

## *The Right Piece in the Right Puzzle*

*January 4, 2022*

We live life with lots of maps in our heads: maps to the physical world, maps to human society, maps to our family, our work, maps to our place in the larger scheme of the universe. A lot of our maps have missing pieces.

They're like puzzles we've pieced together. Some of these maps we've gotten from other people. They'll give us a sketch with some big gaping holes. Then there are the maps we put together ourselves, as we find that one piece that fits to another piece seems to make sense. All these maps serve a purpose.

Now, sometimes we're given a map that doesn't serve our purposes at all; it serves the purposes of the people who gave the map. With some of the maps we put together ourselves, after a while we realize they're not useful anymore. It's like a map to a treasure that, when we've found the treasure, we realized it wasn't a treasure at all—just bits of glass and shiny things, but nothing really of any value.

So we put those maps aside. Maybe we put them up on the wall to look back and say, "That's how I used to believe things, but thank goodness I don't believe those insane things anymore." Even when those maps still have missing pieces—in other words, questions about our place in the world, our place in work, in whatever— if it's a map we no longer have any interest in, we're not interested in finding the missing pieces. They don't matter anymore because we have other maps that we're still trying to put together related to our current concerns. Those are the more important ones. If they have any missing pieces, we want to find them.

When we come to the Dhamma, it's as if the Buddha gives us another map: a map to a world in which the end of suffering is possible. In some cases, the map comes with the pieces put together, but there seem to be other pieces that are missing. Or there are pieces in a pile there on the table, and we're trying to figure out where the pieces fit in. But all too often, we find a piece and it reminds us of another map we have in our minds. If we're not really clear about the Buddha's map, we find some of the pieces from his map, but we think that they're actually pieces that fit into other maps we already have.

An example is the teaching on not-self: the *anatta* piece in his map. It seems to fit in the

maps that ask questions like: *Who am I? Do I have a self? Do I have anything of permanent or lasting value here? Am I actually an agent, or are powers operating up through me? Do I really exist? Do I don't exist?* Those may be missing pieces in some of our preexisting maps.

Or there's the map where the issues of ego come up. *Is the ego a good thing? Is the ego a bad thing?* In the case of the first map, the Buddha's pieces seem to say, *There is no self, there's nobody there.* In the case of the second one, they seem to be saying, *The ego is a bad thing. You shouldn't have an ego.*

So you jam the new piece into your old map, even though it doesn't quite fit. Then we take that map and we look at the remainder of the Buddha's map that we have, and the two maps don't seem to fit together. After all, when the Buddha talks about action—the importance of karma—the question becomes, *Well, if there is no self, who's doing the karma? Who's going to receive the karma?* The Buddha talks about rebirth. *Well, who's going to get reborn?*

He talks about a path of action that you have to follow. *Well, if your ego is a bad thing, can you follow it? You need to have some self-confidence if you're going to follow anything, if you're going to be able to manage this path.*

All this confusion comes from the fact that we're trying to fit his *anatta* piece into maps where it doesn't belong.

What we need to do is to get a clear sense of what his map is and see how that piece fits in there, because he insists that in his map the question, or the hole in the map that would correspond to the question asking, *What is my identity? Who am I? Do I exist? Do I not exist?*—is not a missing piece in his map.

In other words, that's not the question that the *anatta* teaching was meant to answer. The same about the question about the ego, whether the ego is good or bad. *Anatta* was not meant to answer that question, either.

So what questions *was* it meant to answer? Well, think about the Buddha's statement about how two of his teachings are categorical—in other words, true and beneficial across the board. One is that skillful actions should be developed and unskillful ones should be abandoned. The other one is basically a subtler working out of that principle into the four noble truths: the truth of suffering, which is clinging; the truth of the origination of suffering, which is craving; the truth of the cessation of suffering, which is dispassion for that craving.

And then there's the truth of the path of practice that leads to the cessation of suffering, which is the noble eightfold path.

In that sense, the craving is the unskillful action that should be abandoned, and the noble eightfold path is the skillful action that should be developed.

Then, based on that, the question that's the starting point for wisdom or discernment is: What is skillful, what is unskillful? The Buddha further refines that: *What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? And, what when I do it will lead to my long-term harm and suffering?* Those are the questions that the anatta teaching is meant to answer. This means that the Buddha looks at our sense of self, not so much in terms of what it *is*, but as an *action*. It's something we do. We have a perception of self, an assumption of self, and the question then becomes, *When is that a skillful action, and when is it an unskillful action?*

There are stages in the path where the perception of self is skillful. There are versions of your self that are skillful. There's the self that's the governing principle. When you've been practicing for a while and you start getting discouraged and you think of giving up, he has you reflect: "I came to this path because I wanted to put an end to suffering." That's what this map is all about. "Now that I'm thinking of giving up, do I not care about the end of suffering? I came because I love myself. Do I not love myself?" That's a skillful sense of self.

