Origins 6: Not-Self Part 2

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 46:56

Last night we went through the opening of the Anatta Lakhana Sutta, the second of the formal discourses given by the Buddha. We pointed out how the Buddha introduces the subject of not-self explicitly. It's implicit in what he's done so far, but he talks about this explicitly only after his students have attained the vision of Dharma—the first stage of awakening. He then uses the not-self teaching as a guide to full awakening, which indicates that anatta is an advanced teaching. So don't be too quick to try to understand it, and don't be discouraged if you feel that you don't.

We talked mostly about what we could call the psychological self, and in fact this is the Buddha's main emphasis—the self who we deeply think we are, who we deeply feel we are. Of course, when the Buddha was teaching, the social context included the popularity of the doctrinal self, the Atman of the Upanishads. This may have been a reason why he delayed before talking about it. This doctrine of Atman would be what his audiences took for granted as part of their belief system, especially the learned audiences, the people who had studied to some degree. But our interest is not in the philosophical, doctrinal sense of self. We're interested in the psychological self, because this is the self that we engage with in our practice.

Last night we saw how the Buddha introduces the subject of not-self by showing that our experience is not under our control, and therefore should not be related to as me and mine. Control is inherent to selfhood. If I'm a self, I get to choose what I do. If I'm a self, then I possess body, mind, possessions, social status, and so on. And if they're mine, I must be in charge of them. I must be able to control them. So when the Buddha starts to undermine our sense of control, he's undermining our sense of self.

He points out that self is not some metaphysical entity. It's an activity. It's a construction project—the construction of a self-concept based on three movements: craving, conceit, and view. Craving appears as the movement "this is mine." Conceit appears as "I am this." And view appears as "this is myself."

As we mentioned last night, you notice that at no point in this discourse has the Buddha said the self does not exist. In fact, I don't think he ever says that. Nor does he ever say that the self does exist. He's not getting entangled in these philosophical debates. What he's saying is that we never experience self. Whatever we experience turns out to be not-self. This is one reason why he keeps saying "this is not self"—this experience isn't self—rather than "there is no self."

In this he agrees with Yajnavalkya. He was a founding teacher of the Upanishadic tradition who lived about two or three centuries before the Buddha in the Videha kingdom. This is the area in what is now northern Bihar state that the Bodhisattva first went to after he left home, where he practiced meditation and studied Dharma under at least two teachers, Alara Kalama and Uddhaka Ramaputta. Yajnavalkya

came from this area, and his tradition was still quite strong. He was the creator of the Brihadaranyika Upanishad, one of the early famous Upanishads. He either composed it or it was composed by his students looking back to his memory.

So let's look at a brief teaching on self given by Yajnavalkya in the Brihadaranyika Upanishad. Yajnavalkya says: "You cannot see the seer from seeing. You cannot hear the hearer from hearing. You cannot think the thinker from thinking. You cannot know the knower from knowing."

Now this is a very interesting statement, because who is the seer? Who is the hearer? Who is the knower? It's atma, it's self. So Yajnavalkya is agreeing with the Buddha that everything we experience is not self. He and the Buddha are in full agreement on this point.

But Yajnavalkya infers that there is a self, because there is experience. And for him, self—atma—is what lies behind experience, what undergoes experience, what makes experience itself possible.

To get a sense of his argument, which is quite interesting, let's consider in ordinary, mundane, non-philosophical terms the question: What is the one thing I can never see? The one thing in the visible world that I can never see. And the answer is obvious: my own eyes. I cannot see my eyes because I see from my eyes. Now I can see the reflection of my eyes in a mirror, but I cannot see my own eyes directly.

So let's say I was a strict empiricist. I've never seen my own eyes. It's perfectly clear to me I don't have eyes. You have eyes, and you have eyes, and you seem to have eyes, but I don't—because I've never seen them. Well, it's not very convincing, is it? Obviously I've got eyes because I can see.

This is what Yajnavalkya is getting at. Obviously there is an Atman, there is a soul, because there is experience. There is knowing, so there must be a knower. But because we know from the knower, we cannot know the knower. Yet we know there is one because we know.

