# Part 2: Anattā (Not-Self)

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 1:05:55

The Bodhisattva headed to this area, and this is where he practiced for years. This is the area associated with that Upanishadic tradition where Yajnavalkya was a great ancestral teacher.

When the Bodhisattva became the Buddha, he flipped around, and instead of teaching ātman, which was what all his teachers were doing, what all his fellow students and co-students were doing, he turns around and teaches anātman—not ātman.

We talked about the background of that last week, and tonight we're going to go into his understanding of anattā in Pali, anātman in Sanskrit—not-self. We're going to do it by looking in particular at the five aggregates, the pañca-khandha.

Now, if you know anything about the Buddha's teaching, you've probably heard of the five aggregates. The five aggregates is one of the two basic ways in which the Buddha looks at the human condition, analyzes it, and talks about how it works and what to do about it. You have the five aggregates and the six sense fields. Tonight we're talking about the five aggregates. Maybe some other time we can talk about the six sense fields.

The Buddha introduces these five aggregates in his first discourse, the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, Turning the Dharma Wheel. He presents this as the essence of the first truth, that of dukkha, which I'm sure you've all heard, usually translated as "suffering."

Dukkha is a technical term, and it's got a much wider range of meaning than just suffering. In fact, there's no exact English equivalent. If you look at this word, it's a compound word made up of *kha*, where *kha* is empty space, and *du*, the prefix, which indicates bad, difficult, painful, and so on. So *dukkha* is the painful emptiness that we find at the center of our being—the sense of chronic dis-ease that motivates us to make things better.

Dukkha is the source of our motivation: our motivation to undertake the practice, our motivation to undertake any activity that we think will improve our condition. The Buddha begins there, and he analyzes the nature of dukkha from the most superficial to the deepest. He sums it up at the deepest level of dukkha, saying: "In summary, the five aggregates associated with clinging are dukkha."

So if we're talking about the five aggregates, we need to talk about dukkha. There's a close connection between them, and the connection is clinging—in Pali, this is *upādāna*.

Now, of course, one of the problems we have is that we approach the Dharma in English. So we think that

the Buddha is talking about "clinging" or "attachment." It may come as a statement of the bleeding obvious, but it could also come as a surprise to realize that nowhere ever in his teaching, in his entire career, does the Buddha ever mention the word "clinging." He never mentions the word "attachment" either. The reason why is obvious: he didn't speak English. What he talked about was *upādāna*.

Let's have a look at this word. It's a compound word made up of *dāna* and prefixes. This *dāna* is exactly the *dāna* that Tammy is talking about—it means gift or giving. Then you have the prefix *ā*, which means "toward, this direction." And then you have *upa*, which indicates intimacy. *Upa-ā-dāna*: to bring or give toward oneself. Not to give, which is going this direction, but to take in this direction. And *upa* suggests intimacy. So *upādāna* is taking or bringing to oneself, making one's own. Appropriation.

Basically, *upādāna*, that we translate as "clinging" or sometimes as "attachment," refers to taking as one's own.

For example, we have the five aggregates, which is a list. The first item in the list is body, *rūpa*. Does it make sense to you to think in terms of "this is my body"? Does it make sense to you to speak in terms of "this is my body"? Does it make sense to you to act in terms of "this is my body"? Do you ever do that?

Well, this action of taking as mine is *upādāna*. Does that make sense?

Do you get a sense of just how deeply embedded this is? Sometimes people talk about, "Oh, clinging, attachment—you mustn't cling, you mustn't be attached," as if you can just stop doing it now.

The very thought, "Oh, I can stop doing it now," is upadana. It's not this fluffy little thing floating at the top.

So we have *upadana*, and then we have *khandha*—the five aggregates or khandhas. What does *khandha* mean? Khandha indicates a mass of something, a huge quantity of something, and in particular, a great collection of something. For example, a pile of sand is a khandha. It's one big thing—it's a pile of sand—but it consists of many smaller units, each individual grain of sand. So a whole collection, khandha, of sand indicates a mass of sand, a khandha.

