

The Not-self Strategy

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As the Buddha once said, the teaching he most frequently gave to his students was this: All fabrications are inconstant; all phenomena are not-self (*anatta*) (MN 35). Many people have interpreted this second statement as meaning that there is no self. Others, however, have noticed statements in the Pali Canon—our earliest extant record of the Buddha’s teachings—that refer to the idea of self in a positive manner, as when the Buddha stated that the self is its own mainstay (Dhp 160) or when he encouraged a group of young men—who were searching for a woman who had stolen their belongings—to search for the self instead (Mv.I.14.4). From these statements, these readers conclude that the statement, “All phenomena are not-self,” is meant to clear away attachment to a false view of self so that an experience of the true self can be attained.

The debate between these two positions has lasted for millennia, with each side able to cite additional passages from the Canon to prove the other side wrong. Even now, both sides continue to find adherents attracted to their arguments, but neither side has had the final word.

A common way of trying to resolve this impasse has been to say that both sides are right but on different levels of truth. One version of this resolution states that there is a self on the conventional level of truth, but no self on the ultimate level. An alternate version of the resolution, however, switches the levels around: The conventional self does not exist, whereas a higher level of self on the ultimate level of truth does. And so the impasse remains.

All of these positions, however, gloss over the fact that the one time the Buddha was asked point-blank about whether the self does or doesn’t exist, he remained silent. The person who asked him the question, Vacchagotta the wanderer, didn’t bother to ask the Buddha to explain his silence. He simply got up from his seat and left.

However, when Ven. Ananda then asked the Buddha why he didn’t answer the question, the Buddha gave four reasons—two for each of the two alternatives—as to why it would have been unskillful to respond to Vacchagotta’s question by saying either that the self exists or does not exist. (1) To state that there is a self would be to side with the wrong view of eternalism. (2) To state that there is no self would be to side with the wrong view of annihilationism. (3) To state that there is a self would not be in keeping with the arising of knowledge that all phenomena are not-self. (4) To tell Vacchagotta that there is no self would have left him even more bewildered than he already was.

If we take the Buddha’s reasons here at face value, they indicate that both sides of the debate over the existence or non-existence of the self, instead of being partially right, are totally wrong. Their mistake lies in the point they have in common: the assumption that the Buddha’s teachings start with the question of the metaphysical status of the self, i.e., whether or not it exists.

That, of course, is if we take the Buddha’s reasons for his silence at face value. The partisans who want to maintain the claim that the Buddha took a position on the existence of the self, however, have tended to ignore the first three reasons

for his silence in the face of the question and to focus exclusive attention on the fourth. If someone else more spiritually mature than Vacchagotta had asked the question, they say, the Buddha would have revealed his true position.

However, none of the first three reasons apply specifically to Vacchagotta's reaction to the Buddha's possible answer.

The purpose of this essay is to show that these reasons should be accepted as indicating that the Buddha refused consistently to take a stand on whether there is or isn't a self, and that his silence on this issue is important. To establish these points, it looks at the Buddha's silence in three main contexts:

- (1) the purpose and range of his teachings;
- (2) the metaphysical assumptions that make that purpose possible; and
- (3) his pedagogical strategy in trying to achieve that purpose.

Once we understand these contexts, we can come to a better understanding not only of the Buddha's silence, but also of:

- (4) why views concerning the existence or non-existence of the self do not serve the purpose of the Buddha's teachings;
- (5) why perceptions of "self" and "not-self" nevertheless can act as strategies to help serve that purpose;
- (6) in particular, what purpose is served by the perception, "All phenomena are not-self"; and
- (7) why all these perceptions are no longer needed and no longer apply once they have succeeded in serving the Buddha's main purpose in teaching.

In other words, the purpose of this essay is to show that the Buddha's teachings on self and not-self are strategies for helping his students attain the goal of the teaching, and that neither apply once the goal is attained.

1. The purpose & range of the teachings

All of the Buddha's teachings have to be understood in light of their primary purpose, which is to solve a single problem: the problem of *dukkha* (stress, suffering). Other issues are treated only as they relate to solving this problem. Any issues that are irrelevant to this problem—or would interfere with its solution—lie outside of the range of what he was willing to address.

'Both formerly and now, Anuradha, it's only stress that I describe, and the cessation of stress.'

— SN 22:86

"The cessation of stress," here, does not refer to the simple passing away of individual instances of stress, which happens all the time. Instead, it refers to the total ending of stress, an attainment that can be reached only through a path of practice aimed at fostering dispassion for the origination or cause of stress.

These facts shape the Buddha's central teaching, the four noble truths: stress, its origination, its cessation, and the path of practice leading to its cessation.

2. The metaphysical assumptions of the four noble truths

From these four truths, the metaphysical assumptions underlying the Buddha's teachings as a whole can be detected. And they are not hard to find, for they're revealed by the way the truths are interrelated. The first two noble truths state that stress is caused by the mental action of craving and clinging. The last two truths state that the cessation of stress can be reached by means of the actions that make up the path to its cessation. The way these truths are paired shows that the Buddha's basic metaphysical assumptions concern action (*kamma*): that action is real, that it's the result of choice, that it has consequences, and that those consequences can lead either to continued stress or to its end.

Given these assumptions, it makes sense to look at perceptions of self and not-self as types of *kamma*, and to evaluate them as to whether they are actions causing stress or leading to its end. And that is exactly what the Buddha does. He points to the act of creating a sense of self-identity—in his terms, “I-making” and “my-making” (*ahankara, mamankara*—see AN 3:33)—as a major cause of stress. The not-self teaching is also an action, a perception that is one of many actions employed as part of the path to the ending of stress by bringing that cause to an end. However, the Buddha also found that certain types of self-identity were useful in getting his students started on the path and to motivate them to stay on course until the skills of the path were so mature that the perception of self was no longer needed. The perception of not-self would then be used to undercut any clinging to any possible sense of self, thus bringing about full awakening. Because one of the descriptions of awakening is that it's the “end of action” (SN 35:145; AN 4:237; AN 6:63), every act of perception—including perception of self and not-self—would be put aside when awakening is reached.

This means that in the Buddha's teachings about the path, both “self” and “not-self” are used, not as metaphysical tenets, but as strategies: perceptions that are meant to serve a particular purpose along the way and to be put aside when no longer needed.

In fact, the entire path to the end of stress is a set of eight strategies—the factors that give the path its name as an eightfold path: right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. All of these factors are skills to be developed and mastered: strategies devoted to a skillful purpose that are then dropped when that purpose is achieved.