What makes the Buddha unusual at the time, if not unique, is that he refuses to make that move. He refuses to infer the soul. If we try to pin down the Buddha philosophically, we could call him a radical empiricist. He's an empiricist because what he's interested in is human experience. He's radical because that's the entirety of what he's interested in. He's not interested in anything else. If something is beyond the range of our experience, he doesn't want to say anything about it. He doesn't want to say it exists. He doesn't want to say it does not exist. He refuses to move beyond actual felt experience to speculate about what might or might not exist beyond the range of human experience.

And he's consistent with this throughout, including when he talks about life after life, when he talks about deva realms and all this sort of stuff, because he's experienced these things. As far as he's concerned—there might be members of the audience who grimace and say, "No, I don't think so"—but this is what he thought and believed.

Now what we do, of course, perhaps even more than Yajnavalkya, is that we move beyond our actual

experience in order to make sense of it, to navigate it, by creating a concept of a self within a world. And this construction project, the Buddha says, is driven by craving and results in dukkha.

In the first part of the Anattalakkhana Sutta, the Buddha reveals how the self concept is constructed, and this allows us to see self as an activity rather than an identity. You get the term "selfing" in there. When we're doing this practice, much of what we're seeing in real time is selfing—creating a soul operating within a world.

In the second part of the discourse, he goes on to explain how this self concept is deconstructed. The first aspect of this, of course, is to see it being constructed. You can't begin to deconstruct it until we see it as a construct.

But let's take the next step. The Buddha says—and remember that when he talks about self, he talks about it in terms of the five aggregates: body, feeling, perception, choices, awareness—he says: "For any kind of body, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, superior or inferior, near or far—all body should be regarded with penetrating understanding, realistically, in this way: This is not mine. I am not this. This is not my soul."

You notice the focus is on experience. This experience here and now is not self. No grand philosophical conclusions. Just this is not so.

For any kind of feeling, for any kind of perception, for any kind of construction, for any kind of awareness—past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, superior or inferior, near or far—all awareness should be regarded with penetrating understanding realistically in this way: This is not mine. I am not this. This is not my soul.

So here we've reached the heart of the discourse: the practice of tracking not-self.

Now, what kind of experience do we apply this practice to? Well, the Buddha says any experience that can be characterized by its location in time, space, or quality. Time: past, future, or present. Space: internal or external, near or far. Quality: gross or subtle, superior or inferior.

In shorthand, what this is basically talking about is any experience subject to *māna*. Remember we talked about *māna*, usually translated as conceit, literally "measured." It appears as the fundamental sense of separation that enables an event to be experienced as this rather than that, here rather than there, then rather than now, painful rather than pleasant, and so on. Important rather than trivial. These are the categories that provide the meaning of everything we undergo. And at the heart of this is *māna*—measurin g.

Notice again that throughout this teaching the Buddha is pointing to what body, feeling, perception, constructions, and awareness are *not*. He makes no attempt ever to say what they *are*. He's not giving us a theory to fill the gap. He's not going to tell us what's going on. Why not? Needless to say, I'm not going to

answer that—at least not now.

So the Buddha goes on: "Seeing in this way, the trained, cultivated student is disenchanted with body, disenchanted with feeling, disenchanted with perception, disenchanted with constructions, disenchanted with awareness. With disenchantment, obsession fades. And from the fading of obsession comes liberation. With liberation comes the understanding of liberation, along with the knowledge: birth is exhausted, the highest life is fulfilled, what should be done is done, there is no further becoming."

Let's go through this translation in two small paragraphs. First of all, it's all about the trained, cultivated student. This is, in other words, a mature practitioner. Again we have an indication that *anattā* is something that can be appreciated only by someone mature and developed in their practice.

The turning point in this is disenchantment. In earlier translations—and you still tend to see it sometimes today—this gets translated as something like "disgust," which is absolutely ridiculous given that disgust is an emotion fueled by aversion. The Buddha is definitely not talking about this. He's talking about something quite different.

