Exploring Not Self: Is Anyone Here?

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 1:02:31

I've been working on talks regarding insight in general, but more recently I've been focusing on anatta, not self. Tonight's talk is a combination of two other talks I've been putting together, trying to get something that might actually work. My apologies in advance—it is a bit technical.

The title is "Exploring Not Self." We're going to look at the Buddha's teaching of not self, but we're going to try to put it into context, historical context. So we're beginning with his background. Because when you look at his career as a practitioner, he was trained in a tradition that taught self—in Sanskrit, atman. This is the term he would have been familiar with. Only after his awakening did he reject the concept of atman in favor of not atman, or in Pali, anatta. So anatman in Sanskrit, anatta in Pali, not self in English.

He's trained in a tradition where self is at the center of the whole enterprise. And then he flips it around and teaches the opposite. Why? Something's going on. This is what we want to have a look at first.

We begin with the Bodhisattva. The Bodhisattva is the Buddha before he becomes the Buddha. As a young man, he decides to renounce home and search for awakening. So if he's going to go on a search, where to go? He lives in the city of Kapilavastu, which was the capital of the Shakya Republic. This city lay on the main east-west trading route between the kingdom of Kosala to the west, with its capital at Savatthi, and to the southeast, the Vajji Confederacy, which had a couple of capitals, but the major one was at Vesali. Those of you who are familiar with the Buddha's teaching know he spent a fair bit of time at both places, but especially Savatthi.

When the Bodhisattva walks out of home, he arrives at the highway and he's got a choice. He could turn to the right and head to Savatthi, or he could turn to the left and head to Vesali. So why did he turn left?

Where he's going is what in his day was the Vajji Confederacy, a republican confederacy located in what is now northern Bihar state. It was a successor state to the old kingdom of Videha. Videha was smaller; the Vajji Confederacy is bigger. But the old kingdom of Videha—this is the area that he's going to.

Videha, for centuries, had been a major centre for the yogic traditions that we know through the Upanishads. It was in Videha that some of the early Upanishads were composed, especially the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, the Great Forest Upanishad. At the time of the Buddha, this area remained a place where aspiring yogis would go to study and practice Dharma. So the Bodhisattva would have been entering an area where the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad is a very important text.

Essentially in its current form, this Upanishad is a collection of texts that preserve the teaching of the sage Yajnavalkya, who was a native of Videha. Yajnavalkya is very famous as a founding teacher of the Advaita

Vedanta tradition of non-dualism—you've probably all heard of that. He lived several centuries before the Buddha. One of his central teachings was the doctrine of Atman, self. For Yajnavalkya, self is the eternal blissful essence that is found at the heart of subjective experience, and the purpose of practice in this tradition is to uncover atman and then allow it to express itself in our lives. The way of practice is to become deeply silent. Silence in Sanskrit is muni, and one of the old titles of the Buddha is Shakyamuni—the silent one of the Shakyas.

When the mind falls silent, Atman is revealed. So roughly speaking, this is a way of practice.

Now the Bodhisattva joined this tradition. He trained with at least two teachers because we have their names recorded. These were Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputta. And according to the later Buddhist tradition, they taught serenity meditation up to a high level of formless absorption. Without getting into the technicalities, essentially this is very deep concentration. This may be a reference to the practice mentioned in the Brihad Aranyika Upanishad—the silence that reveals the Atman—but it's a later Buddhist perspective on this, in which they're saying, of course it's rubbish, but nice rubbish. Obviously it's not genuine. But when the Bodhisattva was practicing, this is what was going on.

He mastered this tradition, but he then rejected it as inadequate. And then he moves south of the Ganga to the kingdom of Magadha—contemporary South Bihar state, south of the Ganges. In particular, he moved to the area around the city of Gaya. This was a district known for powerful and restless spirits and for the shamans who dealt with them. It's still known for that, by the way. And here the Bodhisattva practiced independently, without a teacher. The practice he took up was extreme asceticism. So this is the second phase of his practice career.

That failed dismally.

And then he developed his own way of practice, which he called the middle way. Through this, he gained awakening. He becomes the Buddha.

