

# Reflections on the Teaching and Practice of Not-self

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Bhante's Essays · 18 min read

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A Reflection on the Teaching and Practice of Not-Self.

## INTRODUCTION

No doctrine of the Buddha has so challenged the western mind as the teaching of not-self, anattā. It is easy to fall

into what the Buddha would call wrong views (ditthi), the opposite of annihilation and eternalism. Either everything

dies at death or something lives on. Here, our exploration begins with basic understandings and uses the Buddha's

first teaching, The Discourse on Not-self. By following the practice he explains there, we can begin to experience

what he means. It is a start.

## The Self

We can describe a 'self' in various ways. It is an entity; it is substantial; it is whole and singular in the present

moment and throughout time. Because it can perceive, it therefore exists. It is the subject, the one who feels, thinks

and experiences. It is the doer. It is distinct from other selves and has its own discrete character and personality. It

is a mental construct, a concept.

What description attracts you most from this list?

## Self as Identity

When we say 'me', what are we referring to? Normally we would have a sense of this 'me' as some central identity, a

central self-reference point that is experienced as solid, unchanging and in control. When we point to 'me', paradoxically we usually point to the middle of the chest (the heart chakra), whereas we experience our self-

awareness in the head. This tells us that 'me' has a feeling and a thinking part – the one knows, the one who feels,

that is, the one who experiences and experiences. When it comes to the body, we would usually say 'my' body. It

rarely becomes 'me'. When we fall gravely or terminally ill, then we see how intertwined the sense of me

and the

body is: 'I am going to die.'

We are aware of me: I can perceive myself so I must exist and as I perceive myself, I see I am distinct from others.

They are not me. I have a personal and distinct character.

This sense of me is made even more real because we do things: I act; I am what I do.

(There are those who suffer from a conflicted or weak sense of self. It is understood that such a person needs to

develop a strong sense of self before they can begin this sort of exploration.)

Should you say: this is the essential me, what might you mean by it?

Self as Eternal Soul

The self presumes itself to be permanent. While we are awake, a feeling of continual presence is experienced as

always being here. It feels other than the body, emotions or thought. Just being here. A self-awareness. It is,

therefore, eternal or timeless – in other words, outside time and so unchanging.

Do you have this sense of 'something' in you being always there? What do you make of it?

Contradiction?

These two descriptions of self and soul are not the same. Whereas the sense of self includes the body, heart and

mind, the soul suggests something ethereal that is in the body, heart and mind, but is beyond them and is self-aware

– it knows itself.

Atta – the Self

During the Buddha's time, the word *atta* was understood to refer to that within a being that was unchanging and so

immortal; solid and so substantial; in control and so all-powerful within itself. The spiritual search for the *atta* led to

freedom from suffering, happiness. Because it was all powerful over itself, the *atta* would always be able to be in a

state of continual happiness, in whatever way it wished to define it: contentment, peace, bliss and so on.

Thus if the

soul said: 'Let there be happiness', that's the way it would be. There were many sects and each had their own

definition and paths to liberation. It was within this atmosphere of spiritual searching and confusion that the

Buddha clarified his teaching.

## The Buddha's Understanding

After his awakening, the Buddha set out to teach. The first people he sought were his five former companions

samanas or wandering ascetics. In the ensuing days, the Buddha explained what he had come to realise and he

constantly asked them if they had ever heard him speak like this before. His was a revolutionary message:

There is

an end to suffering in all its forms, from the slightest to the greatest.

These explanations and discussions have come down to us formalised as the first two discourses. The first presents

the platform of his teaching, the Dhamma – the Four Noble Truths. It is, therefore, known as a Turning the Wheel

of the Dhamma (Start the Wheel of the Dhamma Rolling) Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta. His friends were

impressed and one Kondañña had a deep insight, known as Stream Entry. He had broken through the delusion of

his personality, *sakkaya-diṭṭhi*, as a permanent self.

The second talk, the Discourse on Not-self, completed the process of liberating all five companions. So this is the

discourse we need to understand: it is the platform of this particular teaching about not-self.

