The First Noble Truth - Not-Self and Unsatisfactoriness

Noirin Sheahan · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Noirin Sheahan · 23:35

I want to continue saying something about the first noble truth, the truth of dukkha.

There is what's described as dukkha dukkha—the real suffering that we'd all agree is suffering: pain, illness, disability, death, loss of loved ones. Things that genuinely we all sympathize with each other for. Then there was what I was talking about this morning, anicca dukkha, the suffering and dissatisfaction associated with the fact that things change, that we can't hold on forever to our happiness. And very much related to it is what I want to talk about tonight: anatta dukkha.

Anatta is usually translated as "not-self." Now, it's a very confusing area of Buddhist thought. So if you get confused tonight, just know you're in good company. It's easy to get confused.

It's confusing in the sense that it's obvious to us that I am me and you're you and everybody is themselves. So what on earth do we mean by not-self? We see ourselves as separate parcels of existence. And the Buddha would agree that for practical purposes, yes, this is true. But it's not true all the time—there are times when our sense of self can just drop away. The normal view is true too. We can operate in the world as a self. We can decide to do certain things. But at another level, an ultimate level, we can let our sense of self drop away and experience a peace—the peace of anatta, the peace of not-self.

The truth of anatta is really saying that we don't have a totally separate identity, that we are interdependent, very intimately interdependent.

My first experience or inkling of this was one time I was hearing a birdsong. I was really liking the birdsong, and then when the bird stopped, I noticed I got anxious. The bird would start again and I'd be delighted. Stop, I'd get anxious, and so on. It came to me through that direct contact with the sound: is that sound inside me or outside of me? I couldn't really tell. I knew at the conceptual level that the bird was outside. But at another level, my ears were hearing the sound directly. My brain was processing it. All the neurons and hormones required to make me feel anxious or happy were happening within me as a result of that sound. There was this direct interconnection between the bird and me—the bird was pushing all my buttons at that time. The bird was more in control of me than I was. He could decide whether to stop or start singing, and then I'd have to go anxious or happy.

That's just an example of that truth of interdependence, anatta—that we're not separate. At that moment, because I was just directly hearing, I had no real sense of a boundary between myself and the bird. I

wasn't thinking "me, bird"—I was just hearing and feeling the response.

For me, that was a level of insight into this truth of anatta. It was scary in some sense, because I realized how incredibly vulnerable we are, how open we are. Our emotional openness to each other is very deep. But it also struck me as very beautiful—that for at least that moment, I could see that I wasn't actually separate from the rest of the universe, not in an essential way, a permanent way.

At some level, we know this because we know that our feelings and emotions are all triggered by each other. People can push our buttons and we get annoyed or whatever. So we know we're not separate in that sense, that we directly affect each other. But I think we can experience it at a deeper level if we really pay attention. Feeling that direct contact with the world, direct contact with our emotions—that sense of a separate boundary of me and the world just starts to get fuzzy, very fuzzy and unclear.

In reality, we're very deeply interdependent. We're actually kind of co-creating each other. Even what's happening here now—I'm speaking and you're hearing, and by you listening, I'm having to process ideas. So we're all changing at the moment, very deeply. We're co-creating each other and our own reality.

I think it's an idea worth dwelling on, that level of interdependence. But as opposed to that, there's also a strong sense of identity—me, mine, my biscuit. There is a sense of a big boundary around me. The Buddha would say this is really a belief—the belief that I am a separate parcel of existence. It's a very strong belief. But it can come and go.

This sense of self is created in order to fulfill a desire. It's probably evolutionary in nature—we have to fight or fly from a tiger in order to survive as an animal in this world. A sense of self that says "I'm important, my life is important, I have to get away from this threat" is really important for survival. Similarly, "I have to eat all this lovely food because I'm important." So that sense of self that gets created is very possibly evolutionary, and it helps us enormously in life.

It's not to think of the sense of self as wrong—it's just that it's not ultimate. It's not the absolute truth. It's not the forever-and-ever truth that we have to experience all the time. It's basically a construction in the mind that happens once we feel a desire. If we're walking along the street and we pass by a café and we get the aroma of coffee, and we look in the window and see luscious cream cakes, then suddenly the desire arises for coffee and cake. We immediately turn and go in and get the coffee and cake. The sense of self was just constructed there in order to fulfill that desire.

