

Not-self - Recap and Metaphors

Bhante Bodhidhamma · DhammaBytes · 19:10

Namo tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā Sambuddhassa. Namō tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā Sambuddhassa. Namō tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā Sambuddhassa. Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

So we've been going through this *Anattalakkhana Sutta*, the discourse on the characteristic of not-self. And if you remember, the first teaching is concerning control. If this is me, then I should be able to do what I want with it. This is a key understanding at that time as to what a soul or a self was. A soul or a self was completely in control of itself.

So if you look at any part of our experience as a human being, whether it's the body or thoughts or emotions, you can see from this sitting that we've just done that they arise of themselves. Even though we have a certain control, we discover that actually we don't have total control. And the argument would be if you can't control it, it's not you. It's got another centre. It's got its own centre of control. But he also points out that even that is not a self, as if it were something substantial. It's also something ephemeral, changing.

And that's the next point. The next point about the soul or the self is that it's permanent. So if we look at any of our experience, whether it's physical, mental, emotional, it arises and passes away. So it can't be a soul or a self or anything permanent. And that would be one of the definitions of a soul or a self. That's the point. It's how you define a soul or a self.

And then, of course, he asks the question, well, if it's impermanent, does that bring a sense of dissatisfaction or satisfaction? Well, it's unsatisfactory, isn't it? It might be satisfactory if something is painful and then it passes away. But when it's happy, we can't hold on to it. That's also unsatisfactory.

So in the discourse here, he's actually explaining these three characteristics of existence. They're the fundamental characteristics of existence that he's pointing to, to discover our true nature. When we perceive things as they really are, we also begin to see what there really is.

Now what I want to do is to read another discourse which gives another side of the Buddhist teachings, because this is an intellectual exposition but he also has a way of expressing things through imagery. We'll come to that, but in this particular discourse he gave it to his five companions. So this was after he'd become fully awakened. He searched for them, found them in Benares, present day Varanasi, and at Isipatana, Sarnath, excuse me, Sarnath, is the Deer Park.

And so the story goes, when he gave them a talk, then they went on alms round, and after they'd eaten and

had a rest, he gave this talk, and all of them became fully liberated. And I just want to read the end of it, which gives you the formula in which this is said.

So, seeing thus, the instructed noble disciple becomes disenchanted with form, that's the body as well, disenchanted with feeling, disenchanted with perceptions, disenchanted with volitional formations, so those are your thoughts and emotions, and disenchanted with consciousness. See, that word disenchanted, no longer caught up in the enchantment of the world, you're not bewitched by it.

Now, when we become disenchanted, the next step is to become dispassionate. It doesn't mean to say that you end up being emotionally void, a numb blob. It just means that you don't get passionate about things in the wrong way. Being angry, holding on to things, attachment, you become dispassionate. And it's through this process of dispassion that we're liberated. Dispassion.

So the insight creates a different relationship of disenchantment. This disenchantment affects our relationship with the world, which is the way we experience the world ourselves, which leads to a sense of equanimity, a sense of ease with the world. That's the dispassionate part. And that's, when it's taken to the limit, that's the liberation of the mind. That's the liberation of consciousness. Probably a better word. Although, as you know, the word I prefer is the knowing, that which knows, the Buddha within, the Buddha within.

And once that's done, he understands, it is lovely, destroyed his birth, this rebirth, the spiritual life has been lived, what has been done has been done. Can you feel the relief in that? It's like when you have to redecorate a house and you finish it and it's all very nice and beautiful. And you say what has been done has been done. A sense of relief and satisfaction. There is no more coming back to any state of becoming. This constant rebirthing business.

Now you have to be careful here because at the spiritual level the rebirthing means the recreation of this self which is recreating the wrong relationship to the world. You have to remember that when the Buddha was liberated, he didn't disappear. He was still there. He acted as he was there, fully liberated, walking around as even being. So whenever we read this end of becoming or end of being, as some people translate it, we think of annihilation. It's obviously not.

What's annihilated, the Buddha's clear about this, what is annihilated is that wrong view, the delusion, and with it, all sense of attachment to the world, and all sense of aversion or fear of the world. That's what disappears completely.

And then finally, 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. Now the taint is just another word of saying all those things in us which are produced by this wrong thinking. And that non-clinging is just another way of saying dispassion.

So you can bring this into your daily life. Every time you have a compulsion to do something, to have that biscuit and a cup of tea, just hang on there. Just wait till it passes away. What's the mind when there's no desire in it? And the more that we move towards that state, the more we're developing the state of contentment. Contentment is a quality of the Buddha mind. Contentment and joy.

So, let's see how he expresses this in imagery. Because he often says there are people for whom imagery works better than an intellectual dry approach. So this is on one occasion, he was dwelling at Ayodhya on the bank of the river Ganges. And there the Blessed One addressed the monks thus. In the scriptures where you come across *bhikkhu*, I can't remember what that figure of speech is called. You know when you say things like all hands on deck, meaning all people. So this is when the commentaries tell us that when the Buddha uses the word monks, he's referring to anybody who's listening.

