

The First Noble Truth — Not-Self and Unsatisfactoriness

Noirin Sheahan · Noirin's Teachings · 23:35

So I want to continue saying something about the first noble truth, the truth of *dukkha*. There is what's described as *dukkha dukkha* - that's the real suffering that we'd all agree is suffering: pain, illness, disability, death, loss of loved ones and so on. Things that genuinely we all sympathise with each other for. And then there was what I was talking about this morning, *anicca dukkha*, the suffering, the dissatisfaction associated with the fact that things change, that we can't hold on forever to our happiness.

And then very much related to it is what I want to talk about tonight, *anattā dukkha*. And *anattā* is usually translated as not-self. Now, it's a very confusing area of Buddhist thought. So if you get confused tonight, just know you're in good company. It's easy to get confused.

So, of course, it's confusing in the sense that it's obvious to us that I am me and you're you and everybody is themselves. So what on earth do we mean by not-self? We see ourselves as separate parcels of existence. And the Buddha would agree that for practical purposes, yes, this is true. But it's not true all the time - there are times when our sense of self can just drop away. So the normal view is true too. We can operate in the world as a self. We can decide to do certain things. But at another level, an ultimate level, we can let our sense of self drop away and experience a peace, the peace of *anattā*, the peace of not-self.

So the truth of *anattā* is really saying that we don't have a totally separate identity, that we are interdependent, very, very intimately interdependent. Just one experience, my first experience or inkling of this was one time I was hearing a bird song and hearing, hearing, and I was really liking the bird song and then when the bird stopped, I noticed I got anxious. Then the bird would start again and I'd be delighted. Stop, I get anxious and so on.

So it came to me, just that direct contact with the sound. It seemed to me, well, is that sound inside me or outside of me? And I couldn't really tell. I mean, I knew at the conceptual level that the bird was outside. But at another level, my ears were hearing the sound directly. My brain, I suppose, was processing it. And all the neurons and the hormones required to make me feel anxious or happy were happening within me as a result of that sound. So it just seemed that direct interconnection between the bird and me, that the bird was pushing all my buttons at that time. The bird was more in control of me than I was. He could decide whether to stop or start singing and then I'd have to go anxious or happy.

That's just an example of that truth of interdependence, *anattā*, that we're not separate. At that moment, because I was just directly hearing, I had no real sense of a boundary between myself and the bird.

Because I wasn't thinking me, bird, I was just hearing and feeling the response. So that for me was an insight anyway into this truth of *anattā*.

And it was scary in some sense, because I just realized how incredibly vulnerable we are, that we're so open to our emotional openness to each other - it's very deep. But it also struck me as very beautiful, that for at least that moment, I could see that I wasn't actually separate from the rest of the universe, not in an essential way, a permanent way.

Now, at some level, we know this because we know that our feelings and emotions are all triggered by each other. People can push our buttons and we get annoyed or whatever. So we know we're not separate in that sense, that we directly affect each other. But I think we can experience it at a deeper level if we really pay attention. Feeling that direct contact with the world, direct contact with our emotions, that sense of a separate boundary of me and the world just starts to get fuzzy, very fuzzy and unclear.

And in reality, then, we're very deeply interdependent. We're actually co-creating each other. Even what's happening here now, I'm speaking and you're hearing and by you listening, I'm having to process ideas. So we're all changing at the moment very deeply. And we're co-creating each other and our own reality. So I think it's an idea worth dwelling on, that level of interdependence.

But as opposed to that, there's also a strong sense of identity - me, mine, my biscuit. And so there is a sense of a big boundary around me now. The Buddha would say this is really a belief. The belief that I am a separate parcel of existence. It's a very strong belief. But it can come and go. It's created in order to fulfill a desire.

It's probably evolutionary in nature in the sense that we have to fight or fly from a tiger in order to survive as an animal in this world. So a sense of self that I'm important, my life is important and I have to get away from this threat is really important for survival. And similarly, I have to eat all this lovely food because again, I'm important. So that sense of self that gets created is very possibly evolutionary. And it helps us enormously in life. It's not to think of the sense of self as wrong, but it's just not ultimate. It's not the absolute truth. It's not the forever and ever truth that we have to experience all the time.

So it's basically a construction in the mind that happens once we feel a desire. If we're walking along the street and we pass by a cafe and we get the aroma of coffee and we look in the window and we see luscious cream cakes, then suddenly the desire arises for coffee and cake. And we immediately turn and go in and get the coffee and cake. So the sense of self was just constructed there in order to fulfill that desire.