Right view—the proper focus and framework for understanding stress and its cessation—is one of these strategies. And it's under this path factor that views about self and not-self function in helping to bring stress to an end. This means that the teachings on self and not-self are answers, not to the question of whether or not there is a self, but to the question that the Buddha said lies at the beginning of the discernment leading to right view: “What, when done by me, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” (MN 135) You find long-term welfare and happiness by learning to use perceptions of self and not-self in a skillful way.

As for the goal, the cessation of stress, the Canon states that although it may be experienced, it lies beyond the range of description, and so any descriptions of self or not-self would not apply. Because it is the end of action, it is devoid of all

strategies. Concepts of self and not-self can be dropped not only because they are inadequate to describe the goal, but also because once the goal is attained they have no function to serve.

3. The Buddha's teaching strategy

To help his listeners master right view as a means to that goal, the Buddha followed a pedagogical strategy of answering only those questions that stayed on topic. In line with this policy, he divided questions into four categories based on how they should be handled to keep the listener properly focused with the correct framework in mind (AN 4:42). The first category covers questions deserving a categorical answer, i.e., an answer true across the board. The second category covers those deserving an analytical answer, one in which he would expand or rephrase the question to show under what conditions his answers would or would not apply. The third category covers questions in which the questioner should be cross-questioned first to help clear up the question or help prepare the questioner to understand the answer. The fourth category covers questions that should be put aside because they treat issues that are off topic and would lead the questioner off course.

The most important questions deserving categorical answers are those focused on the skills of the four noble truths: comprehending stress, abandoning its cause, realizing its cessation, and developing the path of practice to its cessation.

Of these skills, the most central one is to develop the path factors that undercut the cause of stress within the mind: passion and desire for things that are bound to change. As a first step in this skill, the Buddha offered—as part of right view—different ways of categorizing the range of objects for which people feel passion and desire. A primary set of categories consists of five activities, called aggregates (*khandha*): form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness. When people cling to these activities through passion and delight, they suffer. As Ven. Sariputta, one of the Buddha's foremost disciples, explained to a group of his fellow monks:

Ven. Sariputta:

'Friends, in foreign lands there are wise nobles and brahmins, householders and contemplatives—for the people there are wise and discriminating—who will question a monk: "What is your teacher's doctrine? What does he teach?"

"Thus asked, you should answer, "Our teacher teaches the subduing of passion and desire."

"" ...passion and desire for what?"

"" ...passion and desire for form... feeling... perception... fabrications... consciousness."

"" ...seeing what danger [or: drawback] does your teacher teach the subduing of passion and desire for form... feeling... perception... fabrications... consciousness?"

“...when one is not free from passion, desire, love, thirst, fever, and craving for form, then with any change and alteration in that form, there arise sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair.” ...

[Similarly with feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness.]

“...and seeing what benefit does your teacher teach the subduing of passion and desire for form... feeling... perception... fabrications... consciousness?”

“...when a person is free from passion, desire, love, thirst, fever, and craving for form, then with any change and alteration in that form, there does not arise any sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, or despair.”

[Similarly with feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness.]

— SN 22:2

One of the main manifestations of passion and desire for these aggregates is to view them as “me” or “mine,” creating a sense of self around them.

‘There is the case where an uninstructed, run-of-the-mill person—who has no regard for noble ones, is not well-versed or disciplined in their Dhamma; who has no regard for men of integrity, is not well-versed or disciplined in their Dhamma—assumes form to be the self, or the self as possessing form, or form as in the self, or the self as in form. He is seized with the idea that ‘I am form’ or ‘Form is mine.’ As he is seized with these ideas, his form changes and alters, and he falls into sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair over its change and alteration.

[Similarly with feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness.]

— SN 22:1

These ways of building a self-identity around any of the aggregates are what the Buddha meant by the terms, “I-making” and “my-making.” Beings engage in the process of I-making and my-making because of the pleasure to be found in the aggregates.

‘Mahali, if form were exclusively stressful—followed by stress, infused with stress and not infused with pleasure—beings would not be infatuated with form. But because form is also pleasurable—followed by pleasure, infused with pleasure and not infused with stress—beings are infatuated with form. Through infatuation, they are captivated. Through captivation, they are defiled. This is the cause, this the requisite condition, for the defilement of beings. And this is how beings are defiled with cause, with requisite condition. [Similarly with the other aggregates.]’

— SN 22:60

The activities of I-making and my-making are defiling because, even though they aim at pleasure, they lead to stress—both because the act of clinging is stressful in and of itself, and because it tries to find a dependable happiness in things that are subject to change, stressful, and not totally under one’s control.

'If form were self, this form would not lend itself to dis-ease. It would be possible [to say] with regard to form, "Let my form be thus. Let my form not be thus." But precisely because form is not self, this form lends itself to dis-ease. And it is not possible [to say] with regard to form, "Let my form be thus. Let my form not be thus." [Similarly with the other aggregates.]'

— SN 22:59

'Monks, do you see any clinging in the form of a doctrine of self which, when you cling to it, there would not arise sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair?'

'No, lord.'

'...Neither do I... What do you think, monks: If a person were to gather or burn or do as he likes with the grass, twigs, branches, and leaves here in Jeta's Grove, would the thought occur to you, "It's *us* that this person is gathering, burning, or doing with as he likes"?''

'No, lord. Why is that? Because those things are not our self and do not pertain to our self.'

'Even so, monks, whatever is not yours: Let go of it. Your letting go of it will be for your long-term welfare and happiness. And what is not yours? Form is not yours... Feeling is not yours... Perception... Fabrications... Consciousness is not yours. Let go of it. Your letting go of it will be for your long-term welfare and happiness.'

— MN 22

Questions that focused on why and how to put an end to I-making and my-making were among those that the Buddha would answer categorically.

Mogharaja:

One who regards the world in what way
isn't seen by Death's King?

The Buddha:

Always mindful, Mogharaja,
regard the world as
empty,
having removed any view
in terms of self.

This way
one is above and beyond death.
One who regards the world
in this way
isn't seen by Death's King.

— Sn 5:15

In other words, the Buddha would give categorical answers to questions that regarded the activity of clinging to a sense of self as both as a choice and as a choice that could be reversed.

To help his listeners see that activity in action, and to reverse it then and there, he would often use the following strategy of cross-questioning to get them to examine their experience of the five aggregates in a way that would lead them to sense disenchantment and dispassion for the aggregates, and so to stop the processes of I-making and my-making around them. The result was that many of his listeners, on being cross-questioned in this way, would gain total release from all stress.