So suppose that this river Ganges was carrying along a great lump of foam and a man with good sight would inspect it, ponder it and carefully investigate it and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a lump of foam? So too monks, whatever kind of form there is, remember that's the body, whether past or future or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near. And the meditator inspects it, ponders it and carefully investigates it and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial for what substance could there be in form?

Now you see we know from our subatomic physics that this body is just a mass of energy. There's nothing substantial in it at all. But that's not how we experience it. You trap your finger in the door, it's definitely got substance. But in reality it's nothing. It's just frazzled energy walking around. Wonderful stuff.

Now suppose that in the autumn when it is raining and the big raindrops are falling, and a water bubble arises and bursts on the surface of the water. A man with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, and insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a water bubble? So too, whatever kind of feeling there is, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, a monk inspects it, ponders it, carefully investigates it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in feeling?

Now, when we have a feeling, it presents itself as something hard. Feeling, say, if you have a pain in the knee or some pain in the body caused by an emotional state. At first, it feels hard because of that identity with it. That's what hardens it. This, you know, I am suffering. But actually, when you go into this meditation, as we've just done, and you can feel it, you can see there's nothing there. Once you get into the texture of it, it's got no substance. There's nothing in it at all. It's just a passing state of different sensations.

Suppose that in the last month of the hot season, at high noon, a shimmering mirage appears. Now a man with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a mirage? So too, monks, whatever kind of perception there is, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or

superior, far or near, a monk inspects it, ponders it, carefully investigates it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in perception?

Now when we perceive something, that is a correlative something which is an image in the mind which relates to what you're looking at. So we know that the eye when it's looking at a picture is just moving around at enormous speeds, picking up little pixels. And it's coming back into the brain, into the mind-brain complex, and it's creating a constant picture. And then, in that amazing way, it then projects it back onto the picture. So what we're actually seeing is the picture in the mind being projected onto the picture that we're supposedly looking at. And therefore, it's a mirage. It doesn't actually exist. We're not actually seeing that picture. What we're seeing is what the mind's creating. That's a lovely image of a mirage.

Suppose a man needing heartwood, that's the very middle of the wood of a tree, seeking heartwood, wandering in search of heartwood, would take a sharp axe and enter a forest. There he would see the trunk of a large banana tree, straight, fresh, without a fruit bud core. He would cut it down at the root, cut off the crown, and unroll the coil. As he unrolled the coil, he would not find even softwood, let alone heartwood. A man with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in the trunk of a banana tree?

So too monks, whatever kind of volitional formations there are, whether past, future or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, a monk inspects them, ponders them, carefully investigates them. And as he investigates them, they appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in volitional formations?

Now, if you think of our emotional thought life, it's layer upon layer isn't it? It's just coming up. You're sitting here and suddenly off on a dream. So if you think of something that makes a little bit more immediate is an onion. As you keep peeling the levels of an onion, when you get to the middle of it there's nothing there. So all these emotional states we get, all these thought patterns, they're all coming up and they're all just going away and there's nothing in them, there's nothing substantial. Good image.

Now suppose that a magician or a magician's apprentice would display a magical illusion at a crossroads and a man with good sight would inspect it, ponder it and carefully investigate it and it would appear to him to be void, hollow and insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a magical illusion? So too monks, whatever kind of consciousness there is, whether past, future or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near. A monk inspects it, ponders it, carefully investigates it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in consciousness?

Now, the English translation here is a bit strange and is not quite right because consciousness has so many meanings these days. Even in the Buddha's discourses the word consciousness is used variously

depending on the context and that's the same with other words because he's having to use the concepts of his time to get across his new understanding and there's always that difficulty of trying to say something and being misunderstood because people hear the word and hear it from another position and hear it from another meaning.

So what's understood here is that a perception is some sort of word, a label that we put on things, and it's also some sort of image. So when you see an apple, you have an image of it, and you also have a word for it. And those all congregate to, shall we say, a perceptual process. This perceptual process grows with the subtlety of your thinking. Large concepts like democracy and freedom and all that which remain in the mind as perceptions, conceptions, all this has to, as it were, come forward onto something that we can see. So that would be like a television screen and at that point there's a cognition and that's what he's talking about.

So just as on the screen of your computer, what is it? Is there any substance there? It's just a picture, isn't it? Or when you're watching a film in a cinema. It looks real, but what it is, it's just a screen, as we know with photons and all that, but there's no substance to it. Even a 3D film, there's no substance to it. And that's a lovely, a magical illusion. It's a magical illusion.

Now, it wouldn't be a problem, but we identify with it. We say, I am my consciousness. I think, therefore I am, and all that. That's the problem. But when we discover we're not that, then we become dispassionate about it. We don't get so involved, we don't get so attached to the world, and the suffering disappears.

So now, as usual, he says, when the instructed noble disciple becomes disenchanted, see this word disenchanted, not being caught up with, form disenchanted with feeling, disenchanted with perception, disenchanted with volitional formations, and 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 is liberated. He understands. Destroyed his birth, the spiritual life has been lived. What had to be done has been done. Oh, what a relief. And there is no more coming back to any state of becoming.

Here ends the discourse on the quality of not-self by the Buddha. I can only hope my words have been of some assistance and that they will lead you to your liberation sooner rather than later.

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