You notice that in this example, what connects the parts to make the whole are very loosely connected. A pile of sand is easily scattered, and this is part of the associations of this word *khandha*. So khandha indicates a mass of something, a great collection of something, and taken as a collection, khandha can also indicate a category of something. For example, we have a pile of sand that sits on a beach. Everything here that could be categorized as sand—above the pile itself and what surrounds the pile—is collected into the khandha "beach."

If you look at the five khandhas, the first one is body, the body khandha. This indicates the whole collection, the whole mass of experiences that we can categorize as body, as physical. Does that make sense? And you notice that with this concept—in the Buddha's time, people hearing this would pick up on it immediately—what holds all this together is actually very loose. It's not really tight at all. We don't get

that so much today.

Then we have the five aggregates, the *pañca khandha*. Now this is a list. And of course, if you're familiar with the Buddha's teaching, you know the Buddha is very fond of a good list. I think he was probably extremely proud of this one. This list consists of body, feeling, perception, choices, awareness. These are the five categories, khandha, of experience. And each one of these categories contains a great collection of individual experiences that can be placed within it.

Why are these particular categories so important? They're the categories of experience that we appropriate as "this is mine." And why is appropriation important? Because appropriation, for the Buddha, is an essential aspect of *atman*. This is where the Buddha begins his critique of the teaching of self, of *atma*.

If we think about what we mean by self—last week we talked about the metaphysical self and the psychological self in the Indian tradition at that time. The Buddha focuses on the psychological self. Self is the one who possesses a body and a mind. Self is the one who possesses his or her actions and who therefore is morally responsible for those actions because they belong to him or her. So self is the person to whom it makes sense to refer to my body, my mind, my actions, my life. Does anybody here ever find themselves thinking in these terms? Have you done that before?

For the Buddha—and this is where he parts company with his contemporaries—self is something we construct. It's not something already given. In the Upanishads, it's the opposite. Self is the already given primary. Self is the starting point from which the multiplicity of the world proceeds.

Think about your experience right now. What are you experiencing? Are you experiencing seeing—a collection of things you're seeing? Hearing—a collection of things you're hearing? Smelling, tasting, touching, minding? Are you experiencing all sorts of different things? In other words, is there a multiplicity out there that you are experiencing? We have this sense of the world of multiplicity—there's a lot happening. And at the other end, we have a unitary point—me—who's experiencing this. This is the nature of experience. And for the Upanishads, self, the one who experiences, is the foundation.

This is the already given primary. This is the starting point from which the multiplicity of the world proceeds. This forms part of the basic doctrine.

The Buddha reverses that. For him, what's given are the collection of individual events that make up the multiplicity of the world. That's what's real for him. And from that, we infer a unitary self. But the self, for the Buddha, is not what is actually given in experience. It's an assumption. It's an inference. It's a projection.

Do you see the difference there between the Buddha and his contemporaries? Both have this sense that there's a multiplicity of the world, and there's a unitary point where all this is experienced. In the Upanishads, they say this self is what's real, and the multiplicity is not so real. The Buddha reverses it. He

says, no, actually the reality is in the multiplicity. It's this unitary point which is not real.

This is how he's so radical within that context. He's flipping over the whole thing. It's like he's tossed over the entire chessboard. We're not going to play by these rules. We're going to play by these other rules.

Again, for him, the self is not something already given. It's something we construct, and we are constructing it right now. Now, if we're going to construct something, we need the raw materials from which we can construct self. And what are they? These are the five aggregates. This is what we appropriate—*upadana*, what we cling to—in order to construct a sense of self.

First we have body, *rupa* in Pali. This is physical experience. Body gives our identity a sense of solidity. I identify myself as a physical form located in space, this space. And when appropriated, physical experience becomes my body—my seeing, my hearing, my smelling, my tasting, my touching. This is who I am.

