

Not-self as a Raft

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A couple of years back, I was looking at some short introductions to Buddhism and I was struck by a pattern that was common to many of them. They start out by saying that Buddhism is a religion of self-reliance. You don't rely on a god. You don't rely on any outside power. You do the practice yourself. But then toward the end of the guide, they would say one of the teachings is that there is no self. And you wonder why people reading those guides would be interested to read any further.

The first statement is true. We are here relying on ourselves. You're sitting here meditating. Nobody else is doing the meditating for you, and it's not simply happening on its own. You have to make the decision that you're going to do this and you're going to benefit from it.

But as for the statement the Buddha taught that there is no self, that's not true at all. He never said anything like that. In fact, he said that even the question of whether there is a self or is not a self was one to be put aside, because if you answered it either way, yes or no, you'd get entangled in what he called a thicket of views, and it would get in the way of looking at things in terms of the four noble truths, which are a definition of right view—the right view that helps lead to the end of suffering.

So what is this teaching on not-self? Well, look back at those four noble truths. The first truth, suffering, is defined as clinging-aggregates. There are five of them altogether: form, which is your sense of the body; feelings of pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain; perceptions, the labels that you put on things; thought fabrications, the way you put thoughts together; and consciousness, which is aware of all these things along with itself. These are all activities and we cling to them. That's what the suffering is: the act of clinging. We cling either because we find that these aggregates give rise to sensual pleasure as we engage in these activities; or we cling to certain ways of doing things, saying that this has to be this way is and that has to be that way. We're almost ritualistic or obsessive in some of our ideas about how things should be done. We also cling to our views and we cling to doctrines of the self.

Now these are all activities. It's good to remember that. Your sense of self is also an activity, and the question is: How skillful is it? To what extent does it lead to suffering and to what extent does it actually help put an end to suffering? To answer that question, you have to look more carefully at the process of what the

Buddha calls “I-making” and “my-making.” It’s a kind of fabrication. It comes under the aggregate of fabrication. It’s also a perception. You slap a label of who you are, either on your body or something related to the body. As the Buddha said, it can be either you identify with the body itself or you identify that you are in the body or that the body’s in you, or that the body belongs to you: four ways of identifying yourself around the body. And you can define yourself around any of the other aggregates in the same four ways. And all of those ways are suffering—the first noble truth.

There’s a duty with regard to each of the four noble truths, and the duty with regard to suffering is to comprehend it, i.e., to develop dispassion for it. The duty with regard to the cause is to abandon it. The cessation of suffering is to be realized and the path is to be developed.

Now, it’s in the developing of the path that you actually use a sense of self, a healthy sense of self. The Buddha talks about being responsible. You have to be your own mainstay. And you have to be the person who judges your actions. And you have to have a sense that you’re able to do this. The technical term here in Pali is *mana*, or conceit. But it’s not conceited in the way we think of it in English. It’s simply the idea, “I’m good enough to do something,” or “I’m not good enough to do something.” And in this case, you know ultimately that we’ll have to go beyond either good enough or not good enough, but before we get to that point we do need to have the sense that we are good enough, capable enough, to develop the path.

There’s a passage where Venerable Ananda expresses it this way. He says, “You think about other people who’ve gained awakening. They can do it. Why can’t I? They’re human beings. I’m a human being. Why can’t I do what they can do?” You might call that the self as the producer or the self as the provider.

Then there’s the self as a consumer, the one who’s going to benefit from following the path. The Buddha mentions this sense of self many, many times. There’s even a passage where he says, “Learn how to let of whatever’s not yours, and that’ll be for your long-term welfare and happiness.” You’re doing this so that you’ll benefit from it.

There are times, he also says, when the practice gets difficult. And one of the ways of keeping yourself on course is to remind yourself that you started out on this path because you wanted to put an end to suffering. And if you stop practicing this path, you’re closing off the way to the end of your suffering. If you did that, would you love yourself? Do you care for yourself? The Buddha calls this line of thinking the self as a governing principle. It’s the self as the consumer, the one who’s going to benefit from sticking with the practice.

So there are parts of the path where you do need to have a good, healthy sense of self that's competent, responsible, taking the long-term view, which is why the idea of "there is no self" would be actually counterproductive on the path. There are many perceptions that the Buddha has you use in a strategic way that he himself eventually put aside, and that you'll eventually have to put aside. But the idea that there is no self doesn't have any strategic use.

Now, the perception of not-self comes in handy when you decide that you don't want to identify with something. This perception is not something foreign to us. It's a perception we've used many times in the past. You think of doing a particular action, but you say to yourself, "No, that's beneath me." That's not-self. Or you think of a possible course of action and you realize it wouldn't be worth it. So you say, "Nope, I'm not going to go there." Not-self.

