The Not-Self Characteristic (Anattā) - Part 1

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 1:11:35

Yesterday we finished off the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, setting in motion the Dharma wheel, or simply turning the Dharma wheel. This was taught on the full moon night of Āsāḷha in July, two months after the Buddha attained awakening. And there he taught the middle way and the four truths.

The middle way was the strategy he used to break open the resistance of the five companions. This is the idea of the middle way here in terms of practice—between indulgence and asceticism—where the middle way is not halfway in between, but it's the place of no fixed position. If it was halfway in between, that would simply be another extreme, a kind of triangular model. The middle way can only be found where there is no *anta*, no extreme. No pushing away, no pulling towards. This is the place where we are not stuck on anything. This is the place where we're not reaching out to hold something and we're not rejecting or resisting something. And this place is not any kind of fixed position. It's constantly moving and dancing, and we're constantly trying to keep up with it.

Then the Buddha taught the Four Truths, and Koṇḍañña understood. He had his first glimpse of awakening and attained the first stage of enlightenment, stream entry. He became Aññā Koṇḍañña, and his insight was expressed as: whatever is of the nature to arise, all that is of the nature to cease. So this is all about dependent arising and, of course, impermanence.

The Buddha is very happy. Someone's actually understood, and he's very pleased with the whole situation. The five companions now become his students, so there's now a practice community. Then they begin the practice—the first Buddhist meditation retreat. The five students, with the Buddha as teacher, the retreat lasts I think five days. It's a long retreat because they took a while to get enlightened. There was Vappa and Bhaddiya, who got it within the first couple of days, and then Mahānāma, and finally Assaji, who was just incredibly thick. Five days together. Anyway, finally he did.

So at the end of this retreat, there are five aryas, five cultivated ones, refined ones—or six altogether, including the Buddha. And as each one attains the first stage of awakening, they request and are given ordination. So at this point there are five bhikkhus. It's interesting that you can see the standard is pretty high for becoming a bhikkhu. You have to be awakened first. Standards have slipped since.

When all of the five have attained the first stage of awakening—so they've all had a glimpse into the unconstructed—then he gives them the second discourse. And this is the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta, the not-self characteristic.

Now what this suggests, if you look at the context, is that he hasn't actually mentioned anattā, not-self. Of

course it's obvious, it's implicit in everything that's gone before, but he's never actually mentioned it. And now for the first time he talks about it and gives a discourse explicitly on the subject of not-self. But he waits until his entire audience have attained the first stage of awakening. And he teaches it with the intention to bring them to full awakening.

What this suggests is, first of all, this is an advanced teaching. Anattā is an advanced teaching. And the other aspect about it is that anattā fundamentally is not a doctrine that can be understood—although lots of scholars and academics spend a lot of energy understanding it, writing about it, and so on. But fundamentally it's not a doctrine which is to be understood; it's an experience which is to be realized.

I see it as Buddha's joke. If you tell someone a joke, and having given them the punchline, they look at you blankly and say, "Could you explain that?"—you know you're wasting your time. Even if they understand it, quote unquote. "Oh, is that why it's funny? Oh." It hasn't worked. With a joke, you either get it or you don't get it. And that's it. And anattā has the same quality. You either get it or you don't get it. You either see it or you don't see it. And this can be shown by the endless academic arguments about it that have gone on through the centuries and continue to go on.

I put all this forward as a preliminary to my caveat: we're going to have two or possibly three talks about this, and I am not suggesting that at the end of them you will understand anattā.

I'm suggesting that at the end of them you will not. So don't blame me—I warned you in the beginning.

One time in Sydney, a fellow who was a long-term practitioner and very active in local Buddhist circles said to me, "You know, over the years I've heard a lot of Dharma talks from a lot of teachers about not-self, and no one's ever explained it satisfactorily." And he looked at me, and I thought, "I hope he's not going to ask me to explain it." Mercifully he didn't. But that's when it really struck me—you can't understand it. You either get it or you don't get it. And it's not easy to get. Well, it is easy to get. But it's not easy to be in the situation in which it's easy to get.

Now, these monks have all attained the first stage of awakening, so they've seen into it. But there's something missing—something still that they haven't got. Yet they've certainly got something. Or they haven't got something. And that means they're ready to receive the full teaching. At the end of the discourse, in fact, they're all Arahants. So this takes them from the first stage to the final stage.