Next in the list is feeling, *vedana*. This is the affective aspect of experience, that which moves me, that which provokes a response. The Buddha talks about three basic movements: I am moved to hold and to become intimate with; I am moved to reject and distance myself from; or I am moved to ignore or be confused and doubtful about what to do. What the Buddha is saying is that all of these responses are appropriated as mine, and feeling tells me how I am.

Then we have perception. Perception is the recognition or interpretation of experience—what gives familiarity and meaning to an experience. Perception gives me what I am experiencing. It gives me my world within which I find myself. So that's what I'm looking at: that's a computer screen. And that little visual collection of rectangles—that's my audience. This is perception.

Notice how feeling and perception act together. Feeling provides our response to what is happening. Perception provides what I think is happening—what I'm responding to.

So they work together.

Next we get choices, sankhāra. 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. Because here we come to the teaching of karma.

And then finally, the fifth khanda is awareness, viññāna. This is the most intimate one of all. Awareness, when it's appropriated, gives me the sense that I am the one who is aware of all this. All these experiences are part of my awareness.

And so now we can answer the question we asked before. The aggregates, the khandhas, are what we cling to in order to construct a self living at the center of his or her world. That brings us back to self. We take these together as self, and they represent our fundamental point of reference. This is what we talked about last week. Self is the place from which we experience the world—I experience the world from here,

going out. And it's also the place to which the world refers. It refers back to here.

We all have a sense, for example, that this is happening to me. And the me to which experiences happen is self. We have a deep sense that this is my life. Self is the owner of this life. Self is the reference against which everything in our lives is measured. And the Buddha is saying that we use the five aggregates to construct that reference.

Any questions so far about aggregates and things of this nature? Are you enlightened or just stunned? I'll assume you're enlightened and I shall move on.

So let's look at the five aggregates, the khandhas. The Buddha says they're closely associated with dukkha. He says, in summary, the five aggregates associated with upādāna, with clinging, are dukkha. These khandhas, these aggregates, are really fundamentally important. Because if we ask, what is the Buddha's project? It's to cultivate a way of life without dukkha. That's what he wants.

I sometimes say that when I give Dharma talks, I open my mouth and channel Buddha. Now, the reason why I'm so confident about this is because I feel Buddha and I understand each other. And the reason for this is very simple. I'm a Taurean. And there's one thing that a Taurean wants—it's to be comfortable. We don't want dukkha. We don't like it at all. So I feel that I understand Buddha, because we've basically got the same life project. This is what he's all about: how do we live without dukkha?

And this is why he's so interested in self—because he thinks that our construction of self gets in the way of living without dukkha. But what he's focused on is not self and not-self. What he's focused on is the cessation of dukkha. In one discourse, he discusses how our view of self plays out, and then he gets to what he's really interested in. I think we quoted this last week. He says, "Previously and now, what I teach is dukkha and the cessation of dukkha." Full stop. That's it. This is in the Simile of the Snake, Majjhima 22.

The Buddha rejects the teaching of self because for him, self and possession go together, and possession causes dukkha. That's the logic of it. Possession here is upādāna, which we usually speak of in terms of clinging or attachment. In other words, if we want our dukkha to cease—and the Buddha says, frankly, we do—if we want that, then what we have to do is stop taking as ours what is not ours. In other words, stop appropriating, stop clinging. And 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. And this, of course, in terms of philosophy and doctrine, is the position of the Upanishads. This is self, this is ātman.

Now, it's important to realise that the problem for the Buddha is not that we construct an identity. Sometimes people think that this is the problem—that we're not supposed to have an identity. This is nonsense. Apart from anything else, the Buddha obviously constructed an identity. When you read the texts, it's quite clear he knew precisely who he was, and he made sure that the people around him knew it

and treated him accordingly.

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

You see the difference between those two. The Upanishadic tradition says what's fundamental is the self. The Buddha says no, it's not—it's actually the world. And there's an ethical response that comes out of it. That means it's not my job to make the world conform to me. It's my job to conform to the world. It's a quite different attitude.