So why is this relevant to our understanding of not-self, anatta, or un-atman? The point is that Atman, self, was central to the Bodhisattva's training and practice. And then once he's awakened and becomes a teacher in his own right, instead of teaching Atman, which everybody would expect, he teaches un-atman, not-Atman—in Pali, anatta. In other words, he taught the opposite of what he had been taught. This was shocking and scandalous to his contemporaries, and for many people since then. In fact, it's still a problem today. Some Indians who like to look back at the Buddha as being one of the greatest Indians still can't wrap their heads around the fact that he rejects Atman.

So why did he take this contrary path? What problem did he see in the Atman doctrine? This is the background that we're looking at.

Let's look at Atman in this Upanishadic tradition, because this is what the Buddha means when he talks about self. This has two aspects, something we tend to miss. We tend to slide these two together. But the

Atman is both metaphysical and psychological—metaphysical, philosophical, and psychological.

It's metaphysical in that Atman transcends the person. For example, in this tradition, if we ask the simple question, how many Atmans are there in the world? How many souls are there in the world? The answer is just one. There's one single Atman that transcends all individual differences and therefore transcends ordinary empirical experience.

Yet how is this Atman to be found, and how is it expressed in one's life? It's found and expressed through the ordinary empirical person. In other words, Atman is also psychological. In a sense, you could say that the psychological Atman is the route to the metaphysical Atman. How do we find this transcendent Atman? We go through the physical self, into the mind. And the psychological Atman is the instrument through which this metaphysical Atman is expressed in the world. So it's expressed through the person.

We have a metaphysical Atman and a psychological Atman, two aspects of the teaching.

Now, this metaphysical Atman pops up in different beliefs, in different traditions. For example, in Hindu traditions that believe in rebirth—life after life—it's the Atman that is reborn. The Atman just cruises along while bodies and minds come and go. Of course, Christianity is an Atman tradition. And here Atman is the soul. It's the Atman, the soul, who goes to an eternal reward in heaven or an eternal punishment in hell.

So these are beliefs built around the metaphysical Atman. The psychological Atman, by contrast, is the one who acts, the one who reaps the results of action, the one who is aware of the world. This is the ordinary everyday self who identifies as the one who acts, the one who possesses such things as a body and a mind, the one who is in charge of his or her own actions. This is the psychological Atman. Does that distinction make sense?

So first of all, the Buddha rejects the metaphysical teaching of Atman. Why does he do that? Basically because this metaphysical Atman is not empirical. Yajnavalkya raises the problem in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad of how we can experience Atman—or rather, how we can be sure that Atman even exists, given that it is transcendent. He 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." This is a very famous passage.

Now, to get a sense of what he's talking about, ask yourself the question: what is the one thing we cannot see? It is a trick question, but think about it. What is the one thing you cannot see? Well, the answer is we cannot see our own eyes. We can see the reflection of our eyes in a mirror, but we cannot see our eyes themselves. Why not? Because sight proceeds out from our eyes. Whatever we see is not our eyes.

Now, the metaphysical Atman lies behind our seeing because it is the one who sees. This means that whatever we see is not Atman, not self, because it's not the one who resides behind seeing. Everything we see, hear, think, or know is not Atman, not self. And in this you can see that Yajnavalkya agrees with the

Buddha—or you could say the Buddha agrees with Yajnavalkya.

But Yajnavalkya does believe in Atman. So how does this work? If we come back to the example of seeing, we cannot see our own eyes. But does anybody seriously suggest that this means we do not have eyes? We know we have eyes because we do in fact see. In other words, we infer the existence of our eyes without ever seeing them. We know we have ears because we do in fact hear, and so on.

So for Yajnavalkya, the Atman, the self, is the one who sees, the one who hears, the one who smells, tastes, touches, knows. The Atman is the one who experiences. Since it is obvious that we experience, then it is equally obvious that there is one who experiences. While it's true that we do not directly experience Atman, we know Atman is real because Atman is what makes experience itself possible. There is experience, therefore there must be one who experiences. Yajnavalkya infers the existence of the knower, the Atman, because we know—even though we can never know the knower. This is the basic stance of the Atman tradition.