"This is how I heard it. Once the Blessed One was living at Bārānasī in the deer park at Isipatana. There he addressed the group of five bhikkhus.

'Bhikkhus?'

'Bhante,' they replied.

The Blessed One said, 'Body is not self. If this body was self, it would not tend to get sick, and I could make it become what I want. But because body is not self, it does tend to get sick, and I cannot make it become what I want.

'Feeling is not self. Perception is not self. Constructions are not self. Awareness is not self. If this awareness was self, it would not tend to get sick, and I could make it become what I want. But because awareness is not self, it does tend to get sick, and I cannot make it become what I want.'"

That's the opening line. The word translators render as "get sick"—*ābādha*—can be translated as affliction, illness, or disease. So it's a kind of "there wouldn't tend to be anything wrong with it." It wouldn't tend to be problematic, would be another way of looking at it.

Now, what I find interesting here: first of all, the Buddha goes through the five aggregates, and this is the first time he's laid them out. We've talked about these before. *Khandha*—usually translated as aggregate. I like Stephen Batchelor's translation of "bundle."

Whenever the Buddha talks about anattā, he will talk about it in terms of these five aggregates. But notice that the first time the Buddha mentions not-self, he presents it as bad news. "But because body is not-self, it does tend to get sick, and I cannot make it become what I want." I find this very interesting because certainly in Mahāyāna Buddhism—at least the Mahāyāna Buddhism I've been exposed to—not-self is always presented as "Hallelujah, brethren! This is fantastic!" Even in Theravāda it's got a kind of good news ring to it. But the first time the Buddha mentions it, it's clearly bad news.

Anyway, he's laying out the five aggregates. He mentioned them in the first discourse—*pañca upādāna khandhā*, the five aggregates associated with clinging. Now he lays them out. Body is all physical experience. Feeling, we've talked about—the hedonic or affective aspect of experience, that which moves me, that which provokes a response.

So I'm moved to hold on if it's pleasant, I'm moved to resist or reject if it's painful, and I'm moved to ignorance, doubt, confusion if it's not registered as being either painful or pleasant.

Then perception—saññā—which I think we mentioned. This is the recognition or interpretation of any experience. In other words, what makes something familiar? We live in a familiar world. I know what this place is, I know who you are, I can understand these words. This is all the realm of perception.

Then constructions—here it means all choices or decisions to act. I think we talked about this last night.

Finally, awareness—viññāṇa—the pure knowing or witnessing of any experience.

Now, these aggregates are associated with clinging. In other words, they constitute that which holds the potential for clinging, upādāna. That which we cling to. What we find irresistible, essentially. If they're

associated with clinging, then they have to be attractive, because otherwise we wouldn't bother. Why would I cling to something that was not attractive to me?

But they're attractive not in a superficial sense of being nice-looking and pleasant, but in the deep sense of being what preoccupies us the most. So what most deeply preoccupies me—these are the five aggregates.

Consider, for example, our relationship to mirrors. Every day I look in the mirror. If there's a mirror around to look at, I will look at it. If it's not around, I won't. But if it's there, I'll have a look. Why? I know what I look like. But I just want to check one more time.

Or take the attractiveness of our deepest pain that can arise during meditation practice. It's incredibly attractive. Not in the sense that it's pleasant, but in the sense that it attracts our attention. Bam! The attention goes straight there and we hold on to it ferociously. So it's deeply attractive, and we cling to it.

Now, for the Buddha, clinging results in identity. This is why we hold on. And so the five aggregates are associated with the construction of an identity. When we cling, we know who we are and we know what we are. In that moment of holding on, that's when my identity is clearest. So that's who I am—the face in the mirror. This is who I am—the one who suffers this pain.

The aggregates provide identity, and the attractiveness is that identity provides certainty. In the moment that I know who I am, I also know what the world is and what's going on. That identity is deeply satisfying and reassuring, even if what I take to be me in the world is incredibly painful. Still, at least I know who I am and what's going on.

The Buddha's first argument about not-self has to do with this sense of certainty. He undermines it by looking at the issues of control, reliability, predictability.

