

## *Anybody Home?*

*September 19, 2019*

I have a student (we'll call him George) who broke up with his partner of many years (we'll call her Martha). He went to a Dhamma teacher for some advice on how to handle his grief. And the advice she gave was that you have to remember that, on an ultimate level, there is no George, there is no Martha, never was. And he realized it was bad advice. To say that there's nobody there means that there's nobody responsible and that the people who are affected by your actions don't really exist, so it doesn't matter what you do. That kind of thinking is the refuge of people who don't like responsibility, who don't like to think there are consequences to their actions. The question he had for me, though, was, why would the Buddha teach such a thing—that on an ultimate level there are no beings? And my response was the Buddha never taught anything like that.

To begin with, he never said that some of his teachings were ultimate truths and others were only conventional truths. The terms the commentaries use for ultimate and conventional truths—*paramattha sacca* or *sammuti-sacca*—don't exist in the suttas. And he never said that there are no beings. Again, the terms for no being—*nisatto* or *nijivo*—also don't exist in the suttas. When asked what a being was, he said very clearly, “Beings are their attachments.” He wouldn't define what you are, but he said that *you're* defining yourself by your attachments. You're creating an identity and you go into it. This is the process of becoming, which, as he said, happens an awful lot. It's why we're suffering. You create an identity in a particular world of experience: That's becoming. And then you go into it: That's birth. And the process can go on indefinitely because we get so fascinated with the becomings we create.

The Buddha's image is of little children building what he called mud houses. He gives an image of the kids by a mud puddle, taking the mud and making little houses with it. And, he says, as long as they're fascinated with the mud houses, they keep playing with them, keep making them. In the same way, we're attached to the things we create. One Western example would be the story of Pygmalion, who created a sculpture of a beautiful woman and then fell in love with the sculpture, forgetting that he'd created it to begin with. But this process is very uncertain and very unstable because it's directed by our desires. And our desires can go in any direction.

As the Buddha said, the mind is so quick to change directions that there's no image, no simile adequate for how quickly it can change. And it's capable of all

kinds of things. So there *are* beings, but beings are very unstable, very changeable. In fact, this is the way the Buddha has you deal with grief of separation, either the death of a loved one or the death of love: Realize how changeable you are, how changeable the other person is, and how universal this pattern is. This applies to everything, everybody. That thought enables your grief to be transformed into compassion.

When you think about everybody's suffering, why pile more suffering on other people who are already suffering? Why pile extra suffering on yourself, since relationships are marked by so much suffering? That's the first stage.

Ultimately, the Buddha says, you want to go from what he calls householder grief, the grief of not getting what you want, to renunciate grief, the grief that there is such a thing as nibbana and you're not there yet. That he calls a pain not-of-the-flesh, and it's something we should actively cultivate to motivate ourselves in the practice.

But we have to go through the step of compassion first, thinking of all beings and how much they're suffering. How many people are suffering separation right now, right now, right now? That thought gives rise to a sense of samvega, realizing that as long as you continue getting fascinated with your mud houses, then no matter where you build them there's going to be suffering. They're going to be washed away. That's what makes you want to get out. And this is where the Buddha's teachings on not-self come in.

He says you have to learn how to overcome your fascination with those mud houses. You see that they're made of nothing but the mud of the aggregates: form, feelings, perceptions, mental fabrications, acts of consciousness coming and going, coming and going. They've been coming and going in all kinds of zigzags. You want to learn how to see that they're really not worth getting involved with.

He represents this by the little children suddenly getting sick and tired of their mud houses, realizing they're nothing but mud, and then destroying them.

So we're trying to take apart our identity that we've created as beings and see that there's nothing worthwhile there.

