The Discourse on Not-Self: Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta (SN 22.59)

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 23:48

Good evening. I hope you've had a fruitful day. I do not say happy, though I hope it has been happy.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa.

Homage to the blessed one. Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-awakened one.

I am going to labour the point tonight and carry on with this teaching of not-self, because I remember my own personal confusion when I came across it for the first time. It seemed to be saying that there was a not-self, which felt very confusing—like a denial of a self. But the Buddha doesn't deny that there's a self; he just says it's unreal. And the not-self is a teaching tool. It's a way of saying, well, this is not me, it's not mine, and it's not myself.

The discourse I want to look at tonight is traditionally the second one the Buddha gave to his five friends—those who had been his companions during that time when he was self-mortifying, mainly through not eating. If you remember, he approaches them and of course they don't respect him anymore; he's gone soft. But as he does approach, they see that something's changed. And when he begins to speak, he keeps asking them, "Have you ever heard me speak like this before?" Very slowly they open up to his teaching, and one of them actually becomes what we call a stream-enterer—just the first step of four steps that take us to liberation.

During the days that followed, they would go off for alms round. Sometimes three of them went and came back while the others remained; sometimes it was two of them. But this teaching has been formalized into what's known as the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta, the discourse on not-self. In a sense, it encapsulates this whole teaching. So we'll just go through it and you'll see how it works.

Again, he's at Benares in that deer park where he's met his five mendicants, and he's talking to them. He says, "Rūpa is not self."

Now this word *rūpa* is often translated as form, but obviously for us as human beings, it's basically the body. Everything has form, everything has some sort of spatial reality—a cupboard, a table. But as far as we're concerned as human beings, *rūpa* refers to this body.

So he asks: is this body self? This body is not self, he says to them. The identity with the body is an illusion,

a delusion.

And he explains: if this body were you, you'd be able to have control over it. You'd be able to say, "Do not fall sick. Do not suffer from any affliction." You'd be able to tell it to grow a bit more—I would anyway—and to have more hair on the head. It doesn't matter to me at this present time, but there was a time when I could have done with more hair on my head. Unfortunately, the center of control is elsewhere.

This is the important point. Where is the center of control? Where is the power? Who controls the body to stop it aging, to stop it dying, to stop it falling ill? Of course, we can move our arms around and shake our heads and all that sort of thing, but it's very superficial. It's a bit like driving a car. When you're in a car driving, you feel you're in control, but actually the car's propelling itself. It's got all sorts of things going on, and anything can go wrong at any time. When the car breaks down or a tire bursts, you realize you're not in control of the car. The control is quite superficial.

It's the same with the body. And when you realize that, you begin to understand what the Buddha means: this body is not mine. You use it, but you don't actually own it. That's the distinction. Like with all objects, the ownership of an object is a legal fiction. We all agree to it. Like, for instance, this is my laptop.

But that's just an agreement that we have between us as human beings. The fact is I don't actually own it. And of course, this ownership gets very big because then people own their houses, states own their country. And that causes all sorts of problems, this idea of possessing something.

And then: the body is not me. See, there's a disjunction. There's some sort of separation between me and the body because the body won't do what I tell it to do. And I am not the body. So this sense of self that I have is not the body.

So again, we're going always back to identity. This was the big breakthrough of the Buddha, this problem of identity. If identity manifested as delusive action, it caused dukkha. That's why the Four Noble Truths are phrased in what we can actually experience—unsatisfactoriness, suffering. But the root cause is this problem of identity.

So then he goes on to talk about feeling. Now, feelings are both physical and emotional, heart feelings. If you hurt your body, you bump your knee or something, or you bite your tongue, then at that moment you're not in charge of the body. The body actually goes into a spasm of pain. And you can't say, "Well, I don't want this pain." The pain remains. If you've got a headache, you have a headache. And you realize that when it comes to feelings in the body, again, very little control. You can take tablets these days, of course, but that's just covering over the pain.

When it comes to emotions, if you feel sad, you feel sad. You can distract yourself. You can listen to some music or jump up and down and dance or whatever. But you can't get rid of the sadness that way. It's just buried underneath this attempt to escape it. And so you realize that we have very little power over our

emotions. They arise and pass away.