### THE DISCOURSE ON NOT-SELF: ANATTALAKKHANA SUTTA

To make the text easier to understand, I have translated it liberally. This link allows you to see how it is more literally rendered:

<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn22/sn22.059.than.html>

In our culture, a religious person tends to think of the human being as made up of three parts: body, mind and

spirit or soul. Scientific materialists would not believe in a soul or spirit and would go so far as to say that mind and

consciousness are 'emergent properties' arising out of the body which, again from a strictly physics point of view, is

just sub-atomic energy fields.

The Buddha, keeping his teaching around *dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness), divided the human into five *khanda* or

aggregates: the physical body; feelings and sensations of the senses; perceptions; volitional formations, our habits

formed by our intentions; and consciousness. We shall see the purpose of this as we go through the different

sections of the Discourse.

## SECTION 1: IDENTITY AND OWNERSHIP:

### The Body

Friends, the body is not-self. Were my body my self, then this body would not be experienced as suffering and unsatisfactory for I could say to the body: 'Let my body be like this; let my body not be like this.' But because the body is not-self, it will still suffer and remain unsatisfactory, for no one has such power over their body to say: 'Let my body be like this; let my body not be like this.'

So the Buddha asks us to investigate and see for ourselves what power we have over the body. Now we can wave our arms about and walk here and there. When it comes to Olympic stature, it is amazing what we can do with the body.

But this is similar to a driver of a car. We can make it go slow or fast, turn left or right, but when the car coughs and grinds to a halt, then we know we are not fully in charge, even though it feels like that when we are driving.

So it is with the body. Consider: who heals the body when we cut ourselves? Our job is to keep it antiseptic.

The body does the rest. Can we stop the body from falling ill or dying? Do we have direct control over organs such as liver, stomach, intestines and so on? Generally speaking we don't have a clue what they are doing and certainly not how they are doing it. The body has a life of its own.

When we sit down and really go through the body bit by bit and ask ourselves: 'Do I know what this is doing or how it is doing it. And what control do I have over it', we find that the sense of 'This body is me or this body is mine' is pretty deluded. We would be better off thinking we were renting the body.

### Feelings

Friends, feelings are not-self. Were feelings my self, then feelings would not be experienced as suffering and unsatisfactory. For one could to say: 'Let me experience this feeling; let me not experience that feeling.' But because feelings are not-self, we will still suffer from them and find them wanting, for no one has such power over feelings to say to it: 'Let me experience this feeling; let me not experience that feeling.'

The word 'feelings' here translates from the word *vedana* which includes all bodily sensations caused by the body, such as pain in the knees from the sitting posture. These also include the sensations coming from the other

four  
senses – sight, hearing, smelling and tasting. And it refers also to all the feelings in the body caused by the mind,  
such as heat and restlessness when we are angry. Any sensations or feelings in the body are all vedana. Let us consider. If you bang your head against an open cupboard, can you stop the pain by ordering it away? When  
you wake in the morning and feel anxious, can you stop the mild nausea by ordering it to leave? Can you command  
yourself never again to feel angry, distressed or anxious? Can you make any feeling of happiness continue indefinitely?  
When we explore the power we have over painful sensations or feelings we again experience our limitations. We  
can only ignore or soothe them to a point, such as rubbing our bruised heads or hugging ourselves in our distress.  
Even when we want to cause ourselves unpleasant sensation such as sipping tea to test its heat, or unpleasant  
feelings such as watching a horror film, we do not directly cause feelings and we have no control over them when  
they emerge.

Perceptions  
Friends, perceptions are not-self. Were perceptions my self, then perceptions would not be experienced as suffering and unsatisfactory. For one could say: 'Let me experience this perception; let me not experience that perception.' But because perceptions are not-self, we will still suffer from them and find them wanting, for no one has such power over perceptions to say to them: 'Let me experience this perception; let me not experience that perception.'

Perception here translates the word *sañña*. When we experience anything, the mind makes a mental picture of it and  
these pictures turn into concrete concepts. We then attach a word to them, shorthand for that concept. On first  
tasting tea, the mind makes a copy and calls it tea. Next time, we recognise the taste. If we taste many types of tea,  
our perception will grow finer and finer. We may even become professional tasters. In this way, a collection of  
perceptions arrives at a concrete concept. This also happens at the more refined level of art and philosophy and so  
we reach abstract concepts. All these perceptions and concepts lie dormant until circumstance brings them to mind.

