

The Not-self Discourse

August 6, 2023

Five days ago we marked the day when the Buddha gave his first sermon—Setting the Wheel of Dharma in Motion. He explained the four noble truths and the duties appropriate for each of those truths. As a result, one of his listeners in the five brethren, Kondañña, gained the Dhamma eye, becoming the first noble disciple in the Buddha’s teachings, and also the first member of the Sangha—the conventional sangha—asking for ordination after the end of the sermon.

The story doesn’t end there. It goes on to say that over the next few days the Buddha taught the remaining members of the five brethren to gain the Dhamma eye as well. Then at some point he gave the second sermon—the sermon we chanted just now—which the commentary has named The Not-self Characteristic. In the Canon it’s simply called Five, *Pañca*, referring either to the five brethren or to the five aggregates.

According to a tradition in Thailand, that was on the fifth day after the first sermon. So that would be tonight. This was the sermon that led all five of the brethren to become arahants—to gain full awakening. It was on the theme, of course, of not-self.

That should alert us right there. Some people say that stream-entry is the point where you see there is no self, but if that were the case, then why would the Buddha have given this sermon to the five brethren? They would have already seen there was no self, and there was nothing more to say on the topic. But the fact is there is more to say.

Actually, with stream entry you let go of the fetter of self-identification. In other words, you don’t say that “I am any of the five aggregates.” You don’t say that “I own any of the five aggregates,” or that “the five aggregates exist in me,” or that “I exist in the five aggregates.” With the letting go of this fetter, that kind of identification with the five aggregates is gone. But there still is a lingering sense of *I am* that’s called conceit, and that fetter isn’t cut until arahantship.

There’s a sutta where a non-returner talks about what it’s like. He says a lingering sense of *I am* hovers around the five aggregates, just as when you wash a cloth and there’s still the lingering scent of the detergent around the cloth. So it was that lingering scent that the Buddha was trying to get rid of.

He started out by pointing out that the five aggregates are not totally under your control. They can suffer dis-ease: There’s dis-ease in the body, dis-ease in your feelings, in your perceptions, in your thought constructs, even in your consciousness. If they really were you or yours, you could totally control them.

Now, this doesn’t mean you have no control at all. As the Buddha admitted in other places, the aggregates do offer some pleasure. If they didn’t offer any pleasure at all, we

wouldn't be attached to them. And they do respond to some extent to our control, which is why we're able to take them and turn them into the path.

But ultimately, no matter what you do with them, it's all going to fall apart. Except for one thing: You make the noble path out of them, the path leads you to the deathless, and then when the aggregates fall apart—and it doesn't matter, because you've found the deathless, which isn't affected by their falling apart.

After pointing out that they don't lie totally under your control, in the next step the Buddha gave the five brethren a questionnaire. This was a questionnaire that he was to give many, many times throughout his teaching career, starting with form: Is form constant or inconstant? We look at it, and can see it's inconstant. If something is inconstant, is it easeful or stressful? The fact that it's inconstant and undependable means that it's stressful.

It's like building a house in a place where there are earthquakes and landslides all the time—you know no peace. So if it's inconstant, stressful, and subject to change, is it worth calling it your self? And the answer is No.

He continued with the same questionnaire down through the remaining aggregates: feelings, perceptions, thought fabrications, and consciousness. That dealt with the aggregates in the present moment. Then he continued by saying you can extrapolate from the present moment—you think back to the past. Those who are able to remember past lives, what are they remembering? They're remembering form, feeling, perceptions, fabrications, consciousness. And wherever you could go in the future in the universe, even the most refined levels, the far distant levels, anywhere in space and time: just the same aggregates with the same features.

So, you look at the present moment, you see that it's not worth latching on to. Then you extrapolate and you realize anything you could create out of these aggregates into the future would not be worth latching on to, either.

This is where the five brethren abandoned their clinging to the aggregates. That's how they gained full awakening.

Basically, they developed dispassion. *Dispassion* is a word that we don't like to use a lot in the West. It sounds gray, dull, dead. But what it basically means is that you've outgrown your fascination with something. You're no longer intrigued by it because you've seen that it's got its limitations.

There two ways you can do this. Think about tic-tac-toe: When you're a little child and you haven't thought through all the various ways that tic-tac-toe could be played, it's fascinating. You have fun playing it with your friends. But there comes a point where you realize there are only so many different ways you can play it. If you start in a particular way, you're bound to lose; if you start in another way, at the very least you're going to come to a draw. You lose your fascination because you've seen all the potentials. They no longer hold any interest; they no longer capture your imagination.