‘What do you think, monks—Is form constant or inconstant?’

‘Inconstant, lord.’

‘And is that which is inconstant easeful or stressful?’

‘Stressful, lord.’

‘And is it fitting to regard what is inconstant, stressful, subject to change as: “This is mine. This is my self. This is what I am”?’

‘No, lord.’

[Similarly with feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness.]

‘Thus, monks, any form whatsoever that is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: Every form is to be seen with right discernment as it has come to be: ‘This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am.’

[Similarly with feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness.]

‘Seeing thus, the instructed disciple of the noble ones grows disenchanted with form, disenchanted with feeling, disenchanted with perception, disenchanted with fabrications, disenchanted with consciousness. Disenchanted, he becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion, he is released. With release, there is the knowledge, “Released.” He discerns that “Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.”’

That is what the Blessed One said. Gratified, the group of five monks delighted in the Blessed One’s words. And while this explanation was being given, the minds of the group of five monks, through lack of clinging / sustenance, were released from effluents.

— SN 22:59

Notice, however, the conclusion to which this pattern of cross-questioning leads: that the aggregates do not deserve to be regarded as “mine,” “my self,” or “what I am.” For the purposes of leading his listeners to release, the Buddha did not ask them to come to the further conclusion that there is no self. In fact, questions as to whether there is or is not a self fall into the category of those deserving to be put aside. Questions framed in those terms, instead of aiding in the end of stress, simply act as fetters and entanglements, interfering with the path.

Here, for instance, is the record of the Buddha’s encounter with Vacchagotta:

Having taken a seat to one side, Vacchagotta the wanderer said to the Blessed One, 'Now then, Master Gotama, is there a self?' When this was said, the Blessed One was silent.

'Then is there no self?' For a second time the Blessed One was silent.

Then Vacchagotta the wanderer got up from his seat and left.

Then, not long after Vacchagotta the wanderer had left, Ven. Ananda said to the Blessed One, 'Why, sir, did the Blessed One not answer when asked a question asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer?'

'Ananda, if I, being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer if there is a self, were to answer that there is a self, that would be in company with those contemplatives and brahmans who are exponents of eternalism [i.e., the view that there is an eternal soul]. And if I, being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer if there is no self, were to answer that there is no self, that would be in company with those contemplatives and brahmans who are exponents of annihilationism [i.e., that death is annihilation]. If I, being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer if there is a self, were to answer that there is a self, would that be in keeping with the arising of knowledge that all phenomena are not-self?'

'No, lord.'

'And if I, being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer if there is no self, were to answer that there is no self, the bewildered Vacchagotta would become even more bewildered: "Does the self that I used to have now not exist?"'

— SN 44:10

As we have already noted, people who hold that the Buddha took a position one way or the other on the question of whether or not there is a self have attempted to explain away the Buddha's silence in the face of Vacchagotta's questions. They usually do so by focusing on his final statement to Ananda: Vacchagotta was already bewildered, and to say that there is no self would have left him even more bewildered. In some cases, they add the same qualification to the Buddha's first two statements to Ananda, saying that Vacchagotta would have *misunderstood* the statement that there is a self as tending toward eternalism, or the statement that there is no self as tending toward annihilationism. For example, some of these people claim that the Buddha took an analytical Yes and No position on the question—that the self exists on one level, but not on another. If he had simply answered Yes or No to Vacchagotta's questions, the latter would not have understood the subtlety of the teaching. Others claim that that to say that the self does not exist is not really annihilationism, as there is no self to be annihilated. A wiser person, all of these interpretations conclude, would not have misunderstood these points.

As proof, they focus on the qualifications that the Buddha uses to preface all four of his reasons: "If I, being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer..." This, they claim, indicates that if someone else had asked the question, the Buddha would have responded differently because the statements, "The self exists" and/or, "The self does not exist" would have meant something else to a different person.

This interpretation, though, ignores four things: (1) If the Buddha had wanted to assert to a person more spiritually advanced than Vacchagotta that there is a

self or is no self, he could have done so with Ananda. But he didn't. (2) If he had held to an analytical view on the existence of the self—such as that the self exists on one level but not on another, or that to say that the self does not exist is not an annihilationist view because there is nothing to be annihilated—he could have given either Vacchagotta or Ananda an analytical answer, explained through cross-questioning. But again, he didn't. (3) The qualification, "If I, being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer..." prefaces not only the first, second, and fourth reasons, but also the third. If it was meant to limit the reasons only to the fact that Vacchagotta asked the questions, then it would apply to the third reason as well. However, no one has ever proposed that it does, and there is no support from anywhere else in the Canon to suggest that it does. (4) Most importantly, there is another passage in the Canon in which the Buddha tells a group of his monks that the equivalent questions, "Do I exist?" and "Do I not exist?" should be put aside in all cases, regardless of who is asking them.

'Monks, there is the case where an uninstructed, run-of-the-mill person... doesn't discern what ideas are fit for attention, or what ideas are unfit for attention. This being so, he doesn't attend to ideas fit for attention, and attends (instead) to ideas unfit for attention... This is how he attends inappropriately: "Was I in the past? Was I not in the past? What was I in the past? How was I in the past? Having been what, what was I in the past? Shall I be in the future? Shall I not be in the future? What shall I be in the future? How shall I be in the future? Having been what, what shall I be in the future?" Or else he is inwardly perplexed about the immediate present: "Am I? Am I not? What am I? How am I? Where has this being come from? Where is it bound?"

'As he attends inappropriately in this way, one of six kinds of view arises in him: The view *I have a self* arises in him as true and established, or the view *I have no self*...

or the view *It is precisely because of self that I perceive self*...

or the view *It is precisely because of self that I perceive not-self*...

or the view *It is precisely because of not-self that I perceive self* arises in him as true and established,

or else he has a view like this: *This very self of mine—the knower which is sensitive here and there to the ripening of good and bad actions—is the self of mine which is constant, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change, and will endure as long as eternity.*

'This is called a thicket of views, a wilderness of views, a contortion of views, a writhing of views, a fetter of views. Bound by a fetter of views, the uninstructed run-of-the-mill person is not freed from birth, aging, and death, from sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair. He is not freed from stress, I say.