*Any questions thus far?*

*It's a bit mind-blowing, just this conforming to the world. What do you mean by that—just being adaptable, or accepting things, like life on life's terms, being adaptable, changeable?*

Yeah, essentially adapting to what's really going on as opposed to being insistent that the world adapts to me.

Actually, given that we had an election quite recently, I'm political in my thoughts. I hope you'll forgive me, but I noticed that there are certain politicians who are overtaken by disaster and they don't seem to have any concept of why. Someone who's been completely, thoroughly bashed by the electorate says, "I did a really good job, and we did great things for the country," blah, blah, blah, "and we're fantastic." When you look at these people, you think, are they really that abominable? Well, they might be, because that's the nature of self. It's not my fault, obviously. I'm not wrong. So they must be wrong.

You could say that the fundamental principle of the self-teaching is "the customer is always wrong." And you do meet people who are like that. This is where the self is particularly strong. But if the self is seen as just a useful construct, then there's much more room for adaptation. It doesn't mean you give up and lie down and let people walk over you. It means you apply wisdom and flexibility to the situation. You adapt to the circumstances in order to pursue what you feel is important.

So in some ways it's an extremely pragmatic teaching. You can see in the example of the Buddha's life that he was an extremely pragmatic person, which is why he was so successful.

For example, the Buddha's politics were republican. He came out of the Shakyamuni republic. But he had to deal with tyrannical monarchs, and these people were just crazy. There are two major ones in his time: Pasenadi of Kosala and Bimbisāra, and then later his son Ajātasattu, of Magadha. Now the person who gets spoken of the most in the discourses is Pasenadi of Kosala, because the Buddha spent most of his time in that kingdom.

Both of these kings were his personal students. And you really get the sense with the stories about

Pasenadi that the man was a lunatic—which is fair enough, he had absolute power. I mean, that would drive you crazy. And the Buddha managed to steer him in the appropriate direction. He was very, very skillful.

But it's clear from the way he set up his sangha, which was set up as a republic, that he must have loathed that monarchical system. He must have absolutely loathed it. But he didn't complain about it.

He simply worked with the situation as it was, in order to do some good in the world and to help Pasenadi himself.

Ethically, I think the teaching of not-self is deeply relevant. So now, how do we practice with these five aggregates? In the Satipatthana Sutta, the Buddha says: "Here a practitioner understands: such is body, such its arising, such its disappearance. Such is feeling, such its arising, such its disappearance. Such is perception, such its arising, such its disappearance. Such are choices, such their arising, such their disappearance. Such is awareness, such its arising, such its disappearance."

This is his instruction for practicing with the five aggregates. And you notice that the practice focuses on the impermanence of the aggregates. This takes us to impermanence, to change.

Now again, this all links together. Remember that the Buddha speaks of insight—insight into the three universal characteristics of anicca, dukkha, and anattā: impermanence, suffering, and not-self. These are intimately connected.

So why is change so important? The Pali word for change or impermanence—usually translated as impermanence—is anicca. The prefix "a" means "not," and nicca comes from the Sanskrit nitya, meaning stable, constant, or permanent. So anicca means not stable, not constant, not permanent.

In everyday usage, nitya refers to what can be relied upon. We've been talking about dāna, about giving, and you encounter mention of nitya dāna—a perpetual gift, an endowment, something that can be relied upon to last for a very long time. So anicca, impermanent, means unstable, inconstant, discontinuous, and therefore unreliable—not to be depended upon, not to be trusted.

You can see the link between anicca and dukkha. When we rely on something unreliable, sooner or later we are disappointed. And the fact is that we know from experience we are disappointed again and again and again.

We use self to deny impermanence, to pretend it's not there. For the Buddha, permanent means lasting unchanged over time. And the word is saying that which is permanent—that which appears to be permanent—can be relied upon. That which is impermanent cannot be relied upon. Self gives us a sense of permanence and the security that permanence offers.

