

## *Just Right as It Is*

### THE TEACHING: ALL PHENOMENA ARE NOT-SELF

In his first discourse, the Buddha explained to the group of five monks that suffering was the act of clinging to any of the five aggregates of form, feeling, perception, fabrication, or consciousness. As a result of that discourse, one member of the group gained his first glimpse of awakening. In the succeeding days, the Buddha gave instructions to the remaining members of the group until all five had gained the same glimpse.

He started his second recorded discourse—the one that led the five to total awakening—with a series of assertions to the effect that each of the five aggregates is not-self. His first argument in support of these assertions was that none of these aggregates could qualify as self because they don't lie totally under your control—the implication being that if they were really you, they would always follow in line with your wishes.

He then went on to cross-question the five monks about each of the aggregates: Is it constant or inconstant? Inconstant. If something is inconstant, is it easeful or stressful? Stressful. And is it fitting to regard what is inconstant, stressful, subject to change as: “This is mine. This is my self. This is what I am”? No.

He followed this questionnaire by pointing out that you should see all instances of the aggregates, regardless of their level of subtlety or where they are in space or time—inside or out; near or far; past, present, or future—as, “This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am.” When you see this, you grow disenchanted with the five aggregates. From disenchantment comes dispassion, and from dispassion, release.

Apparently the five monks, while engaged in this questionnaire and listening to the Buddha's conclusions, examined their own aggregates in real time and applied the Buddha's lessons to what they saw, because the discourse ends by saying that, while the Buddha's explanation was given, their minds were released through not clinging (SN 22:59).

The Buddha had many occasions throughout his teaching career to engage other listeners in the same questionnaire and to draw the same conclusions, the result being that he led many of his listeners either to partial or to total awakening. In every case, these instructions were aimed at getting the listeners to focus on examining the aggregates as they experienced them, and to develop the disenchantment and dispassion that would lead to release.

In the millennia since, many people who have read or listened to reports of these instructions have been able to use them to gain dispassion for the aggregates, while many others, on reading them, have focused their attention on a different aim. They have tried to draw out the logical implications of these instructions to answer a metaphysical question: Is there a self, or is there no self?

Even though this question diverts attention from the Buddha's original aim, it has long been a central issue in Buddhist philosophy.

Broadly speaking, there have been two main ways of answering this question, arriving at opposite conclusions as to how to draw logical inferences from the Buddha's teachings on not-self.

1. One school of interpretation argues that the five aggregates cover all of sensory experience, so the Buddha's questionnaire leaves no room for anything to be described as self. Therefore, it's safe to draw the conclusion that, in his eyes, there is no self.

This interpretation has been fortified by two other observations.

a) The Buddha would occasionally apply the same questionnaire in an even more thoroughgoing way to the six senses, their objects, consciousness at the senses, contact at the senses, and any feeling, perception, fabrication, or consciousness that arises in dependence on sensory contact (MN 147). Because this covers everything that the Buddha includes in the term, "the All," and because nothing can be described beyond the All (SN 35:23), that leaves no room for anything to be described as "self."

b) The aggregates and the senses are all classed as *saṅkhāras*, fabricated phenomena (*dhamma*), which might leave open the possibility that there could be an unfabricated dhamma that qualifies as self. However, the Buddha often would extend the range of the term "not-self" (*anattā*) by saying that all dhammas are not-self. This statement follows on the assertion that all fabricated phenomena are inconstant and stressful, so his choice of words here leads to the obvious conclusion that "phenomena" in the statement, "all phenomena," must include not only fabricated dhammas, but also unfabricated dhammas as well.

The unfabricated dimension is described as "dispassion, the subduing of intoxication, the elimination of thirst, the uprooting of attachment, the breaking of the round, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, the realization of unbinding" (Iti 90). This covers everything that could be experienced as an object of the mind, so the logical conclusion must be—given that all things fabricated and unfabricated are not-self—that there is no self.