Body, mind, all experience is not self. If it was self, it would not tend to be sick, oppressed, afflicted, and I could make it become what I want. It would be under my control. But because body and all the rest is not self, I cannot make it become what I want. It does tend to be spinning out of control and being oppressive.

When we actually examine the nature of experience, one thing that comes up—which is really quite obvious for the meditator—is that I am not actually in control of what happens to me. I spend a lot of time trying to assert my control. If I come to a retreat, I plan carefully. I bring all the right stuff, especially if I know the place. I come early so I get the good room. I get into the hall as soon as possible, get the best cushions, set myself up where I want to be. I'm trying to impose some degree of control and predictability and reliability into the experience.

The more familiar I am with the whole place, the more I can cultivate this notion that I can do this. The more familiar I am with the meditation practice, the more I can create fantasies that this time it'll be different. This time I'll be in charge.

But of course, it always fails.

It always falls apart. And the more we examine our experience, the more obvious it becomes that we're not in control. Nothing is entirely reliable, and I cannot predict the future. I do not know what's going to happen next. So the Buddha is undermining this assumption of self by undermining our sense of control and therefore reliability, predictability.

Now for the Buddha, first of all, he's looking at self—in Sanskrit *ātman*, in Pāli *attan*. *Ātman* is a technical term you find across traditions in India, and you've always got to be careful about the technical terms because what something means in one tradition isn't necessarily what it means in another tradition. Different traditions often share the same vocabulary, but they mean different things.

So *ātman*—when we talk about *ātman*, self, we think about Hindu traditions. But the Buddha's not using *ātman* in that sense. He's using it in a more psychological sense. If one was speaking to a Vedantan and asked, "How many *ātmans* are there in this room?" the answer is obviously one. In fact, there's only one *ātman* in the entire universe. But from a Buddhist perspective, how many *ātmans* in this room? Well, there's, I think, nineteen. Each person is an *ātman*. So the Buddha's using self in a psychological sense, which is good for us because it's more familiar to us.

What he's talking about now—to regard oneself as a self, what do we need? What's required? First of all, we have to be separate and distinct from other selves. I'm me, which means I'm not you. So I have to have that clear sense of separation and distinctness. This is me. I am an individual. I am unique. And I am certainly not you. So that's the first thing I need.

And I have to possess some unchanging characteristics that can provide me with some stable sense of identity through time. In my life I go through many ups and downs. I go through many changes. But I have a sense that underneath all that, it's me who's undergoing these changes. That twenty years ago, I and my life were quite different. Many things have happened in the past twenty years. Many changes. But at the end of it, it's me. So there have to be some characteristics of the self that do not change, that provide the sense of stability on which I can build an identity.

And finally, possession always entails some degree of control. Possession is in the normal everyday sense of the word. For example, take this watch. This watch is my watch, so I'm the one in charge. You can't tell the watch what to do. You can't tell me what to do with it, because it's my watch. Now as for your watch, it's up to you. I've got no argument with your watch—unless it ticks loudly when I'm trying to meditate—but basically it's all up to you. So if I had no control over this watch, how could it be mine? It just wouldn't make sense.

So a possession always implies some degree of control. Possession also includes aspects of myself to which it makes sense to describe as mine. When we were talking about mindfulness immersed in body, we talked about how we have this relationship to this body. This is my body. Now that makes perfect sense to me. That's your body. You do what you need to do with it. But this is mine. So I'm in charge of this body. I'll decide when this body leaves this room, not you. Are we clear on that?

So we have to have a sense of separation from other selves. We have to possess, have to have possessions, at least some of which are sufficiently stable that they can provide a sense of identity over a period of time. And whatever it is that we think we possess, we have to be able to have at least some degree of control over it.

The Buddha is in this opening section challenging these last two assumptions: possession and control. And he does it through the recognition of *dukkha*, which makes sense because he's just been talking about *dukkha*. So he now applies *dukkha* to the self. The fact is that there's *dukkha* in every experience that we depend upon, that we hold on to as constituting me. In every single one of those, somewhere in there is *dukkha*. There's an absence of control. I'm not in charge. And if I'm not in charge of it, it's not mine. So I don't own it.

The Buddha is undermining some of the basic assumptions that the ascetics hold in terms of their belief that they are someone. "I am an ascetic of some seniority, respected among my fellow ascetics. I'm someone." And he's starting to just tear this apart through his first argument.