Consider this. When you direct your eyes towards a flower, the eye as the primary sense base and the brain-mind complex cause us to see a shape and the colour. Past experience tells us it is a red rose. Only when the mind offers that definition do we know what we are looking at. We know when we are looking at a flower we have never seen before because we have no former perception of it nor a concept-word for it. If we take this formula into everyday experience – nature, people, places and so on – we shall find the same mechanism. What power or control do we have over this process? Can we stop the perception of ‘tea’ when tasting tea? Can we change the perception of a red rose when we are looking at it? When a person is mentioned whom we know, can we stop their image or name from arising? And if we have forgotten the face or name, can we make it come back into memory? You may understand, as you read, how the free market and monetarism work, but then have difficulty recalling the facts. Sañña here refers not to reasoning, but to the percepts and concepts that reasoning uses, much as a painter uses different hues to produce a picture. But again we find our power over the process of perceiving is limited. We cannot stop the eye seeing once it is open, though we can intentionally look at something. We cannot stop the ear from hearing, though we can deliberately listen to something. We can put what we want onto the tongue, but we rely on the taste buds for the taste. We can enjoy art, nature and relationships only in so far as our sense bases will allow us. Only in so far as our brains and minds can remember and process the data.

#### Habits

Friends, habits are not-self. Were habits my self, then habits would not be experienced as suffering and unsatisfying. For one could to say: ‘Let me experience this habit; let me not experience that habit.’ But because habits are not-self, we will still suffer from them and find them wanting, for no one has such power over habits to say to them: ‘Let me experience this habit; let me not experience that habit.’

The word ‘habit’ here translates saṅkhâra, a difficult word to explain. It has been variously interpreted as volitional conditionings, volitional formations, mental fabrications, determinations, preparations, and even concoctions. For

our purposes, saṅkhâra are the mental states or mental habits that we create through our intentions and will. It's the will (cetana) that is crucial here for it is that power that actualises our desires. Up until now with body, feelings and perceptions, we have seen we have very minimal control. But in this instance we do create our own mental states from all the joyous, happy ones to all the miserable and despairing ones. And it is here we develop our habits of thinking and imagining. However, once we have developed a habit, we find again we have minimal control. If we have taught ourselves to get angry when the bus is late, whether we want to or not, when the bus comes late anger arises. If we have taught ourselves to get excited about and glued to the TV screen when Wimbledon is on, we find it painful when we can't gratify that desire. If we have taught ourselves to daydream a lot, we find the mind daydreaming even when we don't want it to. Habits cannot be annihilated at will. What causes these mental habits to control us is that they are attitudes that can be transferred onto other objects. We can get angry with anything that displeases us and excited about anything that pleases us. We can intellectualise or fantasise about anything. And so we swing from negative to positive depending on the situation. When we meditate, we find these mental habits arise, often without reason. If they are negative, we can choose to ignore them by distracting ourselves, react with anger or fear, or bear with them. We can, of course, practise vipassana on them. But we can't get rid of them simply by an act of will. We can determine as much as we may: 'I will not be angry ever again'; 'I will not allow myself to get so insanely excited about tennis'; 'I will stop daydreaming!' But it usually doesn't work and if it does, we will be suppressing them and we know that won't do us any good. Paradoxically, we don't want to get rid of habits. What we want is for them to help create happiness and support our endeavour to become liberated. The Buddha had habits. They were always beautiful and spontaneous to the situation for even he could not stop rejoicing when someone accepted his teaching and training. Indeed he says of

those who attain nibbanic consciousness that they are 'happy and with it, contented'. Because they are beautiful, in

harmony with the situation and especially spontaneous, they no longer cause suffering. Suffering arises because of clinging, attachment, expectation and so on.

Consciousness

Friends, consciousness is not-self. Were consciousness my self, then this consciousness would not be experienced as suffering or unsatisfactory, and one could say to consciousness: 'Let consciousness be like this; let consciousness not be like this.' But because consciousness is not-self, it is experienced as suffering and unsatisfactory, for no one has such power over cognition to say to it: 'Let consciousness be like this; let consciousness not be like this.'

