided in two ways. One, the Buddha never said there is no self. He never said there was a self, but he never said there was no self. And two, the question has the context backwards. People are trying to take the teaching on not-self as the primary context, and they try to fit karma in that. Actually, it should be the other way around. You start with the principle of karma, that people do act, and then try to fit the not-self teaching into that context. In other words, given that there are actions, what kind of action is the perception of not-self? What kind of action is the perception of self? These are things that you do.

The question then is: Given that these are forms of karma, when are they skillful and when are they not? The karma of self the Buddha calls "I-making" and "my-making." You create a sense of self around your desires. You have a desire for happiness of one form or another, and you create a sense of self around it in two ways: One, you're the self who's going to experience the happiness of having that desire fulfilled, and, two, you're also the self who has the power to bring that happiness about.

Think about when you were a child. Even before you had any idea of who you were, you did have desires. You saw a little block next to you on the bed, and you wanted that block. After a while, you decided that this thing that was moving around in the range of your eyesight was something you could control. This hand—of course you didn't have any concept of "hand" at the time—but, whatever that shape was, you could control it, you could reach it out and use it to grab the block. That hand became *your* hand. The block was now something under your control. It was *your* block. This is why the Buddha often points out that the notion of control is basic to the notion of self.

Of course, as you go through life, you develop other desires and you try to find other ways of gaining the things you desire. The skills you learn in trying to attain your desired feelings or objects or whatever: That's another form of I-making and my-making. In this way, you make lots of different selves. And given that part of your sense of self is based on the things you can control, the things you can manipulate, your sense of self depends to a great extent on the range of skills that you develop.

So that's selfing as an action. There are ways in which it's skillful, and ways in which it's not. To begin with, it's based on desire. Sometimes your desires are really harmful, and the self created around those desires is an unskillful self. It leads to a lot of suffering. Even with things that are relatively skillful, you find that you latch on to them and then they disappoint you. So you create another self to try another desire, and you keep going, creating more selves all the time. The problem is that these selves have to keep feeding. So even when they're relatively skillful, there's always this element of feeding, there's always this element of stress inside them.

But there's a skillful side to these things as well: skillful selfing. You develop attributes that the Buddha actively encourages, like heedfulness, the ability to see that there are dangers lying down the road, and the conviction that you have the ability to avoid them if you're careful. That's a skillful sense of self: a sense of self responsibility, self-reliance. As the Buddha said, the self is its own mainstay. In other words, you have to depend on yourself to straighten out your mind. You can't depend on other people to do it.

There's also a sense of self that knows restraint, realizing that if you don't say No to certain desires, there's going to be trouble. So you learn how to say No to your desire for immediate gratification in the interest of greater happiness down the line, in keeping with the verse from the Dhammapada: If you see a greater happiness that comes from letting go of a lesser happiness, you're willing to let go of the lesser happiness for the sake of the greater one. That's basic wisdom. And it requires a skillful kind of self to do that.

In one way, you might say that you have lots of different selves, and some of the selves can train the other selves: The self that forms around an unskillful desire can be trained sometimes by a self that forms around a skillful one. So it's not the case that selfing is always bad.

Sometimes you hear people saying that if people realized that their self caused nothing but stress and trouble, they'd let it go. Well, if it caused nothing but stress and trouble, they *would* let it go, no problem at all. But there are forms of selfing that are beneficial. As we all sense, it's by having a sense of what we can do, what skills we've mastered, the abilities we can identify with, that we find our happiness. Tell people just to let go of those strategies and they're going to say, "How am I going to find my happiness?" It doesn't work that way.

This is where that other activity comes in: the perception of not-self. This is actually something we've been doing all along, too. Things that we realize are not under our control, that are opposed to our sense of self, we perceive as not-self. It's a dividing line that we create all the time. Where there is self, there's going to be

not-self. And that sense of not-self, too, can be either skillful or unskillful. You learn how not to identify with certain unskillful desires: That's a useful use of not-selfing. But then there are times when you deny responsibility and say, "I didn't do that. It was already broken when I stepped on it. I didn't mean to," when you actually did. That kind of denial is very unhealthy. The skillful use of not-self is when you see that some form of identification is actually causing harm, and you learn to say, "No, that's not me. That's not mine."

So both selfing and not-selfing can be either skillful or unskillful, and a large part of our training is learning how to sort those things out. Like right now, as you're sitting here meditating: You're doing this because you see that benefits will come down the line from training the mind. Trying to bring the mind under control is a form of selfing right there. Each time you catch yourself wandering off with a distraction, you drop the distraction. That's a form of not-selfing. You come back and you self with the breath. This is all based on the principle of restraint, the principle of heedfulness, and also the principle of what they call sublimation: the ability to substitute a more skillful pleasure for a less skillful one.

And compassion, or what the psychologists call altruism: You see that this is a form of happiness that doesn't harm anybody at all. In fact, the more self-reliant you are, the less you weigh other people down. This way, the more you can depend on yourself not to get knocked off course by pain, illness, aging, disappointment, the better it is for others, too. This resilience that you can develop through the powers of concentration, mindfulness, and discernment is a form of happiness that's good for everybody: for you and the people around you.

So all this is healthy selfing. As for any distractions that come up, any defilements that come up, you learn how not to identify with them, how to let them stop. That's healthy not-selfing. As you keep this up, your powers of concentration get more and more refined, stronger and stronger, until you're able to use them to let go of a lot more radical things, more deeply ingrained habits, old ways of selfing that have been constantly bothering you, parts of your self that keep coming back, coming back. You use the concentration, you use the discernment to learn how not to identify with them.

That requires developing other skills. There's no way you can just drop one form of selfing unless you can replace it with another set of skills, which is what we're doing right here. Ultimately, when the concentration has done its work, and you've let go of everything else that would destroy your concentration or knock it off balance, then you can start turning around and looking at the concentration itself, seeing that it, too, has limitations. You start applying the perception of not-self to this as well. That's one way that you can break through to the deathless.

So it's helpful to realize that the Buddha's not saying that there is or isn't a self. Instead, look at the way you self as a verb, as a form of karma, and develop a skillful sense of self, a wholesome sense of self, along with a skillful sense of not-self. That helps create the karma that leads to the end of karma, the kind of selfing and not-selfing that leads to the end of selfing. You can do that only by finding a happiness that's totally free from conditions. In other words, you don't have to do anything to maintain it. At that point, any need for a sense of self is set aside because, after all, you've been selfing because you want happiness. Once you find ultimate happiness, though, there's no need for those selves anymore. There's no need for not-self, either. Now the question of selfing and not-selfing gets put aside.

So the question isn't: If there's no self, who does the action or who receives the results? The question is: Given that there are actions, what kind of action is selfing, what kind of action is not-selfing? When is it skillful, when is it not? What skills can you develop to foster a skillful sense of self and learn how to use the process of not-selfing in a skillful way as well?—so that ultimately you get to that state of happiness, that type of happiness—unconditioned, unlimited—where you can put all selfing and not-selfing aside.