2. Another school of interpretation arrives at the opposite conclusion. It does this by asserting that in all these cases, the Buddha leaves unspoken a dimension of experience that is not covered by the things he describes as not-self. According to this interpretation, the Buddha is asking his listeners to dis-identify with things that are not their true self so that they can arrive at an experience of what is their true self in the dimension not covered by the terms "the All" and "unfabricated dhammas."

The arguments in support of this interpretation can be summarized as follows:

a) Even though there can be no description of anything outside the "All" of the six senses, the Buddha does state that there is a dimension where the senses cease and their objects fade away, and that that dimension should be experienced (SN 35:117).

b) Although the realization of unbinding is described as a dhamma—which can mean that it is either a phenomenon or an action or both—unbinding itself is neither an action nor a phenomenon, and the Buddha in fact describes it as the ending of all dhammas (AN 10:58). This statement is supported by Sn 5:6, which quotes the Buddha as saying that, on reaching the end of the practice, “all dhammas are done away with.” It’s also supported by Sn 4:10, which states that the arahant is “beyond dispassion,” said to be the highest dhamma.

Thus, according to this interpretation, when the Buddha encouraged a group of young men—who were searching for a woman who had stolen their belongings—to search for the self instead, he was encouraging them to search for the self that lay beyond all dhammas (Mv I.14.4).

The arguments of the second school are easy to refute, in that the Buddha explicitly stated that to believe that there is a self would not be in keeping with the arising of the knowledge that all phenomena are not-self (SN 44:10). Apparently, his reasoning here is that any belief in a self would leave something to which the mind would cling, and that would get in the way of the mind’s release through non-clinging.

This means that it would be against the Buddha’s intentions to infer from his statements about not-self that they were intended to leave room for belief in a self.

Here it’s relevant to note that the Buddha gave a general principle for how to draw inferences from his teachings. He divided his discourses into two sorts: those that need to have their meaning further drawn out—in other words, they are intended for the listener to draw further logical conclusions from them—and those that already have their meaning fully drawn out. He also stated that it would be an act of slander to treat discourses of one sort as if they belonged to the other sort, the point relevant to our discussion here being that it would be an act of slander to draw further meanings—further logical conclusions—from teachings of the second sort:

“Monks, these two slander the Tathāgata. Which two? He who explains a discourse whose meaning needs to be further drawn out as one whose meaning has already been fully drawn out. And he who explains a discourse whose meaning has already been fully drawn out as one whose meaning needs to be further drawn out.” — AN 2:24

Unfortunately, AN 2:24 doesn’t give any examples of which of the Buddha’s teachings belong to the second sort, but it’s apparent that the teaching, “All phenomena are not-self” would fall into that category, in that it would be a mistake to draw from it the conclusion that there is a self.

However, there are passages in the Canon indicating that it would also be a mistake to draw from this teaching the opposite logical conclusion: that there is *no* self. To begin with, two passages indicate that the question of whether there is or is not a self belongs to the category of questions that the Buddha would put aside, meaning that using his questionnaire on not-self or the teaching “all phenomena are not-self” to answer a question that he refused to answer would

be to slander him. In MN 2, the Buddha states that such questions as “Am I? Am I not? What am I? How am I?” are not worthy of attention. To answer these questions by saying either, “I have a self,” or “I have no self,” is, in his words, “a thicket of views, a wilderness of views, a contortion of views, a writhing of views, a fetter of views. Bound by a fetter of views, the uninstructed run-of-the-mill person is not freed from birth, aging, and death, from sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair. He is not freed, I tell you, from suffering and stress.”

In SN 44:10, the Buddha remains silent when asked whether the self exists or not. He later explains his silence to his attendant, Ven. Ānanda, saying that if he were to say that there is a self, that would be to conform with the eternalists, those who teach the wrong view that the self is eternal and unchanging. To say that there is no self would be to conform with the annihilationists, those who teach that one is annihilated at death.