There's also a skillful use for conceit, this is where your ego comes in. You think about how other people have found awakening: "They're human beings, I'm a human being. If they can do it, why can't I?"

So you've got the sense of self who will enjoy the results of the path. You've got the sense of self that feels competent to do the path. Those are some of our most basic senses of self—the provider and the consumer—regardless of what our desire is. In this case, the desire is a good one. It's to be encouraged, that we want the end of suffering.

Then there's a third sense of self, which you might call the reflective self, which comes into play when you have a desire, and you start acting on that desire. With the reflective self, you look at what you're doing to see how well it's working. That's the self that steps back from other senses of self, steps back from other activities to judge them properly, and that, too, is to be encouraged on the path. You need that. As the Buddha said, the Dhamma comes from being committed to the path and then reflecting on what you're doing. Then, based on that reflection, you make further refinements.

These senses of self are important. They're necessary for the path. So it's perfectly okay to have a sense of self as you get started. The Buddha expresses this when he's talking to his son. As he told his son, "Before you act, ask yourself, 'This action that I plan to do, will it lead to harm to myself or to anyone else?' If you foresee any harm, you don't do it. While you're doing it, you ask yourself, 'This action that I'm doing, is it leading to harm to myself or anyone else?' If it is, stop. If not, continue. Then when you're done, ask yourself, 'This action that I did, did it lead to harm?' If it did, make up your mind not to repeat the action. Go talk it over with someone who you trust, to get some idea of how you can avoid that mistake in the future. If you didn't harm anybody, then you take joy in that fact that you're progressing on the path. Then you continue practicing, growing in the path."

There's an *I* in there: This action that *I* am planning to do, *I* am doing, *I* did. You're taking responsibility for your actions, which is a necessary part of the path. So there are cases where the sense of self is a skillful thing: a sense of healthy ego, a sense of competence. You know you're going to benefit from these actions. You take care in your actions because you realize your actions are important. That kind of ego is a good ego.

As the path gets more and more refined, you learn on the one hand to dis-identify with any senses of self that would pull you off the path. For example, with the practice of virtue, when you realize that following the precepts might sometimes be bad for your health or your wealth, you have to make some sacrifices there to maintain your precepts. Or if your relatives come and ask you to lie for their sake, you have to say No. That's when you have to realize the sense of self that would hold on to the health or the wealth or the relatives at that point is unhealthy. That sense of self you've got to drop.

The same with your meditation: There may be lots of you's in the mind that want to do something else besides meditate, and you have to say No to them. Any sense of self like that is something you also have to drop.

There will come a point where the only thing you're holding on to is the path. You have to remember, in the context of the four noble truths, that the path is to be developed. But the path is fabricated. If you're going to let go of all fabrications, you're ultimately going to have to let go of the path, too.

This is where the teaching on not-self really moves into high gear. You look, say, at your concentration, and you realize that it's made out of the aggregates. The form is the form of the breath, the form of the body as you're aware of the whole body. The feeling is the feeling of

pleasure. Perception is the mental image that holds you with the breath. Fabrication consists of your directed thought and evaluation as you adjust the breath to fit with the mind, adjust the mind to fit with the breath, and then keep them there together. Then there's consciousness, which is aware of all these things. You have to see that these things, too, once you've mastered the concentration, are stressful, and inconstant—and they're based on craving.

So you have to let go of the craving even for the concentration. Even for your discernment: You have to let go of that craving too. That's when you apply not-self as a perception all around. But again, as the Buddha said, you do this for your long-term welfare and happiness, because the happiness that comes, the cessation of suffering that comes when you've totally let go like that, is the ultimate happiness, totally free from suffering.

That's where the not-self teaching fits in, in the areas where you have to let go of things that would pull you away from the path, and ultimately when you have to let go of the path itself. You see the path as not-self so that you can let go of it: virtue, concentration, and discernment. Everything.

This is why it's a not-self teaching. It's not a no-self teaching or an ego-is-bad teaching, because the question of whether there is or is not a self, the Buddha said, gets you involved in a thicket of views that would pull you away from the path, and would foster the kinds of craving that would keep you off the path.

So you learn how to put this piece of the puzzle in the right puzzle, in the right place. Then it all makes sense. And it not only makes sense, it's really useful and beneficial. To teach that there is no self is not beneficial at all, because you might start thinking, "Well, who cares?" Or, "If I do anything unskillful, who's going to be receiving the results of that unskillful action, if there's nobody there?"

"The ego is bad, the ego is good": Those teachings have their pitfalls as well. But when you learn to see the sense of self as something that you do—and that there are skillful and unskillful ways of doing it—then the question simply becomes, "Which kinds of ways are skillful, which ways are unskillful?"

There may still be a missing set of pieces in your Dhamma puzzle, but at least you've got the right puzzle, and have a good idea of what kind of pieces would actually fit so you can use that puzzle—the map portrayed in the puzzle—for its purpose, which is to see how you can get to the end of suffering: that it is something possible, and this is how you do it.