The term I translate here as disenchantment is *nibbidā*. It comes from the root *vid*, to experience, to find, also to feel. In front of it is the prefix *nir*, which in Pali becomes *nib*—so *nibbidā* is a finding out, a discovery of something. Enchantment always implies *avijjā*, delusion. We're enchanted with something only when we don't really understand it, when we are intoxicated by it.

For example, dare I say, the delusions of romantic love. Nibbida also implies a moving out, away from our normal experience to something quite new. So when we really discover what's going on, our relationship to it changes. We're moved to a new response, a different response. For example, over time, the movement from romantic love to a much more stable love, based on mutual care and friendship.

Now, classical examples of nibbida. One is Gotama's disillusionment with domestic life when, as a young man, he first realized dukkha, and then left home in search of awakening. Disenchantment—he was disenchanted with his way of life. Another is Gotama's disillusionment with asceticism, when he realized it was completely futile and abandoned it in search of a new way of practicing. These are classical examples of nibbida that the Buddha would have drawn on from his own experience.

Nibbida, disenchantment, embraces the entire human condition, both cognitive and affective. It is affective in that the heart is moved to say "enough." And it does that through an intimacy of experience, becoming intimate with the experience. For example, we find ourselves obsessed with painful stories, endlessly recycling them. When we meditate, they just come up as ambushes, endlessly recycling. When they stop is when, quite genuinely, we've had enough. When we've had enough, we stop. And if the stories are still circulating, it's because we haven't had enough yet. This would suggest we haven't been intimate enough yet.

So nibbida is affective, but it's also cognitive. It's a finding out, a discovery, an understanding that

arises—a new understanding that arises as part of that response. The heart has changed. What previously seemed desirable is not anymore, because the heart has changed and our desires have moved on to focus on something else that has become interesting, stimulating, necessary. And again, it's cognitive because from the change in the heart, the world is now different. What was previously hidden from us is now obvious. We find ourselves living in a different world.

So this is the turning point. Nibbida.

Actually, I'm reminded of a Sydney barrister—the man who developed that ABC series about the rake. Do you remember *Rake*? The eccentric barrister? Well, the person who invented that character was himself a Sydney barrister and was an alcoholic. He used to write columns, and in one of them he said, "I wish when I was young that somebody had explained to me that there is only so much alcohol a human body can consume in a given lifetime. Because if I'd known that, I wouldn't have used up my share by the time I was forty." It's quite interesting because clearly he had an experience of limit. One day he decided, "That's enough now." And that's when you stop.

So the Buddha says, "With disenchantment, obsession fades. And from the fading of obsession comes liberation."

Obsession fades. This is viraga. And this indicates a natural process of maturity. I think we've mentioned this before. Viraga is the opposite of raga. Raga literally means "colour." So viraga is the fading of colour.

And the image is that Indians liked brightly coloured clothing. So let's say you buy a set of robes, because they wore robes rather than trousers, and it's a beautiful colour. You wear it, and it gets dirty, so you wash it. After it's dry, you look at it, and you realise this is good quality dye, because it looks exactly the same. And so you continue to wear it and wash it, dry it, wash it, dry it, wash it, wash it, wash it.

And that colour really holds. It's really good quality. And one day, when you put it on, you realise, actually, it's not the same colour. It's fading. This is viraga. And you notice that it's slow—so slow that you don't notice it from day to day, week to week, even month to month. So it's a natural process of maturity where desire changes.

Actually, one time I was talking about this, and I used to give the example: it's like if you're ten years old and you're completely obsessed with certain toys and activities, and by the time you reach adulthood, you've not only left all these behind, you've completely forgotten about them. Because your desire has moved on to something new. And there was one fellow in the audience, English originally but living in Australia, and he cried out in objection, "Except football!" I have to admit, that might be an exception.

Anyway, so this indicates a gradual, natural process of maturity of the citta. The world is different. We're not so driven. We have some distance. So the heart moves, but we have a different attitude. It's like watching a really good drama on television. If the script is good, the production value is good, the acting is good, we get really drawn in. As the characters go through their drama, we feel an emotion that comes up

and flows along with the story. The story moves us. So the emotion we are feeling is real, genuine. But while this emotion is real, we can clearly see that the situation is not real. It's a created narrative. And we can see that in real time.