'The well-taught disciple of the noble ones... discerns what ideas are fit for attention, and what ideas are unfit for attention. This being so, he doesn't attend to ideas unfit for attention, and attends (instead) to ideas fit for attention... He attends appropriately, *This is stress... This is the origin of stress... This is the cessation of stress... This is the way leading to the cessation of*

stress. As he attends appropriately in this way, three fetters are abandoned in him: identity-view, uncertainty, and grasping at habits and practices.’

— MN 2

This passage makes many important points, but two are most relevant here. First, it disproves the interpretation that the Buddha avoided the label of annihilationism by holding that there is no self to be annihilated at death. As the passage shows, simply to ask in the present, “Do I not exist?” and to come up with the answer, “I have no self,” is just as much a fetter as to come up with the answer “I have a self” that later might be annihilated. Both positions get in the way of attending to ideas that are fit for attention.

Second, the passage shows that such questions as “Is there a self?” “Is there no self?” “Am I?” “Am I not?” “What am I?” all fall into the category of questions that should consistently be put aside, regardless of who asks them. Thus the Buddha’s first three reasons for not answering Vacchagotta’s questions hold not only in Vacchagotta’s case, but in every case where those questions or their equivalents are asked.

4. Two fetters of views

Whenever the Buddha put a question aside, there was always a reason why. The above passage from MN 2 gives the short answer to the “why” in this case: Both the view “I have a self” and the view “I have no self”—and, in fact, all attempts to answer the question, “Do I exist?”—act as fetters and entanglements that prevent the ending of stress. In the terms that Ven. Sariputta uses in SN 22:2, the act of holding to a view that there is a self or that there is no self is a form of passion or desire for the perceptions and mental fabrications that go into forming the view.

That’s the short answer. To gain a more detailed understanding of why the questions behind these views should be put aside, it’s worth looking into the first three reasons the Buddha gave for not responding to Vacchagotta’s questions in SN 44:10.

The first reason states that to say “There is a self” is to side with the wrong view of eternalism. Here it’s important to note that the Buddha is not stating that all views of an existing self are eternalistic. As we will see, he is well aware of views claiming the existence of a self that is not eternal. However, the statement, “There is a self” conforms with eternalism in that it shares the same practical drawbacks as an eternalist view. It cannot be used as part of the strategy for putting an end to stress because, in holding to this sort of view, there is a double level of attachment: to the view itself, and to the objects the view identifies as self. This is why the Buddha so frequently deconstructed the view of an existing self in order to help his listeners advance along the path.

One of his most thorough treatments of the view that there is a self is found in the Great Causes Discourse (DN 15). There he rejects any and all views that there is a self. First he classifies all theories of the self into four major categories: those describing a self that is either (1) possessed of form (a body) and finite; (2) possessed of form and infinite; (3) formless and finite; and (4) formless and

infinite. Then he states that a person whose definition of the self falls into any of these four categories might say either that the self is already that way, that it will naturally become that way (when at sleep or at death), or that it can be made to be that way through practice. This gives, in all, twelve ways of defining the self.

The text gives no examples of the four basic categories, but we can cite the following as illustrations: (1) theories that deny the existence of a soul, and identify the self with the body; (2) theories that identify the self with all being or with the universe; (3) theories of discrete, individual souls; (4) theories of a unitary soul or identity immanent in all things. The Buddha points out that any view falling into any of these categories entails obsession.

He then goes on to show that any assumption of a self, however defined, revolves around one or more of the five aggregates, as noted above—assuming the self either as identical with the aggregate, as possessing the aggregate, as in the aggregate, or as contained within the aggregate. For example, a formless infinite self might be assumed to contain consciousness within it, or as being identified with consciousness. Because these aggregates, including the consciousness-aggregate, are all inconstant and stressful, the result is that any theory of a self, no matter how defined, entails obsession with what is inconstant and stressful. The obsession itself is also stressful. This is why any view that there is a self counts as a fetter of views. None of them can take you beyond range of Death's King.

The Buddha's second reason for not answering Vacchagotta's questions is that if he were to state that there is no self, he would be siding with the wrong view annihilationism. This is because this statement shares the same practical drawbacks as an annihilationist view. It, too, interferes with the strategies needed to put an end to stress because the act of holding to it can act as a fetter on two main levels.

On the grosser level, a view of this sort can be used to justify immoral behavior: If there is no self, there is no agent who is responsible for action, no one to benefit from skillful actions, and no one to be harmed by unskillful actions.

This point is illustrated in MN 109, where an assembly of monks is listening to the Buddha, and one of them asks the Buddha how to put an end to I-making and my-making. The Buddha responds:

“Monk, one sees any form whatsoever—past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near—every form, as it actually is with right discernment: ‘This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am.’

“One sees any feeling whatsoever... any perception whatsoever... any fabrications whatsoever...

“One sees any consciousness whatsoever—past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near—every consciousness—as it actually is with right discernment: ‘This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am.’ [See SN 22:59, above.]

Another monk sitting in the assembly, however, takes this contemplation in an unskillful direction. Instead of using it for its intended purpose—the end of I-

making and my-making—he turns it toward a conclusion that action done by what is not-self will not be able to touch oneself:

Now at that moment this line of thinking appeared in the awareness of a certain monk: ‘So—form is not-self, feeling is not-self, perception is not-self, fabrications are not-self, consciousness is not-self. Then what self will be touched by the actions done by what is not-self?’

This conclusion, in effect, denies the Buddha’s underlying assumptions about the efficacy of kamma. The Buddha’s first response to this misuse of his teaching is to denounce it:

Then the Blessed One, realizing with his awareness the line of thinking in that monk’s awareness, addressed the monks: ‘It’s possible that a senseless person—immersed in ignorance, overcome with craving—might think that he could outsmart the Teacher’s message in this way: “So—form is not-self, feeling is not-self, perception is not-self, fabrications are not-self, consciousness is not-self. Then what self will be touched by the actions done by what is not-self?”

The Buddha then turns to the other monks and leads them through his standard questionnaire of cross-questioning about whether the aggregates deserve to be regarded as self (as in SN 22:59, above). The result is that sixty of the monks gain full awakening by abandoning all clinging. In this way, instead of arguing with the errant monk, the Buddha shows by example how the teaching on not-self should be used: as a strategy for abandoning clinging. To use the teaching as a metaphysical tenet denying both one’s responsibility for action and the efficacy of action in determining one’s pleasure and pain is, in the Buddha’s words, a sign of senselessness, immersed in ignorance and overcome by craving.