The problem is that we get pretty random in our application of self and not-self. We identify as "self" things that are actually not in our own best interest. And we say "not-self" to things that *are* in our best interest. So the Buddha wants us to be a little more systematic in applying these perceptions, using them with an eye to long-term happiness.

For example: Right now as you're practicing concentration, you're the one doing it. You're the one who's going to benefit. Any thoughts that come up that are not related to your concentration, that would destroy your concentration, you can label as not-self, remembering that both "self" and "not-self" are perceptions. You want to learn how to use them well, so that you're not just clinging to them, but you're actually turning them into a path.

So we're not here to decide whether or not there is a self or there is no self. We're here to learn how to use these functions of the mind, these perceptions, in a skillful way.

Now, there will come a point at the end of the path where you've developed the path as far as it can go and you're going to have to let it go. That's when you apply the perception of not-self to everything related to the path. Even your concentration and your discernment: You've got to let those go at that point. But it's not the case that you let them go and they're gone. It's simply that you're no longer clinging to them. Even your first perception of the deathless, the Buddha said, you have to label as not-self. Otherwise, you cling to it and that gets in the way of full awakening.

But as for the awakening itself, that's something that lies outside the aggregates. There's no perception in there, so perceptions of self wouldn't apply; perceptions of not-self wouldn't apply. Fabrications of self or not-self don't apply. Ajaan Maha Boowa has a nice comment on this. Years back, there was a

controversy in the Thai newspapers. A sect north of Bangkok started advertising, saying that nirvana is your true self. And there was a huge uproar. It even got into the newspapers. Can you imagine, *The New York Times*, *The Daily News*, running articles on the question, “Is nirvana self? Is nirvana not-self?” At any rate, someone took the question to Ajaan Maha Boowa. And his answer was, “Nibbana is nibbana.” He said that if you label it as self or not-self, you’re—in his terms—putting shit all over something that’s really pure. There’s no sense of self there, but even the perception of not-self, that’s part of the path. It’s not part of the attainment. He said it’s like a stairway going up to a house. You use perceptions of self and not-self as the stairway. But then you have to let go of the stairway if you’re going to get into the house.

So we’re not here to prove whether or not there is a self. We’re not here even to focus on the question of whether this is or is not a self. We’re focused on the question of “Why is there suffering? What am I doing that’s causing suffering? What can I do to stop?” because this is the big problem in life. We’re constantly acting, constantly making choices, all for the purpose of happiness, but so many times those choices lead to suffering.

What are we doing wrong? That’s where we should focus our attention. And then we use these perceptions of self and not-self as they’re helpful in trying to solve that problem. When the problem is solved, it’s the ultimate happiness. It’s not a happiness that’s a feeling. The Buddha simply says it’s outside of the aggregates. It’s an awareness outside of the aggregates. And as for who’s there, the Buddha wouldn’t answer. He said when the arahant dies, you can’t say that he or she exists or doesn’t exist or both or neither. Ajaan Suwat had a nice way of putting it. He said that when you gain the ultimate happiness, you don’t really care if there’s a self or not. It’s not an issue there. The happiness itself is totally sufficient.

So learn to use these perceptions well and look at your sense of self as an action. It’s a type of karma. And then the question is: When is it skillful and when is it not? And one of the things you discover as you develop more of the skills of the path is that your sense of your self will change. This is a truth that applies to all skills. If you get really good at playing the piano, your sense of who you are is going to change as you get really good at that. As you get really good as a cook, or really good at any skill, you’re going to become a different person. Your sense of what you can do will change.

So here’s a skill you can develop. It enables you to put an end to suffering. Sometimes the path looks daunting. You say, “How can I possibly do that?” Well, if you follow the path, it’ll turn you into the kind of person who can. And it’ll

open up to a dimension where you don't need perceptions of self or not-self. That's what these perceptions are for: They're strategies we use for the sake of happiness. All too often, we misuse them. The Buddha's teaching us to use them more systematically, more skillfully. And then when the happiness is obtained, you can put them aside.

An image that's useful, and common in the forest tradition, is that you're making a piece of furniture: a table or a chest of drawers. While you're working on chest, you have to hold onto the tools, take good care of the tools. But when the chest is done, you can put the tools down. They've served their purpose, and you can enjoy what you've made. The only difference here is that nirvana is not made. It's discovered. So in this case, you could say that these tools—or these vehicles you might call them—have delivered you to a good place. This is why the Buddha uses the images of the relay chariots and of the raft. The raft takes you across the river. Once you've reached the other side, you don't have to carry the raft around. You don't have to be weighed down by it. And you're free to roam the other side. The Buddha discusses the path. He describes the path in a lot of detail. But then he says of the arahants, once they've gained awakening, that their path can't be traced—like the path of birds through the sky.