Here it’s important to note that the Buddha is not stating that all views of an existing self are eternalistic. He is well aware of views claiming the existence of a self that is not eternal (DN 1). However, the statement, “There is a self” conforms with eternalism in that it shares the same practical drawbacks as an eternalist view. It can’t be used as part of the strategy for putting an end to stress because, in holding to this sort of view, there’s a double level of attachment: to the view itself, and to the objects that the view identifies as self. This is why the Buddha so frequently deconstructed the view of an existing self in order to help his listeners advance along the path.

Similarly, the Buddha is not saying that all views saying that no self exists would count as annihilationist. It’s just that the statement, “There is no self” has practical drawbacks similar to those of annihilationism, as can be seen in MN 109.

MN 109 also shows explicitly that the questionnaire on not-self belongs to the category of teaching that should not have its logical conclusions further drawn out. In doing so, it also suggests some general reasons why the Buddha would insist that some of his teachings belonged to this category.

As the sutta begins, the Buddha is sitting in the open air on the night of a very full moon together with a Sangha of monks, answering the questions of one monk in particular. When asked, “Knowing in what way, seeing in what way, is there—with regard to this body endowed with consciousness, and with regard to all external signs—no longer any I-making, or my-making, or obsession with conceit?” the Buddha responds that one regards all the aggregates as, “This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am.”

Another monk sitting in the audience draws a logical conclusion from this statement: “So—form is not-self, feeling is not-self, perception is not-self, fabrications are not-self, consciousness is not-self. Then what self will be touched by the actions done by what is not-self?”

In other words, if the aggregates are not-self, then there must be no self who will be touched by the actions done by the aggregates. This conclusion, though logical, would undercut the Buddha’s teachings related to right view about kamma, and would give license to all kinds of unskillful actions on the grounds

that there's no one to be affected by them. This is, in fact, one of the practical implications of annihilationism: It's all right to do what you want, because you won't survive death to be punished for your misdeeds (DN 2).

The Buddha reads the monk's mind and says, "It's possible that a senseless person—immersed in ignorance, overcome with craving—might think that he could outsmart the Teacher's message in this way: 'So—form is not-self, feeling is not-self, perception is not-self, fabrications are not-self, consciousness is not-self. Then what self will be touched by the actions done by what is not-self?'"

This is the Buddha's way of saying that drawing this logical conclusion from the teaching on not-self would be to misuse the teaching. He then shows the correct use of the teaching by giving the monks the standard questionnaire on not-self, followed by the standard conclusions. As a result, the minds of sixty of the monks are released through not clinging.

This shows why this particular teaching should *not* have logical conclusions drawn from it. To do so would be to stay immersed in craving and ignorance. To take its message as stated and apply it directly to one's own mind, on the other hand, opens the way to total release. The difference in the outcome of the two approaches to listening could not be more stark.

So it's worth looking into what the Canon has to say about the right way to listen to the Dhamma and apply it to your own mind.

#### LISTENING TO THE DHAMMA

AN 5:151 states that if you're endowed with five qualities, you're capable of "alighting on the orderliness of the Dhamma"—its way of describing awakening—while listening to the True Dhamma. The five qualities are: You don't hold the talk in contempt; you don't hold the speaker in contempt; you don't hold yourself in contempt; you listen with an unscattered mind, a mind gathered into one; and you attend appropriately to the Dhamma.

The first two qualities ensure that you're open to taking in the message of the talk; the next ensures that you feel you're capable of following the talk and applying it to your own mind. The fourth quality ensures that you're properly focused and concentrated on the talk, and the fifth ensures that you apply the talk to the problem of how to gain dispassion for suffering and its cause right then and there.

Because the not-self questionnaire is aimed directly at inducing dispassion, appropriate attention focuses precisely on how this particular teaching can be used to induce dispassion in your own mind. SN 22:57 expands on how this is done, listing seven stages in the process leading to dispassion: You discern what the aggregate is, how it's originated or caused, how it ceases when its origination or cause ceases, and what needs to be done for it to cease: developing the noble eightfold path. You also have to see its allure, its drawbacks, and finally the escape from it, which is the ending of passion-desire for it—i.e., dispassion.