On a more refined level, the act of holding to the view that there is no self contains a fetter in the very act of holding to the view. It can also lead a meditator to become fettered to any experience of peace or equanimity that meditating on this view might produce. As MN 106 points out, the perception of not-self, when consistently applied to all experience through the senses, can lead to a formless level of meditative absorption called the dimension of nothingness.

“Then again, the disciple of the noble ones, having gone into the wilderness, to the root of a tree, or into an empty dwelling, considers this: ‘This is empty of self or of anything pertaining to self.’ Practicing and frequently abiding in this way, his mind acquires confidence in that dimension. There being full confidence, he either attains the dimension of nothingness now or else is committed to discernment. With the break-up of the body, after death, it’s possible that this leading-on consciousness of his will go to the dimension of nothingness.”

On attaining this level of concentration, a person who holds to the view that there is no self would read the experience of nothingness as confirmation of that view. Satisfied that he had found the truth, he would stop there, not realizing that there is more work to be done. That's because in that state, as in all the formless attainments, any contentment with the attainment and the peaceful sense of equanimity it contains makes it an object of clinging.

When this was said, Ven. Ananda said to the Blessed One: "There is the case, lord, where a monk, having practiced in this way—'It should not be, it should not occur to me; it will not be, it will not occur to me. What is, what has come to be, that I abandon'—obtains equanimity. Now, would this monk be totally unbound, or not?"

"A certain such monk might, Ananda, and another might not."

"What is the cause, what is the reason, whereby one might and another might not?"

"There is the case, Ananda, where a monk, having practiced in this way—(thinking) 'It should not be, it should not occur to me; it will not be, it will not occur to me. What is, what has come to be, that I abandon'—obtains equanimity. He relishes that equanimity, welcomes it, remains fastened to it. As he relishes that equanimity, welcomes it, remains fastened to it, his consciousness is dependent on it, is sustained by it [clings to it]. With clinging/sustenance, Ananda, a monk is not totally unbound."

"Being sustained, where is that monk sustained?"

"The dimension of neither perception nor non-perception [one level higher than the dimension of nothingness]."

"Then, indeed, being sustained, he is sustained by the supreme clinging/sustenance."

"Being sustained, Ananda, he *is* sustained by the supreme clinging/sustenance; for this—the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception—is the supreme clinging/sustenance. There is [however] the case where a monk, having practiced in this way—'It should not be, it should not occur to me; it will not be, it will not occur to me. What is, what has come to be, that I abandon'—obtains equanimity. He doesn't relish that equanimity, doesn't welcome it, doesn't remain fastened to it. As doesn't relish that equanimity, doesn't welcome it, doesn't remain fastened to it, his consciousness is not dependent on it, is not sustained by it [does not cling to it]. Without clinging/sustenance, Ananda, a monk is totally unbound."

— MN 106

In other words, to gain freedom from the subtle stress to be found even in the equanimity of the formless attainments, a meditator needs to avoid looking for proof that there is no self, and instead to look for which mental activity is causing the stress. Seeing it in the act of passion that relishes the feeling produced by the attainment, one can gain release from it.

5. “Self” & “not-self” as skillful strategies

Avoiding the question of the existence of the self not only allowed the Buddha to sidestep an issue that could prevent a student’s progress on the path to the end of suffering; it also allowed him to focus directly on the kamma of self and not-self. In other words, it allowed him to look at the mental activities of I-making and my-making *as activities*, and to examine them in the terms that are appropriate to activities: When are they skillful in leading to the end of stress, and when are they not? If he had held to the doctrine that there is no self, there would have been no space in his teaching for the possibility that the notion of self could actually play a skillful role on the path, for it would have been a lie. With no room for I-making or my-making, the question that lies at the beginning of discernment—“What, when done by me, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?”—would have been aborted.

If, on the other hand, he had held to the doctrine that there is a self, then whatever he identified as self could not be regarded as not-self, and so would have been left as an object of clinging, and thus a remaining area of limitation and stress.

But to treat I-making and my-making purely as activities allowed him to give precise, helpful advice on when and where the perceptions of self and not-self—and what kind of self—are skillful strategies and when not.

We have already seen several examples of the Buddha recommending the perception of not-self as skillful. Here are a few examples of when he and his disciples recommended the perception of self as a skillful strategy along the path.

Your own self is your own mainstay,
for who else could your mainstay be?
With you yourself well-trained,
you obtain a mainstay hard to obtain.

—Dhp 160

Evil is done by oneself.
By oneself is one defiled.
Evil is left undone by oneself.
By oneself is one cleansed.
Purity and impurity are one’s own doing.
No one purifies another.
No other purifies one.

—Dhp 165

You yourself should reprove yourself,
should examine yourself.
As a self-guarded monk with guarded self,
mindful you dwell at ease.

—Dhp 379

‘And what is the self as a governing principle? There is the case where a monk, having gone to a wilderness, to the foot of a tree, or to an empty dwelling, reflects on this: “It’s not for the sake of robes that I have gone forth from the home life into homelessness; it is not for the sake of almsfood, for the sake of lodgings, or for the sake of this or that state of [future] becoming that I have gone forth from the home life into homelessness. Simply that I am beset by birth, aging, and death; by sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses, and despairs; beset by stress, overcome with stress, [and I hope,] ‘Perhaps the end of this entire mass of suffering and stress might be known!’ Now, if I were to seek the same sort of sensual pleasures that I abandoned in going forth from home into homelessness—or a worse sort—that would not be fitting for me.” So he reflects on this: “My persistence will be aroused and not lax; my mindfulness established and not confused; my body calm and not aroused; my mind centered and unified.” Having made himself his governing principle, he abandons what is unskillful, develops what is skillful, abandons what is blameworthy, develops what is unblameworthy, and looks after himself in a pure way. This is called the self as a governing principle.’

—AN 3:40

Ven. Ananda:

“This body comes into being through conceit. And yet it is by relying on conceit that conceit is to be abandoned.” Thus it was said. And in reference to what was it said? There is the case, sister, where a monk hears, “The monk named such-and-such, they say, through the ending of the effluents, has entered and remains in the effluent-free awareness-release and discernment-release, having directly known and realized them for himself right in the here-and-now.” The thought occurs to him, “The monk named such-and-such, they say, through the ending of the effluents, has entered and remains in the effluent-free awareness-release and discernment-release, having directly known and realized them for himself right in the here-and-now. Then why not me?” Then he eventually abandons conceit, having relied on conceit. “This body comes into being through conceit. And yet it is by relying on conceit that conceit is to be abandoned.” Thus it was said, and in reference to this was it said.’