This, of course, becomes obvious when you're sitting. You might sit with every intention to get deeply concentrated, have these wonderful insights, and all you have is these emotions coming up. One minute there's all sorts of anxiety, there's all sorts of excitement, and then you're depressed, and then you're angry. It's just a waterfall of uncontrolled emotions, uncontrollable emotions.

And then we have perception. Perception belongs to the mind, that part which thinks. It thinks not only in an abstract sense of thoughts and words, but also in imagery, in imagination. So if I said the word "cat," you not only understand what that means intellectually—it's got four legs and a little tail and all that—but also you have an image in your mind of what a cat is. So you know it's not a dog. We can normally tell clearly that this is a cat, it is not a dog.

And these perceptions are not controlled by us. They arise because we see things, we hear things, we touch things, we smell things, we taste things, and then we make a photocopy of it. The more we experience something that we see every day—a car, for instance—it builds up a concept about it, an image which runs with the concept, a concrete concept. So you know that this is a car, it's not a truck, it's not a train, it's not a plane. And then of course it gets very subtle, very big—like freedom, democracy.

But all these things are given to us. They develop through our experience, through our cultures, and so on. And you can't get rid of it. You can't get rid of your sense of what your personal freedom means to you. You can change it, but you can't get rid of it. It's just there within you.

It's the next part, the sankhāras, where we have some sort of choice, where we do have some sort of power. And all the time he's saying, well, these feelings, these perceptions, this body—it's not right to say this is mine. You don't possess it. It changes of its own power. I was going to say free will, but there's no free will. It changes because of its own power. The eyes have a power to see.

There's a process of vision which comes when the retina receives an object, and you have this mentation going on, the whole process happening within the mind, within the brain-mind. The brain would be the sensitive base for the mind.

Now, when it comes to sankhara, which are the volitional conditionings, our habits—I much prefer just the word habits—you can't get rid of a habit. You can change it. You can draw it down so that it doesn't have any effect on you. But even in an arahat, old habits will arise, even those that belong to delusiveness. They'll arise, but they have no power. They're called vasana—leftovers, traces of past habits. The Buddha is said to have got rid of all of those, but that again is just hagiography, turning the Buddha into some magical being, some hyper-human being, a beyond-human being. But as a human being, he would have had habits. That's what a human being is: the body and a process of habituation.

And again, when you see these habits come, when you find yourself in or acting out of a habit, you can become an observer of it. You can be aware of it and realize, well, I don't have to possess this. If I have an

attitude of possessing it, it's going to be difficult for me to change it. If I identify with it—"If I did that, it wouldn't be me"—I remember an old aunt saying that. If she behaved like that, it wouldn't be her. So a very stuck idea of who I am. And that just produces staleness. It produces stagnancy. Whereas we want to be able to flow, to flow with events and to change with events. And that's how our lives grow, hopefully towards what is beneficial.

By the way, I did see a little cartoon about going with the flow. It just said, "Only dead fish go with the flow." I don't think that's the meaning here.

Then finally we have consciousness. Consciousness is the fifth of the khandhas. So remember the khandhas—we've just been through them: the body, feelings, perceptions, habits, and consciousness. Consciousness only arises when it is impinged upon, when something touches it. It's like a screen, just like this screen that I'm looking at, like a monitor. There has to be an object. There has to be an object that impinges upon a sense base. Light must impinge upon the eye. A sound must impinge upon the ear. Something must come out of, for want of a better word, the subconscious—some sort of image, some sort of emotion—which arises and then touches upon this screen of consciousness.

Now, that screen of consciousness is not always the same because it's being touched constantly by different impulses, by different stimuli. And you can't stop being conscious. You can put yourself asleep—obviously, when we go to sleep, we lose consciousness. You can hit yourself on the head and lose consciousness. But while we're awake, you cannot be not conscious. Your consciousness just arises because it's constantly being awoken by stimulus.

So again, we don't have that control over consciousness. Whenever I put my eye on something, I become aware of it. It becomes part of my consciousness. And now, if the center of control is elsewhere, then it can't be me. That's one of the definitions of "I," of "me." I know I'm not you because I can't control you. I know I'm not something outside me because I have limited control. I can move objects, I can control them, but they're still objects, they're still outside me, so I know it's not me.

Now, when you're meditating, you're taking a position within yourself of identifying with the observer, the feeler. And once you're in that position, everything's an object. And it's not under your control. The body offers feelings, sensations. The heart offers its moods and emotions, and the mind its thoughts and images, whether you want it to or not. It isn't under your direct control when you're in the position of the observer, the feeler, the experiencer—the one who knows in vipassana.

