

The Core of Experience

September 24, 2017

When I was up in the Bay Area last week, I came across a new word: corelessness. Apparently, the latest fashion is to say that the Buddha said we are coreless; and that's the meaning of *anatta*. In other words, there's a jumble of karmic activities that make up a human being. That's what you are. The *anatta* teaching, in this interpretation, is not a not-self teaching; it's a no-self teaching. It answers the question of what you are, saying that what you are has no core. You're like a karmic fuzz ball. All the fuzz that's picked up as the fuzz ball moves across the floor under the force of the wind is held together only by static electricity, but there's no real core there. This is supposed to represent what the Buddha taught about what we are.

The problem is the Buddha never talked about what we are. That was one of the questions he consistently avoided. If you say that there's no core there, then when karma ends in the attainment of nibbana, there'd be nothing left. You would no longer exist. Nothing would exist there. And the Buddha wouldn't have gone to such trouble to say that an arahant after death can't be said to exist or not exist or both or neither. It would be obvious: The arahant wouldn't exist. End of problem. But that wasn't his solution to the question. And it's no solution to anything at all.

The Buddha was wise enough to see that however you define yourself, you limit yourself. So he wasn't concerned with limiting us or defining us. He wanted to help us find an unlimited happiness, because that was his main point: not what we are, but exactly how far can the quest for true happiness go. What kind of happiness is really worth the effort put into it? Is there a happiness that doesn't change? Something that, once you attain it, isn't going to turn on you? And he found that such a happiness does exist. It's the happiness of release, which he actually said is the core of all experience.

All dhammas, he said, have release as their core. For core, he used the word *sara*, the heartwood of a tree. But that's what it basically means: essence, core. Release is the only core to be found in experience, but there *is* a core there. If there were no core at all, we'd just be floating around with nothing of any real solid importance to us or anybody else. It would be a miserable world. And you'd say, "Well, people can just go and do what they want, because there's nothing really there that genuinely matters."

But, as the Buddha said, suffering matters. Happiness matters. And you'd think that, given the fact that such a happiness is available, people would want it. But, for most people, when they search for happiness, they look around and ask, "Well, who's doing something that looks like it might make them happy? Or who looks attractive? Or who looks interesting?" And they take those people as their models without really stopping to examine carefully: Are those people really happy? And if a solid happiness is possible, why do we content ourselves with lesser things?

So there is a core to experience and it is a challenge, which may be another reason why people don't like to think about it. It forces them to change their ways too much. But you have to ask yourself: "Are you serious about being happy?" And "serious" here doesn't mean grim, but simply sincere. Do you sincerely want to be happy? Do you want to take your desire for happiness as something important? For the Buddha, that's the beginning of wisdom and discernment: taking your desire for true happiness as having essential value. And then, from the assumption, discernment develops.

It develops through asking the question, "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" That's the question that lies at the beginning of wisdom; the beginning of discernment. It's wise because it realizes that happiness is something that comes from your actions. It's not a question of who you are. And second, there is such a thing as long-term happiness. It doesn't just come and go. Third, long-term is better than short-term.

The Buddha's question here underlies the practice of what's called merit: doing good things, being generous, being virtuous, having the restraint of goodwill for everybody. It's interesting that goodwill is regarded as a restraint. It basically holds your actions in check, the actions that would be harmful. What's unlimited about goodwill, of course, is that you extend it to everybody.

But then the Buddha goes beyond those practices, because, as he said, on their own they don't lead ultimately to nibbana. They don't lead to release. You're looking for a happiness that's more than just long-term. You're looking for a happiness outside of time entirely so that time cannot touch it. That's the core we're looking for.

This is where the Buddha expands on that question on discernment, through the questions about inconstancy, stress, and not-self. If we're looking for something that's really beyond time, then it can't be inconstant. If it's true happiness, it can't be stressful. And anything that's less than that, you don't want to hold onto as self. You don't even want to hold onto release as self, because the idea of self implies clinging, and clinging stands in the way.

So we take the issues of “my long-term welfare and happiness” and translate them into the questions on the three characteristics, or, rather, the three perceptions. “Long-term” corresponds to the question about inconstancy. “Happiness” corresponds to the question on stress. And “my,” of course, corresponds to the question on self or not-self. So when you encounter things on the path of your practice, ask yourself, “Is this constant or inconstant?” If it’s inconstant, it’s stressful and it’s not-self: nothing you would want to hold onto. It’s not the core you’re looking for.

Now, you will find, though, that in the course of the path, there are certain things you do have to hold onto temporarily, or provisionally—things like virtue, concentration, and discernment. Those are the skills you need to develop to get to release. After all, you can’t use release to get to release. You have to use what you’ve got. And the things you’ve got—form, feelings, perceptions, fabrications and consciousness, what the Buddha calls the five aggregates—are things that if you simply cling to them, are going to cause problems, going to cause suffering. In fact, the clinging will be suffering. But you can turn them into a path, which switches their role as part of the first noble truth, about suffering, to part of the fourth: the path to the end of suffering.

Like you’re doing right now: You’ve got your body sitting here, which is form. You’re holding onto the perception of the breath to give rise to a feeling of ease. You’re talking to yourself about the breath: That’s fabrication. And your consciousness is aware of all these things. This is how you take the five aggregates and make them a path. So those are some of the things you hold onto provisionally as part of the Buddha’s strategy.

But whatever comes up in the course of your meditation, if you want to test to see whether it’s the ultimate goal, you pull out those three questions: Is it constant or inconstant? Stressful or not stressful? And then if it’s stressful and inconstant, is it worth holding onto, worth claiming as you or yours? These questions are your touchstone to find out what really is gold in here; what really is of solid value. Because there is something of solid value. The happiness that the Buddha points to has a solid value. It’s something of infinite worth. And it can be touched inside.

So we, as human beings, have this potential. Other human beings have this potential too, which is why we want to respect them. This connects with the fact that the Buddha never says that we’re coreless. He doesn’t say what we *are*, but he *does* say we have the potential to find a deathless happiness. It’s there. And it’s the core, the most valuable part of all experience.

So keep that in mind as you practice. The question is always, “What am I doing, what are the results I’m getting from my actions, and are they up to

standard?” You want to make the Buddha’s standards the ones by which you measure things if you’re really sincere about your happiness. Because that’s what it comes down to: the level of your own sincerity.

As the Buddha said, one of the treasures of the mind is *ottappa*, compunction, which is the opposite of apathy. Apathy says, “Well, I’ll do what I want and I don’t care about the results.” Compunction places all the importance on the results, regardless of whether an action is something you like or dislike. The issue isn’t whether you like the causes; the issue is whether the results are worth the effort. In other words, you focus on “What does this action lead to?” The treasure of compunction is something the Buddha wants us to encourage to develop within us so that we can find the happiness he found in the same way that he found it, by looking inside and seeing that there is something, there is a core in here—not something you would say is you or yours, but it’s a core and it’s there. And that’s what gives value to everything else.