This argument from Yajnavalkya would fit perfectly into Christian theology, Muslim theology, and so on. It's all the same sort of logic—the sense that there's no one here, but there's something happening.

Anyway, the Buddha will have none of this. He will not have a bar of it. There's no way. Basically what the Buddha does—or rather, what he refuses to do—is move beyond the empirical. He refuses to move beyond experience. He won't do it. In philosophical terms, the Buddha is a radical empiricist. He's interested only in the nature of human experience. Full stop. If something is beyond the range of our experience, he does not want to say anything about it. He does not say it exists. He does not say it does not exist.

And this is something that got forgotten in the later traditions. Often *anattā* is translated as "no self." But I think that's actually wrong. I think the correct translation is "not self." The difference is significant: if you say "no self," you're making a statement about what's out there or what's not out there. You're saying X does not exist. But the Buddha doesn't say that. He never actually says there isn't an *ātman*. What he says is, "This isn't *ātman*. This is not *ātman*. This experience here—that's not *ātman*. This experience over here—that's not *ātman*." But he never says there isn't one. He doesn't say there is one. He doesn't say there isn't one. He refuses to engage with any of that. He refuses to move beyond our actual felt experience in order to speculate about what might or might not exist. He will not make that move.

He explains this in a discourse called the *Sabba Sutta*—"Everything"—where he tells his students that he's going to teach them everything. In Pali, this is *sabba*. We can imagine them settling in for a long talk, but it's actually very brief. The Buddha says: "What is everything? Eye sensitivity and forms, ear sensitivity and sounds, nose sensitivity and smells, tongue sensitivity and tastes, body sensitivity and tangibles, mind sensitivity and phenomena. Whoever would say, 'I reject this everything and declare another'—in other words, for example, a transcendent *ātman*—if questioned on the foundation of his words, he could not explain and would become distressed. Why? Because it is beyond range."

So the Buddha is interested only in what lies within the range of human experience: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, minding. Anything outside that range turns out to be bundles of words and concepts. If we're talking about the transcendent, the only experience we have of the transcendent are the bundles of concepts we use to talk about it. It turns out to be just blah, blah, blah.

When the Buddha is faced with a competing belief system—someone who says, "I reject this everything and declare another"—he says that if questioned on the foundation of his words, he could not explain. What the Buddha would typically do is investigate the foundation of those words. He would investigate the experience this belief is based on. What experience do you have of this? Of X, whatever it is you believe in? He would challenge the Brahmins, for example, who believed in the revelation of the Vedas: Have you actually experienced what the Vedas are talking about? What's the experience? That's a typical move he makes.

This is why he has no interest in the metaphysical *ātman*. Because even according to its adherents, this *āt man* is beyond the range of experience. So the Buddha just has no time for it. He's not rejecting it; he's simply refusing to engage with it. He's not even going to waste five minutes talking about it.

There's something else worth noting here. There was also a lot of ritual involved in how people were supposed to attain knowledge of the *ātman*. The Buddha's insistence on experience seems to cut through all of that, because certain people in society were claiming exclusive knowledge of how to get there. There's an aspect of power at play. The Buddha's stance emphasizing direct experience is actually empowering the practitioner versus empowering a certain social structure that was endemic in Brahmin society at that time.

When he turned to the left, he really was a bit of a lefty in terms of the politics of his time. He was a thoroughgoing republican. When he built his Sangha, he built it on republican principles—self-governing communities. This permeates through Buddhist beliefs and practices.

Now, a lot of this republicanism was lost because, either towards the end of his life or just after he died, a massive war broke out in the Northern Indian plain between Kosala and Magadha, the two new centralized tyrannical monarchies. They destroyed all the republics, including the Buddha's own Shakya Republic.