And then the Buddha moves on to the issue of change, impermanence. "What do you think, bhikkhus, is body permanent or impermanent?" "Impermanent, Bhante." "And that which is impermanent, is it painful or pleasurable?"

Painful, Bhante. And that which is painful and subject to change, is it appropriate to regard it in terms of "this is mine, I am this, this is myself"? Certainly not, Bhante.

So here the Buddha shifts into impermanence and brings this out front and centre. Experience is impermanent, it is anicca, it changes.

Now when I first read this discourse, which was sometime in the mid-seventies, I found this dialogue very odd. Is body permanent or impermanent? Impermanent. Yes, okay, sounds reasonable. And that which is impermanent, is it painful or pleasurable? Painful. And I thought, what? Why? What's the problem? I just couldn't see the problem. I mean, if nothing changed, things would get pretty tedious pretty quickly. Don't they say a change is as good as a holiday?

So this really bothered me when I first read it. I just couldn't figure it out. I did not get the logic. Buddha, you said it, apparently you're wise, but let's just move on here.

It helps to actually look at the Pali word, anicca, or in Sanskrit, anitya. In Pali and Sanskrit, nicca or nitya means permanent, but it also means reliable. Let's say one is running a meditation centre and feels a certain insecurity about paying the bills. But then someone leaves a bucket full of money in some kind of trust account, and so there's a permanent income. Every year the centre is guaranteed this amount of money handed to it. It's permanent, it's reliable. Let's say you're looking for farmland and you're told this has a permanent water supply. It's permanent, it's reliable.

So when the Buddha says permanent, he's not just saying it doesn't change—he's saying this is reliable, I can depend upon this. When he says that which is impermanent is painful or pleasurable, the monks of course say painful because they know what this means. What the Buddha is saying is that all experience is impermanent, it changes, and therefore it is unreliable. Ultimately we will be disappointed with it, whatever it is. At some point we will be disappointed. We will be let down. And this is just part of the nature of the universe.

So whatever we experience, at some point, becomes a source of distress. And therefore it's not worthy of holding onto. In fact it's something to be let go of. Therefore it's not worthy to be considered self. Because to be considered self it has to be reliably available all the time. So for me to be Patrick, Patrick has to be available all the time.

Does that make any sense? No? Why not? Why does it have to be reliable to be self? It can be unreliable, provided that it's there to be unreliable—as long as it's reliably there. Like, "this is happening to me," I can count on that. Let's go on and see if it makes any sense later.

So the Buddha says that which is painful and subject to change, is it appropriate to regard it in terms of "this is mine, I am this, this is myself"? Now here the Buddha presents what he means by self. This is important because if he's going to deny self, then we've got to know what it is that he's denying. He's talking about identity, and we assume identity is something given.

So I am already Patrick. But the Buddha is saying identity is an ongoing construction. It's not something already given. It's something that we're constantly constructing. We don't notice ourselves doing it most of the time, but we are. This is in fact what we're doing.

And he says there are three movements in this construction: this is mine, I am this, this is myself. These three movements are craving, conceit, and view. So let's have a look at what the Buddha is getting at.

The first one is "this is mine." This represents taṇhā, which we talked about the last couple of nights—craving, drivenness. Here, it's the drive to possess. This is the raw energy. We talked about how dukkha represents this painful energy, empty space at the core of our being. From that painful emptiness we reach up and try to hold something, get something that we can draw into this space and fill it up and get rid of this sense of unease. We're constantly going out to hold onto something as a possession. This is taṇhā, or craving, and this is what drives consumerism and narcissism.

We talked about it in terms of consumerism—how we constantly want more stuff. The appeal to greed is usually pretty successful in terms of social movements. But more subtly, we can see it in our drive to possess experience. When you come to talk about meditation experience, say in the interview, whose experience do you come to talk about? "Let me tell you about *my* meditation experience." We talked about this basic attitude we have to experience: What is this to me? How does it fit into my plan? How does it function as my possession? So this is *my* meditation experience. And we just do that quite naturally. We

don't even think about it. It's just obvious. Of course it's mine. It's certainly not yours. So it has to be mine. And if I feel I've had a very successful retreat, I might say something like, "I got a lot out of this retreat." We use that kind of expression quite naturally. It's totally meaningful.