Somebody has actually translated sankhara as "choices." There's a very good website called Sutta Central—that's just one word, Sutta Central. And there's another one, Ancient Buddhist Texts, by Ananda Jyoti, who's an English monk. He lives in Thailand, really. I've known him for a very long time.

He also has a little website I just pointed out, Dharma Documentaries—they're really quite good. I'll post this up at some point.

So now, having explored the idea of control, the Buddha then goes on to impermanence—ever-changing.

"What do you think, mendicants? Is form permanent or impermanent? Is the body permanent or impermanent?"

And the answer comes: "It is impermanent, Venerable Sir."

"And if it is impermanent, is that suffering or happiness?"

Now, those two words—dukkha and sukha—you can translate as suffering or happiness, but I think it makes more sense to ask: Is that satisfying? Is it unsatisfying? Because one of the translations of dukkha is unsatisfactoriness. And of course they say, "No, sir, it is unsatisfactory."

"And if it is impermanent, unsatisfactory, and perishable, is it fit to be regarded as 'this is mine, I am this, this is myself'?"

Well, the answer of course is no.

So there are your basic questions. Is it permanent or impermanent? All these things are impermanent. And if it's impermanent, is that satisfying for you? I mean, if you arrive at a beautiful state of mind and then it disappears, that's not very satisfactory. You want to try and maintain it, you want to try and develop it.

And then he goes through the rest of it. Feelings—are they permanent or impermanent? Now, this impermanence is not simply things changing all the time. They are completely new moments. Every consciousness is arising and passing away. At that fundamental level, the impermanence is immediate. Even now, consciousnesses are arising and passing away in me and in you at a speed such that we're not aware of it, so it gives some idea of continuity. But in Buddhist psychology, these consciousnesses are flashing, moment after moment.

Then of course with perception—perceptions arise and pass away just as quickly. And is that desirable? Is that undesirable? Sometimes it is, sometimes it isn't.

Then we have what this particular translation by Sujato Bhikkhu calls "choices." But habits—I much prefer the word habits. Are they permanent or impermanent? They're constantly changing, either getting worse or getting better.

Consciousness is the very seat of impermanence because that's, as I say, flashing and rising and passing away.

So none of this can be satisfactory to a sense of self, because the sense of self wants to be in control. The identity, *me*—I want to be in control, and I find myself not so.

Then he goes on to say: "You should truly see any kind of form—past, future, present, internal, external,

coarse or fine, inferior or superior, far or near—all form, the whole material world, as empty." Now, that's the word *anattā*. And the other word he uses in other scriptures is *suñña*, which means empty—it doesn't have any substance. This, of course, was taken into a more metaphysical understanding by the Mahayana, that everything is empty. But in the Theravada discourses, the Buddha is very much centered on the person, on *me*—me and you—trying to really imprint upon us this idea that nothing is permanent and nothing has any substance.

So this is what happens. When you begin to investigate this, then this word *nibbidā* arises—it's translated variously, but the one I particularly like is "disillusioned." Disillusionment grows, and because of that disillusionment, your desire fades away—*virāga*.

And then finally, with desire fading away—when all wrong desire fades away—then of course you are left with the experience of nibbāna, not-self, which is that experience of something beyond the five aggregates. We'll come to that at another time.

And then finally, when a person is fully liberated, there's this lovely way of talking about it: "Rebirth is ended"—this constant production of a self, of a false self, is ended. "The spiritual journey has been completed. What had to be done has been done." That's a lovely feeling about it—what had to be done has been done. And there's no return to this constant becoming of a false self, of a false being.

And so satisfied, the group of five mendicants were happy. And while the discourse was being spoken, the minds of the group of five were freed from defilements by non-grasping, by losing that sense of desire. In other words, they all became fully liberated. So let's hope that bit is true.

I think that virtually concludes my effort to try and get across this teaching about not-self, which some of you may have found quite confusing. So remember, it's all about identity. It's about *me*. Who am I? That's a question you can always ask. Who am I—or what am I? That would be Korean Zen: *What* am I?

Tomorrow I'll talk more about the actual process of meditation. And I have some questions that have come in, which I'll tackle in a couple of days' time.

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