Self provides us with a fundamental reference point: "This is happening to me." Self lets us project this reference point into the past: "This happened to me." And we can project it into the future: "This will

happen to me." Then we get locked into the sameness that permanence presents: "I didn't like this before, therefore I will never like it." Or at a more abstract level: "You disagree with our eternal truth—you must be a threat." Any threat to this sameness becomes a threat to me, to mine.

Self creates an illusion of permanence, and so it is threatened by the perception of impermanence. This is anicca saññā, the perception of impermanence, which for the Buddha is absolutely central to developing insight.

We know that things change—that's pretty obvious. But why do things change? Do things change because I decide they should? Do they change in ways that I want? Because if that were true, then it would appear that self is real, since self is the one in charge of me and my life. The changes that self makes would naturally be convenient to it.

But clearly, when we examine our experience, it becomes painfully clear that things do not change as we decide. They change because of a multitude of natural conditions that are beyond the range of me and my control. Things change because of the workings of nature, and my choices and decisions are just one facet of these workings.

Now it's very important to underscore that for the Buddha, my choices and decisions are real and they are important, because they represent what I can do to change my life for the better. This is the teaching of action and its ripening—kamma vipāka.

But my choices and decisions are just one part of a much wider fabric of conditions that determine the nature of experience. This wider fabric and its workings is what the Buddha calls dependent arising. So my experienced world does not operate as a dictatorship with me as the dictator. It operates more like an infinitely complex republic with me having one vote. Now, it's a very significant vote, but it's just a vote.

And as we track change and the pain inherent in change, our view opens up. We see the workings of dependent arising. In other words, we see not-self. So the practice of tracking the five aggregates matures into perception of not-self. In fact, in most instances where the Buddha speaks about not-self and emptiness, he does so in terms of the five aggregates. Probably most famously in the Buddhist world is the Heart Sutra, which is very important in Mahayana Buddhism. Clinging to the five aggregates, appropriating the five aggregates, constitutes self. Letting go of the five aggregates, allowing them to function in their own way as part of nature, constitutes not-self.

*Question from the audience about the Buddha's definition of permanence when everything is impermanent.*

What the Buddha is talking about is the way that we normally perceive. Let's say the self that lasts for a hundred years—let's assume that I live for a hundred years. I know intellectually that the self is impermanent because at some point it falls off the twig. That's quite obvious. But then the way I relate to it at a deeper level is: who is the self who's going to fall off the twig in another fifty years or twenty years? It's me. It's the same self that was born so many decades ago, and that's the self which is going to die in the

future. So it hasn't changed over that period of time. That fundamental point of reference is the same. That's the projection, that's the inference, that's the assumption, that's the concept.

But what the teaching is saying is that if you actually look at the experience, you can't find any one aspect of the actual experience that satisfies that criteria. Everything is changing. But even when I can see everything is changing, still I have the determination to project back: is there someone to whom everything is changing? So self has this kind of pernicious quality to it. It's not something we can ever get a hold of.

*Follow-up question about why permanence enters into this discussion if self is being constructed all the time.*

I think he's just talking about the nature of human experience, that we do have this sense. I have this sense that the person sitting here tonight giving this talk is the same person who got out of bed at six o'clock this morning. I just feel this. I don't have a philosophy about it.

But it's a personal experience based on an inference. The Buddha is saying it's not a directly experienced event or series of events. It's an experience of an inference that I take. It's a stepping back from the actual events that are going on.

We're trying to examine the nature of experience as it flows. And the Buddha talks about the elements. He says if you actually get your awareness really closely into what's happening right now—let's say you're doing breathing meditation—you start off with the assumption "I am being mindful of my breathing." So you have me, you have breathing, and the relationship is that it belongs to me. And that makes perfect sense.

But if the samadhi really does develop, at some point the sense of "this is me" falls away, the sense that "this breathing is mine" falls away, the sense that "this is breathing" falls away, and all there is is a series of physical events and the awareness that goes along with it. In other words, self has dropped away. But of course, as soon as I'm not paying close attention, it's back again: "Oh, that was a good meditation. I completely forgot about myself."