Another image used in the Canon is of a chariot. You take the chariot apart and then, when everything's been taken apart, there's no more chariot. Now, this image is sometimes interpreted to mean that there never was a chariot to begin with. But that's obviously not true. There were chariots. And as long as you're fascinated with chariots, you keep putting them together and fixing them when they fall apart. But when you begin to realize that they're going to keep falling apart, falling apart, and that even though they have their uses, they're not worth the effort that goes into maintaining them, that's when you dismantle them and

say, “There’s nothing left anymore.” But actually, it’s not the case that you’re destroying the being you’ve created. You’re just letting it run out on its own and you don’t create anything new in its place. What you destroy is your fascination with the process of creating new states of becoming all the time.

So you might think of the image of sand castles at the edge of the ocean. We keep building sand castles, and the waves come in to wash them away. We build another one and they wash it away. And yet we keep at it. We seem to never get enough. And the Buddha on the night of his awakening, looked around and saw beings suffering from just this problem. He realized he himself had been suffering for long periods of time, building these houses. That’s why, after his awakening, he said he’d been searching for the house builder, and now that the house builder was seen, he wouldn’t build a house again. That was because the mind had been engaged in dismantling—that’s the meaning of the word *visankhara*; it’s the opposite of *sankhara*; with *sankhara* you put things together, with *visankhara* you take them apart—he realized it was not worth doing anymore. This is why we say that insight is a value judgment as to what’s worth doing, what’s not.

These identities that we take on: Ultimately, they’re not worth the effort, even when we’ve trained the identity well. Now, along the path we do use a sense of self: the sense of self that can meditate, the sense of self that can practice generosity, practice virtue. That kind of self we need as long as the path hasn’t yet been fully developed. We need the sense of confidence that we can do it and the sense of competence that we can do it, the sense of responsibility that if we don’t do it, it’s not going to get done. So we’ve got to roll up our sleeves and do it ourselves, with the sense that we’re going to benefit from this.

Now, you notice that the Buddha never says what’s left after the job is done. If he had said that there were no beings to begin with, you’d wonder, “Then why does he keep saying that the arahant, after death, cannot be described as existing or not existing or both or neither?” If the being hadn’t existed to begin with, then nibbana wouldn’t make any difference. There’d be no existence. The arahant after death wouldn’t exist. But the Buddha was very careful to say, “No. You can’t describe the arahant in those terms. The arahant is beyond description because beings are defined by their desires, but here there’s no desire. And so you’re undefined.”

This relates to the Buddha’s statement that when you take on an identity, you take on an obsession or an attachment to the aggregates, and you’re limiting yourself. The images for the people who are not doing that are images of no limitations at all: as vast and unfathomable as the ocean, or like a fire that’s gone

out. In those days, when a fire went out, it was assumed to be vast. It became an element.

And so what you are—who is the “you” who is creating these identities—the Buddha never says. That’s one of those questions he has you put aside. But he does have you know that the state that comes when you stop being fascinated with this house building, building these sand castles, building these mud houses, is a state of ultimate happiness. In fact, when the Buddha uses the word *paramattha*, ultimate, it’s to describe nibbana. It’s not used to describe a vocabulary or a language of a certain level of truths that are more ultimate than other truths on a conventional level. After all, he says the arahant knows the limitations of languages, *all* of which are conventions. Even the Buddha’s language of the aggregates is a series of conventions. You use these conventions to attain a direct experience of what’s ultimate.

So we’re not being asked to content ourselves with arriving at or consenting to an ultimate description of things. We’re trying to find—and the Buddha promises, that if we follow the path, there’s going to be—an ultimate happiness that’s not dependent on any conditions at all. And that’s his ultimate cure for grief. After all, renunciate grief is not meant to just sit there. It’s meant to motivate you. You realize that you’re suffering and there’s more to be done, so you focus on doing it. And it’s in the doing that renunciate grief turns into renunciate joy, renunciate equanimity, something that can’t be contained in any little house.

The Buddha said that, while he was alive, he dwelled with unrestricted awareness, an awareness that wasn’t associated with the six sense spheres at all. So when the six sense spheres passed away, that awareness remained—if we were to talk in terms of space and time. But it’s beyond even space and time, which is why it can’t be described as remaining or not. Yet it can be found. And as the Buddha said, it’s well worth experiencing.