Identity and Not-Self

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 21:50

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma-sambuddhassa
Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma-sambuddhassa
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Homage to the Blessed, Noble and Fully Self-Enlightened One.

The Buddha's teaching on anatta, not-self, is a hard aspect of the Dhamma to understand. We will all be grappling with it until the moment of enlightenment. To motivate ourselves for the challenge, it's worth reflecting on the suffering we experience because of identifying with our body, our mind, our life stories.

Take the example of role identification. Whatever role we're playing in life—father, daughter, gardener—we want to do it well, which is a good motive. No problem there. It's when we over-identify, when we can't see beyond our role, that dukkha emerges.

On a good day, we get a buzz out of doing things well: cooking a meal, mending a puncture, teaching a class. But we all have days when these go wrong. The sponge cake turns out as a stodgy lump. The tyre deflates the minute we put the wheel back on. We go blank when trying to teach. This is when the dukkha of identification is felt. The more we identify as a good cook, a good DIYer, a good teacher, the harder it is to bear the letdown. We can't stop thinking about it. What went wrong? How could I have made such a mess of things? What did they think of me? We look for someone to blame. If he hadn't interrupted, it would have been perfect.

While none of us enjoy those times when we've made a hash of something, it is worth dwelling on them long enough to acknowledge that the source of the misery is not actually the gooey mess or the deflating tyre. It's the sense of me and how badly I've let myself down. That's the real dukkha—a loss of confidence, perhaps an almost desperate need to reassert ourselves, prove our ability.

The more clearly we can acknowledge the suffering that comes from identification, the more we will be willing to explore the difficult Buddhist teaching of anatta. And there is no doubt anatta is a difficult nut to crack. We all have a strong sense that we are the ones baking the cake, mending the tyre, teaching the class, living our life. It's hard to even toy with the idea that this might not be so.

The Buddha's advice is to keep breaking down experience into smaller and smaller chunks. It's easier to get glimpses of the truth in these. Then gradually, over time, the notion of not-self becomes easier to contemplate. We start to see its benefits—how much easier life is when we're not identified with our roles or opinions or abilities or achievements. It's wonderful to have nothing to defend.

One instruction from the Satipatthana Sutta, the four foundations of mindfulness, that I found very helpful for exploring anatta is the advice to practice internally and externally. Internal can be interpreted to mean our subjective felt experience, while external means our mental understanding of it. We feel the sensations of breathing for internal practice. For external practice, we reflect that we are breathing.

The Mahasi noting technique provides a way of practicing both internally and externally. We feel the breath and at the same time make a mental note of it. Same for walking, eating, talking. All of life can be known both internally, as moment-to-moment sensations and feelings, and externally, as our objective mental perception of what's happening.

Say we are practising mindfulness of breathing. Feeling the sensations of breathing is to practise mindfulness internally. Although we don't usually make the thought conscious, we assume we are the one who's sitting here breathing. If we're also practising externally, then we're noting "rising, falling" as we track the breath.

As concentration deepens, it can seem like our identity shifts. Instead of being the one who is sitting here breathing, we sense ourselves as the observer—some sort of spaced-out entity hovering around our head, the one who is watching the body breathing. On a good day, we'll also be able to watch our thoughts coming and going, watch emotions rise and fade, realize we don't have to get caught up in them.

All of this is helping us disentangle our confusion about identity. Internally, we feel ourselves breathing, thinking, growing happy one moment, sad the next. But because of our external perspective, we realize we don't need to identify with our thoughts, emotions, or breathing. We see these as happening of their own accord, driven by various stimuli, but not driven by what I now think of as me.

This can be a lovely experience—a sense of coming home, having found our true self, a sort of disembodied entity that hovers in and around the body, equanimous, interested, watching the show without getting caught up in it. But after a while, we might grow uncomfortable. Things start to feel sticky, as if there's a sheet of velcro passing over each sensation, pulling us along with it.

We start getting caught up with experience again, identified with thoughts and feelings and emotions. We are again the one who is sitting here breathing, and now anxiously trying to find our way back to that lofty crow's nest from which we had been able to observe the show.

Although there's a temptation to see this as bad meditation, we should really see it as a precious opportunity to learn the Dhamma more deeply. Pema Chödrön likens these episodes to rocket fuel for enlightenment.

