

# Not-self — Impermanence and Suffering

Bhante Bodhidhamma · DhammaBytes · 16:07

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*Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammasambuddhassa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato  
Sammasambuddhassa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammasambuddhassa*

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

So, the discourse on not-self that the Buddha gave at the old deer park in Isipatana, which is near modern Benares, to the five companions — if you remember, he makes the point concerning the self that it has to be in control, because it's not me, not mine. Remember in those days the Brahminical tradition or the general understanding was that the soul was in control and it could do what it wanted with itself. So the question was then: well, what was it? That was one of the definitions.

And he goes through the five *khandhas*. So remember the five khandhas, the five aggregates, are the way he splits up, deconstructs the human being into five parts. The body with its sensations, perceptions — that's the basic mental process of perceiving through the senses. Feelings in the body which are coming both from the body itself and from our emotional life, whereby we discern the world as either pleasant or unpleasant, some shade of unpleasantness or pleasantness. These *sankhāra* — now these sankhāra, remember, are what we construct or what we create with our will. So that's our emotional thought life. And finally, consciousness.

And it's the consciousness which is — sometimes it's a little bit confusing in the descriptions. It's either the consciousness which is a basic act of cognition. It's like the screen of a TV, where the input is put into a picture. Sometimes it's understood as that. Other times it's understood as discriminative consciousness. So what can tell between blue and red and things like that, so it can discriminate. In higher faculties of course it's philosophy and art, but it's the same consciousness that discriminates, compares, et cetera. So he's asking: are we in control of these things? Do we have that total control which would be a definition of a self?

And just very simply: if we were in control of the body, then you'd be able to stop it growing old for a start. At least that's the first thing I'd do.

So having made that point now, he now goes on to the next thing, and the discussion carries on like this. It's more like a catechism: "What do you think, monks? Is form — so that's the body — permanent or impermanent?" "Impermanent, Venerable Sir." "And 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."

So here's the points he makes. So just thinking about the body — and remember the body also here refers to the sense bases and that basic act of contact with the world at the physical level. In other words, at the physical bodily level rather than smelling or tasting and all that, the contact is — remember — split into four different types: the feeling of hardness or softness, pressure; feeling of some sort of warmth, heat, fire, cold; feeling of movement, some sort of movement; and a more subtle feeling of cohesion, elasticity, which you might sometimes get in the breath when you're breathing, feeling of expansion, like a concertina. So that's what he's referring to.

And his first question is: is it permanent? So that was another definition of the self, the *attā* — it was permanent. So is it permanent? So you can't be the body. Then he asks, then he links — if it's impermanent, is it suffering or not suffering? Is it suffering or happiness?

Now in the three characteristics which we investigate in order to become fully liberated — because these three characteristics are the way in which we are deluded by the world, or we delude ourselves — the first one is this impermanence. So we tend to see, at least if not permanency, we see continuity. So thinking about the body, we tend to feel it as some sort of continuous body. So the body I've got now is the same as I had this morning. But we know that every seven years there's a complete change of atoms. So what we tend to do is form this continuity.

It's the same with time. Remember there are acts of cognition — momentary acts of cognition. They're like a blinking. So one picture is put into the mind as to what we're looking at, and then before the next picture can arise, that picture has to go away. So actually, when you get down to how consciousness works, it's stroboscopic. But we don't experience that. What we experience is flow. So that's exactly the same as the old films — we experience it as flow, but actually there's twenty-five or something per second of these frames.

And so this impermanence he's talking about isn't the sense of something in a constant state of change, as you might, for instance, get a piece of clay, mold it into a cup, then fiddle around with it, then mold it into a saucer. So it's the same piece of clay. No, every moment is absolutely created from the beginning. That's what the Buddha's meaning of impermanence is. So it's not change in the way that we would think of change. It's not some sort of continuity. A moment arises, a moment arises, a moment disappears. That's it. There's obviously a connection with the past, but the past has been completely ended for this new moment to begin.