For the mental aggregates, the origination or cause is something that, if you're sufficiently focused and paying proper attention, can be observed in the mind in

the present moment: Contact is the origination in the case of feeling, perception, and fabrications; name and form—i.e., other aggregates—are the origination in the case of consciousness.

If you take the message of the Buddha's teaching while listening and use it to notice how these things rise and fall in your mind, you can observe their inconstancy. From there, you can follow the questionnaire to see that these inconstant things are also stressful and don't deserve to be seen as self. This is what it means to see their drawbacks.

Now, because dispassion is a value judgment—seeing that the passion that goes into the constant fabrication of these things yields results that aren't worth the effort that goes into them—it's also important to compare the drawbacks of these things with their allure: why you felt passion for them in the first place. If you're not clear on the allure, it's hard to come to a clear value judgment about whether the passion is worth it or not. In every case, and in general terms, the allure comes down to the pleasure and happiness that arise born from the aggregate. It's up to you to discern precisely what particular pleasures and forms of happiness incite the passion for you to keep fabricating aggregates. When you do, and the truth hits home that the specific allure of each aggregate is not worth the drawbacks it entails, that puts an end to any passion or desire for the aggregates. The mind stops producing these aggregates, stops clinging to them, and so gains release.

So the first reason why the Buddha didn't want his listeners to come to the conclusion that there is no self is that an assertion of that sort would distract them from the ideal way of listening to the teaching on not-self and using it so as to free their minds.

#### DEVELOPING THE PATH

The problem, though is that, people can get this result from listening only if they're fully alert and properly focused on applying the lessons to their minds in the immediate present. And the fact of the matter is that not everyone listening to these teachings can do this. Even on that full-moon night, not all the Buddha's listeners gained awakening. That means that they had to develop the noble eightfold path further on their own. Only then would their powers of concentration and discernment be sufficiently strong to observe the aggregates with enough sensitivity that they could give their full assent to the value judgment that the aggregates are not worthy of their passion.

However, to develop the path requires making use of the aggregates. Right concentration, for instance, the last factor of the path, is composed of all five (AN 9:36). And in particular, the Buddha shows that right view—the primary discernment factor of the path—together with right effort—the factor responsible for generating desire to develop the path and abandon anything that stands in its way—makes strategic use of both perceptions of "self" and perceptions of "not-self" as the path develops. After all, you have to feel some craving and passion for the path to see that it's worth following (AN 4:159; AN 6:78). This requires a

sense that you yourself will benefit, but that you'll also have to dis-identify with any desires that would pull you off the path.

This is apparently another reason why the Buddha didn't answer the question as to whether there is or is not a self. If he had said either that there was a self or there was no self, he wouldn't have been free to recommend the strategies needed for the path to mature. However, by leaving perceptions of "self" and "not-self" as value judgments, he was free to tell his listeners to apply them strategically in ways that were appropriate for their level of progress on the path.

Right view, which governs the use of these perceptions, starts on the mundane level with the principle of action: that good and bad actions—bodily, verbal, and mental—are real and bear real results (MN 117). The transcendent level of right view builds on this principle by focusing on the role of mental action in causing and putting an end to suffering. It's expressed in terms of the four noble truths:

- 1) suffering, which is identical to the five clinging-aggregates;
- 2) its origination, which is the craving that leads to becoming (the act of taking on an identity in a world of experience);
- 3) its cessation, which is dispassion for that craving; and
- 4) the path to its cessation, the noble eightfold path.

Each of these truths entails a duty: Suffering is to be comprehended to the point where there's no passion, aversion, or delusion around it; its origination is to be abandoned; its cessation—which is the same as the abandoning of craving—is to be realized; and the path to its cessation is to be developed.