And so India became purely monarchical, tyrannical. And so a lot of these old Republican ideals died out. It survived in the Sangha in terms of the way they conducted their business, but for centuries, this aspect of the Buddha was kind of buried. But at the time, during his lifetime, it was really important. He saw this as very important. So, for example, when he died, he refused to name a successor. He said, "Look, it's up to you. You people figure it out. Here's the teaching. Go for it." He was committed to a Republican way—which by our standards would be Republican anarchist, a kind of community-based power structure. But that got swept away after he died.

Okay, let's look at the psychological atman.

The Buddha doesn't have any time for the metaphysical atman. He doesn't exactly say that it's wrong. He just won't go there. He won't say it's wrong. He won't say it's right. He will just probe into it.

So here we come to the psychological atman. Why does he reject psychological atman—the atman, the self that does lie within the realm of experience? Here atman, our sense of self, represents our fundamental point of reference. Atman, self, is the place from which we experience the world.

Right now I'm experiencing the world—an inner world of thought, feeling, and so on, an outer world of seeing, hearing, and so on. Where do I experience it from? From here. And this is where the self is. Atman is the place from which we experience the world as well as the place from which we go out to the world. All of us have this sense: my world is out there. I experience the world from here, and this experience goes out there. This is the fundamental frame of reference. This is atman. This is self.

For example, we all have a deep sense that what's happening right now is happening to me. The "me" to which experiences happen is atman. Atman is the reference against which everything in our lives is measured. And here we're talking about the psychological atman. Does that make sense? Does your experience happen to you? This is the atman. This is the self.

This brings us to the problem of possession. Let's drop the philosophy and let me ask you this simple question: Does it make sense to you to think, to speak, or to act in terms of "this is my body," "these are my thoughts," "this is my decision"? Do you think in those terms on a normal day? I suspect so. I strongly suspect so.

Here we have atman, self, as the owner of this life. When the Buddha looks at how we actually experience this mysterious atman, for him it appears first as the drive to possess. It appears as the movement: "this is mine." We take possession of our experience. And from that possession, we construct a self as the owner and the controller, because owning and controlling go together.

It doesn't make any sense to own something but not have any control over it. Not really. If I am forced to make a decision, is it really mine? I'm not a lawyer, but I think the legal system wouldn't agree. And this is, I think, one reason why children are treated differently than adults.

So self and possession go together. The Buddha thinks we experience ātman very largely as the drive to possess. And this is what he calls taṇhā—literally "thirst," usually translated as craving, or we could simply call it drivenness. It's the urgent necessity to possess that matures as the movement "this is mine." I don't know if you've noticed, but this dharma talk is mine, for example.

Now craving—let me call it craving or drivenness—is characterized by a policy of aggressive expansion. Because when can we have enough of "mine"? Do we ever have enough? Economists certainly don't believe so. And if "mine" tends to expansion, so does ātman. And if "mine" tends to loss, then so does

ātman. And given that possession is fundamentally insecure, then so is ātman, which makes it all very unsatisfactory.

And this brings us to the teaching of the five aggregates, which is one of the Buddha's basic schemas for analyzing the nature of human experience. I'm sure if you've been around the Buddhist traps for any period of time, you would have heard about these five aggregates. So let's have a look at them.

The five aggregates—or what Stephen Batchelor translates as the five bundles, approaching them from a different angle than we're approaching tonight—were introduced by the Buddha in his first teaching, his first discourse, the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, "Turning the Dharma Wheel." They're introduced as the essence of the first truth, that of dukkha.

Dukkha is a technical term, traditionally translated as suffering, but it has a much wider range of meanings. In fact, there's no exact English equivalent to dukkha. Dukkha, in its essence, is the painful emptiness we find at the center of our being, the sense of chronic dis-ease that motivates us to make things better. So, for example, sitting around attending this particular dharma meeting—that's because of dukkha. Dukkha is the source of our motivation to undertake the practice, to undertake any activity that we think will improve our condition.

In his first discourse, the Buddha analyzes the nature of dukkha from the most superficial to the deepest. And he ends with this summing up. He says, "In summary, the five aggregates associated with clinging are dukkha." So there's a very close relationship for the Buddha between the five aggregates and dukkha. We need to understand this connection. And that means we need to understand the link between clinging and the aggregates. The five aggregates associated with clinging are dukkha.