So that sense of self is characterized by permanence, while that sense of being intimate with the actual flow of experience is characterized by impermanence.

A student asked about the witness having a sense of permanence from one moment to the next, while the ideas of the self change over time. They noted that you can have those deeper states, like jhana, where your sense of ego dissipates, but even through that experience you have a witness. They also raised the Buddha's teaching that self is useful—there's a joke that you need enough ego to know whose mouth to put the food in at the dinner table, so you don't put it in the wrong person's mouth, but not so much that you become an egoist, the dictator of your realm. Just enough day-to-day awareness that's not excessively clinging.

Yes, except the Buddha would say that this sense of an unchanging witness is also a delusion. He says if you actually look for this witness, you can't find it. This is where he separates from the Upanishadic tradition. In that tradition, the goal is to get down to what's really at the basis of experience—the witness. But the Buddha is saying, "Okay, look, where is the witness in your experience? What aspect of your experience doesn't shift?"

The witness is associated with awareness itself, and the Buddha says awareness is impermanent. It changes. It comes and goes depending upon conditions. He has this whole analysis of the nature of awareness.

He had problems getting this across even in his own lifetime. There's one famous discourse where one of the bhikkhus is reported by his fellow monks because he actually thinks that awareness is permanent, that consciousness continues unchanged. He's brought before the Buddha, and the Buddha just rips into him: "Haven't I said in so many times, in so many ways, that awareness is impermanent? It comes and goes according to conditions."

But it's interesting that this discourse exists, because it indicates how much this teaching was resisted, even among his own students. They wanted to believe in permanent awareness. And what the Buddha was saying is, "Look, you can believe whatever you like, but do you experience awareness as unchanging?" His challenge is that if you look at experience closely enough, you will see change. You will see impermanence. He's quite ruthless in that respect. And even in his own time, even among his own students, people had difficulty accepting this.

But this is what he was saying. It is quite radical.

And then from there, you get the ethical dimension when it comes to what we talk about as ego—the inflated ego and so on. And this does naturally segue from this teaching of not-self. It's much harder to construct an inflated ego if you can see that nothing actually lasts. Everything's changing. So it's not about me, it's about conditions. And that does have ethical implications. But the teaching is very radical. And for a lot of people, absolutely counterintuitive. Like this fellow in the discourse.

Okay, shall we move on? Time is... Oh, another question. Tammy.

"Yeah, I have a question, Patrick. So if our sense of self doesn't exist, what about other people's sense of self? Or do other people exist?"

What the Buddha is saying is you can't find it in your experience. The background here is that what the Buddha is interested in is the nature of human experience. That's all that he's interested in. So in Western philosophical terms, you could categorise him as a radical empiricist. He's interested only in the nature of experience.

So for example, he rejects metaphysical teachings like, "Oh, there's this metaphysical self." Equally, he

rejects teachings like, "Oh, there's a creator God." But let's take the creator God one. This is scandalous for people like Christians, Jews, Muslims, people from theistic traditions, Hindus. Why does he reject the teaching of a creator God? He doesn't reject it because he says there isn't one. He rejects it because you can't experience one.

If there's a creator God from which everything, from which creation comes, we're in the creation. We cannot get to the creator. That's just in the nature of the whole thing. And so the Buddha is saying, "Look, I'm not interested in this creator because it's just a concept. I can't actually experience it. I'm not interested. And I'm not going to talk about it."

And this is where the teaching of not-self comes in. He's saying, "Look, you can't actually experience it. So forget about it. It just gets in the way."

But then he adds something more: in your determination to believe or to act as if there is a self, as if your self is real and other people's selves are real, the only way you can do that is by appropriation. If you do the appropriation, it will cause you suffering. So if you solidify other people's selves, it will cause you pain. So why do it? What's the point?

And again, it's both mind-blowing, but it's also extremely pragmatic. He's saying, "Look, it doesn't work. So drop it."

I don't know if I'm answering your question or just blathering.

"I think that was helpful. Thanks."

