

Not Resolved on Self

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One of the words that the Buddha uses to talk about our relationship to ourselves is that we're "resolved" on our self. We can either be enthusiastically resolved, in the sense that we really like our self—attached to our wants, attached to our thoughts, attached to however we identify ourselves—or we can be resolved in a negative way: We look at ourselves, we don't like our habits, we don't like the way we interact with the world. We see how we create a lot of trouble. We're negatively resolved on ourselves. We'd like to see our sense of self abolished.

If you come to the practice of the Dhamma with that kind of resolve, either negative or positive, the issue of self becomes a really big deal. When we hear about the teachings on not-self, if you're already positively attached to yourself, it's going to sound very negative. If you're already negatively attached to yourself, it's going to encourage you in your negativity—neither of which is healthy, neither of which is going to put an end to the cravings that lead to becoming.

We need to be focused on something else, resolved on something else. Take the issue of self and put it aside. Find something else to become the center of your attention. This is where the Buddha raises the issue of skillful and unskillful actions. It's one of his categorical teachings—the teachings that he says are true across the board, the ones that he wants to make the center of your attention: How can you develop skillful qualities and how can you abandon unskillful qualities? This way, your attention gets focused on the skill and the qualities of mind that you bring to the skill. As you practice virtue, as you practice concentration, as you practice discernment, you want to develop each of these practices into a skill. Issues of self can get pushed off to the side.

This is why when the Buddha described his own awakening, he didn't describe it as awakening to the three characteristics. It was awakening to the four noble truths. The four noble truths are all about skill: the skill of abandoning craving, the skill of developing the path.

The same with his first listeners, the five monks: His first teaching to them was the four noble truths about skillful action, about how to abandon craving and to develop the factors of the path. He didn't even mention to them the topic of not-self until after they'd gained the Dhamma eye at stream entry.

Sometimes we're told that stream-entry is when you see that there is no self, but if that were the case, why would he have taught them not-self afterwards? Stream entry is when you see the deathless. You see the deathless by getting more

and more sensitive to how you fabricate your experience until you begin to reflect on what it means to fabricate an experience. In other words, you look at the question of skillful and unskillful actions until that becomes your focus. That's where you're resolved. Right resolve is not resolved on deconstructing your sense of self. It's resolved on renunciation, non-ill will, harmlessness.

Renunciation isn't just giving up things. It means looking for your happiness in a way that's not involved in sensuality. That requires that you work on the skills of concentration. The same with being resolved on non-ill will. You want to make sure that you have goodwill for yourself, goodwill for others. Or if you can't muster goodwill, work on equanimity. Being resolved on harmlessness means finding your happiness in ways that don't cause long-term harm to anybody. This relates to the practice of virtue.

So right resolve is basically taking the insights that come from the four noble truths and applying them to your practice of virtue, concentration, and the discernment that sees that goodwill is the way to go—in other words, really working on developing goodwill, because you see that the skillfulness of your actions depends on goodwill for all, and the skillfulness of your actions is what will make the difference between happiness and suffering.

So you focus on that issue. That becomes central. You try to develop the qualities that will make that focus as solid as possible. It's as if you're doing your own Copernican revolution. Copernicus took the center of the universe and moved it from the Earth to the Sun, which solved a lot of problems in understanding the movement of the planets. Of course, others ultimately found that there's no center to the universe at all. But the moving of the center was the first step in the right direction. Here you want to make that the first step inside, by moving your focus of awareness, your resolves, away from your sense of self and centering them on the question of really becoming skillful in how you approach your thoughts, how you approach your words, how you approach your deeds.

The texts often talk about three qualities that make this resolve on skillfulness really solid. You're ardent, heedful, resolute. Heedful, in the sense that you see how important it is to act in skillful ways—that if your actions are unskillful, there's going to be suffering. If you're more skillful, you can avoid a lot of unnecessary suffering. You want to take that principle to heart.

And it should inspire you to be ardent. This is basically related to right effort: ardent in abandoning what's unskillful, ardent in preventing it from arising if you can; ardent in giving rise to skillful qualities, and ardent in developing them as far as you can take them.