To take a practical example: we got a new connector for our gas canister the other day, and so I overcame all my fears about gas and explosions and went to hook it up. After about a dozen failed attempts, all the bits eventually came together. It looked perfect. But gas started leaking the moment I opened the cylinder. I took it apart, reread the instructions, reconnected it. Still no go. Disappointing.

I was then asked to look at the printer because it wasn't working. It needed a new toner cartridge. And again, I overcame my deep suspicion of all things electrical and mechanical, and managed to replace the cartridge. But no go. Every page came out white as snow with nothing at all being printed. Again, I took it all apart, reread the instructions, watched a few videos on replacing the cartridge, tried again. Still no go. Another disappointment. And this time I felt the edge of bad humour. My mind was starting to close up, feel oppressed by others and by the world in general.

A bit later, Banté came over, took the cartridge out and, in his own words, gave it a few thumps and put it back in place. Lo and behold, it worked perfectly. Of course, I was impressed and amused and grateful, but alongside these happy responses, my incipient bad humour gave a painful kick within. Why couldn't it have worked for me?

I decided to go to my room to explore this more deeply. Rationally, it was just silliness—the mind building a mountain out of a molehill. And yet there was not quite a mountain, but certainly more than a molehill of frustration at my failure to connect up a gas cylinder and change a toner cartridge. But what was more distressing was the admission of being so emotionally impacted by such trivial matters. What was the point of decades of Dhamma practice only to be getting distraught over nothing?

This is the dukkha, the suffering of identification. Identifying with self as manager, the one who is supposed to sort out problems. Identification with self as meditator, who should by now have developed outstanding equanimity. Not to speak of self as meditation teacher, who should know the Dhamma upside down and be able to instantly see through this latest delusion.

As always, mindfulness allowed the storm to blow itself out. Looking back now, I sense the truth of Pema Chödrön's advice to see these times—when our buttons are pressed and we feel like a two-year-old again—as rocket fuel for enlightenment. Emotional storms have so much energy that negative thoughts and feelings we normally suppress come skyrocketing into consciousness. In the light of awareness, their pain becomes so acute that our system is forced to learn a new way of coping with the dukkha. This new coping mechanism, learned from within, from moment-to-moment awareness, opens up new pathways for energy flow in the body and new doorways in the mind. We discover new thoughts and perspectives which are gentler, kinder, more patient and forgiving.

In my own example, a new doorway opened because of feeling so acutely the pain of identification—how it traps the mind in a prison of delusion. The pain of this prison sharpened when the storyline of "me who should be better at everything" had fallen away, and I could more clearly feel the emotional patterns underlying the thoughts.

Practising mindfulness internally, I could feel how eagerly the body and mind pounced on a pleasant feeling, sending tentacles of energy around it to clutch and hold as mine, while a bright light switched on in my head, which I perceived as me—confident, on top of things, in control. A whirlpool of energy arose around my chest and head to sustain this delight. The feeling of confidence was gorgeous, but watching it,

the external perspective showed up the craziness and pain underneath. Seeing this, I desperately wanted to escape the prison of identification.

The external perspective let me recognise the crazy whirlpool of energy and the bright light as what the Buddha terms upādāna, usually translated as grasping or clinging. It's also sometimes referred to as selfing. What is happening is that unskilful desire, taṇhā, has driven us to create a new identity so as to fulfil this desire.

The better we get to know this experience of selfing, the more we are persuaded of the Buddhist teaching on anattā, not-self. Knowing from our direct experience that a "me" has suddenly arisen makes it hard to take "me" too seriously. We start to see how various "me's" arise and fade depending on external stimuli. When things go well, a happy, pleased, self-confident me emerges. But that fades quickly when things go wrong, and the deflated, miserable me takes its place instead.

Back to my own example of watching the fallout from my emotional storm. Internally, I was experiencing the selfing process, which was generating a confident, delighted sense of me—one who could fix all the printers and gas cylinders in the world. However, the external perspective knew this as delusion. Undermined by that recognition, the confident self suddenly collapsed into a timid, scared, stiff entity which felt it had no right to exist. A moment later, the confident self reappeared, wildly insisting it was totally in control of the situation.