So let's look at this idea of clinging, which again, if you've been around the Buddhist traps, I'm sure you've heard of—clinging or attachment. In Pāli this is the word upādāna. It's constructed from the word dāna—give, or giving, or gift—which of course we've talked about tonight. Giving dāna. It's the same word. So dāna is giving or gift. If you put the prefix ā in front of it—it's a long ā—this indicates "toward." So dāna is giving; the direction is this way. Ādāna is taking, bringing toward. And the upā at the beginning of upādāna indicates nearness, close touch, intimacy. So upādāna is taking or bringing to oneself, making one's own, appropriation.

Upādāna, usually translated as clinging or attachment, is the action of taking as one's own. And to give an example we've already discussed: remember how we asked if it makes sense to you to say, "This is my body"? The action of taking as mine—that is upādāna. Does that make sense?

"I guess I've just got a question: whose body is it then?"

That is a very good question, Evelyn. And I expect after a few years of intensive practice, you'll be able to answer it.

"Can you just tell us the answer?"

Okay. I'll give you a clue. The answer comes when the question itself dissolves.

When you realise it's completely pointless even asking the question.

"Excuse me, Patrick. You said the five aggregates *associated with clinging*. This may be just a misunderstanding on my part, but are there five aggregates that are *not* associated with clinging?"

This is one of many things that could be in this talk which are dropped because otherwise we'd be here all night. But yes, it's a really important point. In Pali, it's the *pañca upādāna khandha*. It's all one word, a compound. So *pañca* is five. *Upādāna khandha*.

Now, the Buddha says in summary, the five *upādāna* aggregates are *dukkha*. You notice what he did *not* say is the five aggregates are *dukkha*. If he said that, then we're stuffed. Sometimes people say, "Oh, the Buddha said life is suffering, everything is suffering." No, he didn't. If he said the five aggregates are suffering, then yes, sure, he would have said that, but he didn't. The five aggregates are fine. There's no problem with the five aggregates. The problem is the *upādāna*. It's the relationship to the aggregates that's the problem. And that's what we work on in the meditation practice. And this is what makes liberation possible. We can change our relationship. We can't change the world—it is what it is. But we can change our relationship to the world. And this is what he's getting at.

Let's look at this *khandha*, this aggregate business. In Pali, the word is *khandha*. It's usually translated as "aggregate." *Khandha* indicates a mass of something, and in particular, a great collection of something. So a pile of sand is a *khandha*—it's one big thing, a pile of sand consisting of many smaller units, each individual grain of sand. It's a great mass of grains of sand. And you notice in this example that what connects the parts—the individual grains of sand—to make the whole, these are only very loosely connected. In other words, a pile of sand is easily scattered. This is part of the implication of the word that the Buddha's audience would have registered, which of course we don't.

Taken as a collection, *khandha* can also indicate a category of something. So our pile of sand sits on a beach. Everything here that can be categorized as "sand"—both the pile itself and what surrounds the pile—is collected into the *khandha* category "beach." So the *rūpa khandha*, literally the body *khandha*, consists of the whole mass of experiences that taken together could be characterized as body, as physical.

So count the five as the five categories of experiences. Again you notice it's always about experience, always experience. The *pañca khandha*, the five aggregates, is a list consisting of body, feeling, perception, choices, awareness. These are five categories, *khandha*, that each contain a great collection, *khandha*, of individual experiences that could be placed into one or more of these five categories.

Now, why are these five categories so important? Why are they so important that they merit their own list and they appear in the very first discourse? Because for the Buddha, they are the categories of experience

that we appropriate as "this is mine." And why is appropriation important? Because it's an essential aspect of *ātman*, of self. In other words, for the Buddha, *ātman*, self, means something fundamentally different from what's being spoken of in the Upanishads. For him, self, *ātman*, is something we construct. It's not something already given.

In the Upanishads and in the other *ātman* traditions, self is the already-given primary. It's the already-given starting point from which the multiplicity of the world proceeds. And the Buddha sees things in reverse.