So this is the drive to possess. And possession has to do with identity. Where is the boundary of the self? Where does the self end and the world begin? Most obviously the border would be here, at the edges of this body. But in fact, of course, the boundaries are wider than that. This recorder is outside the boundaries of this body, but because it's mine, it's inside myself. My sense of self as the teacher—by the way, these are *my* Dharma talks. Are you sure? I'm positive. No, no.

And this is another thing. This is the next thing. This is *my* meditation retreat. I'm the teacher. I'm in control. And I don't want you lot messing up my meditation retreat. I'll be clear about that.

So when we start to look at the self in terms of possession, the boundary of the self starts to go out and it gets bigger and bigger. You're not my teacher, I'm your student.

That's right. So you're all my students and I'm in charge. That's why I'm constantly frustrated and disappointed.

So if you're in charge, how come you haven't made us all be enlightened yet?

Well, I'm trying to persuade you, but you're just resisting me all the time. So on the one hand... stop mucking about. You've been too relaxed.

So "this is mine" is all about creating this sense of self and making it bigger, and the bigger the better.

Then we get conceit: "I am this."

The Pali term is *mana*, usually translated as conceit. It's not a very good translation, but there's no English equivalent. Literally, it's measuring. If you did a literal translation, it would be measuring. It is a measuring, from the root *ma*, to measure. So measurement, comparison.

I think I mentioned this before. Let's say I measure something. I take out of something—this pad—pull out the tape and measure it. Now in measuring it, what I've just done is define its boundaries. This is where it begins and this is where it ends. And that means I've created separation. This is pad and all of this is not pad. So you get a basic sense of boundary and separation.

Mana manifests as a fundamental sense of separation and therefore of comparison. First of all, there are borders: me, not me; this, not this, that. And also, part of this duality involves values—important, not important—and along with that, comparison between them.

So a lot of this has to do with a sense of location, location in relation to the self. "I" and "mine" are both here, and they're important. "You" and "yours" is a bit further away, so not quite so important. "Them" and "theirs" is even further away and even less important.

Now this distance can be physical, but it can also be—in fact largely it is—psychological. So let's say in the media if there's a disaster in India, it'll be on page five with half a column. If a corresponding disaster occurs in the US, it'll be on page one with several columns. It would be more important because the USA is closer to us than India. Now that distance is not geographical. It's in terms of our identification. We're much more likely to identify with people from North America than we are with people from India. So India is more distant.

For Australians, you can see it in the sense that Europe is much more close to us than Southeast Asia, for most people. Europe is far closer than Southeast Asia. Southeast Asia is the place you fly over to get to Europe. And again, this has got nothing to do with geography. This has to do with the sense of what's closest to me, what's me and not me.

So this has to do with *mana*, classically translated as conceit, but really measuring.

Now, craving and conceit come together. Craving energizes conceit. Conceit manifests in the basic sense of "I am" at the behind of experience. There's this sense that I have that there's someone here who is experiencing. So at the moment I'm experiencing giving a Dharma talk, and I have this sense that this is happening to someone, and the someone is here.

Now if as a meditator I was interested in finding out, well, who is that someone? And if I turned my awareness around and went into the *citta* to find that someone, whatever I found—that would be happening to someone. So whatever I found would not be "I am." Does that make sense?

So when you're practicing you can have a very deep *samādhi*, concentration. You can be very intimate with the experience. A sense of self and other, in a crude sense, has dropped away. But there's still this sense that all of this is happening to someone, but you can't put your finger on who that is, because it's always in the shadows.

Now you take this sense of "I am," add craving—and craving is this raw drive—

always in search of possession. So then it becomes "I am this." The mind reaches out to grab an experience, to identify with it. "Oh, this is what I am."

So we might be meditating, for example, and the mind is throwing up thoughts—they're just kind of bubbling up and disappearing, bubbling up and disappearing. But if we look at the process, suddenly the awareness reaches out and grabs onto one of those thoughts, bang, and turns it into something. What's happened is there's this kind of background sense of "I am," but there's an agitation in it. "I am, but what am I? I am, I am..." Bang. "I'm this. I'm this thought. This is what I am." And suddenly we're into creating an identity. So this is the movement: "I am this." Conceit.