This yo-yo between elated confidence and abject fear continued for some time. Both identities felt excruciatingly painful and vulnerable. There was a strong desire to abandon the meditation, but I persisted, allowing my emotional roller coaster to take its course, trusting that a lesson would eventually be learned.

In vipassana, we cannot interfere. We cannot tell ourselves to stop being deluded. We have to bear patiently with our greeds, hatreds, and delusions—trust them to burn out in the light of awareness, teach us the Dhamma as we suffer their flames.

And sure enough, the energy of the roller coaster gradually diminished. As it did, my attention extended gingerly beyond the whirlpool of elated and fearful energies in my chest and head, to sense my arms, legs, my body sitting. I couldn't really feel these in any detail. I only knew them as faint suggestions. They seemed like strangers from another world—alien, scary. Luckily, curiosity was stronger than fear, and each outbreath let awareness rest more attentively in the seemingly alien body.

At last, some feelings rippled through. They were unpleasant and carried the message that the heady whirlpool of confidence was not me, not mine. The emotionally energetic, deluded part of myself felt this as a threat. But some wisdom emerged from the depths to welcome the unpleasantness. Here was something I would not want to cling to—therefore very welcome. Letting attention rest on the unpleasantness became a non-interfering way of containing and restraining the deluded self. Gradually,

the energetic, bright-light me felt glad of being contained and limited, embodied rather than a totally deluded mental entity.

It became like looking in a mirror. Perhaps we've all had similar experiences where we sense ourselves as both watching and being watched. Sometimes I was the watcher, the observer, the disembodied entity that hovers near my head—this was the external mindful perspective. Sometimes I was the mirror image—this was the internal mindfulness perspective, bringing the embodied experience of me, the experience of sitting and breathing and knowing that I was being watched.

The desire to know who I really am has always been very strong for me. And the part of me that was observing felt this now as an almost overwhelming attraction towards the mirror image. I wanted to grasp hold of the image, devour it even. But whenever I gave in to that desire, it was as if I'd gobbled up my own reflection. All that was left were little shivers of fear and grief as I realised how I destroyed what I desired. I had to suffer the fear and grief, wait patiently till peace prevailed, before I could again glimpse the mirror image.

I became grateful for any unpleasant sensations in the mirror image. These acted like repulsive forces, countering the attempt to grasp and own the image. They carried the message: this isn't who you really are. That understanding also helped me not to grasp and thereby destroy the image of me that I desired so deeply. I became grateful for the fact that the body can repel the mind as well as attract it.

By this stage, I'd forgotten altogether about my sense of having let myself down. It just wasn't an issue. And I was very glad I'd persisted with the meditation, hadn't given up at the height of the emotional storm. The great gift of sitting with the misery was that the message—this is not who you really are—became for the first time totally welcome. As the meditation went on, the message brought joy, relief, gratitude. I understood it as necessary to counter the strong desire to identify with my body and mind, the only reflection I can find for whatever it is I sense myself to be.

In subsequent meditations and in daily life, I was better able to recognise all mes as temporary and conditional. I could smile at them, appreciate them, but not be surprised when they dissolved. This is such a gift. The deluded me expects too much of me, expects me always to be on top of everything. Being able to see myself as limited brings forth compassion, as well as appreciation for whatever efforts I make to follow the path and fulfil my various roles. And if I'm getting a bit heated in conversation, clinging to my opinion, then I can focus on some unpleasant sensation

and welcome them as messengers, reminding me that this strongly opinionated one is not my true self either. Again, this brings a smile and allows me to be more flexible, ready to change my mind and see the other's point of view.

I hope this illustration of working with the dukkha of identification encourages you to explore the teaching around anattā, not-self, and perhaps also see how those external and internal mindfulness

perspectives can help with this challenging teaching.

In this way, may we all see through our identification as daughter, manager, cook, or whatever roles we inhabit. May we see these as temporary, conditional, never designed to be satisfactory. As the Buddha said, whatever is inconstant, conditioned, unsatisfactory, is not worthy of being thought of as me.

We sell ourselves short by investing in these limited identities. Our continued practice leads us to a truth, a resting place beyond all such limitations.

May we all experience the peace and bliss of Nibbāna.

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