Origins 5: Not-Self Part 1

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 54:37

Tonight and the following Monday night, we're going to talk about not-self. We're going to do it by looking at the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta, the discourse on the not-self characteristic, which is the second of the Buddha's formal teachings.

So we continue with our look at the origins of Buddhism. As we talked about, the Buddha attained awakening on the full moon of Vesākha, roughly May. His first teaching was delivered two months later on the full moon of Āsāḷha, roughly July. He taught the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, Setting in Motion the Dharma Wheel. He delivered this to his five former companions, who he had split with when he realised that his practice was failing. What he taught was the middle way and the four truths.

During this teaching, in particular during the teaching of the four truths, one of the five, Añña Koṇḍañña, understood what the Buddha was talking about. He saw the Dhamma. This is the dhammacakku, and of course this is the first stage of awakening, also known as stream entry—entering the stream of the Dhamma. He expressed his insight with this brief saying: "Whatever is of the nature to arise, all that is of the nature to cease." This verse encapsulates the dynamism of experience when it's seen through completely.

After that comes the first Buddhist meditation retreat. It lasted five days and it was taught by the Buddha. Two of the students, Vappa and Bhaddiya, were reasonably quick and were the first ones to attain the first stage of awakening. But I regret to say that two of them, Mahānāma and Assaji, took five full days to attain the first stage of awakening. I mean, can you believe it? But eventually they all made it.

Once the Buddha had an audience made up entirely of people who have attained the first stage of awakening, who have seen the Dhamma, then he introduces the subject of not-self. Up to now, he had not mentioned it. It had been in the background—it's kind of the basis for everything—but he hadn't actually talked about it until now. He talks about it with the intention to take his audience from that first glimpse into reality all the way to full awakening.

All this suggests that anattā, not-self, is an advanced teaching. In part this is because anattā is not a doctrine to be understood. It can be studied philosophically, but you can't understand it intellectually. It's an experience to be realised. It's something that we get or we don't get. It's like the punchline of a joke. You either get the joke or you don't get the joke. You can't explain your way to a joke.

This is one reason why I like to give the spoiler alert that if you listen carefully to my talks on not-self, I can guarantee that at the end of it you will not understand not-self. So don't be frustrated if you don't get

it, because you can't understand it. You either get it or you don't get it. As it happens, during this retreat all of the five got it and they all attained full awakening.

The background is that the Buddha is preparing his students to reject the teaching of ātman. This is "self" in Sanskrit rather than Pali. The doctrine of ātman is very important in the tradition of the Upaniṣads, which the Buddha himself had trained in, and presumably his five companions had also trained in.

If we ask, "What is this ātman that they talk about, that the Buddha was trained in and taught about?"—ātman is permanent, unchanging, and therefore blissful. To get a sense of it, think about your meditation experience when your mind settles and becomes relatively still. Is this pleasant? Is it a pleasant experience? Could it be that this pleasantness is associated with the fact that there is less change apparent when the mind is still? For the Indian tradition, stillness of mind is blissful. If the mind is completely still, that experience is blissful.

Ātman, self, is free from any change. It's therefore permanent and therefore blissful. This is the background that the Buddha and his audience are coming from.

If they were trained in that Upanishadic tradition—and we don't know for sure that they were, but they probably were—then that's what that tradition was about: training them to realize Atman. And they equate Atman with Brahman. Then it gets very theological, and we won't go there. But essentially, that's what they're after: the experience of Atman.

So where do we find Atman? Where do we find self? Self sits behind experience as the one who undergoes the experience, the one who owns experience, the one to whom experience is happening. For example, this experience you're having right now—to whom is this experience happening? Isn't it happening to me? And this is self, atma. We can take it further. What is this experience for? Isn't it for me? Whose experience is this? Isn't it mine?

What the Buddha is saying is that if we directly see the Dharma, if we encounter the middle way, this way of looking at things doesn't satisfy anymore. So let's see how the Buddha explains it.

This is how I heard it. Once the Blessed One was living at Baranasi 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."

So he goes through the five aggregates, the khandhas. When the Buddha speaks about self, atman, and not-self, he always talks about it in terms of these five aggregates associated with clinging, which we saw before as the deepest level of dukkha. Remember when he was analyzing dukkha and said constructing dukkha is the deepest layer? He said, "What is this dukkha? It's the five aggregates associated with clinging." And now he's laying out what these are, what he means by this.