Now, I think it's interesting that one teacher says, and I can't remember the name, unfortunately, but anyway, he would say that the mind state, the sense of not-self, is actually much more common. But it's just that it's so unobtrusive that we don't notice it. It's happening most of the time, all our lives. But we just don't notice it. It's just that when an idea isn't in our mind, we don't think about it.

So, for example, the usual example that's given, I think, is if I tell you, don't think about a pink elephant, most people just start immediately thinking about a pink elephant. And it's the same way if I say, well, don't think about yourself, just drop that idea, you immediately start thinking about yourself. Of course I'm me. So we can't stop thinking, we can't stop thinking about an idea on willpower. The idea stimulates the idea.

So it's the very same for the sense of self. When it's there, when the idea of self is there, it's strong, it's very persuasive. It really tells us that we are an important person who needs this, that and the other thing. And when it just falls away, as it does when there's just no desire happening, just peaceful moments in life, it's such a simple, unobtrusive, not demanding attention type of mind state to be in, that we just don't notice it.

So in that sense we often don't experience that truth of *anattā*, but in actual fact it's there in the background of our lives all the time.

Now one mistake we can make around all this is to think we're bad for having a sense of self. We hear the teaching that not-self is a deep truth, a very peaceful truth, and we want to be in that state all of the time. Now, that's an impossibility. This is a gradual path. The Buddha often described his path to full enlightenment as a very gradual path, like he likened it to the continental shelf, just gradually sloping into the ocean, gradually getting deeper and deeper.

And the sense of self is an important part of getting us to the deeper truth of not-self. So we need to have a strong, well-developed, confident, good, healthy sense of ourselves in order to tread the path. So to be thinking of ourselves as wrong is not the idea that the Buddha was trying to get across. In fact, he would say the opposite. He would often say, cherish yourselves. Do what's best for your own happiness, which is to tread this path. Strive diligently for your liberation. So he would tell us to really look after ourselves in order to find the deeper happiness where this is the truth of *anattā*.

So the self is created, a construction in the mind, an idea you could say that comes and goes in order to fulfill a desire. So there can be really wise desires. The desire to meditate, the desire to come on retreat, the desire to help others, to care for others, to give service and work and so on. So these are all very wise desires that it's good to create a good sense of self in order to do them. To help our friends and to be a good friend and so on. These are really wise desires that help the world in the right direction.

So we certainly do need to look after ourselves to do our best to really have a good, confident sense of self, to love ourselves, to care for ourselves and not to run ourselves down. So the Buddha never said that the sense of self was wrong. He would have said the opposite - care for yourself. All he said was that it's temporary. It's insubstantial. It's a state of mind that comes and goes. It comes up when we have a desire. Once that desire has been fulfilled, it'll actually drop away again, but we just don't notice it because it's so unobtrusive.

So basically then, our work really is to decide when to create a sense of self - which desires to fulfill, which ones to really get ourselves together and attack with gusto and say, yes, I will do this. And then which desires can we let go of in order to move towards that deep peace of not-self, of not having to react to every single whim.

Now, although it's hard to experience the sense of not-self, though we might on occasion, it is possible to tune into the experience of a self being created. That's easier to do, and it's just very interesting to see it happening, and I think you probably will start seeing it happening if you just tune in.

Say in life, for example, if somebody gives you a compliment, then you might immediately just feel yourself growing taller. Gregory Kramer calls it puffing up. The whole sense of self is fed, is nourished by getting a compliment. So we feel bigger, we feel stronger, we feel more confident. We feel important and so on. So it's a good feeling. A very happy sense of self is created for a few moments at least when we get a compliment. So just tuning into that, just noticing the sense of me, me, an important person, just coming up. And that's all - not criticizing, just the wonder of it, how the whole being can be stimulated by various things.

Of course the opposite can happen. We can create a very unhappy sense of self if we get, for example, criticized or ignored or something like that. And again it's interesting to tune into what happens there and often I experience it as some sort of a collapse. So even physically, the head might go down, the shoulders might droop and a sense of dullness maybe comes into the mind. A sense of, well, it could be anger, of course, but anger will probably create that important sense of self. But if it's not anger, if it's an I'm no good type feeling, then that often feels like a collapse, some sort of a dulling down.

So it's just to tune into the process of what many teachers call selfing. It's a verb, the self getting created, a mental process happening in moment after moment so we can tune into it.

Now it is harder to tune into the dropping away of self in the same way as, if you have a toothache, while it's there, it's the centre of your experience, the centre of existence. It's so important and it's terrible. But do you ever, and maybe hours later you notice, oh, it's gone. Or days later you might notice, oh, it's gone. But do you ever notice the last moment of a toothache? Very few people do. I don't know if I ever have. No, I don't think so. I have noticed the last moment of shorter term things like cramp just if you can tune into them. And it is very interesting just to follow them to the end and how the mind just loses interest really towards the end when the pain is going away.