For him, what's given is the collection of individual events that make up the multiplicity of the world, which we appropriate in order to infer the existence of an Ātman. But this self, this Ātman for the Buddha, is not actually part of experience or directly given in experience. It's an assumption, an inference, a projection. It's a construction project. And what are the raw materials from which we construct this self? This is the list of the five aggregates that we appropriate, that we cling to, in order to construct a sense of self. Does that make sense? And this is why this particular list is important.

A question arose at this point: "I think I'm hearing about the Buddha constantly pointing to experience, and that the self is constructed. In my own very limited practice and reading, when I undertake inquiry or investigation in those other traditions—looking for 'what is this' or 'who is this,' the headless way, whatever—all of those different approaches seem to arrive at the same conclusion that self is constructed. So my confusion from tonight's talk is that experientially I get to the same place. But it seems you're saying they're not the same."

I'm saying the Buddha says they're not the same. That's the way he looks at it. So for you, it might be six of one, half a dozen of the other—the investigation in any of those traditions seems to arrive at the same conclusion that the self is a constructed concept. And if that's your experience, that is your experience, and nobody can argue with your experience. That approach is perfectly valid.

But here we're trying to work out where the Buddha is coming from. What's the problem that he sees? Whether one agrees with him or not, in my view, is neither here nor there. I mean, I'm not entirely sure that I agree with him. I'm not entirely sure I do either! I think I could happily practice in an Ātman tradition and get to the same place. But he sees certain dangers. He's flagging certain things. He's saying, "Wait a minute, hold on there. There's a problem here." And this problem is what we're beginning to uncover—what he thinks is the problem.

Another observation followed: "It seems a lot of the Neo-Advaita teachers, or however you want to frame them, have created systems where a lot of those problems do arise—particularly in terms of relationships between male teachers and female students. So it seems like there's a lot of wisdom in him challenging the structures around those traditions."

Although exactly the same problems occur in Buddhist traditions, Christian traditions—basically

anywhere where there are blokes who think they're enlightened.

"It does seem to be more prevalent where there's somebody claiming guru status."

I think it's a question of power structures, and I think that's one of the things about the Buddha. When you look at the system he created, he tried to eliminate that as much as possible by having a much more republican system. And even in terms of the relationship of lay people to the monks and nuns—in traditional Buddhist societies, which are conditioned by centuries of monarchical and completely anti-democratic social structures, you might get this hierarchical thing where the job of the lay people is to obey orders. But you don't get that in the Buddha's teaching. In fact, if you look at

the role of the monks and the nuns, they have zero authority over lay people. None. A monk or a nun in relation to lay people can teach, admonish, advise, encourage, inspire, and so on, but cannot give orders. That's not part of their role.

But later on, as the traditions solidified, they created hierarchies, and you end up with monks owning vast estates with thousands of serfs. That's the political structures at work. And one of the interesting things about contemporary Western Buddhism is that we're coming at this without all those structures. So it gives us a different way of looking at things.

So, the raw materials from which we construct self are, for the Buddha, the five aggregates. Let's start with body, physical experience. Body gives our identity a sense of solidity as a physical form located in space. When appropriated, when clung to, physical experience becomes "my body," "my seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching"—and this is who I am.

Then we have feeling, *vedanā*. This is the affective aspect of experience, that which moves me or stimulates a response. I am moved to hold and become intimate with, to reject and distance myself from, or to ignore or be confused and doubtful about what to do. All of these responses are mine. And feeling tells me *how* I am—the distinctive pattern of feelings, responses, and emotions that govern my emotional life.

Then we get perception. This is the recognition or interpretation of any experience, what gives familiarity and meaning to an experience. Perception gives me *what* I am experiencing—my world within which I find myself. And notice how feeling and perception act together. Feeling provides our response to what is happening, and perception provides us with what we think is happening. The response comes from feeling; the what comes from perception.

Then we get choices. These are all choices and decisions to act, and these are appropriated to give me the sense that these are *my* decisions. I am the one who is making them, and I am responsible for them.

