

# The Discourse on Not-self (SN 22.59)

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Dharma Talks · 23:48

---

Good evening. I hope you've had a fruitful day. I do not say happy, though I hope it has been happy.

*Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa.*

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

So, I am going to labour the point. It's just to carry on with this not-self, because I remember my own personal confusion when I came across this teaching for the first time. It seemed to be saying that there was a not-self, which seemed very confusing, and the denial of a self. So the Buddha doesn't deny that there's a self, he just says it's unreal. And the not-self is a teaching tool. It's a way of saying, well, this is not me, it's not mine, and it's not myself.

The discourse I want to look at tonight is traditionally the second one he gave to his disciples, to his five friends who had been his five friends during that time when he was self-mortifying mainly through not eating. If you remember, he approaches them and of course they don't respect him anymore - he's gone soft. But as he does approach, they see that something's changed. And when he begins to speak, he keeps asking them, have you ever heard me speak like this before? And just very slowly they open up to his teaching, and one of them actually becomes what we call a stream-enterer, just the first step of four steps that take us to liberation.

So now, during the day, of course, they go off. Well, I would have thought it was some time, days maybe, because he does say that three of them went for alms round and came back, and they all left. Sometimes it was two of them went on alms round. But it's been formalized into what's known as the *Anattalakkhana Sutta*, the discourse on not-self. So this, in a sense, encapsulates this whole teaching. So we'll just go through it and you'll see how it works.

So again, he's at Benares in that deer park where he's met his five mendicants and he's talking to them and he says, "Is form..." Now this word *rūpa* is often translated as form, but obviously for us as human beings, it's basically the body. Everything has form, everything has some sort of spatial reality - a cupboard, a table. But as far as we're concerned, human beings, the *rūpa* refers to this body.

So he asks, "Is this body..." This body is not self, he says to them. So the identity to the body is an illusion, is a delusion. And he says, well, if this body were you, you'd be able to have control over it. You'd be able to say, do not fall sick. Do not suffer from any affliction. You'd be able to tell it to grow a bit more, or I would anyway, and to have more hair on the head. It doesn't matter to me at this present time, but there was a

time when I could have done with more hair on my head. But unfortunately, the centre of control is elsewhere.

So this is the important point. Where is the centre of control? Where is the power? Who controls the body to stop it aging, to stop it dying, falling ill? Of course, we can move our arms around and shake our heads, but it's very superficial. It's a bit like driving a car, isn't it? I mean, when you're in a car driving, you feel you're in control, but actually the car's propelling itself. It's got all sorts of stuff going on and anything can go wrong any time. And then when of course it breaks down or a tire bursts, then you realize you're not in control of the car. The control is quite superficial. So it's the same with the body.

And when you realize that, you begin to realize that, how does he put it now? This body is not mine. You use it, but you don't actually own it. That's the distinction. Like with all objects, the ownership of an object is a legal fiction. I mean, we all agree to it. Like, for instance, this is my laptop. But that's just an agreement that we have between us as human beings. The fact is I don't actually own it. And of course, this ownership gets very big because then people own their houses. States own their country. And that causes all sorts of problems, this idea of possessing something.

And then the body is not me. See, there's a disjunction. There's some sort of separation between me and the body because the body won't do what I tell it to do. And I am not the body. So this sense of self that I have is not the body. So again, we're going always back to identity. This was the big breakthrough of the Buddha, this problem of identity. If identity manifested as delusive action, it caused *dukkha*. So that's why the Four Noble Truths are phrased in what we can actually experience, unsatisfactoriness, suffering. But the root cause is this problem of identity.

So then he goes on to talk about feeling. Now, feelings are both physical and emotional, heart feelings. So again, if you hurt your body, you bump your knee or something, or you bite your tongue, then at that moment, you're not in charge of the body. The body actually goes into a spasm of pain. And you can't say, well, you know, I don't want this pain. The pain remains. If you've got a headache, you have a headache. And you realize that when it comes to actually feelings in the body, again, very little control. You can take tablets these days, of course, but that's just covering over the pain.

When it comes to emotions, if you feel sad, you feel sad. You can distract yourself. You can listen to some music or something or jump up and down and dance or whatever. But you can't get rid of the sadness that way. It's just buried underneath this attempt to escape it. And so you realize that we have very little power over our emotions. They arise and pass away. And this, of course, becomes obvious when you're sitting. You might sit with every intention, you know, to get deeply concentrated, have these wonderful insights, and all you have is these emotions coming up. You know, one minute there's all sorts of anxiety, there's all sorts of excitement, and then you're depressed, and then you're angry. It's just a waterfall of uncontrolled emotions, uncontrollable emotions.