For an example of another way you could get dispassionate, think about chess: It'd be very hard to think of all the possible ways of playing chess. Some people find it fascinating; they can spend their whole lives doing it. But if you look at the rules you realize: This is all very artificial. And what's really accomplished by playing such an artificial game? So even though you don't know all the possibilities, you realize that whatever they are, they're not worth it.

This was the kind of dispassion that the five brethren developed, looking at the aggregates and realizing there's not much there.

We can create all kinds of things out of the aggregates. Universes can go on and on and on for billions of years, with all kinds of different configurations. Beings can take on all kinds of identities. As the Buddha once said, "Look at the animal world. All the different animals, from the little tiny ones to the huge whales." Back in those days they had stories of whale eaters, and whale eater eaters: enormous sea creatures. All of that comes from the mind. It's all just five aggregates, but those aggregates can take all kinds of shapes, all kinds of identities.

But it's still all very artificial and it's all going to come crashing down. Then you try to do it again, do it again, do it again. You can think about that: Cast your mind to the past, about the vast number of eons you've been doing this. And into the future: How many more eons do you want to keep on doing it?

Now, the five brethren had the advantage that they had actually experienced the deathless already and they were looking at this teaching in terms of the four noble truths. In fact, that questionnaire makes sense only in terms of the four noble truths. If you believe that all there is in this world is the five aggregates, then you say, "Well, even though they have their limitations, this is what I've got, this is all there is—I'd better hold on."

But they'd already seen there was something else that was *not* encompassed by the five aggregates. That was consciousness without surface—the deathless. And they realized that by letting go of the aggregates, they could fully realize that. So, their minds were already inclined to see: There must be something better; there must be some way out of this universe of limitations.

The Buddha's Dhamma talk was designed to help encourage that sense of dispassion, so that whatever lingering sense of *I am* there might be around the aggregates would be gone—because the five aggregates lost their appeal. They no longer captured the imaginations of the five brethren.

Our problem is that we still find them fascinating. For most of us, we haven't seen the deathless, so the range of our imagination is encompassed by these aggregates. And as we've seen, you can do all kinds of things with them. So, you have to learn to realize they do have their limitations, and trust the Buddha when he says that if you can develop dispassion for these things, there's something a lot better.

So we follow his strategy: We take these aggregates and we do the most useful thing we can with them, which is to make them a path, the noble path. Right view for instance, is made

up of perceptions and thought fabrications. Right concentration is made up of all five aggregates.

Do the best thing you can with the aggregates, and then reflect on what you're doing. You push against those three perceptions: inconstancy, stress, and not-self. You try to make your concentration as constant as you can, as easeful as you can, and bring the mind as much under control as you can. You learn to appreciate the state of concentration that can develop, and the many levels it can go through. That becomes your main attachment.

But then, when you begin to see—as your sensitivities get developed—that this, too, has its limitations, and keeping in mind the Buddha's third noble truth, you say, "Well, how about letting go of even this?" That's the task that lies before us; the five brethren have shown the way. And as I said, the Buddha would give this questionnaire with the follow-up reflection many, many times throughout the course of his teaching career, bringing many people to awakening.

So, trust the Buddha when he says that dispassion is the highest of all dhammas. Trust Sariputta when he taught those monks who wanted to introduce the Buddha's teachings to strangers in foreign countries: "When they ask you, 'What does the Buddha teach?' Start out by saying, 'He teaches the end of passion and desire.' 'Passion and desire for what?' 'For the five aggregates.' 'What advantage is there in developing passion and desire?' 'If you still have attachment to passion and desire for the five aggregates, then when they change, you're going to suffer. If you abandon that passion and desire, then no matter how much they change you're not going to suffer.'"

As I said, he taught this because it's something that people *can* do; and they'll benefit from it. They'll find the ultimate happiness.

In fact, this theme of dispassion is so important that when the Buddha's stepmother asked him for some basic principles of the Dhamma to take and put into practice, he started out by saying, "You know something is genuine Dhamma if it leads to dispassion." So, trust the Buddha on that point. Learn to see the limitations of the five aggregates. You don't have to encompass all their possibilities because you've been going through many possibilities already.

But just look at them right now: They show their limitations all the time right now. You try to develop a feeling of ease, and it'll last for a while, but then it'll change. You try to develop a perception of the breath that gives rise to concentration, and it'll last for a while, but then it'll change; and so on through the aggregates.

Learn to keep looking at this again and again and again until you've finally decided you've had enough. And that state of enough is not a sort of dead weariness, it comes with the realization that when you've had enough of these things, something much better opens up.

So, follow the path, have trust in the path, and that's where it'll take you.