So let's go through them. There's body, feeling, perception, constructions, and awareness.

Body is all physical experience.

Feeling, as we've talked about, is the affective aspect of experience—that which moves me, that which stimulates a response. I am moved to hold on to, to become intimate with what is pleasant. I am moved to distance myself from or reject what is painful. And I am moved to ignore or to be doubtful and confused about what is neither painful nor pleasant.

Then we get perception. This is the recognition or interpretation of any given experience—what gives familiarity and meaning to an experience. For example, I step into this hall and I recognize, "Oh, this is the meditation hall at the Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre." That recognition is perception.

Then we have constructions, which here means all choices or decisions to act. This takes us to the teaching of karma.

And finally, we have awareness, the pure presence or witnessing of any experience.

If we ask what role these five aggregates play, essentially they are the experiences that we use as raw materials to construct an identity. So: I am my body. I am the one who experiences the distinctive pattern of feeling and responses that govern my life. I am the one who perceives the world in this particular way. I am the one who makes the decisions that guide my life. And most intimately, I am the one who is aware of all of this.

The five aggregates constitute that which can be clung to, or that which holds the potential for clinging, because they constitute identity. Me. And therefore, they are what we find irresistible. The aggregates are attractive—not attractive in the surface sense of being pleasant, but in the deep sense of being what preoccupies us the most. Consider, for example, our relationship to mirrors. Whether I like what I see or do not like what I see, I have to look.

Our deepest pain is attractive in the sense that it attracts our attention. We cannot let it go. We cling to it ferociously. And why do we do that? Because clinging results in an identity. When we cling, we know who we are, we know what we are. Identity gives us certainty, and we certainly crave certainty. Why is despair so seductive? Because when I'm in a state of despair, I know who I am. I am the one in a hopeless situation, and there is a security in that recognition.

Now the Buddha says, "If this body was self, it would not tend to get sick, and I could make it become what

I want." And he goes through the same reasoning for all five aggregates. For the first one, body, this kind of makes sense. But what do we mean by awareness becoming sick? Or perception becoming sick?

The word that I translate here as "sick" is *ābādhāya*, a term that indicates sickness, oppression, affliction—it has a collective meaning. So you could say, "If this body was self, it would not tend to be afflicted, oppressed." In other words, it would not be subject to pain, essentially.

If it was self, why wouldn't it be subject to pain and affliction? Remember that this teaching is coming out of the Upanishadic tradition. In that tradition, Ātman does not change and is therefore blissful. This is partly because of the bliss of stillness, but it's also partly because change is incompatible with Ātman, with self, because things change in ways that are out of our control.

Does the body change? Yes. Does the body change in ways that are out of my control? Yes—therefore it is not self. If I'm looking for Ātman, I won't find it there.

Atman, yes. This is one of the difficulties of understanding what's going on, because there is this cultural background that the Buddha and the people around him just take for granted. But we don't. One of the reasons why I raise this is to establish the context—this is why he's talking about it in this way. But it does fit psychologically as well, which we'll get into. It's a really helpful concept.

So body and the other aggregates are not self because they change. And the ways that they change, I cannot control. The central aspect of dukkha, as outlined in the Four Truths, is the pain of change—viparinama dukkha. Change that is beyond my control. I am changing because I'm getting older, and I'm subject to the pain and the weaknesses of age. Now, does this happen because I want it to? No. In fact, I'd rather it didn't. Does it just happen? Am I its unwilling victim? If any aspect of myself is subject to change and pain, then it is not atman in the Upanishadic sense, the sense that was familiar to the Buddha and his audience at that time, what was culturally familiar to them.

But it also applies to what we might call the psychological self. Let's say I'm constructing an identity, who I think I am. To construct an identity, a self in the psychological sense, what do I need? What's necessary to do it?

Well, first of all, I have to be separate and distinct from other selves. Separation is fundamental to my sense of myself. There cannot be self without others. And if there are others, well, there must be me. But I'm not those others—I'm me. If there are others, then there's me. If there's me, there are others. They always go together.

So to be separate and distinct from other selves, it's necessary to identify some unchanging characteristics that provide a stable sense of identity, of stability in the identity. This is the person that I remain throughout all the ups and downs of life. For example, I know things change—it's pretty obvious. I know I'm getting old and I know the world is changing. But all of that perception rests on the assumption that there is some permanent underlying "I" that is subject to these changes I complain about and in essence

remains the same.