The word 'consciousness' here translates *viññāna*. These days consciousness has come under the scrutiny of science

and its usage now as before is varied. You can access Wikipedia:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consciousness> to

find out the various usages of consciousness. The situation is made complicated by the various ways the Buddha uses *viññāna*.

The best way I can describe consciousness as an Aggregate is to ask you to imagine a multidimensional screen

which can hold sensations and feelings; moods and emotions; thoughts and images. That screen is *viññāna*. And it

is within this screen that habits manifest and activate.

So what control have we over the processes of consciousness? It happens automatically if the information coming

into the brain-mind complex is sufficiently strong enough. Sometimes because we are engrossed in something, we

fail to hear the doorbell. Other times, we are not so concentrated and we become conscious that a door bell is

ringing.

## SECTION 2: IMPERMANENCE AND UNSATISFACTORINESS

In this section, the Buddha introduces the other two Characteristics of Existence: impermanence and unsatisfactoriness. Here it is set out as a dialogue.

Friends, what do you think? Is the body permanent or impermanent?

It's impermanent.

When the body is ever changing [and not under our control] does that satisfy us or not?

It does not satisfy us.

So if the body is impermanent and unsatisfactory because it is subject to change, should we be saying, 'This body is mine. I am my body. My body is my Self, my Soul?'

No, we shouldn't.

The same questions are asked about the other four khanda or aggregates: feelings, perceptions, habits and consciousness. All are impermanent and unsatisfactory and therefore we cannot say of them: 'This is mine. I am

this ... My ... is my Self, my Soul.'

The Buddha is not saying here that we cannot enjoy the pleasures and joys of life. He is instead arguing that they

cannot be permanent and therefore from a Self or Soul's point of view, they are just not going to satisfy. He then drives the point home.

Therefore, friends, considering any kind of body or indeed any material form, whether of the past, the future or as we experience it in the present, whether it is obvious or subtle, within oneself or outside oneself, near or far, we must correctly say of any of it, "This is not mine, this is not me, this is not myself."

And the same formula is repeated for feeling, perception, habits and consciousness.

A WAY OF PRACTISING TO REALISE ANNATA

Vipassana – Insight Meditation

In our practice of vipassana we are attempting to realise these insights for ourselves. One advantage of the noting

technique is that it directs us to what is being observed or felt. On the breath when we note 'rising', we could say

'there's rising'. If there's a pain, we could note, 'there's pain'. If there is anxiety, 'there's anxiety'. By doing this we

create a separation between that which knows and what is known. There is a mental distance between the two.

When this becomes clear to us, the sense of being the knower becomes more acute. And this process of objectifying what we experience has been going on since birth.

Margaret Schönberger Mahler

Margaret Mahler (May 10, 1897 – October 2, 1985), a Hungarian physician became interested in psychiatry. She was

one of the most important figures within psychoanalysis. Her main interest was in normal childhood development,

but she spent much of her time with psychiatric children and discovered how they arrived at a sense of self. Mahler

developed the Separation-Individuation theory of child development.

She observed three stages of development: The first, 'autistic' stage lasts from birth for about four weeks.

It begins

with the infant inhabiting its own world, unaware of anything outside its 'self'. There are no 'objects'. From the fifth week, it starts to objectify. Usually the first object is the mother since she is tending to its needs. This process of objectifying into a 'symbiotic' relationship lasts until the fifth month. Yet even so the other is as yet not entirely separate from the infant. There is a vague understanding that somehow someone soothes and feeds. The baby begins to smile, but it is still within an interpersonal relationship so it reacts to the mother's moods as if they were its own. Mahler says that at this stage the infant is categorising the pleasant from the unpleasant (in other words beginning to experience vedana, feeling, whereby we begin to experience the world as either pleasant or unpleasant.) As yet the baby is still 'pre-objectal'.

The third and final stage to individuation is more complex and has a series of steps. From the fifth month to the tenth month, (these times are approximate), the 'differentiation' sub-phase, the self and object become more differentiated. One sign is that the infant becomes afraid of strangers. It is as though up until then the infant has been looking and now realises that 'others' out there are looking at it! Then the 'practising' sub-phase begins where the infant can crawl away and physically separate itself from mother. Mahler calls this 'hatching'. The infant still needs mother for 'emotional refuelling' and returns constantly. By the end of this phase, the infant is upright and actively exploring the world.