Now, I think it's interesting that one teacher says—and I unfortunately can't remember the name—that the mind state of not-self is actually much more common, but it's just so unobtrusive that we don't notice it. It's happening most of the time, all our lives, but we just don't notice it. When an idea isn't in our mind, we don't think about it. The usual example given is this: if I tell you "don't think about a pink elephant," most people immediately start thinking about a pink elephant. It's the same way if I say "don't think about yourself, just drop that idea"—you immediately start thinking about yourself. "Of course I'm me." We can't

stop thinking about an idea through willpower. The idea stimulates the idea.

So it is with the sense of self. When the idea of self is there, it's strong, it's very persuasive. It really tells us that we are an important person who needs this, that, and the other thing. And when it just falls away—as it does when there's no desire happening, just peaceful moments in life—it's such a simple, unobtrusive, not-demanding-attention type of mind state that we just don't notice it. In that sense, we often don't consciously experience the truth of anattā, but in actual fact it's there in the background of our lives all the time.

Now, one mistake we can make around all this is to think we're bad for having a sense of self. We hear the teaching that not-self is a deep truth, a very peaceful truth, and we want to be in that state all of the time. But that's an impossibility. This is a gradual path. The Buddha often described his path to full enlightenment as a very gradual one—he likened it to the continental shelf, just gradually sloping into the ocean, gradually getting deeper and deeper. The sense of self is an important part of getting us to the deeper truth of not-self. We need to have a strong, well-developed, confident, good, healthy sense of ourselves in order to tread the path.

So to be thinking of ourselves as wrong is not the idea the Buddha was trying to get across. In fact, he would say the opposite. He would often say, "Cherish yourselves. Do what's best for your own happiness, which is to tread this path. Strive diligently for your liberation." He would tell us to really look after ourselves in order to find the deeper happiness where the truth of anattā resides.

Remember, the self is created—a construction in the mind, an idea you could say, that comes and goes—in order to fulfill a desire. There can be really wise desires: the desire to meditate, the desire to come on retreat, the desire to help others, to care for others, to give service and work. These are all very wise desires, and it's good to create a good sense of self in order to do them—to help our friends, to be a good friend. These are wise desires that help the world move in the right direction.

So we certainly do need to look after ourselves, to do our best to have a good, confident sense of self, to love ourselves, to care for ourselves, and not to run ourselves down. The Buddha never said that the sense of self was wrong. He would have said the opposite: care for yourself. All he said was that it's temporary. It's insubstantial. It's a state of mind that comes and goes. It comes up when we have a desire. Once that desire has been fulfilled, it will actually drop away again—but we just don't notice it, because it's so unobtrusive.

So basically then, our work really is to decide when to create a sense of self—which desires to fulfil, which ones to really get ourselves together and attack with gusto, saying "Yes, I will do this." And then which desires can we let go of in order to move towards that deep peace of not-self, of not having to react to every single whim.

Now, although it's hard to experience the sense of not-self—though we might on occasion—it is possible to

tune into the experience of a self being created. That's easier, and it's just very interesting to see it happening. I think you probably will start seeing it if you just tune in.

Say in life, for example, if somebody gives you a compliment, you might immediately feel yourself growing taller. Gregory Kramer calls it "puffing up." The whole sense of self is fed, is nourished by getting a compliment. So we feel bigger, we feel stronger, we feel more confident. We feel important, and so on. It's a good feeling. A very happy sense of self is created for a few moments at least when we get a compliment. So just tuning into that, just noticing the sense of me, an important person, just coming up—and that's all, not criticising, just the wonder of it. How the whole being can be stimulated by various things.

Of course the opposite can happen. We can create a very unhappy sense of self if we get criticised or ignored or something like that. And again, it's interesting to tune into what happens there. Often I experience it as some sort of collapse. Even physically, the head might go down, the shoulders might droop, and a sense of dullness maybe comes into the mind. A sense of "I'm no good"—though it could be anger, of course, and anger will probably create that important sense of self. But if it's not anger, if it's that "I'm no good" type of feeling, then that often feels like a collapse, some sort of dulling down.

So it's just to tune into the process of what many teachers call "selfing"—a verb, the self getting created, a mental process happening moment after moment. We can tune into it.

Now it is harder to tune into the dropping away of self. In the same way as, if you have a toothache, while it's there it's the centre of your experience, the centre of existence. It's so important and terrible. But hours later you might notice, "Oh, it's gone." Or days later. But do you ever notice the last moment of a toothache? Very few people do. I don't know if I ever have. I have noticed the last moment of shorter-term things like cramp, if you can tune into them. And it is very interesting just to follow them to the end, and how the mind just loses interest really towards the end when the pain is going away.

