

Not-Self - Control

Bhante Bodhidhamma · DhammaBytes · 16:59

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa

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Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

So now the Buddha had made this amazing breakthrough and he'd wondered whether people would be able to understand what he'd discovered. Overcoming his doubt, he sought his five companions. These are the ascetics that he'd been with for a few years practicing austerity. Remember when he approached them, they didn't really want to see him. He'd gone soft, so they said. When he started talking to them, it doesn't come up actually in the discourse on the turning of the wheel of the law – that's more formalised – but in the *Vinaya*, which is the rule of the monks where it describes things a bit more, he says that as he's giving that talk he's constantly asking them: Have you ever heard me speak like this before? Have you ever heard me say these things before?

By the end of that first discussion that he'd had, in which he laid down the platform of his understanding – the Four Noble Truths – that there is suffering, *dukkha*, unsatisfactoriness, which is pretty straightforward, pretty obvious. The cause of it is this desire, which translates as seeking happiness in the sensual world, seeking happiness in this phenomenal world – that's a big problem. The third noble truth says that there is an end to suffering, and it is when this particular desire is completely eradicated. Then, of course, he goes on to the path: right understanding, right attitude, right intention. There's right speech, right action, right livelihood. So you've got to bring it right into daily life. And then there's the meditation: right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration.

Now after he'd spoken, presumably in the morning, it was said that they all went off to get some food. They all went off on alms rounds. Having come back and had a little lunch to revive their spirits and had a little kip, as you do, they got together again and the Buddha is said to have delivered this particular sermon on the characteristic of non-self, the *Anattalakkhana Sutta*.

What I'll do first is just read it straight through so that you get the gist of it. It's not very long, of course. Then we'll go back and have a look at what he's saying.

Before I start, Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation – this is the book "In the Buddha's Words" – is literal and sometimes a little difficult in style, but he's trying to be as close to the text as possible. As we go through the text, then you'll see there are other ways of expressing things.

Thus have I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling at Bārānasi, which is Benares, present day Benares, in the deer park at Isipatana. Now there the Blessed One addressed the monks of the group of five. "Thus, monks." "Venerable sir," those monks replied, and the Blessed One said this:

"Monks, form is non-self. For if, monks, form were self, this form would not lead to affliction, and it would be possible to determine of form: 'Let my form be thus, let my form not be thus.' But because form is not self, form leads to affliction and it is not possible to determine of form: 'Let my form be thus, let my form not be thus.'

"Feeling is not self. Perception is not self. Volitional formations are non-self. And consciousness is non-self."

Now for those of you who know the five *khandhas* and who have been diligently attending these talks will remember that this is the way the Buddha looks at our experience through these five heaps.

For each of them, and we'll just repeat the one about consciousness, he says the same thing: "For if, monks, consciousness were self, this consciousness would not lead to affliction, and it would be possible to determine of consciousness: 'Let my consciousness be thus, let my consciousness not be thus.' But because consciousness is non-self, consciousness leads to affliction and it is not possible to determine of consciousness: 'Let my consciousness be thus, let my consciousness not be thus.'"

"Now what do you think, monks: is form permanent or impermanent?" "Impermanent, venerable sir." "Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?" "Suffering, venerable sir." "Is what is impermanent, suffering and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: 'This is mine, this I am, this is myself?'" "No, venerable sir."

"Is feeling permanent or impermanent? Is perception permanent or impermanent? Are volitional formations permanent or impermanent? Is consciousness permanent or impermanent?" "Impermanent, venerable sir." "Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?" "Suffering, venerable sir." "Is what is impermanent, suffering and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: 'This is mine, this I am, this is myself?'" "No, venerable sir."

"Therefore, monks, any kind of form whatsoever, whether past, future or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, all form should be seen as it really is with correct wisdom thus: 'This is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself.'

"Any kind of feeling whatsoever, any kind of perception whatsoever, any kind of volitional formations, any kind of consciousness whatsoever, whether past, future or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, all consciousness should be seen as it really is with correct wisdom thus: 'This is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself.'

"Seeing thus, monks, the instructed noble disciple becomes disenchanted with forms, disenchanted with

feeling, disenchanted with perception, disenchanted with volitional formations, disenchanted with consciousness. And becoming disenchanted, he becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion, his mind is liberated. And when it is liberated, there comes the knowledge it's liberated. He understands: 'Destroyed is birth. The spiritual life has been lived. What had to be done has been done, and there is no more coming back to any state of being.'"