Daniel, you've got your hand up. No, you're on, Daniel.

"It's Jessica here. I'm using someone else's computer."

I thought it was you, Daniel. This is not you.

"You're looking at the example of not-self. I'm interested in the relationship between not-self and experience. If the goal is non-self or not-self, then you can't really have the experience because no one is experiencing anything. Or you can't know you're experiencing because it's not-self. So what's the point of experiencing? I feel like I'm getting in a circle in my thinking."

The point is not to get to not-self. The point is to stop suffering.

"Not what?"

The point is to stop suffering.

"Right."

And the Buddha is saying, if we appropriate, if we take something as mine that isn't mine, then we'll

suffer. And how do we experience the self? We experience the self by taking things to be mine. "This is my experience." If we do that, we suffer. So let's not do it.

One of the things to understand is that the Buddha is not a philosopher. He's not laying out a philosophical doctrine of no-self. Later in the Buddhist tradition, they talk about this extensively—there's this whole Buddhist philosophy in which they're proving no-self or non-self or what have you. But that's not the Buddha. The Buddha is interested simply in stopping suffering. And he's saying, as far as I can see, self is something that I construct. I construct it by appropriating as mine. And whenever I do that, I suffer. So let's not do it.

One way this is expressed is by a contemporary Thai teacher, Ajahn Buddhadasa. He taught not-self as a practice. He said, "Give back what does not belong to you." That's your practice. Give back what does not belong to you. Do that and you'll be happy. And what is it that does not belong to us? Body, feeling, perception, choices, awareness—everything. Give it back and you'll be happy. Keep it and you'll be miserable. So what do you want? Do you want to be miserable or do you want to be happy?

This is not a philosophical doctrine. This is a practical strategy. If you try to overthink it, then either you're going to drive yourself crazy, or you're going to become a great Buddhist philosopher. But neither of those would help.

"I'm curious about that instruction to just give it back. That claiming that occurs—at least here—doesn't seem to be predicated on a claimer. So to say 'just give it back' seems to be predicated on a separate being who claims or doesn't claim."

What we're talking about, of course, is letting go. And letting go is very tricky. Because if we try to let go, we're holding on. It's like saying "relax." I want you to relax now. When you hear the instruction "okay, relax," you're doing something and now you've got to do this extra thing to a sufficient degree that you can prove that you're okay now—which means you're not relaxed.

"Yeah, it seems like it's adding an unnecessary extra step. There's the claiming that happens or the relaxing that happens, but it seems like there's an adding in of a relaxer or a claimer, which isn't actually real."

That's right. And that's where it gets really tricky. That's where it gets so subtle. That relaxation, like not-self, is not that we do something extra, but that we stop doing what we do. And it's very difficult to talk about. You recognize it when it happens. We can't claim that "I did that."

It's like the experience meditators will often describe. They're meditating away and something happens, everything works, and they think, "This is fantastic! I've cracked it!" And then that experience never comes back—because it wasn't them that was doing that. It just happened according to conditions. And this is the teaching of dependent arising: it happens according to conditions.

*Going back to earlier when you were saying awareness is also impermanent—but that ineffable thing you're talking about, of the good sit or whatever, that just "happening"—that does seem to be permanent, that happenings are always happening. But I don't know, I'm going back to that earlier conversation and I'm aware of the time, so we don't have to get into that.*

But that experience you have is perfectly valid, and you must never think, "Oh, that's the wrong experience because the Buddha disagrees." That's your experience. From a Buddhist perspective, it's like, "Oh, this is interesting—investigate more." What is that? What's going on?

And the whole point, when we get to the practice aspect, is what the Buddha is doing: he's setting up this framework and saying, "Okay, now have a look. Is there something that doesn't change?" And you say, "Oh yes, this doesn't change. X doesn't change." That's what he's doing. He's not saying, "X doesn't change, and if you don't believe this, you're out." He's saying, "Oh, that's really interesting that you say X doesn't change. Please look more closely. See what you come up with."

