

The Kamma of Self & Not-Self

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Sometimes you hear Buddhist teachers treating your sense of self as if it were a logical fallacy. If you look at events, if you look at your life and realize that everything is impermanent, then there can be no separate permanent self, they say. Your sense of self is just a series of actions. There's nothing substantial there, and because actions are ephemeral you just give up identifying with them. Then you'll be okay. That's what they say. And then they complain that people don't admit the logic of what they're saying and still hold onto their sense of self—again, as if it were a logical fallacy.

The thing is your sense of self is an important tool for trying to find happiness. And deep down we all realize this. If you didn't have a sense of self as being capable of attaining your aims or being able to enjoy your aims, you wouldn't be able to do anything purposeful in life. To say that a sense of self is just a series of actions is not the end of the problem. Because they're actions, the question is: When are they skillful? When are they not?

After all, the Buddha does say you have to have your self as your own mainstay, your self as your governing principle. By that he means if you feel like giving up on the path, you remind yourself that you embarked on this path to begin with because you wanted to put an end to suffering. And if you give up on the path, do you really love yourself? So those are cases where your sense of self as being responsible, as being capable, is necessary for the path. It's when you start identifying with things that are unskillful: That's when your sense of self gets in the way.

So what are some skillful uses of self? A while back there was a book, called *The Wisdom of the Ego*, in which a psychologist talked about healthy ego functions—the ego being the part of your self-committee in the mind that negotiates among your desires, and between your sense of what you *should* do and what you *want* to do. And although your ego can have some pretty unskillful or unhealthy functions, it does have some healthy ones. And it turns out that they all correspond to qualities that the mind needs to develop for the path, simply that the vocabulary is different.

For example, psychologists say you need to have a sense of anticipation, which the Buddha would call heedfulness, or sometimes he would call it compunction—in other words, realizing that your actions will have results, that they can have a huge impact on your life for good or for bad, so you have to be very careful about what you do. Caring about how you experience the results of your actions is an important part of acting skillfully. So heedfulness or anticipation is a healthy ego function in the path.

Then there's altruism, realizing that if your happiness depends on the suffering of other people they're not going to stand it. They're not going to allow it. So you have to take other people's well-being, other people's happiness into account. That, of course, the Buddha calls goodwill and compassion, which is another quality we develop on the path. And goodwill is a healthy ego function.

There's suppression, which is different from repression. Repression is when you say No to something and pretend it didn't happen in the mind. Suppression is when you know it's there but you can still say No. In the Buddha's vocabulary, that's restraint. And there are two kinds. There's restraint over what you take in through the senses, noting that if you're looking for the purpose of lust or greed or aversion, you'd better look in another way. There's also restraint over what you say and do and think. In both cases, you suppress the urges to do unskillful things and you replace those urges with another form of happiness.

This is another healthy ego function, called sublimation in psychologists' terms. The Buddha doesn't have a term for it, but he does recommend that you develop concentration as a source of well-being in the mind that's totally harmless. It doesn't require that you do anything unskillful to develop it and it doesn't have a bad impact on the mind. As he said, if you have this pleasure, the pleasure of the first jhana on up, then when you see the bad effects of sensuality, you're in a position where you can give it up. If you don't have this alternative form of pleasure, then no matter how much you understand that sensuality is bad for you, you're still going to keep on going back for sensuality, because you think it's the only alternative to pain. So you take your desire for happiness and you channel it in a more productive way.

And finally in the psychologists' list there's humor, learning to step back from your foibles and laugh at them. Again, the Buddha doesn't use this term but there are lots of examples in the Canon, especially in the Vinaya, of the Buddha's humor. And it's interesting that they're in the Vinaya. Because, after all, part of presenting the rules is to make you want to follow them. And if you can laugh at the behavior of the person who incited the rule to begin with, it puts you in a position where you can step back from that kind of behavior in yourself. If you realize that these rules were created by a person with a sense of humor, you trust them more. You're more willing to take them on.