That is what the Blessed One said. Elated, those monks delighted in the Blessed One's statement. And while this discourse was being spoken, the minds of those monks of the group of five were liberated from the taints by non-clinging.

There we are, you see. Anybody liberated? You see, it's the way you say it, it's the way he said it, I reckon. I don't have it, you see. Now liberated from the taint by non-clinging.

As I say, some of the words he uses are debatable, but we can first of all begin by taking from this discourse what exactly was understood at the time by a self.

We're going back now to the Brahminical tradition, which predates what we call Hinduism. Remember at that time there was also a great change in their way of thinking. The Vedanta was being completed. The Upanishads were just being written, well, made up, created. They were coming out of the ritualistic way of living through the Rig Veda, coming to understand that ritual didn't actually bring results. This great movement at that time of people going into the forests and living the ascetic life was all part of this loss of confidence, existential problem. Remember you've got to put that in context of the whole axial age because the same thing, similar things happening in China with Lao Tzu, in Greece with Socrates, and Moses. Probably all over another part of the world that we don't know of. The whole of human consciousness was moving, you see. Really the big message of the age was do unto others as you would have them do unto you, not do unto others before they do unto you.

Now what was understood by a self at that time? The self was the centre of power of itself. The whole idea of a self was that you were in complete control – that's the first thing, we'll come back to it. The second thing was that it was permanent, it wasn't changing, it was always the same. The third one was that it was happy, it was always happy.

If you think about it, if you have complete power over your being, then you could say to yourself: "From now on I'm going to be happy," and that'd be it, that'd be the end of it, wouldn't it? You would be happy all the time. That would presume a state of continuity, a state of absolute continuity. So this was the idea of a soul, an *attā* as understood at that time. We have to remember that, yeah?

I presume that you get a similar explanation of spirit or soul in other religious traditions. What he's doing now – he is not saying, and this is a really important point – nowhere in the scriptures do you see him saying there is no self. There's never a metaphysical statement. He never goes that far. It's a teaching tool. He's asking: If the self is the centre of power and has complete power over what it thinks it is, and if it is

permanent, and if it is always happy, then where is it?

Now he's asking us: The first thing is form is non-self. This word form, remember, is referring to the body. In a more subtle sense, it's more to do with the experience of the body at its sense base. There we go into those four great elements, the *mahābhūta*, which we've also done, and which of course you'll all remember: fire, earth, water and air, which refer to the properties of temperature, the property of pressure or lack of it, the property of movement and the property of cohesion or elasticity. It is understood that you can reduce all sensations down to some combination of these – even sight, which would be more the fire element. We know that the ear for instance is basically a pressure point. There's no sound as such. There's no sound in the universe. There are simply waves, waves of pressure. In your meditation you can get down to that.

When it comes to the more difficult senses like tasting and smelling, even so, these are said to be combinations of these four.

Now, we'll just do this one, and we'll sort of draw it to the end there. What he's saying is: Is this body a self? If it were a self, then it wouldn't lead to affliction. It wouldn't lead to suffering or unsatisfactoriness. So the question is: Are you in a state of continual satisfaction with your body? No.

He says, "Right, well it can't be that." He says, "Is it possible to say then to this body: From now on, you will remain at the age of 30, and you will not move?" Or whatever age you felt to be at your most greatest physical prowess. Then he's saying, if not, if you can't say that, and you can't say "Let it be this, let it not be that," then it must be – it can't be a self. It must be, it cannot be something over which you can say you have power.

So that's what he's saying. He's asking us to always recognise that the body, although we have superficial control over it, fundamentally we have very little control over it. If it falls seriously ill, when it falls ill, it just falls ill. We don't even know what's happening in the body. I mean, have you any idea now what your liver is doing? You might know intellectually, you might have read about it, but actually, can you now know what your liver is doing? Are you aware that red blood corpuscles are moving out of the marrow of your bone and into your bloodstream?

See, it's a completely weird state we're in. This is the first argument that he puts to us. That if we think, if we ask ourselves, "Who am I?" or "What am I?" one way to look at it is: Am I in control of it? Is it completely within my power? That's all.

Next week we'll revise that by going through the others. A bit more to be said about that too.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May, through your careful investigation of the quality of power over your body, lead you to liberation from suffering sooner rather than later.

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