So in that sense, it's harder to notice the dropping away of self. We just don't notice the absence of problems, usually, because when the self is there it's often big and strong and creating some sort of trouble because it wants to get its desires met. The sense of self can often be problematic for us. But when it all dies away, it's like a toothache or a cramp dying away—just not terribly interesting for us. It doesn't call attention.

But in meditation, we can sometimes dip into experiences where we are in direct contact with reality. We're simply hearing, or feeling our bodies, sensations, our moods—feeling all that without the added layer of concept and thought. At those times, we actually are in the experience of anattā, the experience of not-self. Usually it's just that we're not reflecting at that time, so we don't take it in consciously in a way we can then talk about to ourselves afterwards. We're just in that lovely direct experience. But if you do have any of those moments, it's worth reflecting on them afterwards, just seeing: was there much of a sense of self there? This allows the teaching to seep in a bit deeper—that it is possible for the sense of self to fall

away, that it's happening all the time and causing us no problem at all.

And yet we feel so threatened. The idea of anattā is often very frightening—the sense that I don't have any permanent existence. It can scare us to think about it. But I think it's consoling to be told that it's happening all the time, and we're just not noticing because it's such a happy, pleasant state. So we can cope with the truth of anattā. We can. Our being is coping with it all the time.

The self often means trouble, in the sense that it comes up to fulfil a desire, and very often most of our desires are simply reactivity—reactions to the cold, for example. We could have been in that very peaceful state of direct experience in walking meditation, and then suddenly we start to feel a bit cold, and very quickly there's crossness. "Where's the hat and gloves?" And all the self-consciousness about leaving the walking meditation, wondering if others will judge us, and they're getting in the way. An awful lot of trouble arises with the self, very often. So you can usually tell when the self has arisen by just noting the trouble in life. It brings a lot of trouble.

My agenda, my needs, and so on. The sense of self is associated with the stress of reactivity. This is really what we mean by *anattā dukkha*—the suffering associated with a self that's trying to control experience, control life, control others in order to be happy. It's just trying to find happiness, trying to find pleasure, which is very laudable. This whole path that we're on is happiness-seeking.

But the only trouble with the self trying to find happiness is that it's out of touch with ultimate reality, because the self isn't permanent and basically can't keep manipulating things to keep happiness for itself. So it's onto a losing battle immediately. It's often associated with deep distress, trying to over-control things.

We would understand this in terms of over-identification. Over-identification with our job, where we just get really fussy—things have to be done this way and this way only. We get perfectionistic, we won't trust others to help in the work, we work late, we work long, we think ours is the best way and the only way. Then if anyone criticises, of course, it's devastating, and basically the job becomes a torment, usually for us as well as for others. The over-identification problem.

There's a lot of distress in any area of life where we over-identify. If we're trying to control family members so that they're the way we think they ought to be, there's an awful lot of unhappiness associated with that. We can over-identify with anything—a hobby. We can over-identify with our spiritual practice and just be stressing ourselves out, trying to get to the state of not-self. We can do all kinds of things to ourselves.

So it's a tricky area, one to just keep examining—the distress of this illusion of self that thinks it should be in control. And then there's an awful lot of self-blame. When things go wrong, it must be my fault, because that idea that I can control life means that if things go against me, it was my fault, I didn't control it right. So a huge amount of self-blame gets embedded in there, very, very distressing. Over-identification would

be one way of seeing this *anattā dukkha*.

But we can find the way out, which we're doing here now. It's surrendering to the truth that we're actually not in control, not ultimately. We have a certain level of control—we can decide to meditate—but we can't control our mind state. We can't make sure that we're concentrated, or that we're alert, or that we have happy experiences. We have only a very limited level of control over our experience.

So it's surrendering to that truth, and knowing that the rotten stuff can happen to anyone, anywhere. And if it happens to me, it's not my fault. It's just circumstances coming together so that I'm going through a patch that maybe feels very bad. But the rotten stuff can be embraced willingly, as we reflect on the truth that there's just no way out of it. We can't always control and keep away what we don't like.

Therefore, the only way to be at peace with the world is to embrace what comes our way as willingly as we possibly can, and just trust that this will get deeper and deeper as we immerse ourselves more fully in truth. It's exactly the practice here—taking an interest in what comes our way, accepting it, and yes, eventually coming to a deeper peace than we could possibly have as a separate self.

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