I remember a lightning flash of realization when I was quite young, at university. I lived in a student household in Sydney, and one of the people living there at the time was this young woman who was quite slender. I remember her as tall, although that could be a visual misperception because it just meant she was taller than me—and that's most of the population. I remember explaining to her one night that I was lean and tough as whipcord. She looked down her nose at me and said, "You're not lean, Patrick. You're pudgy."

At the time I wasn't pleased with this perception. But sitting up here now, I'd be really pleased to be pudgy again. So there was this young bloke who was pudgy. Now there's this old bloke who's fat. But to me, it's the same person. That hasn't changed. Everything else has changed, but what hasn't changed is that was me back then—the same me who's sitting here tonight.

So identification requires some unchanging characteristics that provide the sense of identity. We need that for ourselves. And we need to possess something subject to the control of this identity. This includes possessions in the normal sense of the word, such as my watch. But there are also aspects of myself to which it makes sense to refer to as "mine." For example, my body. That makes sense, doesn't it? My thoughts.

my feelings. And this sense of possession extends to our social identity—my relationship, my job, my reputation.

The Buddha is undermining our assumption of permanence, permanence in the sense of lasting unchanged over time, and he's undermining our sense of possession. He's saying that we cannot find any aspect of ourselves that lasts unchanged over time, and we cannot find any aspect of what we claim as mine which we actually control.

For example, if any possession of mine is characterized as being under my control, then who here possesses their own meditation practice? And yet, don't we call it "my practice"? You notice it doesn't quite work?

So the Buddha is undermining our assumption of permanence. And then he moves on to examine the relationship between change and pain. He says, "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."

You do get the impression that the bhikkhus were yes-men. Let's assume they meant it.

So this is the second argument that the Buddha presents. Experience is impermanent. It is anicca, changing. Whatever experience we identify with as "me" turns into something else. And so it cannot be

me, because that means that with the disappearance of that experience, I die. And more than that, anything which is impermanent is unreliable.

Here we come to the Pali word which helps us understand what's going on. The word that usually gets translated as "impermanent" is anicca—where the "a" is the negative prefix. So, not nicca in Pali, or in Sanskrit not nitya. Now, nicca or nitya, in ordinary everyday language in the Buddha's time, refers to that which is permanent and therefore that which is reliable. This is a central aspect of the meaning which we miss in the abstract term "impermanent."

Let's say that a city has a permanent water supply. That means it's got a reliable water supply. That means its inhabitants do not have to worry about drought. They can relax, at least about this. But if the water supply is anicca, that means it will, at some time, disappoint, because it will, at some time, fail. It's not a question of if, it's a question of when. What is certain here is that the water supply will fail, and this fact is not under my control.

If something is beyond my control, and ultimately, because of its failure, a source of distress, then for the Upanishadic tradition, it does not qualify as atman, as self. What the Buddha is saying is that every experience we track changes. So no experience qualifies as self.

But if identity—who I deeply think I am, who I deeply feel I am—is not atman, not self, then what is it? For the Buddha, identity is a construction project. And it's a construction project which is never completed. In that sense, it's rather like a lot of home renovation projects. I speak from bitter experience.

So it's not something already given, already here. It's something that is under construction. And this project of self or identity construction has three fundamental movements, according to the Buddha: craving, conceit, and view.

Let's look at these three. The first one is craving, which we've talked about—drivenness, tanha—which we're familiar with from the Four Truths. This is the movement "this is mine." It can be seen here as the drive to possess. We talked about the Buddhist teaching concerning dukkha, which is a painful emptiness, a sense of lack at the core of our being. We feel we are missing something, and we're driven to fill that gap.

So tanha represents the affective drive that fuels our delusion and attachments, expressed in things like narcissism and consumerism—the craving to possess, "this is mine." And of course, this is what the advertising industry is built around.

We can see it broadly in the drive to production and consumption, but we can see it more subtly in ourselves as the drive to possess experience. In other words, my relationship to experience is always colored by the sense of, "What can I get out of this? What's in it for me?"

Even when we're doing the meditation practice—this is *my* meditation experience. Or when I'm sitting,

doing a meditation session, do I have a sense that it's going well? Doesn't that mean that I feel I am getting something out of this? Isn't it the drive to possess? Or if you do a meditation retreat and you're very happy with it, very satisfied, feeling you're very close to attaining full awakening, you might be tempted to say, "I got a lot out of this retreat." And again, it's this drive to possess.