—AN 4:159

These passages show that the idea of self can play a useful role on the path by creating a sense of self-reliance and clear motivation to practice. Without these skillful forms of I-making and my-making, a meditator would find it hard to get started and to stay on the path. Only after these skillful uses of the idea of self have done their work in leading the meditator to strong mindfulness and concentration can they be abandoned with the perception of not-self applied to the path, as we have seen above. Ultimately, even this perception can be abandoned when passion and delight for all five aggregates—including the aggregate of perception—are put aside, and the mind reaches total release from stress.

6. The strategic use of the knowledge, “All phenomena are not-self”

As the above discussion shows, the Buddha’s first two reasons for not answering Vacchagotta’s questions have many strategic implications and show the wisdom of taking no position as to whether there is or is not a self. This leaves us with the Buddha’s third reason for not answering Vacchagotta’s questions: that to say there is a self would not be in keeping with the arising of the knowledge that “All phenomena are not-self.” To understand why the Buddha saw the arising of this knowledge as so important, we have to understand (a) what the statement, “All phenomena are not-self” means and (b) what strategic purpose it serves on the path.

In the Buddha’s vocabulary, both the words “All” (*sabba*) and “phenomena” (*dhamma*) have very precise ranges of meaning. First, “All”:

‘What is All? Simply the eye and forms, ear and sounds, nose and aromas, tongue and flavors, body and tactile sensations, intellect and ideas. This, monks, is termed the All. Anyone who would say, “Repudiating this All, I will describe another,” if questioned on what exactly might be the grounds for his statement, would be unable to explain, and furthermore, would be put to grief. Why? Because it lies beyond range.’

— SN 35:23

In other words, the range of the word “All” goes only as far as the six senses and their objects—sometimes called the six spheres of contact. Anything beyond that range cannot be described, even as remaining or not remaining when those spheres of contact fade and cease.

Ven. MahaKotthita:

‘With the remainderless fading and cessation of the six spheres of contact, is it the case that there is anything else?’

Ven. Sariputta:

‘Do not say that, my friend.’

MahaKotthita:

‘With the remainderless fading and cessation of the six spheres of contact, is it the case that there is not anything else?’

Sariputta:

‘Do not say that, my friend.’

MahaKotthita:

‘...is it the case that there both is and is not anything else?’

Sariputta:

‘Do not say that, my friend.’

MahaKotthita:

'...is it the case that there neither is nor is not anything else?'

Sariputta:

'Do not say that, my friend.'

MahaKotthita:

'Being asked... if there is anything else, you say, "Do not say that, my friend." Being asked... if there is not anything else... if there both is and is not anything else... if there neither is nor is not anything else, you say, "Do not say that, my friend." Now, how is the meaning of this statement to be understood?'

Sariputta:

'Saying, "... is it the case that there is anything else... is it the case that there is not anything else... is it the case that there both is and is not anything else... is it the case that there neither is nor is not anything else?" one is objectifying the non-objectified. However far the six spheres of contact go, that is how far objectification goes. However far objectification goes, that is how far the six spheres of contact go. With the remainderless fading and cessation of the six spheres of contact, there comes to be the cessation of objectification, the stilling of objectification.'

— AN 4:173

The dimension of non-objectification, although it cannot be described, can be realized through direct experience.

'Monks, that dimension is to be experienced where the eye [vision] ceases and the perception of form fades. That dimension is to be experienced where the ear ceases and the perception of sound fades... where the nose ceases and the perception of aroma fades... where the tongue ceases and the perception of flavor fades... where the body ceases and the perception of tactile sensation fades... where the intellect ceases and the perception of idea / phenomenon fades: That dimension is to be experienced.'

— SN 35:116

Thus the word "All," even though it may cover the entirety of experience that can be described, does not cover the entirety of what can be directly experienced.

Similar considerations apply to the word, "phenomenon." As the last quotation indicates, "phenomenon" applies to objects of the intellect or mind (*manas*). Iti 90 shows that these objects can be either fabricated—conditioned, willed, put together—or not. Thus in the teaching, "All fabrications are inconstant; all phenomena are not-self," the term "not-self" applies to a wider range of phenomena than does the term "inconstant." Only fabricated phenomena are inconstant; both fabricated and unfabricated phenomena are not-self.

The highest unfabricated phenomenon is dispassion (*viraga*, which can also be translated as “fading,” as in AN 4:173 and SN 35:116, above).

‘Among whatever phenomena there may be, fabricated or unfabricated, dispassion—the subduing of intoxication, the elimination of thirst, the uprooting of attachment, the breaking of the round, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, the realization of unbinding—is considered supreme. Those who have confidence in the phenomenon of dispassion have confidence in what is supreme; and for those with confidence in the supreme, supreme is the result.’

— *Iti 90*

Some of the terms following “dispassion” in this passage are its synonyms; some are not. Those that aren’t are events that follow automatically on it. However, because *dhamma* can also mean “event,” all these events come under the classification of the highest unfabricated event.

However, even though the realization of unbinding (*nibbana*) is classed as a dhamma, several passages in the Canon indicate that unbinding itself is not. This point is clearest in the following exchange, where the young brahman Upasiva describes the goal as a dhamma, whereas the Buddha is careful to say that it is where all dhammas are done away with.

Upasiva:

One who has reached the end:
Does he not exist,
or is he for eternity free from affliction?
Please, sage, declare this to me
as this dhamma has been known by you.

The Buddha:

One who has reached the end has no criterion
by which anyone would say that —
it does not exist for him.
When all dhammas are done away with,
all means of speaking are done away with as well.

— *Sn 5:6*

Given the range of the words “All” and “phenomena,” the knowledge, “All phenomena are not-self” would apply to all objects of the mind, fabricated or not, registered through the six senses. This would include unbinding as an object of the mind, as in the realization of unbinding. However, it would not apply to unbinding itself, because that is where all dhammas end and are done away with. This point, though subtle, has an important bearing on the strategic use of the knowledge that all phenomena are not-self.

In fact, that is the first point to note about this knowledge: It is meant to be used strategically. Instead of being a description of what is learned upon attaining the goal, it is part of the path leading to the goal.

‘All dhammas are not-self’ —
 When one sees [this] with discernment
 and grows disenchanted with stress,
 this is the path to purity.

— *Dhp* 279

This knowledge is especially useful at a very advanced stage of the path, for it can help a person who has already attained a partial awakening to attain total awakening.