So this is the kind of relationship to experience that begins to emerge. One way of looking at it is that we could say the experiencing itself is more real than what we think we experience. The experiencing itself is what's real. Which means we're no longer so bound up in our affective responses and our conceptual view, because we can see them as part of a wider network of conditioning, and these conditions come and go.

And then the Buddha says, with liberation comes the understanding of liberation. Along with the knowledge: birth is exhausted, the highest life is fulfilled, what should be done is done, there is no further becoming.

So with disenchantment, obsession fades. From the fading of obsession comes liberation. Liberation translates vimutti. In Sanskrit, this is vimoksha. Now it comes from the verb munjiti, to release. In everyday language, this verb is also used to describe the release of an arrow from a bow. When an arrow is released from the bow, it goes—sudden. And liberation implies a sudden movement of awareness, even a shock of awareness. Suddenly we know something new, something different. Perhaps not yet defined at that moment. We don't necessarily put it into language. But we know—bang!—something just happened. Beyond any previous perception of normality.

And liberation is essentially affective. The heart is moved and changed. So with liberation comes the understanding of liberation. The understanding is more cognitive and implies a reflexive distance, a looking back upon the situation.

So we know ourselves to be different. We know the world to be different.

Now, without understanding, the experience of liberation might fail to become anything more than a memory with no particular significance—no significance for the way that we live. It's like in meditation, for example: we may have a new, unexpected experience, but we don't know what it is, and we don't know what it means. And so it fails. It's just an interesting memory. But if we understand it, if we can fit it into a context, then the experience itself is completed. It becomes part of a new normal and is integrated into our lives.

Liberation is like a sudden flash. Suddenly something happens that changes our relationship to the world, and it seems to come from outside, from beyond ourselves. While understanding, in contrast, comes gradually. It matures over time. And we don't know the unit of time. It may be a day. It may be a month. It may be a year. It may be a decade. It may be fifty years. But who's counting? What does fifty years mean when time is just a concept?

But something starts to happen, and we now can put this experience into a context.

Just to give an example: when I was at the Mahasi Centre, I had ordained, and a close friend of mine, who I practiced with, was a young monk, originally from the US. He began his meditation practice when he was about twenty. He went to a retreat run by a very well-known teacher, and he jumped right into it. Towards the end of the retreat, something happened. Click. Which was clearly significant. And he went to interview. He said what happened. Now, he said his memory of this was not entirely guaranteed clear, because it was at least ten years ago and it happened very quickly. But it was like the teacher did this really quick double take and muttered something like, "Nah, couldn't be." And then said, "Don't worry about it, calm down, everything's okay." And sent him off.

And he was okay. The retreat ended, he left, he went home, and his whole world collapsed. He was thrashing about. But he had the—in Buddhist terms—the *pāramī*, the affinity with the Dharma, not to give up on this. It impelled him into serious meditation, into spiritual quest.

So we're standing on the veranda of the foreign male guest house at the Mahasi Centre. He had just come out of his room, and I was in the corridor. I said, "Venerable Sir, you look like the cat who's just swallowed the fish. You look very pleased with yourself. What happened?"

So he tells me this story. And I'm wondering, why is he telling me this long story? He finishes by saying, "About five minutes ago, I had that same experience. And this time, the response was: 'Ah, that's where it is.'" Completely different response. That's where it is. I understand it now. And it's not a problem.

The Buddha speaks of how this understanding matures into full awakening. With liberation comes the understanding of liberation, along with the knowledge: "Birth is exhausted, the highest life is fulfilled, what should be done is done, there is no further becoming."

Now, this last sentence actually jumps to the end of the story, to when the practitioner becomes an Arahant, fully awakened. So we're just going to jump to the end, with the final—

understanding there is no further becoming. This is one expression the Buddha uses to describe full awakening.

Now, the further becoming—if there is further becoming—by the way, this expression is sometimes translated to mean life after life, there is no future life. But it actually doesn't mention life. It's just literally "further becoming." Sometimes you see the expression "further becoming in the future," and this is interpreted as meaning the Buddha's talking about future lives. He doesn't mention them. He just says further becoming, sometimes in the future—like the further becoming when you leave this hall. That's further becoming in the future.