And then we have perception. Now, perception belongs to the mind, that part which thinks. It thinks not

only in an abstract sense of thoughts, words, but also in imagery, in imagination. So if I said the word cat, you not only understand what that means intellectually, you know, when it's got four legs and a little tail and all that, but also you have an image in your mind of what a cat is. So you know it's not a dog. We can normally tell clearly that this is a cat. It is not a dog.

And these perceptions are not controlled by us, they arise because we see things, we hear things, we touch things, we smell things, we taste things, and then we make a photocopy of it. And the more we experience something that we see every day, a car for instance, it builds up a concept about it, an image which runs with the concept, concrete concept. So you know that this is a car - it's not a truck, it's not a train, it's not a plane. And then of course it gets very subtle because then it becomes very big like freedom, democracy. But all these things are given to us. And they develop through our experience, through our cultures, and so on. And you can't get rid of it. You can't get rid of your sense of what your personal freedom means to you. You can change it, but you can't get rid of it. It's just there within you.

It's the next part, the *saṅkhāra*, where we have some sort of choice, where we do have some sort of power. And all the time he's saying, well, these feelings, these perceptions, this body, you see, it's not right to say this is mine. You don't possess it. It changes of its own power. I was going to say free will, but there's no free will. It changes because of its own power. The eyes have a power to see. There's a process of vision which comes when the retina receives an object and you have this mentation going on, the whole process that's happening within the mind, within the brain mind. The brain would be the sensitive base for the mind.

Now, when it comes to *saṅkhāra*, which are the volitional conditionings, our habits, I much prefer just the word habits. You can't get rid of a habit. You can change it. You can draw it down so that it doesn't have any effect on you. But even in an arahat, old habits will arise, even those that belong to delusiveness. They'll arise, but they have no power. They're called *vāsanā*, they're called leftovers, traces, traces of past habits. The Buddha is said to have got rid of all of those, but that again is just hagiography, turning the Buddha into some magical being, some hyper human being, a beyond human being. But as a human being, he would have had habits. That's what a human being is, is the body and a process of habituation.

And again, when you see these habits come, when you find yourself in or acting out of a habit, you can become an observer of it, you can be aware of it and realize, well, I don't have to possess this. If I have an attitude of possessing it, it's going to be difficult for me to change it. If I identify with it, if I did that, it wouldn't be me. I remember an old aunt saying that. If she behaved like that, it wouldn't be me. So a very stuck idea of who I am. And that just produces staleness. It produces stagnancy. Whereas we want to be able to flow, to flow with events and to change with events. And that's how our lives grow, hopefully towards what is beneficial.

By the way, I did see a little cartoon about going with the flow. It just said, only dead fish go with the flow. I don't think that's the meaning here.

Then finally we have this consciousness. Now consciousness is the fifth of the *khandhas*. So remember the *khandha*, we've just been through them, the body, feelings, perceptions, habits and consciousness. Consciousness only arises when it is impinged upon, when something touches it. So it's like a screen, just like this screen that I'm looking at, like a monitor. There has to be an object. There has to be an object that impinges upon a sense base. So light must impinge upon the eye. A sound must impinge upon the ear. Something must come out of, for want of a better word, the subconscious, some sort of image, some sort of emotion, which arises and then touches upon this scheme, upon this screen of consciousness.

Now, that screen of consciousness is not always there because it's being touched constantly by different impulses, by different stimuli. And you can't stop being conscious. I mean, you can put yourself asleep. I mean, obviously, when we go to sleep, we lose consciousness. Now you can hit yourself on the head and lose consciousness. But while we're awake, you cannot be not conscious. Your consciousness just arises because it's constantly being awoken by stimulus.

So we don't have that control over consciousness - whenever I put my eye on something I become aware of it, it becomes part of my consciousness. So again this idea of control you see, and now if the centre of control is elsewhere then it can't be me. That's one of the definitions of I, me. See, I know I'm not you because I can't control you. I know I'm not something outside me because I have limited control. I can move objects, I can control them, but they're still objects, they're still outside me, so I know it's not me.

Now, when you're meditating, you're taking a position within yourself of identifying with the observer, the feeler. Once you're in that position, everything's an object, and it's not under your control. The body offers feelings, sensations, the heart offers its moods and emotions, and the mind its thoughts and images. Whether you want it to or not, it isn't under your direct control when you're in the position of the observer, the feeler, the experiencer, the one who knows in *vipassanā*.