And then finally we get awareness, most intimate of all. When we appropriate awareness, this gives me the sense that I am the one who is aware of all this. All these experiences are part of my awareness, and

they refer back to me.

Finally, notice that of these five aggregates, one is physical and the rest are psychological, because the construction project that builds self is essentially conceptual, psychological in its nature. Self is constructed by mind from what we directly encounter, and when it emerges to the surface, it emerges as a view—*diṭṭhi* in Pali—and particularly the view of the reality of the person, what's called *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*. The aggregates are what we cling to in order to construct a self living at the centre of his or her world.

Now, once we arrive here, we can move on to what the problem is from the Buddha's perspective. Because you notice that from his perspective, these five aggregates, these five *khandhas*, are closely associated with *dukkha*. He says, "In summary, the five aggregates associated with clinging are *dukkha*," or "the five appropriated aggregates are *dukkha*."

This is really important, because if we look at the Buddha's project, what is it? His project is: how do we cultivate a way of life without *dukkha*? And this is why he's so interested in self—because he sees that our construction of self gets in the way of living without *dukkha*. But his focus is the cessation of *dukkha*. He'll talk about self and he'll talk about not-self, but only to get to somewhere else.

In one discourse, the Simile of the Snake in Majjhima 22, he talks about how our view of self plays out in all sorts of ways. But then he gets down to what he's really interested in. He says, "Previously and now, what I teach is *dukkha* and the cessation of *dukkha*." That's it.

The Buddha rejects the teaching of self because for him, self and possession go together—particularly a psychological self—and possession causes *dukkha*. That's the problem for him. So if we want our *dukkha* to cease, then we have to stop taking as ours what is not ours. In other words, we have to stop appropriating, stop clinging.

The five aggregates are important because this is what we appropriate as "mine," and we use them to construct an identity that we take to be fundamentally real, against which everything is measured. Because for the Buddha, the problem is not that we construct an identity. We have to construct an identity—otherwise we can't function. And the Buddha constructed an identity. He knew precisely who he was, and he made sure that the people around him knew it.

But he recognized this identity as essentially a convenience. It's a concept, or a network of concepts, that helped him get through the day and function well. He did not take this self as the fundamental reality and then try to bend the world to accommodate it. Instead, he took the opposite approach: he adapted his self to be able to work within the changing conditions of the world.

Does that make sense? And it's one of the problems with translating *anattā* as "no self," because then it gets confusing. Well, does it mean no identity? How do I function without an identity? The answer is, we can't. But we don't take this identity as the absolute, primary, already given reality and bend the world to it—which will fail. Rather, we ground ourselves in the world and adapt the identity to be able to surf the

conditions.

So the Buddha is not interested in the doctrine of *ātman* that he inherited because this doctrine is just a bundle of concepts referring to something beyond the world of experience. And all he's interested in is experience itself. So he rejects the metaphysical *ātman* that he was trained in. But more than that, he feels that any concept we have of *ātman*, of self, any way we have of substantiating it in the world, is bound up with drivenness and pain.

And this is because of the deep ties between "this is mine" and "I am this"—and finally emerging as the view, "this is my self." So we hold on to possessions in order to maintain an identity, and as our possessions crumble, so does our identity, and all of this creates pain. The Buddha is trying to cut through all this philosophical stuff and get down to what's actually important. Since from his point of view, holding to our instinctive view of self necessarily causes pain, then drop it.

We get lost in our concepts about self and the drives that give it life because it turns out that that's all that *ātman*, that self, is—it's a bundle of concepts and drives. From the Buddha's perspective, this self that everybody seems so concerned with has no real basis in experience and is actually the source of our troubles. And on the other hand, since self is just a bundle of concepts and drives, it provides an entry into the Buddha's examination of experience. So you believe in this self—what's your experience of it? And then the inquiry might move on to: does having a belief in this self help you cultivate the wholesome and abandon the unwholesome? Or does it get in the way, because at some point it encourages clinging to whatever you identify as self?

So this is where he's getting at with his rejection of self and the promotion of the doctrine of not-self.

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