

The Karma of Self

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For all the Buddha's teachings on not-self, he has some good uses for the concept of self. The beginning of wisdom, he says, starts with a question: What when I do it will lead to my long-term harm and suffering, and what when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? The "I" and the "my," there, show two sides of the concept of self. One is the self as the producer: "What when I do it, will lead to long-term happiness?" The "I" there is your sense of control over some parts of your experience—you can control your body to some extent, you can control your mind to some extent. The question is, how are you going to use that control to lead to long-term happiness? How are you going to use it to avoid long-term suffering?

This measure of control is something you have to take seriously. When the Buddha talks about self, the only really useful concept for self, or the only really useful way of defining a sense of self he mentions, is where you have control, where you have power to have things go along with what you want. Though there may be a lot of things in life that you can't bring in line with what you want, still there are some things you can. And it's good to be very clear about where the line is between those two things. Oftentimes we confuse it. We try to control things that we really can't. And we neglect to control some things where we really do have some power, particularly in the area of the mind. If it weren't possible to bring the mind under some control, you couldn't do meditation. You couldn't focus the mind. You couldn't be mindful. You couldn't develop any of the qualities that are needed. You'd just be sitting there waiting for something to happen.

But, as the Buddha said, if skillful qualities couldn't be developed, he wouldn't teach people to do it. If unskillful qualities couldn't be abandoned, he wouldn't teach people to do it. We can do these things, so we do have some measure of control. And that's where we should focus it, on the mind. Ask yourself, "What mental qualities have I allowed to take over my mind? How am I complicit with false friends in the mind?" That chant we had on friends just now doesn't refer only to outside friends. There are false friends in your mind. We don't like to think about it, but we're often complicit with the very things that are going to destroy our concentration.

The Buddha has all kinds of techniques for dealing with sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and anxiety, uncertainty—all of the hindrances. And

they're perfectly good tools. Yet if you're siding with your defilements, if you're siding with your hindrances, the tools are for naught. You might as well not have them. So you have to remind yourself: This is what you really want to do. You really want to get past these hindrances. You really want to develop skillful qualities. This is why right effort starts with generating desire. You motivate yourself. You remind yourself why you want to do these things, why you want to be skillful, why you don't want to be unskillful.

This is where the other side of self comes in, the self that's experiencing the happiness and suffering coming from the things you do. You have to keep reminding yourself, yes, you will suffer if you're not skillful, but if you do develop skillfulness, if you put the effort in right now, it's going to bring good results right now and on into the future. So the "my" in "What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?"—that's the self on the receiving side, the experiencing side.

So you've got the self as the producer and the self as the receiver. And you want to take them both seriously. If you apply the teaching on not-self indiscriminately, saying, "Well, there's nobody doing anything, there's nobody experiencing anything, it's just empty phenomena rolling on. Who cares about what they roll into?": That's an unskillful application of the teaching.

The Buddha makes this clear in one of his discourses, where a monk has been asked, "What is a result of karma?" And he says, "Stress," the justification being, that all feelings are stressful, karma leads to feelings, therefore karma leads to stress. That, the Buddha said, was not a time to apply that teaching. The relevant teaching was the fact that there are three kinds of feeling. There are pleasant feelings, painful feelings, and feelings that are neither pleasant nor painful.

That way of thinking about feelings is useful when you're thinking about what you want to get out of your actions. If you think that everything you feel is going to be stressful, then who cares what you do? It's all going to be stress. There's no motivation to be skillful at all. But you keep running into the fact that your actions do lead to a range of feelings that go from pleasant—they can be very pleasant—all the way to very painful. Do you want to experience those painful feelings? If you want to experience the pleasant ones, you've got to see the distinction and do what's needed.

This is where thought of the self as having some control is useful in motivating you to make good use of that control. There are two other areas where the Buddha and Ven. Ananda specifically talk about the usefulness of self. In the first one, the Buddha talks about the self as what he calls a governing principle, where you're supposed to remind yourself, "Now that I've embarked on the path of the

practice, it wouldn't be fitting for me to fall back into my old ways of indulgence, because after all, I do want to put an end to suffering. I don't want to continue suffering on and on and on, the way I have been." So, as he says, making your sense of self your governing principle—in other words, making it your main motivation, seeing yourself as the experiencer, or on the receiving end of the pleasure or pain that comes from your actions—you can use that as a motivation to stick with the path.

As for the self as the producer, that's in Ven. Ananda's discussion with a nun. It's an interesting story. She's attracted to Ananda and she wants to get him attracted to her. So she lets it out that she's sick. She wants him to come and teach her the Dhamma. There are two versions of the story. One—this is in the Sarvastivadin version—is where she lies in the bed, and as soon as he comes into the room, she throws off the covers and she's totally naked. The Theravadan version—which I think is probably more true to what can happen in a situation like that—she sees him coming, so she lies down in the bed, covers her head with a robe, pretends to be sick, hoping that he would feel sympathy for her and teach her the Dharma. Then she would gradually show her face and say, "Thank you so much for teaching the Dharma, that was very sweet of you." And then things could go from there.

But Ananda teaches her that the body depends on food. It's by using food that you come to the point where you don't need food anymore. It comes into being through conceit, and it's by using conceit that you don't need conceit anymore. It comes into being through craving, it's by using craving that you don't need craving anymore. But as for sex, he says, the Buddha tells you to cut off the bridge on that one. You don't use it at all.

The teaching on conceit is the one relevant to the issue about self. He said, you think of the fact that other people have attained the end of suffering. They are people; you are a person. They can do it, why can't you put an end to suffering, too?

So here you think about yourself as the producer, someone who is capable, someone who is competent. These other human beings in the past—the monks and the nuns and the lay people and the adults, the old people, and the children—had to put up with a lot of difficulties, but were ultimately able to reach awakening. People aren't born arahants. They start out as people with defilements, just like yours, sometimes worse than yours. Yet they were able to straighten themselves out. They can do it, why can't you?

The sense of conceit here is not that you're better than other people, just that you're equal to other people. That, too, can count as a kind of conceit, and that,

too, can be useful, that sense of self as a competent producer. You can develop skillful qualities. You can act in skillful ways, speak in skillful ways, think in skillful ways. You can develop these habits. That sense of self is useful. It keeps you encouraged on the path.

In some places, they say you need to assume that you have Buddha nature so that you can do this, but the Buddha doesn't ask you to do that. He says, all you need to do is to be heedful, realizing that your actions really do make a difference, and you have some control over them. So you want to train yourself as the producer so that the self as consumer or experiencer of pleasure and pain can reach a pleasure, can reach a happiness that's totally secure.

Now, there are later stages. Once these senses of self have done their duty, you don't really need them anymore. You can put them aside. They're like tools: They do their work and then you don't need to hang on to them anymore. But it's good to remember that they do have their uses. You don't want to throw the tools away before they've done their work. You take good care of them so that they can do their work well.

So if you could think of your perception of self as a tool and understand exactly what kind of self you want to define—the self that's in control and the self that really does prefer pleasure to pain—that's enough "self" to do the practice.

Remember that the Buddha's teachings are a path. He doesn't start out with, say, some first principles and argue logically all the way through the Dhamma to awakening. He provides you with different techniques, different tools, different strategies, that you will use at different stages along the path. Your duty is to make sure you know where you are and which strategies you need. Leave the more elementary strategies behind when you no longer need them, and don't worry about the ones further down the path yet. They will be there when you need them. The important thing is that you use the tools that are right for you right now.