There are, all in all, four stages of awakening described in the Canon: The first three involve seeing the deathless; the last, a total plunge into unbinding. This point is indicated in the following simile:

Ven. Narada:

‘It’s as if there were a well along a road in a desert, with neither rope nor water bucket. A man would come along overcome by heat, oppressed by the heat, exhausted, dehydrated, and thirsty. He would look into the well and would have knowledge of “water,” but he would not dwell touching it with his body. In the same way, although I have seen properly with right discernment, as it has come to be, that “The cessation of becoming is unbinding,” still I am not an arahant [a fully awakened one] whose effluents are ended.’

— *SN* 12:68

The implied analogy here is that the arahant is like someone who has plunged into the well and dwells touching the water with his body.

Another simile compares the path to total awakening to the act of crossing a river. In this case, the water stands for craving and for the flow of suffering in the wandering-on of repeated rebirth. The first three stages of awakening correspond to the point where one gains a footing on the far side of the river; full awakening, the point where one has climbed to safety on the bank where all dhammas have been brought to a final end.

‘All dhammas gain footing in the deathless.
 ‘All dhammas have unbinding as their final end.’

— *AN* 10:58

The practical difference between gaining a footing and climbing the bank lies in how one reacts to the experience of the deathless—and this is where the knowledge, “All phenomena are not-self” comes into play:

‘There is the case where a monk... enters and remains in the first jhana: rapture and pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought and evaluation. He regards whatever phenomena there that are connected with form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness, as inconstant, stressful, a disease, a cancer, an arrow, painful, an affliction,

alien, a disintegration, an emptiness, not-self. He turns his mind away from those phenomena, and having done so, inclines his mind to the property of deathlessness: “This is peace, this is exquisite—the resolution of all fabrications; the relinquishment of all acquisitions; the ending of craving; dispassion; cessation; unbinding.”

‘Staying right there, he reaches the ending of the effluents. Or, if not, then—through this very Dhamma-passion, this Dhamma-delight, and from the total wasting away of the five lower fetters [self-identity views, grasping at habits and practices, uncertainty, sensual passion, and irritation]—he is due to be spontaneously reborn [in the Pure Abodes], there to be totally unbound, never again to return from that world.

[Similarly with the remaining jhanas and the formless attainments up through the dimension of nothingness.]’

—AN 9:36

As this passage indicates, the act of perceiving the five aggregates as not-self is, for some people, enough to gain full awakening. If any passion and delight arise around the experience of the deathless—taking that experience as an object—such people can detect the passion and delight as coming under the fabrication aggregate, and so they can apply the perception of not-self to that passion and delight as well. Other people, however, focus too narrowly on the experience of the deathless, and so when passion and delight arise for that experience, they misperceive them as part of the experience. This would lead them to assume that the passion and delight are unfabricated. Because the unfabricated does not fall under the aggregates, and because they have been applying the perception not-self only to the aggregates as they perceived them, they would not apply the same perception to the passion and delight that they wrongly perceive as part of the deathless.

It’s precisely this misperception that the knowledge, “All phenomena are not-self” is meant to cure. When this knowledge is applied even to the experience of the deathless, it can help detect the fabricated passion and delight around the deathless as actually separate from it. After all, these fabrications are dhammas, and they come from viewing the deathless as a dhamma. Thus the perception of not-self applies to them and to the aspect of the deathless experience that still takes that experience as an object of the mind. When this perception fully removes the last remaining act of clinging to these subtle mind-objects and events, all activity at the six senses ceases. Full awakening occurs with a full plunge into unbinding.

It’s because the knowledge, “All phenomena are not-self” can lead to this goal, and because the Buddha wanted to prevent anything from getting in the way of the arising of this useful knowledge, that he remained silent when Vacchagotta asked him if there is a self.

7. The abandoning of all strategies

Once the goal is attained with the ending of action, all strategies are dropped. As we have noted, even the knowledge, “All phenomena are not-self” does not

apply once there is a full plunge into unbinding. However, that does not mean that what lies beyond the range of that knowledge should be perceived as self. To believe that it does would be to fall into the wrong view that the Buddha avoided by not answering Vacchagotta's first question. As the above passage from Sn 5:6 indicates, there is no way of describing the person who has reached the end: a point that applies both to descriptions that use "self" and those that use "not-self."

In saying that the awakened person cannot be described, the Buddha was not simply being lazy in his use of language. He had a very clear notion of what defines a living being.

As he was sitting to one side, Ven. Radha said to the Blessed One, "'A being," lord. "A being," it's said. To what extent is one said to be "a being"?"

'Any desire, passion, delight, or craving for form, Radha: When one is caught up [*satta*] there, tied up [*visatta*] there, one is said to be "a being [*satta*]."

'Any desire, passion, delight, or craving for feeling... perception... fabrications...

'Any desire, passion, delight, or craving for consciousness, Radha: when one is caught up there, tied up there, one is said to be "a being."

— SN 23:2

'If one stays obsessed with form, that's what one is measured by. Whatever one is measured by, that's how one is classified.

'If one stays obsessed with feeling... perception... fabrications... consciousness, that's what one is measured by. Whatever one is measured by, that's how one is classified.

'If one doesn't stay obsessed with form, monk, that's not what one is measured by. Whatever one isn't measured by, that's not how one is classified.

'If one doesn't stay obsessed with feeling... perception... fabrications... consciousness, that's not what one is measured by. Whatever one isn't measured by, that's not how one is classified.'

— SN 22:36

With nothing by which he/she can be measured or defined, there is no way of describing the person who is free from passion and delight for the aggregates. That is why the Buddha kept insisting that an awakened person cannot be described as existing, not existing, both, or neither (DN 9; MN 63; MN 72).

This point applies not only to what other people might say about the awakened person, but also to what the awakened person would say about him or herself. After all, in the attainment of the goal, all six sense spheres have ceased; when they have ceased, there is nothing felt. When there is nothing felt, not even the thought, "I am" would occur.

The Buddha:

‘As for the person who says, “Feeling is not the self: My self is insensitive [to feeling],” he should be addressed as follows: “My friend, where nothing whatsoever is felt at all, would there be the thought, ‘I am’?”’

Ananda:

‘No, lord.’

The Buddha:

‘Thus in this manner, Ananda, one does not see fit to assume that “Feeling is not my self: My self is insensitive [to feeling].”’

— DN 15

The fact that nothing is felt through the senses, however, does not mean that the experience of the goal is a total blank. It contains its own inherent *sukha*: pleasure, happiness, ease, and bliss.