Then you're resolute as you stick with this all the time.

In Ajaan Fuang's terms, you make your practice timeless. The question as you go through the day always is, "What's the skillful thing to do now?" You learn to see that question as having a lot of promise. After all, often the skillful thing to do is to get the mind still, settled down, on familiar terms with your breath, on familiar terms with your body as you feel it from within. That's a good place to be. Then you try to maintain that sense of center regardless of what's going on around you.

So you move the resolve from being centered on you—who you are or what you are—to the question of skill in your thoughts, words, and deeds. As things get really skillful in your concentration and as your discernment gets sharper, you begin to think in ways that can help take apart the things that distract you.

Here again we have that five-step program that the Buddha set out. You're looking for things that are disturbing the mind and you see where they're originating. That's the first step. The second step is seeing how they cease, how they pass away when the origination ceases. See the connections of cause and effect. You see they're just events happening. Why is it that you're so taken with them? Why is it that you build a sense of self and a sense of the world around them? What's the allure?

That's the third step, seeing the allure. When you can see the allure, then you try to compare that with the drawbacks. That's the fourth step, which leads to the fifth step: You gain a sense of dispassion, now that you can begin to take apart these things that are disturbing the mind. You learn to let go.

Now, while you're doing this, there will be a sense of self hovering around what you're doing. After all, you see that you are capable of doing this and you will benefit from doing this. And there's the "you" who's watching over the whole process to make it as skillful as possible.

These are your three basic types of self: producer, consumer, and commentator. They're all strategies for happiness. The problem is in the past that they were awkward and often would make bad choices. But as you start making better and better choices by sticking with the Buddha's program, those strategies become more skillful. And as you start taking apart your attachment to the activities that disturb the mind—that get in the way of the happiness of your concentration, get in the way of the happiness of your discernment—you begin to reflect: These senses of self that have been lurking around your strategies, they're made out of the same things. They're made out of feelings, perceptions, thought-constructs, the sense of the form of the body, your consciousness.

So when you start taking apart the things that disturb you, you find that it begins to have an effect on what goes into making up your sense of self: who you

are, who's doing the practice. It's like an avalanche as the unskillful things get sloughed off. The avalanche begins to eat into your sense of self. You realize that you'd be better off letting go of some of the old ways you have of holding on.

This is what you've been actually learning all the way along, simply that the focus was not on the self. You're not resolved on the self, you're resolved on being skillful. But the practice of getting more skillful begins to eat into the unskillful parts of yourself, as you see that you've been engaged in I-making and my-making around these things. So you allow yourself to let go of a lot of things that otherwise you might not have been able to let go of because they were attached to a sense of self. Now you see them in the light of the question of what's skillful to do, what's not skillful to do, what should be developed, what should be abandoned.

That's how you let go of craving for becoming and craving for non-becoming: by taking a middle approach, i.e., changing the framework of the questions. You want to be resolved on right resolve, not resolved on yourself. Being resolved on right resolve will get you to a place where you're free from the limitations of all your I-making and my-making in the past.

The Buddha gives the image of a dog tied to a leash, and the leash is tied to a post. No matter how much the dog runs around, it's just going to run around and around that post. In the same way, you begin to realize that everything you've done has been running around form, feeling, perceptions, thought-constructs, and consciousness. No matter how much variety there's been in your past lives or in this life or in potential future lives, it's going to be made of these same five things. So you learn how to let go of them in one area. In other words, the thoughts that would pull you into doing unskillful things, the urges that would pull you into doing unskillful things. When you start letting those go, you find that you let go of a lot of things that go a lot deeper.

So we resolve the issue of self, not by focusing on self, but by focusing on the question of what's skillful and what's not, trying to develop those qualities of being heedful, ardent, resolute in our actions. Let that become the center of your attention, and the issue of self and not-self will get settled on its own. Keep your focus, keep your center, at the right spot. This is strategic. It's only by being strategic that you can take care of issues like this and not get sucked into their terms. That's the way you get free.