If we talk about further becoming, what we're talking about is the self, basically. Because the self exists as a trajectory that takes an identity constructed now from the past into the present, and from there to the future. The self is always associated with this trajectory through time because the self needs time. It's a construction project, and the self needs time to complete the project. So the classic objection: "I can't die

today, my life is still unfinished. There's still things I need to do." Time is built into the self. Further becoming is built into it. We need time to locate ourselves as someone permanent, someone who exists unchanged throughout our life.

So if you take away further becoming, what are we left with? Well, what we're left with is this, now—but not any story about this now. Any story we tell ourselves takes us back into time, back into further becoming. So when we let go of becoming, what we arrive at is pure presence. And this is the place where we began, and which we can recognize only when we drop all our manipulations and agendas, all our attempts to improve ourselves and improve our world so they finally become satisfactory to me.

Presence entails intimacy. When we drop our manipulations and our agendas, we become intimate with experience. And liberation takes place within this intimacy.

Another term that the Buddha uses to talk about this is suchness, which we've already discussed. Remember Ajahn Buddhadasa. The rain is pouring down. The meditators are completely sodden. And Buddhadasa says, "You think the rain is bad. On the other side of the hill there are farmers dancing in their fields because the rain means they can feed their families for another year. So they think the rain is good. You think the rain is bad. You're both wrong. The rain is wet. That's it."

This is suchness. This is intimacy. And where can we find it? By going deeper into our own subjectivity. This is the journey of the practice. And it's our own subjectivity which is both what is most obvious to us, but also what is most hidden. Suchness, for example, is obvious because it's with us all the time. It's with us in our experiencing, which is already happening all of the time. And suchness is hidden

Because our attention is usually directed away from our experiencing towards what is being experienced. Our attention goes there to grasp hold of what we are experiencing in order to judge it, measure it, manipulate it according to our projects and concerns.

But how I experience is more intimate than what I experience. And being more intimate, it is also hidden. It's so close to us that we cannot recognize it. It's like looking for something which is right in front of our eyes—and that's precisely why we can't see it.

When I first heard this story, I thought it perfectly illustrates this predicament. The story goes like this: Two little fish are calmly minding their own business, swimming in the water. In the distance, they see a big, mean, nasty fish swimming towards them. At first, they're in a bit of a panic. What do we do? There's no point in trying to hide. We can't get away—he's already seen us. He'll notice that we're running. We've just got to swim past. Just ignore him.

So they swim very nervously. And the big fish swims past them. But as he's swimming past, he says, "Morning, boys. The water's beautiful today, isn't it?" And off he goes.

The two little fish have just gotten away—made it this time—and they're swimming off to a safe distance.

And then one of the little fish says to the other, "What the hell is water?"

This is the situation we find ourselves in most of the time.

So the discourse ends. "This is what the Blessed One said, and the group of five bhikkhus rejoiced in his words. As he was speaking, they were fully liberated from the influences." Then there were six arahants in the world. The five of them became fully awakened, and from one arahant, one fully awakened one, we now have six. Things are pretty good.

And on that good news, we'll end the talk. Any questions?

What was your friend's insider experience?

I don't know. He didn't tell me. It was devastating to his worldview, that's for sure. And such experiences do happen. They can happen quite naively, in the sense that people are far from ready for such an experience. They can happen outside the context of meditation practice entirely—it could be in ordinary life, it could be a drug experience. Anything can happen. And suddenly you realize the world isn't what you thought it was.

And then what do you do? Maybe you find a good psychologist. It's part of the human condition. But some experiences are stronger than others, and some of them can be quite shocking. Yet we are simply talking about natural human experience. What the Buddha provides is a way of reading the experience—to make meaning of it in a way that helps us to live better.

Can you put presence in the context of Pali, maybe the khandhas or some Pali terminology? That term in English is used quite a lot.

"Presence" and "beingness" — did I say beingness? That's a stretch. But presence, definitely. Intimacy and a certain presence. You get a sense of it sometimes when the heart and the mind really settle and you're present and there's nothing getting in the way at all.