There are also other healthy self-functions that the Buddha talks about but the psychologists don't. The primary one is shame. Psychologists seem to have a real thing about how bad shame is for you, but the Buddha points out that shame can be healthy. When you think about people you respect and you realize that your behavior is beneath you, that they would think less of you for engaging in that kind of behaviour: That's a healthy sense of self. In other

words, that's a sense of shame that comes from high self-esteem rather than low self-esteem. It's healthy.

So these are ways in which a healthy sense of self is an important part of the path.

Now, even though the self as you experience it is kind of activity, the Buddha never goes into the issue of whether there really is or really is not a self behind that activity. Because if you try to answer that question, either way you're going to get involved in wrong view. But he does focus you on the activity. And as I said, he doesn't just leave it there, saying, "Well, when you see your sense of self as a process, that's the end of the problem because you realize that you have nothing solid to hold on to." Actually, people can hold onto processes just as easily as they can hold on to solid things. They can cling to unskillful processes just as easily as they can cling to unskillful things. The Buddha simply takes the issue of self into the area of karma. In other words, you look at it as a kind of karma. And as he said, the question always there in the context of karma is: When is it skillful, when is it not? And you'll find that your sense of self will change as you progress on the path.

Basically, what you want to do eventually is get it out of the way. Get the whole question out of the way. The Buddha has you focus on activities as skillful or not. As long as there remains something to develop in the mind and something to abandon in the mind, you're going to need to a sense of self to motivate yourself and to get a clear sense of what needs to be done. It's only when you've brought the path almost to completion that you realize that the only attachment remaining is that sense of self—the self that's directing things—and you see it simply as one more activity: things arising things passing away. And even when they're skillful, those things are stressful.

So you're looking at them not in terms of self or not self. You're looking at them more in terms of the four noble truths. And at this point, as Ajaan Mun says, the four noble truths collapse into one: Whatever arises is stressful, and what do you do with it? You develop dispassion for it and let it go. That's it. At that point, you're not even thinking in terms of whether your self exists or doesn't exist. In fact, you're not even thinking in terms of existing or non-existing. As the Buddha explains, when you see things arising in the senses, the idea of non-existence just doesn't occur to you. You see things passing away, the idea of existence doesn't occur to you.

So the question of whether a self exists or not wouldn't occur to you, either. Those terms just get put out of the way—either because you consciously put them out of the way or simply because they just don't occur to you. The result is the same either way. You see that an action is unskillful and stressful, you let it go. Even if you see that it's skillful, it's stressful. You let it go. And the issue of self or not self disappears.

Years back there was a controversy in Thailand. There was a Buddhist sect that claimed that nibbana was your true self. And a lot of Buddhist scholars came out en masse and said “No! No! No! Nibbana is not self.” Someone then asked Ajaan Maha Boowa whether nibbana was self or not self, and he replied, “Nibbana is nibbana.” Then he explained not self as a tool, self as a tool. You use the tools until they’ve done their work and then you put them down. So at that point, the whole issue of self and not self existing and not existing doesn’t really occur to the mind.

Before you reach that point, though, you just can’t drop your sense of self because someone says it’s a logical fallacy or just because it’s ephemeral. After all, we need to feed. And if we don’t admit that we have a sense of self operating behind our quest to feed, then it just disappears behind the scenes and we can never do anything about it. The purpose of the path is to train the mind so that it feeds in better and better ways until finally it doesn’t need to feed anymore. It finds something that doesn’t require any sustenance. At that point, your sense of who you are doing all this is also unnecessary, and you put it aside.

But for the time being, we have to focus on: What are the skillful ways of selfing? What are the skillful ways of acting? We’re working on a skill, and learning how to be skillful in choosing who in this committee of your mind you identify with and who you don’t, is going to make a huge difference. So remember, the issue is not what you are, it’s what are you doing? And are you doing it well? What are you feeding on? What are your feeding habits? Can you learn to feed in a more skillful way?

When you pursue those questions, you find that they lead to something really good. If you simply say, “Well, my self is very impermanent so I’ll just let go of any assumption of self,” all the feeding goes underground, where you can’t see it. And you end up just kind of floating around.

So choose your questions well. Choose the questions that lead you to develop skills, the skills of the path, and you’ll find they’ll reward you. Their answers will reward you many times over.