Somebody's actually translated *saṅkhāra* as choices. There's a very good website called Sutta Central. That's just one word, Sutta Central. And there's another one, ancient Buddhist texts by Ānanda Jyoti, who's an English monk, where he lives in Thailand, really. I've known him for a very long time. He also has a little website I just pointed out, Dharma Documentaries, they're really quite good. I'll post this up at some point.

So now having explored the idea of control, the Buddha then goes on to impermanence. Ever-changing. "What do you think, Mendicants?" That's another word for *bhikkhu*, yeah? "Is form permanent or impermanent?" So is the body permanent or impermanent? So the answer is that it's impermanent, Venerable Sir. "And if it's impermanent, is that suffering or happiness?"

Now, those two words, *dukkha* and *sukha*, you can translate as suffering or happiness, but I think it makes more sense to say, is that satisfying? Is it unsatisfying? Because one of the translations of *dukkha* is unsatisfactoriness. And of course they say no sir it is unsatisfactory. "And if it's impermanent, unsatisfactory and perishable, is it fit to be regarded as 'this is mine, I am this, this is myself?'" Well the

answer of course is no, venerable. So there's your basic questions.

The basic question is: is it permanent or impermanent? Now all these things are permanent and impermanent - if it's impermanent is that satisfying for you? I mean if you arrive at a beautiful state of mind and then it disappears that's not very satisfactory, you want to try and maintain it, you want to try and develop it maybe.

And then he goes through the rest of it. Feeling - so feelings, are they permanent, impermanent? Now this permanent-impermanent is not it's not the same thing changing all the time, they are completely new moments. Every consciousness is arising and passing away, so it's at that fundamental level the impermanence is immediate and. Even now consciousnesses are arising and passing away in me and in you at a speed such as that we're not aware of, so it gives some idea of continuity. But in Buddhist psychology these consciousnesses are flashing, they're flashing moment after moment.

So then of course with perception, so perceptions arise and pass away just as quickly. And is that desirable? Is that undesirable? Sometimes it is, sometimes it isn't. Then we have what he calls choices in this particular translation, Sujato Bhikkhu. But habits, I much prefer the word habits. Are they permanent, impermanent? They're constantly changing. They're either getting worse or getting better and so on. Consciousness is the very seat of impermanence because that's, as I say, flashing and arising and passing away.

So none of this can be satisfactory to a sense of self because the sense of self wants to be in control. The identity, me, I want to be in control and I find myself not so.

So then he goes on to say, so you should truly see any kind of form, so it's any kind of form, but here especially the body, past, future, present, internal, external, coarse or fine, inferior or superior, far or near, all form, the whole material world is empty. Now, that's the word *śūnya*, and I do believe he actually uses the word *śūnya* here. Oh, sorry, *anattā*. And the other word he uses in other scriptures is *śūnya*, which means empty. It doesn't have any substance.

And this, of course, was taken into a more metaphysical understanding by the Mahāyāna that everything is empty. But in the Theravāda's discourses, the Buddha is very much centred on the person, on me, me and you, trying to really imprint upon us this idea that nothing is permanent and nothing has any substance.

So this is what happens - when you begin to investigate this then this word *nibbidā* and it's translated variously but the one I particularly like is disillusioned. Disillusionment grows and then because of that disillusion your desire fades away.

And then finally, with that desire fades away, when all desire, the wrong desire fades away, then of course you are left with the experience of *nibbāna*, not self, which is that experience of something that is beyond the five aggregates, and we'll come to that at another time.

And then finally, when a person is fully liberated, there's this lovely way of talking about it: that rebirth is ended, this constant production of a self of a false self is ended, the spiritual journey has been completed, what had to be done has been done. That's a lovely feeling about that — what has to be done has been done — and there's no return to this constant becoming of a false self, of a false being becoming.

And so satisfied, the group of five mendicants were happy. And while the discourse was being spoken, the minds of the group of the five mendicants were freed from defilements by non-grasping, by losing that sense of desire. In other words, they all became fully liberated. So let's hope that bit is true.

So I think that virtually concludes my effort to try and get across this teaching about not-self, which some of you may have found quite confusing. So remember, it's all about identity. It's about me. Who am I? I mean, that's a question you can always ask. Who am I or what am I? That would be Korean Zen. What am I?

And tomorrow, I'll talk more about the actual process of meditation. And then I have some questions that have come in, and I'll tackle that in a couple of days' time after tomorrow.

---

*Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.*