And then finally we get view: "This is myself." This third one, view, is the most visible, the most surface of the three movements. And to a large extent, it's the culmination of the construction of a self into some

kind of narrative—some kind of story that defines myself to me and to others.

I always like to quote Daniel Dennett, the American philosopher of mind. He's still going strong, very fashionable, a very good writer. Back in the nineties he wrote a book called *Consciousness Explained*, where he says that we do not tell our stories—our stories tell us. Which is a very nice way of putting it. And he says there are some stories that we keep coming back to again and again and again. These are foundational stories that he calls "the center of narrative gravity." So they all come back to these ones. And if we're looking for the self, that's where we find it. But I think from the Buddha's perspective, more accurately, this is where we find view: "This is myself." Craving and conceit, however, manifest at more basic levels beneath the narrative. In a sense, they fuel the narrative. But with view, the whole movement bursts up above the surface and becomes a coherent kind of story.

Someone asked whether, given Daniel Dennett's deep understanding of apparently no self, he would be enlightened. No, he's thinking about all this. He's got intellectual insight. He's also a committed materialist who clings ferociously to that view. There's another philosopher—I think Australian—who talks about the hard problem of consciousness. He talks about the two problems of consciousness, one hard and one easy. The easy problems are the sorts of problems that Daniel Dennett works on, like how does the mind work? How does it function? But the hard problem is essentially: what's the nature of the one who is aware of all this? I heard Dennett being interviewed about this fellow, and Dennett was just scathing, dumping on him. You could sense the outrage: "How dare you even go there? We've got to be scientific here, and therefore materialist."

But self-view is all about meaning. When I create a self, I create meaning. This is who I am.

This is what the world is. This is what it all means. In creating a self, I've created what all of this means. But I can't do that without some kind of story. The meaning is really important, and the stories that I tell myself that explain what this means are actually more real to me than the physical world that I inhabit.

An example I like to give is the activity of hanging out the clothes. Have you ever hung out the clothes? Let's say you're watching somebody hanging up clothes on the line over there. You're watching this and thinking to yourself, what is that person doing? Well, the answer is pretty obvious—they're hanging up the clothes. But if you were inside that person, if you were that person hanging up the clothes, and let's say you were not impeccably mindful (which of course all of you would be), then the activity would actually be thinking. The hanging out of the clothes would be on automatic pilot. The real activity would be creating a reality by telling a story to oneself. And that story would be more real and much more interesting than hanging out the clothes. The story would be what is actually happening from inside—the experience.

So the routine physical activity doesn't grab the attention. Why doesn't routine physical activity grab attention? Why is it so hard to stay with it? I think it's because its narrative power is weak, and therefore its capacity to give meaning is weak. Even if the direct, sensate feeling aspect is strong, its narrative power

is weak. And we head towards the narrative power because that's where we find meaning. And in meaning we have a self—me—within a world—this world—of which you may not have noticed I am the centre.

So this is the self in the Buddha's teaching: this process of construction. Now you notice also what strikes in this—in each case it's "this is mine, I am this, this is myself." Very specific. This is mine. I am this. Very definite, very specific.

The Buddha is not saying that there's no self. Often people think that he is. People think that he's putting forth some kind of philosophical, ontological statement saying there is no such thing as a self. He doesn't say that. He says this is not self. He's not saying there is no self. He's saying this is not self. That's all. He's not making a grand philosophical statement. He's making a perfectly straightforward empirical statement: this is not self.

And when we construct a self, what we're doing is zeroing in on something specific. This is mine. This. I am this. This is myself.

So have you had the experience, for example, of sitting in the hall, perfectly still, perfect posture, completely absorbed in some narcissistic fantasy in which you're considering what a marvellous meditator you are? That you finally got it worked out. It's taken years, a lot of struggle, a lot of pain, a lot of difficulty, but now I've got it. I've arrived. I can afford now to feel compassionate for all these other jokers.

They try their best.