Yes, but how does that state fit into what the Buddha taught? What did the Buddha do with that?

In the context of the practice, it's strong mindfulness — nothing getting in the way — and therefore the heart is calm. So equanimity, there is an expression. You could also see it as nibbāna, because everything is cool and quiet. But the category of nibbāna here is *tadaṅga nibbāna*, which is usually translated as "temporary nibbāna." It's when the heart completely cools.

One teacher who really emphasized this was Ajahn Buddhadasa. He said every adult human being, for sure, has experienced nibbāna on at least one occasion — probably multiple occasions. And we can prove it because they're not all locked up in insane asylums. Otherwise they would go mad. So we must have experienced it. I don't know if that's right or not, but it's a very interesting view. Sometimes you do get the experience where all difficulty just — oh, it's gone. But then it comes back. So this could be described as *ta*

daṅga nibbāna. I think it's in the Zen stories they talk about this. In Theravāda, not so much at all. But it's there in the suttas. And even Mahasi Sayadaw talks about it, amazingly enough.

I'm glad you mentioned that, because I've always felt that you have no experience in the sense that you "get there" and might like attaching this notion of nibbāna upon your arrival — but surely you have the temperament of the exit along the way.

So nibbāna is, again, part of the human condition. It's not something supernatural. None of what the Buddha taught was supernatural. But the question is: how do we allow ourselves to recognize it? Often the experience itself is a kind of falling in, purely by accident. And of course, when the grasping starts up, we've fallen out of it. But when we get a sense of it, then we can recognize — it's a cooling, it's a peace, like the fires have gone out, at least temporarily.

The idea of enlightenment, particularly full enlightenment, is that this becomes the normal everyday state. That's the awakened one's normal everyday consciousness. But for most people, it's just an occasional something that happens, and invariably it doesn't last. Sometimes it ends as soon as we notice it.

That takes us away from the Dhamma into history and politics. As far as we know, there's a whole field of research into early Mahāyāna and the origins of the Mahāyāna. We do know that in early Mahāyāna in India, monks who identified themselves as Mahāyāna — and nuns — would live in the same monastery with monks and nuns who were not Mahāyāna. At the time, essentially, they were mainstream. And they lived together harmoniously, apparently, because they would share the same *vinaya*, the same interpretation of the monastic discipline.

Again, this is part of the Buddhist tradition where it doesn't really matter what you believe. You believe what you believe. But the way that we live — that's important. So you can have members of a community who disagree with each other on doctrinal matters, but it doesn't matter.

At some point, however, the people of the early Mahāyāna started to move away. They started to live in their own communities and decided that these other people who hadn't converted would be called "Hīnayāna" — lower vehicle, lesser vehicle, inferior vehicle.

And then they started to downplay what these people were saying. They claimed that the Arahant was just getting started on the quest for liberation, that they would eventually need to wake up and realize they were merely partway along the path, and then continue all the way to full Buddhahood. So you begin to see this hierarchy emerging.

But this development is fairly late in India. When Mahayana was successfully exported to other countries, however, all of this was simply taken for granted—this idea of the superiority of "us" and the inferiority of "them."

It actually rather reminds me of the caste system. Today we have people in India who regard themselves

as Brahmins, and therefore pure. But they can't be Brahmins unless there are people at the bottom who are outcasts, who are impure. Because you can't be pure unless you measure yourself against the impure. And so upper caste people become really upset when lower caste people say, "You're nothing. The caste system is complete rubbish." No, you can't say that, because you've threatened them and their position. If you want to be greater, you've got to have someone who is lesser. This is where politics comes in.

But I like what Gary Snyder, the American Zen practitioner and poet, once said: "Lesser vehicle, greater vehicle—all vehicles will be towed away at owner's expense." For me, that pretty much sums it up.

There's a nice little book by Analayo called *Superiority Conceit in Buddhism*. It's about four chapters, and he goes through the superiority conceit of the Mahayanists, the superiority conceit of the Theravadans who think they're superior, and a couple of others. It's quite interesting—he just demolishes all of them.

And then, of course, there are the Vajrayanists. Well, yes.

Thank you very much.

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