*Thank you. Beautiful.*

Thanks. And again, the Buddha's not a philosopher—he's a practitioner. Buddhist philosophy comes later; it's after him. He's not teaching philosophy. He's teaching practice.

So let's talk about this practice. The Buddha says, "Here a practitioner understands: such is body, such is arising, such is disappearance—feeling, perception, choices, awareness." He goes through the same thing.

If you look at that, there are two aspects. First, clarify the experience. Such is body. This physical experience—what is it exactly? This feeling or this concept—what is it? What does it do? When we practice, particularly when we're practicing for insight, it's like we are interrogating the experience. We're interested, we're curious about the nature of experience. What is it exactly? What is going on?

And in particular, in this section of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the Buddha is saying: look, if you're interested in getting a flavor of self, clarify that which you regard as yours. Don't try to force it, but notice your relationship to experience as you practice. Is this mine? Just have this question in the back of your mind. What you're doing is applying investigation to your awareness.

Now, the investigation may appear simply as a sense of curiosity. For example: Does this memory affect me? Does this desire affect me? Does this aversion, this dislike, affect me? Why? Is it mine? Is this happening to me? Don't do anything with the perception—just notice when it's there and what happens once you notice it. Be interested in it. You're not trying to get rid of it. You're just interested in what it is and how it behaves.

So first, clarify the experience, and then perceive the impermanence of the experience. Such is arising, such is disappearance. This tracking of impermanence involves seeing change itself, but also developing a broader view of what conditions change. When I'm teaching retreats, I like to emphasize getting to know

your distractions. Distraction is a change. If I'm meditating and then I'm distracted—whoops, I realize I'm distracted and I get back to meditation—that's change. What conditions that change? Did I do that?

Does it belong to me?

When we start to see change, especially once we get this wider view, we may begin to see the dynamics of change—what stimulates change. And we may start to recognise how little of this change has to do with me and my decisions. We may start seeing that things change according to natural patterns that do not fit my agenda. And so then notice how I am disappointed or frustrated by change. Did I do that? Did that happen to me? Or did it happen simply according to the natural flow of conditions?

So when practicing not-self with the five aggregates and just experience, there are two parts. First, clarify the experience, and second, perceive its impermanence—the fact that it changes and how it changes. Essentially, this is the practice that the Buddha is presenting.

*A question arises: Is the self also not-self?*

Yes, what we would take to be self is actually not-self. This is what the Buddha would say. This brings us, by the way, to translation. I translate *anattā* as "not-self," not "no-self" or "non-self." All those renderings are grammatically possible, but when the Buddha talks about it, he talks about it in terms of a something. He says, "This is not-self." So this particular experience—is it self or not-self? And what he's saying is that if you're making that investigation, focus on change. And along with that, focus on who's responsible for the change.

Now for him—and this is coming out of the ancient Indian tradition—to qualify as self, it's got to be you that's making the change. This view is fundamental not only to the Indian understanding of self but also to the psychological sense of self. The self is essentially the one in charge. It's the boss. I don't have a functioning sense of self if I can't make the decision to stand up from this chair. The fact that I can—that I'm in charge of whether I'm sitting down or standing up—gives me my sense of self.

Hence the suffering of people who are struck by illness and can no longer do that. They lose agency. The suffering of people in nursing homes—they lose agency and therefore lose their sense of self. So when you're making this investigation, one of the things to be interested in is: who's in charge of this?

*Another reflection emerges: Even the ego-concept arising in consciousness right now as I listen—there was no volition, no choice to engage that concept. So in that sense, the ego-concept, the personality appearing in consciousness, that's also anattā?*

Correct. When you talk to the scientifically minded, they will say it's evolutionarily necessary—otherwise we'd all have been eaten by sabre-toothed tigers. So it goes very, very deep. And it's not so much that we are producing the self, but that the self is producing us. It's the determination to draw the self. Incredibly deep.

I think we should finish on time because I'm sure people have things to do. I'm disappointed that I went on for so long and we never got the chance to actually try this out.

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