‘Now it’s possible, Ananda, that some wanderers of other persuasions might say, “Gotama the contemplative speaks of the cessation of perception & feeling and yet describes it as pleasure. What is this? How is this?” When they say that, they are to be told, “It’s not the case, friends, that the Blessed One describes only pleasant feeling as included under pleasure. Wherever pleasure is found, in whatever terms, the Blessed One describes it as pleasure.”’

— SN 36:19

It’s because of this supreme pleasure that when an awakened person, after experiencing the goal and returning to the realms of the six senses, no longer feels the need to feed on the feelings that the six senses provide.

‘Sensing a feeling of pleasure, one senses it disjoined from it. Sensing a feeling of pain, one senses it disjoined from it. Sensing a feeling of neither-pleasure-nor-pain, one senses it disjoined from it. This is called a well-instructed disciple of the noble ones disjoined from birth, aging, and death; from sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses, and despairs—disjoined, I tell you, from suffering and stress.’

— SN 36:6

With no need to feed off the six senses, the awakened person is freed from any need to read a “self” or “other” into sensory experience. This is what liberates such a person from any passion for views. As a result, experience can occur with no “subject” or “object” superimposed on it, no construing of experience or thing experienced. There can be simply the experience in and of itself.

‘Monks, whatever in this world—with its devas, Maras and Brahmas, its generations complete with contemplatives and brahmans, princes and men—is seen, heard, sensed, cognized, attained, sought after, pondered

by the intellect: That do I know. Whatever in this world... is seen, heard, sensed, cognized, attained, sought after, pondered by the intellect: That I directly know. That has been realized by the Tathagata [the fully awakened person], but in the Tathagata it has not been established...

'Thus, monks, the Tathagata, when seeing what is to be seen, doesn't construe an (object as) seen. He doesn't construe an unseen. He doesn't construe an (object) to-be-seen. He doesn't construe a seer.

'When hearing... When sensing... When cognizing what is to be cognized, he doesn't construe an (object as) cognized. He doesn't construe an uncognized. He doesn't construe an (object) to-be-cognized. He doesn't construe a cognizer.

'Thus, monks, the Tathagata—being the same with regard to all phenomena that can be seen, heard, sensed, and cognized—is "Such." And I tell you: There is no other "Such" higher or more sublime.

Whatever is seen or heard or sensed
and fastened onto as true by others,
One who is Such—among those who are self-fettered—
would not further assume to be true or even false.
Having seen well in advance that arrow
where generations are fastened and hung
— 'I know, I see, that's just how it is!' —
there's nothing of the Tathagata fastened.

— AN 4:24

A view is true or false only when one is judging how accurately it refers to something else. If one is regarding it simply as a mental or verbal act, an event, in and of itself, true and false can be put aside. Thus for the Tathagata—whose lack of hunger frees him not to impose notions of subject or object on experience, and who can regard sights, sounds, feelings, and thoughts purely in and of themselves—views don't have to be true or false. They can just be phenomena—actions, events—to be experienced. With no notion of subject, there are no grounds for "I know, I see"; with no notion of object, no grounds for, "That's just how it is." Views of true, false, self, no self, etc., thus lose all their holding power, and the mind is left free to its Suchness: untouched, uninfluenced by anything of any sort. Although the Buddha, as a teacher, used views as strategies to help his students gain release, his Suchness—having gone beyond the need for such strategies—was something beyond.

'Does Master Gotama have any position at all?'

'A "position," Vaccha, is something a Tathagata [a fully awakened one] has done away with. What a Tathagata sees is this: "Such is form, such its origination, such its disappearance; such is feeling, such its origination, such its disappearance; such is perception... such are fabrications... such is consciousness, such its origination, such its disappearance." Because of that, I say, a Tathagata—with the ending, fading, cessation, renunciation, and relinquishment of all construing, all

excogitations, all I-making and my-making and obsession with conceit—is, through lack of clinging/sustenance, released.’

— MN 72

‘This, monks, the Tathagata discerns. And he discerns that these positions, thus seized, thus held to, lead to such and such a destination, to such and such a state in the world beyond. And he discerns what is higher than this. And yet discerning that, he does not grasp at that act of discerning. And as he is not grasping at it, unbinding [*nibbuti*] is experienced right within. Knowing, as they have come to be, the origination, disappearance, allure, and drawbacks of feelings, along with the escape from feelings, the Tathagata, monks—through lack of clinging/sustenance—is released.’

— DN 1

* * *

The Canon thus contains plenty of evidence that the Buddha meant his most frequent teaching—that all phenomena are not-self—to be used as a strategy for putting an end to clinging. Because the end of clinging leads to the end of suffering, this teaching thus serves the overall purpose of why he taught in the first place. He did not mean for this teaching to serve as part of an answer to the metaphysical question of whether or not the self exists. That’s because no answer to this question—either a categorical Yes, a categorical No, or an analytical Yes and No—could serve as an effective strategy on the path to the end of stress. In fact, these latter views are all obstacles in the path. At the same time, they do not correspond to any view held by the awakened person once the path has achieved its goal, for such a person cannot be described in these terms, and indeed lies beyond the sway of any view at all.

The metaphysical question that the not-self teaching *does* respond to concerns the efficacy of action: that human action is the result of choice, and that those choices can lead either to stress or to the total ending of stress. When viewed in this light, questions of self and not-self become questions of action and skill: when choosing to use a perception of self will lead to long-term welfare and happiness, what kind of perception of self is useful toward that end, and when it’s skillful to apply the perception of not-self instead. By avoiding the question of whether there is or is not a self, the Buddha was freed to focus on the most effective way to use perceptions both of self and of not-self as tools on the path. In particular, he was freed to employ the teaching that all phenomena are not-self as a tool leading his students to drop subtle forms of clinging without, at the same time, creating even subtler forms. That’s why this strategy can help them reach full awakening.

Because the path to awakening leads to a total happiness, the need to think in terms of self and not-self ends when the path reaches its goal. And because the path is a set of actions leading to the end of action, all aspects of the path—including perceptions of self and not-self—are strategies: actions adopted to serve a purpose, and then put aside when that purpose is served. Although an awakened person can still use these perceptions for strategic purposes when

dealing with others, the fact that they are perceptions—and thus included under the aggregates—means that they are transcended in the plunge into unbinding.

That, of course, is simply what the Canon says. Whether it's true—i.e., useful in putting an end to stress—cannot be proven simply by quoting the Canon. The ultimate test of this interpretation is to put it into practice and see if it actually leads to the aim of the Buddha's teachings: the total ending of all suffering and stress.