And then at some point you realize that you've been spending the last fifteen minutes in this self-congratulatory orgy because of a fleeting experience of samādhi that happened about fifteen minutes ago, and suddenly the story changes. *Oh God, I'm pathetic. I can't do this. It's impossible. I'm a terrible meditator. I'm probably the worst meditator in this room. Everybody else is doing well, but I'm doing really badly.*

And you notice that, well, first of all, the two stories can't both be true. They could both be false, but they cannot both be true. And yet, while we're in that one, *this* is me, and *this* is my world. And then, boom—no, *this* is me, and *this* is my world. And the identities completely clash with each other, but we don't even notice that. *This is mine. I am this.* No, no, no—*I'm this.* Now, come to think of it, *I'm this.* Now, I think I was wrong there, actually. Now that I'm enlightened, I realize *I'm this.*

So the Buddha, when he's talking about self, he's not talking about any kind of being or entity that either exists or doesn't exist. He's talking about a process—a process of constructing someone. And a process exists. It could be that dependent arising exists. This is one reason why becoming sensitive to the thought stream is so useful, because the thought stream represents a basic way in which we create a sense of self. Being sensitive to it and tracking it is extremely useful.

Now, the fact that we create a self through our narratives, through our thought stream, is not a problem. It's just part of nature. We're designed to do that. It's just how we are designed. Our problem is that our creation is an expression of our delusion, and as a result it ends up with suffering, with dukkha. We create ourselves, but because of our delusion and our drivenness, we end up with a poor product.

Our normal relationship to narratives keeps us locked into a very superficial dream world. When we look at the mind and how the mind behaves, we see that we create this dream world, and it's driven by these drifting desires and aversions which are constantly changing. Any real in-depth contact with reality is blocked by these dreams that keep swirling around, and we keep holding on. The mind works with all experience coming through all six senses—especially the mind itself—to create some stable reference point which is *me*.

What the mind does in particular is give a narrative unity. It gives us a stable point of reference for me and my world. *I know what it is. I know who I am. I know what this is.* And yet the stability of this is always threatened by change. And when I actually look at it, it's never anything more than a complex web of concepts and feelings, all swirling around, conditioning each other and chasing each other. But this is the self and world that we take to be real.

So we create a self which is real, but it's real only as a construct of the mind. It has no reality other than that. It's basically an organized network of concepts and associated feelings—a very complex, organized network. But we're convinced that there's more to it than that. We believe that the self creates concepts, and that our concepts point towards the self. For example, I believe that my fantasies of the future point to what will happen to me and what will be the world in which this happens. Yet when we look for who's creating these concepts, we can't find anyone. Or take it the other way—if we look for the person for whom these concepts are created. For example, I'm doing walking meditation, and I find my mind is creating a story, and it might occur to me to ask: who's the audience? Who's the intended audience of this story?

Who is this for? And again, I can't find anybody.

So we're convinced that there's someone here. This is the most fundamental reality of my life—that there's someone here. But this self which is so real, which seems so important that it dominates the way I live, is so ephemeral that I cannot pin it down in any experience. And the more I try to pin it down, the more I can't find it, which is very odd. It seems completely contradictory.

So if we can't pin down the self in our experience, then what is it? In the next talk we'll move on with the discourse and talk about the practice of not-self. But if you want to play with this beforehand, see if you can find the one who's creating the concepts. See if you can find the audience for whom the narrative is being told, and see what you come up with.

The Buddha is suggesting that you won't find anyone. Now, notice he's not making a philosophical

statement that there is no one there. He's just basically, at most, placing a bet that if you look, you won't find one. And he's doing this because he looked and he couldn't find one. So he's suggesting, well, why don't you look and see if you can find one? The meditation practice is a way of looking. So is there one? Can I find one? Keep looking—it's quite an interesting project.

A participant shared: "I've been contemplating something about Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. I was reading Amitāyus, and he was talking about how when we take refuge in the Buddha, we're really taking refuge in our own Buddha nature, our own awareness, because the Buddha historically died 2,500 or 2,600 years ago. You can't take refuge in a being."

"You mean he didn't rise again?" I asked. "Sorry?" "He didn't rise again from the dead? Or am I getting that mixed up with something else?"