If we ask, "What is a possession?" we find that if something is mine, it's part of me. It's not just an object in the world. If we ask, "Where is the boundary of the self?"—we might say the edges of the body, that seems obvious. But when we look more closely, we can see that the self actually extends beyond the body into what is mine, my possessions.

For example, my watch, which I'm wearing tonight. What makes my watch unique? Thousands have been manufactured, all of them identical. But this watch is special, different, unique—because this watch is mine, which makes it part of me.

And for the Buddha, if this is mine, then I should be in command of it. But does my watch obey my orders? Often it does, so I can take it for granted as mine and it confirms me and my project. But sometimes it misbehaves. It shows the wrong time. Or the battery runs out. Or the light is too poor to see the hands. Or my sight is declining so much that I can't read it. Or I lose it. Or someone takes it. And then the limits of my control become evident, along with the futility of depending on this possession for my sense of identity. What's true of the watch is true of every relationship of "this is mine."

The second movement is in English called conceit, and it has the form "I am this." Now, what gets translated as conceit is mana. It's not a good translation. Literally it means measuring. When we measure something, we define its boundaries—we define the border where this thing ends and other things begin. So mana, usually translated as conceit, appears as a sense of separation and therefore comparison.

Separation creates borders. It creates a fundamental duality of identity and difference in all of its forms. It creates the world of this and that, here and there, near and far, good and bad, better and worse, and so on. Separation also creates identity as "I in here" and "you out there," which are different. And one way we can see how this mana, this conceit, this measuring appears...

is as a sense of what is important to me. I and mine are here and important. You and yours are out there and not so important. Them and theirs are way out there and so even less important. The more distant, the less important.

And this is not necessarily the distance of geography, but of identity. For most Australians, for example, Asia is further away than Europe, despite being actually a lot closer in terms of physical distance. Asia is more distant, more separated in culture, history, relevance. We do not construct a collective identity as Southern Asians. Our collective identity is as Europeans living on the wrong side of the world. So this sense of distance is more psychological than geographical or physical.

This is conceit: "I am this."

And finally we arrive at view, *diṭṭhi*: "This is myself." Craving and conceit are bound together. Craving energises conceit. We are driven to possess and to identify as something—"I am this." It's not enough to be other, to be separate. We want to be something, something specific. And we find this something through view.

This is the most surface, the most visible of these three movements. One way to recognise it in action, which you've seen throughout this retreat, is how the creation of self culminates in a story—the story that defines myself to me and to others. We define ourselves through stories. We remember through stories. We construct a future through stories. In a fundamental sense, we *are* stories.

The philosopher Daniel Dennett, way back in the last century, wrote that we do not tell our stories—our stories tell us. I think that sums it up very nicely. The self can be seen as the centre of narrative gravity, the foundational stories we come back to again and again.

This is the view of identity, *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, which we've mentioned, abandoned only at stream entry. It's bound up with narrative, with story. Craving and conceit operate at more basic levels, beneath the story. But view bursts above the surface as a story of a self within a social world.

This is one reason why tracking the thought stream can be such powerful practice. When we see the emptiness of our thinking, it's a gateway into recognising the emptiness of the self.

Story is significant because stories give us meaning. They're the ways in which we create the meaning of our lives. And the stories within which I live are actually more real to me than the physical world I inhabit.

Consider the simple activity of hanging out the clothes. Externally, from an observer's perspective, if we ask, "What is this person doing?" it's pretty obvious—they're hanging clothes out on the line. But from the actor's perspective, from inside the experience, the activity may be thinking, creating a reality by telling a story. A story which is more real and more compelling than the physical act of hanging out the clothes. The routine physical activity does not grab, because its narrative power is weak, even if its direct sensate quality is strong. Still, we easily forget that and slide into the world of the story.

This is why thinking is so seductive. Thinking creates meaning. And with that, it creates a self within a world.

So that's an internal self bound up with stories. But we also have the social self, which is likewise bound up with stories—but here it's the stories that other people tell about us.

Let's say I meet with family on some special occasion, Christmas or whatever. To my shock, I realise why I don't like these gatherings: I realise that they're relating to me as the person they knew twenty or thirty years ago, rather than the person I am now. But what's even more alarming is that I find myself relating to them as that person of thirty years ago. Somehow they have the power to define my own identity, which is

quite unsettling when it happens.