When carrying out the duties of the first two noble truths, your use of the perception of not-self is relatively straightforward. Throughout the practice of the path, in almost every instance where you see that you're suffering, you can try to ferret out the clinging that constitutes the suffering and the craving that causes it, and apply the perception of not-self to any of the aggregates on which that particular act of clinging or craving is focused. That's how you comprehend suffering and abandon its origination.

Here, however, it's necessary to say "*almost every instance,*" because—as we noted above—the path, the fourth noble truth, is also comprised of aggregates. And there are times when the practice of the path involves some suffering, especially as you reflect on the fact that you're still far from the goal. The Buddha calls this "*renunciation-based distress,*" and advocates that you develop it to pull yourself out of "*house-based distress,*" the distress that comes when you're deprived of the sights, sounds, aromas, etc., that you find appealing (MN 137). House-based distress is basically hopeless, in that it aims at gaining sights, etc., that will leave you again, whereas renunciation-based distress offers genuine hope: There is a dimension that is free from change. In cases of this sort, as we'll see below, you hold back from applying the perception of not-self to the experience of suffering if that suffering actually helps motivate you along the path.

In fact, as we look more in detail at how to follow the duties appropriate to the third and fourth noble truths, we see that the issue of how to apply perceptions of self and not-self gets more complex. Here we'll discuss the fourth truth first, because you have to perform the duties appropriate to it before you perform the duties appropriate to the third.

To develop the path requires using perceptions of self and not-self depending on circumstances. To begin with, as we've noted, a proper concept of "self" is a useful perception for motivating yourself to develop the path. It helps you feel that you're capable of doing it, capable of judging your progress as you do so, and that you'll benefit from the efforts you put into it.

This point is widely misunderstood. Many modern teachers have claimed that, given the not-self teaching, it's a mistake to think that you're personally responsible for getting the path to mature. Instead, you should see the maturation of the path as the result of impersonal causes and conditions. The Buddha himself, however, never talks in that way. In his recommendations for how to think about following the path, he makes frequent use of concepts of "self" and "I" as agent and beneficiary of following the path. As he stated in AN 10:73, the Dhamma is nourished through commitment and reflection, and concepts of "self" and "I" play a prominent role in providing both sorts of nourishment.

However, it's important to note that the Buddha never gives a precise definition of what "self" and "I" mean in this context. In fact, he leaves the terms undefined. This may have been to prevent his listeners from getting obsessed with defining what they are, and so limiting themselves and the range of what they could do. As he noted, any obsession with the aggregates defines you, and so places limitations on you (SN 22:36). So instead, when using the terms "self" and "I" in giving advice for following the path, the Buddha simply describes not what these concepts *are*, but how they should *function*. In other words, he views the concepts of "self" and "I" as strategies, and he gives advice on how to use them strategically with skill.

There are two main points worth noting in how he approaches this issue:

a) He assigns "self" and "I" three main functions: as the agent who's responsible for following the path, as the consumer who will benefit from following the path, and as the commentator who reflects on the actions of the agent and consumer—and itself—judging them as skillful or unskillful, and giving them advice on how better to function to make further progress on the path.

b) "Self" and "I" are used on many levels of the practice, from the most basic to the fairly advanced. Because the conceit "I am" is not abandoned until the final level of awakening, the Buddha advises getting some skillful use out of it before you put it aside.

Because of the misunderstandings around this point, it's worth quoting some examples to show how the Buddha uses "self" and "I" in this context. Some of these examples deal with issues faced on the more basic levels of the path.