She continued: "Anyway, basically we take refuge in the quality of awakening within ourselves. And he said that ultimate subjectivity is the Buddha, and the Dharma is ultimate objectivity. I wonder about the difference between subjectivity and that sense of 'I am' that you're talking about. We feel like there's a subjective sense of something happening to us. But did the Buddha have subjectivity? He would have had a sense of subjectivity, wouldn't he? But he wouldn't have confused it with being who he was. He wouldn't have had that conceit—he wouldn't have had māna. What do you think about the sense of subjectivity and the difference between that and the sense of 'I am'?"

To me, the sense of "I am" is like cling wrap. It prevents me from being completely intimate with the experience. It's always associated with a sense of being one step back, not fully there. But there are moments, aren't there, where that's not there? We have that. And in that moment, I'm not thinking, "Oh gosh, this is me having this experience." There are times when we're just completely with the experience, so intimate there's no sense of any audience. So there's no self in that moment. And that's realization of not-self.

Sometimes what happens then is fear arises. Now, as soon as the fear arises, it means suddenly there's someone back here to whom this is happening—someone who's getting scared.

One time I was quite interested in this sense of the dropping away of the self. During one retreat I was working on it through meaning. If there's meaning, there's an audience who appreciates the meaning. Can I have an experience that doesn't mean anything? I was very interested in that. At times everything would drop away and there was just that intimacy. But I wanted to check something about the body, because I was interested in the body. I wondered, what is the body like when the mind recognizes this? And I kind of programmed myself to check that when it happens.

One night it happened. I was doing walking meditation on this veranda, and as soon as I noticed it, I immediately started stretching. I noticed that I could stretch further than I could a moment before. The body had just let go of a massive amount of tension. And then the thought arose in my mind, "I wonder

how long this will last." And it was over. The body was back to its normal state.

It's quite interesting that even the body is changed.

But these glimpses come and go, and part of the whole process is allowing the glimpses to happen and noticing that they are there—because they're very subtle. It's largely an absence you're noticing. And then learning to become comfortable within that, and therefore extending them.

This is what the tradition calls *tadaṅga nibbāna*—nibbāna in its specific aspect of just walking, or just singing, or whatever. The English Romantics, Coleridge and Wordsworth, were into that same thing in their search for the sublime. That's exactly what they were interested in—that same feeling. It comes across in a lot of the Zen literature as well.

Thomas Metzinger, who's a philosopher of cognitive science I've been following, has a nice analogy related to what we've been exploring—where the selfing process is both the object and the subject. He uses the analogy of the selfing process giving us a user interface: a sense of a constant now, always happening in the present, a feeling of position. So it gives you a user interface to your external world. But even more profoundly, it gives you an avatar that can move around in this world. You're actually trapped in the idea that it is *you* moving around in this space.

He has some clever experiments where a person connected to an MRI in Tel Aviv is moving a robot in London. He's extended the sense of proprioception through computer science—the MRI extending from Tel Aviv to London. So the six senses that we've been talking about are extended across continents. It's a very interesting idea. His view is that we're in a cognitive arms race all the way through, from slime right through to where we are now. The organisms that could emulate themselves in the world best survived at an evolutionary level. We're really a product of that whole process.

Someone asked: "Can not-self only be recognized a nanosecond after it's happened? Because if you're completely intimate with an experience, it's not until you realize, 'Oh, I'm completely intimate with the experience,' that you know it."

Well, once you name it, something has shifted. At the time, one couldn't recognize it in the sense of saying what it is. So it's just happening. I think awe is wordless, isn't it? When you get to the top of the hill and see the tree up above against the sky—it's an awe-type wordless feeling. Basically it's just whatever is happening. But it's not *about* whatever is happening. There is no "about." It's just what's happening.

We've come back to *tathatā*, to suchness, just thisness. I think the constraining assumption is that something can only be experienced through the verbal storyline. But when the verbal storyline drops away, the suchness is still known, still experienced. When the self and the storyline drop away, that experience is known in and of itself, just in a non-verbal, non-conceptual manner—a bit like how we walk. Walking is a non-verbal experience, but it's still known. How to walk is known.

And I think over the years you get used to it, and that's fine. So the more often the self falls away, the more you get used to it—the more you get used to that non-verbal experience of being intimate with the present moment, not having to have a bunch of words to tell yourself the story of being intimate with the moment. It's still known, though. But as soon as you're telling yourself the story, then what you know is the story. You've just separated out.

Anyway, that's enough for tonight. Thank you very much.

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