This is view, the most surface aspect of the construction of self.

But basically, for the Buddha, what we're doing all of the time is creating a self which is real—but real only as a construct of the mind, a network of concepts and feelings. Yet we are convinced that there is more to it than just concepts. We believe that the self creates the concepts and that our concepts point back toward the self. But when we look for the creator of the concepts, the writer of the stories, we can't find it.

And when we look for the one for whom these concepts are created, the audience of our thoughts, we can't find him. We can't find anyone. So we're convinced that there is someone here, but the self that seems so real, so important, that it dominates the way that we live, is also so ephemeral that we cannot pin it down in any experience.

So this is an exposition of how the Buddha sees self as a construction project. And in the next talk, we're going to describe how the Buddha explains the deconstruction of self and how the understanding of not-self emerges.

Question: Occasionally you have said that you choose to go and be monks or this or that. And then you've said that we are just a sensory flow of information. I have talked to masters and they have assured me there is choice. I can't see a choice. I was wondering what Buddha's view is on choice.

This is one of the tricky questions for the Buddha's teaching, because he says choice is real but there's no one making the choice. So choice is conditioned. But this system of conditioning which he calls dependent arising is a very complex, non-linear system, and it's possible for us to influence it, to change its direction. So he doesn't teach determinism.

For him, choice is conditioned, but we can do things that change our relationship to choice. A lot of the choices that we make are habitual, and so we simply do not see them. And if we do not see them, we don't think that we're making a choice. If we can see ourselves making a choice, then there's an opportunity to influence it. It can be conditioned by desire, aversion, aspiration, whatever.

So choice is very important, and for the Buddha, choice is karma. Karma is very important. But for the Buddha, if you ask what is karma, it is choice.

Basically, in practical terms, he says, look, there's a lot of our experience which is already given. Let's say you come along to a meditation retreat and at some point in the retreat you think, "I really wish I hadn't come. I just want to get out of here." I'm sure no one in this room has ever had that thought. But when that thought arises, you realise, well, there's a sense in which I'm stuck. I'm already here. And my past conditioned me in all sorts of ways which ended up with me here, now. And this is a given.

So the question is: okay, what do I do about it? And this is where choice comes up. Well, I could leave, or I

could stay. So suddenly there's an opening out. And the Buddha says this area where we have an opportunity to influence the flow of events is crucially important. He insists that we do have that ability.

Follow-up: I don't see it because, for example, with your example of the retreat—I would probably say that for me personally, I've never left a retreat. I hardly lose my record, or a certain stubbornness which is innate to my personality. Or someone may think, "I don't want other people to think something of me if I leave the retreat," so their personality, which they haven't chosen, is determining the outcome rather than a choice.

So you can say that there's the appearance of a choice, but in reality it's being conditioned by past events. This is a teaching which certainly was around when the Buddha was around, and there's one discourse in which he explicitly rejects it. He says there are three views that he rejected, if I remember correctly, even before he became the Buddha. One is that everything that happens, happens as a result of previous causes—which I think is the view you're suggesting. Another is that everything that happens, happens as a result of fate. And the third is that everything that happens, happens because of the will of God.

He laid out these three views, and he rejected all of them. But interestingly, he didn't reject them because he thought they were wrong—although I suspect he did think they were wrong. He rejected them because he said, if you actually believe, genuinely believe, any of these three doctrines, you will give up. And that's the worst thing to do. So it's better to believe that there is a choice, even if it turns out there isn't. Because then we won't give up. We'll keep going. And things will happen.

Someone raised the point that this connects to the whole idea of reaching an unconditioned state—that as you become more unconditioned, you have more genuine choice.

Yes, that opens up a whole new can of worms when we start talking about the unconditioned. I think you're right, but I don't want to go there, because I think we could be here all night.

This is part of the idea behind pragmatic truth. This isn't the Buddha specifically, but there is a school of philosophical reasoning about truth which argues that what's central about truth isn't whether or not something actually is factual, but whether it is useful. Does it work? And I think the Buddha would have had sympathy with that kind of approach, because his basic project wasn't philosophy. He wasn't doing philosophy. What he wanted was the reduction of suffering. So how can I help people work towards less suffering? Well, if they believe they have a choice, that'll make it easier. So why not believe you've got a choice? I suspect that's where he was coming from.