Now, when we say moments, remember, we're never really talking about the world out there. We're talking about how we experience the world. We are completely and entirely dependent upon our senses and brain as to how we experience the world. And what he's saying is that this is how it works. So when he's saying "is it impermanent," he means "is it radically impermanent?" Yes, it is.

Now, where does the suffering come from? So we first of all perceive things as continuous. When you realize it's not continuous, then you realize that you've been holding on to something. It brings out a

certain expectation. So that's why when somebody dies suddenly, it comes as a shock. You don't expect it. Continuity gives you expectation. So wherever we believe something to be in any way permanent, even if it's only in a short time, there's always the possibility of suffering.

So those three characteristics, when they're taught, they're always taught with impermanence first, suffering second, and then not-self. And that's exactly how he puts it here. So "is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?" "Suffering, Venerable Sir." "Is what is impermanent and suffering and subject to change" — that's another way of saying impermanent — "can we say this is mine? Can I say that I possess something which doesn't exist only for a moment and then that's gone? Can I say this is me, I am this? Can I say this is myself?" — in other words, my soul, my eternal soul. "No, Venerable Sir."

So the key is impermanence. The key is to see impermanence, and through impermanence you begin to connect with the suffering that arises because we expect things to continue. And we see that through impermanence there's nothing solid there, there's nothing substantial. And that begins to undermine our ideas of who we are.

Then, of course, he goes through the next four khandhas, the next four aggregates, as they're called. So there's feeling, the same thing. Which feeling are you? If you say, "I am my emotions, I am my emotional life, that's what I really am. I am what I feel," so which one are you going to be? You can't expect an emotion, can you? You don't go to bed and think, "Well, tomorrow I shall determine to wake up depressed." You wake up depressed. You wake up happy. There's absolutely no control after you've been to sleep as to how you wake up. If you're the type that wakes up very beautifully — so I had this elderly lady come to see me today, and she says she always wakes up bright. She's very lucky because she knows all these people wake up depressed, but she says all her life, apart from the occasional hard time, she said, "I always wake up full of life, full of wanting to go." I said to her, "You are blessed."

So there's feeling, and we ask ourselves: well, why do I say "I am sad"? What is this "I"? What is it? Why do I so associate with, identify with my emotions when they're impermanent, and that identity causes me suffering?

Then of course there's perception. So all the things that we perceive, they're also to be understood as impermanent. And if we believe our perceptions — if you take perceptions up the ladder, what *saññā* is, perception, it's the holding of first of all a percept, but as your thought gets more and more complicated, it becomes conceptual. And that becomes the percept, the perception with which you see the world through. So if you say to yourself, "I am a socialist" or something, that's it, you're blocked, you can't move. You're frozen into a definition. Now that's not true if you say you're a Buddhist. I'll come to that after the talk.

And then there's the volitional formations. It's just a way of trying to translate this word *sankhāra* — it's difficult. All it means is our emotional thought life which we create through our acts of will. Every time you remember you pay attention to something, there's an act of intention involved, and an intention is the beginning of an act of will. So you might hear something as you walk into your house — somebody's there,

something — and you hear something, you hear the TV, and you put your attention there. And with that attention, which is an intention, you intend to listen. There arises a desire to watch the TV, and you go and watch TV. It's like — so every time, remember, every time you attend to something, there's also an act of intention. That's why it's conditioning. So these are all the sankhāras, and he asks exactly the same question: are they permanent, and so on.

And then finally, consciousness itself. Consciousness here itself is not a sort of suffering in the sense that one is aware of it. One is aware of suffering. Consciousness itself isn't suffering — it's just the awareness of suffering. And therefore we can say that there is suffering; we know there is suffering.

So then he goes on. He says, "Therefore, monks" — by the way, this translation of *bhikkhu* translates as monks, but the commentaries tell us that this means all people who are listening to the Dharma. What do you call that figure of speech when you say "all hands on deck"? I can't remember what it is — "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." And he says the same with feeling, with perception, volitional formations, and consciousness.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you be fully liberated from all suffering, even impermanent suffering, sooner rather than later.

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