So in that sense, it's harder to notice the dropping away of self. We just don't notice the absence of problems usually because when the self is there, it's usually big and strong and often creating some sort of a problem because it wants to get its desires met. So the sense of self can often be problematic for us. But when it all dies away, it's like a toothache or a cramp dying away. It's just not terribly interesting for us. It doesn't call attention.

But in meditation here, we can sometimes just dip into experiences where we are just in direct contact with reality. We're simply hearing or feeling our bodies, sensations, our moods, feeling all that without the added layer of concept and thought. And at those times, we actually are in the experience of *anattā*, the experience of not-self.

Now, it's usually just that we're not reflecting at that time, so therefore we don't take it in consciously in a way that we can then talk about to ourselves afterwards and think about because we're just in that lovely direct experience. But it's worth, if you do have any of those, it's worth just reflecting on them afterwards maybe and just seeing, well, was there much of a sense of self there? Just to allow this teaching to seep in a bit deeper that it is possible for the sense of self just to fall away and it's happening all the time and causing us no problem at all. And yet we feel so threatened. The idea of *anattā* often is very frightening. The sense that I don't have any permanent existence. And it can scare us to think about it.

But I think it's consoling to be told that it's happening all the time and we're just not noticing because it's such a happy, pleasant state. So we can cope with the truth of *anattā*. We can. Our being is coping with it all the time.

So the self often means trouble in the sense that it comes up to fulfill a desire and very often most of our desires are simply reactivity, like reactions to the cold, for example. We could have been in that very peaceful state of direct experience in walking meditation and then suddenly we just start to feel a bit cold and very quickly then there's crossness and where's the hat and gloves and all the self-consciousness maybe about just leaving the walking meditation and wondering will others judge us and they're getting in the way. So an awful lot of trouble arises with the self very often.

So you can usually tell when the self has arisen by just noting the trouble in life. It brings a lot of trouble. My agenda, my needs and so on. So the sense of self is associated with the stress of reactivity. And this is really what we mean by *anattā dukkha*, the suffering associated with a self that's trying to control experience, control life, control others in order to be happy. It's just trying to find happiness, trying to find pleasure, which is very laudable. I mean, this whole path that we're on is happiness seeking. But the only trouble with the self trying to find happiness is that it's out of touch with the ultimate reality because the self isn't permanent and basically can't keep manipulating things to keep the happiness for itself. So it's onto a losing battle immediately. So it's often associated with deep distress, trying to over-control things.

So I suppose we would understand this in terms of over-identification.

Over-identification with our job, where we just get really fussy, things have to be done this way and this way only, and we get maybe perfectionistic, and we won't trust others to help in the work, and we work late, and we work long, and we think ours is the best way and the only way, and then if anyone criticises, of course, it's devastating, and basically the job becomes a torment, usually for us as well as for others, you know, the over-identification problem.

So it's a lot of distress that, and any area of life where we over-identify with, you know, if we're trying to control family members so that they're the way we think they ought to be, there's an awful lot of unhappiness associated with that. We can over-identify with anything, a hobby. We can over-identify, I think, with our spiritual practice and just be stressing ourselves out, trying to get to the state of not-self. We can do all kinds of things to ourselves. So it's a tricky area. It's one to just keep examining.

The distress of this illusion of self that thinks it should be in control. And then there's an awful lot of self-blame. You know, when things go wrong, it must be my fault, because that idea that I can control life means that if things go against me, it was my fault, I didn't control it right. So a huge amount of self-blame gets embedded in there and very, very distressing.

So over-identification would be one way of seeing this *anattā dukkha*.

But however we can find the way out, which we're doing here now. So it's surrendering to the truth that we're actually not in control, not ultimately. We have a certain level of control, we can decide to meditate, but we can't control our mind state. We can't make sure that we're concentrated or that we're alert or that we have happy experiences. So we have only a very limited level of control over our experience.

So it's surrendering to that truth and knowing that the rotten stuff can happen to anyone, anywhere. And if it happens to me, it's not my fault. It's just circumstances coming together so that I'm going through a patch that maybe feels very bad. But the rotten stuff can be embraced willingly, as we reflect on the truth that there's just no way out of it. We can't always control and keep away what we don't like. So therefore the only way to be at peace with the world is to embrace what comes our way as willingly as we possibly can and just trust that this will get deeper and deeper and deeper as we immerse ourselves more deeply in truth.

So it's just exactly the practice here. Taking an interest in what comes our way, accepting it and yes, eventually coming to a deeper peace than we could possibly have as a separate self.

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