Someone mentioned the sense of momentum in the mind—how did they end up here, finding the Dharma, practicing, having the inclination toward it? Why me?

Yes, there is something quite mysterious about it, which I don't think gets captured in any philosophical discussion or doctrine. I think the Buddha's approach was basically very pragmatic. Does it work? Does this take me towards less suffering or more suffering? I think I'll go for that one. Which is a choice. Which I'm not making because it's already been made. This is where it just spins around and around and around.

Even with all those conditions we were talking about, you could still walk out. You wake up in the morning, have a nice sleep, and just walk out. It's still possible. Anything is possible, but the question is where does it come from? I don't think there's any answer to these kinds of debates—not philosophically. Existentially there's an answer. Am I going to make a choice or not? But philosophically, I think it just goes around and around forever.

Then someone asked about stream entry. They were confused because three of the ascetics—actually, all five of them—achieved stream entry before they learned about not-self. But isn't the marker of stream entry the perception of not-self?

Yes, but that's a way of reading what happened.

So the doctrine of not-self is a way of reading experience. It's a conceptual overlay we put on top of experience. And apparently the Buddha hadn't introduced that until after they all attained stream entry. He was very careful. For example, he talked about the middle way first—and the middle way implies not-self. So he had already introduced it in that form, the form of practice. Finding the middle way of practice, but without challenging the Upanishadic doctrine directly. He waited until he felt they were ready.

The fact that the Buddha taught *anātman*, not-self, was controversial in his time. He did cop flack for doing it, and he cops flack to this very day. There are Indians who would say, "Oh, Buddha was a Hindu. He's part of our proud Indian tradition. And while there are heretics who claim he taught not-self, really he taught self—just a more subtle form of self." Because they can't quite accept this not-self. When I was teaching retreats in India, it was interesting how many students were quite disturbed at this idea of not-self and me saying it's important. "What? But we're talking about the Buddha, aren't we? He's the great Indian sage." So we're talking about concept and the clinging to concept. He was careful not to introduce that concept until he was quite sure everybody was ready for it. But then, once it was out of the bag, it was out there.

*Student:** Just to clarify, in this sutta the Buddha is talking about what self is not. But he's not challenging the self itself. He's saying the factors known as contributing to self are not self, and he explains why. He's not actually saying self exists or self doesn't exist.

*Teacher:** He never says self exists. He never says self does not exist. Bingo. He says, "This is not self. This is not self." He's always explicit. In other words, he's always interested in this experience.

*Student:** So that still leaves the question mark—is there self or not? We're just not talking about it?

*Teacher:** Let's go into this later on. It's a very interesting point. We'll explore it.

So the aggregates are conditioned by other things. The self we perceive is made up of non-self elements.

*Student:** When you go into the discourse about stream entry and once-returner—if there's a

once-returner, who returns?

*Teacher:** This is really a question of language. Let's say you're living with an enlightened one. And let's say you decide it's time for a nice cup of coffee. The enlightened one, full of compassion, gets up, goes to the fridge, and says, "Oh, there's no milk. Don't worry, I'll just nip down to the shop and bring back a bottle." Would you be horrified and say, "How could you say that? You know there's no self!"

So should the enlightened one say, "In this infinitely complex universe, innumerable dharmas arise and cease. Arising in this particular *citta* located approximately here is the decision to move this physical apparatus in the direction of what would appear to be a shop"? And after five minutes of explanation, finally manage to communicate that they're going down to the shop to get a bottle of milk.

This is conventional language. The Buddha uses conventional language, but he's not suggesting there's a direct experience that corresponds to that language.

So this is the difference between the world of direct experience, the world of the dharmas, versus the world of concept. But the world of concept is necessary, otherwise we'd be paralyzed, we couldn't function. So the Buddha uses this kind of language, but knowing that fundamentally it's not true, but it's useful.

Of course, in the tradition, as Buddhism becomes a mass religion, most of the people have not realized. So they get caught up in the language. They assume that the "I" of the language is real. "I will be reborn," for example. But just for entertainment's sake, in a few days' time we're going to have a talk on rebirth, and we'll go into it then. Should stir things up.

Question from student about the phrase "it happened for a reason" being common in Australia.

I like to write things on my window in the back of the car. I have yet to get my tire slashed. But what I've got is: "It happened for a reason" — and I crossed out "for a" and put "because of." I invite anybody to write that on the back of your window.

Very good.

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