Finally there is the 'rapprochement' sub-phase, between 15 and 18-30 months and even to two and half years, the child now begins to speak to others and significant others, like father, appear. There is a great self-assertion (the terrible twos for example) and slowly the child establishes its 'self' as himself or herself. In all it is not until the age of three that the child has objectified the outer world from itself and is able to say confidently, 'I am a girl.', 'I am a boy'.

Objectifying the Inner World

The process of 'awakening' is the slow realisation that we are not 'the world'. Just as the infant begins to separate from the outer world to discover itself as a unique individual, the meditator is taking this process into the inner world.

We discover that we have been internally 'autistic'. We have believed ourselves to 'be' this psychophysical organism.

We then begin to differentiate between the observer, the feeler, the experiencer and what is being observed, felt and experienced, that is the knower from the known.

In terms of the khanda, the five aggregates, the body with its movements is seen as an object. We can watch our hands washing pots. Feelings derived from emotions and sensations in the body are clearly separate from the experiencing of them, just as the carpet felt is separate from the foot feeling it. At a more subtle level, when the

eyes are closed, perceptions are seen as images or cognised as concepts arising in the mind. Yes even thoughts can be perceived as objects. And at the most subtle level the screen upon which all this is happening can be experienced as an object – the screen of consciousness\*.

Through this process of objectifying the interior life, the knower individuates. Yet a strong sense of a self persists: 'I am the knower.'

Beyond the Knower

So now we come to the final barrier to realising what the Buddha refers to as the 'not-born, not-created, not-subject to conditions' and so on. The feel of presence, what I earlier referred to as the 'soul', is the mirror image of the 'knowing' in the screen of consciousness.

When we see our reflection in a mirror we think this is how our face looks. If we take another mirror to view the first reflection and look into that, then we see how our face really looks like. (If you haven't done this you may be in for a shock ... or surprise.)

Similarly, we believe 'self-awareness', awareness-of-me, is what we are. However, in the same way that we have

come to realise that whatever we experience as an object, whatever we are aware of, cannot be 'me', so we can't 'be'

the 'self' in the self-awareness!

So now we must investigate this 'feeling of presence', self-awareness.. By making this feeling of a self the object of

our vipassana, that is, just to sit in its presence with curiosity – and this is best done when tranquillity of body, heart

and mind are established – the realisation, by direct experience, of the Nibbana dhatu, the principle or element of

Nibbana is available. To know the Nibbana dhatu is also to know the Tathagata dhatu, the Buddha principle or

element. (Southern Buddhism tries to avoid 'personalising' the experience. Northern Buddhism feels at ease

referring to this as Buddha Nature/Mind.) That's the why Buddha says in the Dhammapada No.372: those who are

steady in attention and insightful are in the presence of Nibbana.

**Spiritual Purpose of Human Life**

Now we come to know the purpose of being here as humans. This is the realm of existence the Buddha points to

as the best for awakening. It has the inherent pain of the body and the unsatisfactory nature of all the pleasures and

joys of life – and the intuitive awareness to know it. It is the dukkha, the unsatisfactoriness of the world that drives

us to seek the end of dukkha. All we ever wanted was to be happy. All we are doing is seeking it in the wrong place.

Yet even the Buddha continued to suffer physical pain and pleasant sensations; sorrowful occasions arose and so

did joyful ones. A different relationship to this world was established, however. Seeking undiluted and ever present

happiness in the sensual world, both inner and outer, was over, for the Buddha was grounded in the inner unchanging happiness of Nibbana.

**CONCLUSION**

We know through our practice that the outer and inner worlds become more bearable when burdensome and more

enjoyable when delightful. But can we have some idea of what Nibbanic happiness might be like?

When we have clearly established the knower within ourselves, when the body is still, the heart calmed and mind

silent, after we have been in that state of the equanimous observer, feeler, experiencer, we can ask

ourselves what

were the inner factors of the knower. When we recognise the inner qualities of the one who knows, we will know

why all spirituality is drawn to silence.

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