First, in the role of agent:

Your own self is your own mainstay,  
for who else could your mainstay be?  
With you yourself well-trained,  
you obtain a mainstay hard to obtain. — *Dhp* 160

Evil is done by oneself.  
By oneself is one defiled.  
Evil is left undone by oneself.  
By oneself is one cleansed.  
Purity and impurity are one's own doing.  
No one purifies another.  
No other purifies one. — *Dhp* 165

Ven. Ānanda: "There is the case, sister, where a monk hears, 'The monk named such-&-such, they say, through the ending of the effluents, has entered and remains in the effluent-free awareness-release & discernment-release, having directly known & realized them for himself right in the here-and-now.' The thought occurs to him, 'The monk named such-&-such, they say, through the ending of the effluents, has entered and remains in the effluent-free awareness-release & discernment-release.... Then why not me?' Then he eventually abandons conceit, having relied on conceit." — *AN* 4:159

Here are "self" and "I" in the role of consumer:

"And what, monks, is the self as a governing principle? There is the case where a monk, having gone to a wilderness, to the foot of a tree, or to an empty dwelling, reflects on this: 'It's not for the sake of robes that I have gone forth from the home life into homelessness; it's not for the sake of almsfood, for the sake of lodgings, or for the sake of this or that state of [future] becoming that I have gone forth from the home life into homelessness. Simply that I am beset by birth, aging, & death; by sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses, & despairs; beset by stress, overcome with stress, [and I hope,] "Perhaps the end of this entire mass of suffering & stress might be known!" Now, if I were to seek the same sort of sensual pleasures that I abandoned in going forth from home into homelessness—or a worse sort—that would not be fitting for me.'

"So he reflects on this: 'My persistence will be aroused & not lax; my mindfulness established & not confused; my body calm & not aroused; my mind concentrated & unified.' Having made himself his governing principle, he abandons what is unskillful, develops what is skillful, abandons what is blameworthy, develops what is unblameworthy, and looks after himself in a pure way. This is called the self as a governing principle.' — *AN* 3:40

"And what are the six kinds of renunciation-based distress? The distress coming from the longing that arises in one who is filled with longing for the unexcelled liberations when—experiencing the inconstancy of those very forms, their change, fading, & cessation—he sees with right discernment as it has come to be that all forms, both before & now, are inconstant, stressful, subject to change and he is filled with this longing: 'O when will I enter & remain in the dimension that the noble ones now enter & remain in?' This is called

renunciation-based distress. [Similarly with sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, & ideas.]” — MN 137

And here are two basic examples of “I” as the commentator:

You yourself should reprove yourself,  
                                   should examine yourself.  
 As a self-guarded monk  
 with guarded self,  
 mindful, you dwell at ease. — *Dhp* 379

“Whenever you want to do a mental action, Rāhula, you should reflect on it: ‘This mental action I want to do—would it lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Would it be an unskillful mental action, with painful consequences, painful results?’ If, on reflection, you know that it would lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both; it would be an unskillful mental action with painful consequences, painful results, then any mental action of that sort is absolutely unfit for you to do. But if on reflection you know that it would not cause affliction... it would be a skillful mental action with pleasant consequences, pleasant results, then any mental action of that sort is fit for you to do.

“While you’re doing a mental action, Rāhula, you should reflect on it: ‘This mental action I’m doing—is it leading to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Is it an unskillful mental action, with painful consequences, painful results?’ If, on reflection, you know that it is leading to self-affliction, to affliction of others, or both... you should give it up. But if on reflection you know that it is not... you may continue with it.

“When you’ve done a mental action, Rāhula, you should reflect on it: ‘This mental action I’ve done—did it lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Was it an unskillful mental action, with painful consequences, painful results?’ If, on reflection, you know that it led to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both; it was an unskillful mental action with painful consequences, painful results, then you should feel distressed, ashamed, & disgusted with it. Feeling distressed... you should exercise restraint in the future. But if on reflection you know that it did not lead to affliction... it was a skillful mental action with pleasant consequences, pleasant results, then you should stay mentally refreshed & joyful, training day & night in skillful qualities.” — MN 61

On a more advanced level, here’s an example of “I” as consumer of the fruits of the practice:

“In seeing six rewards, it’s enough for a monk to establish the perception of not-self with regard to all phenomena without exception. Which six? ‘I won’t be fashioned in connection with any world. My I-making will be stopped. My my-making will be stopped. I will be endowed with uncommon knowledge. I will become one who rightly sees cause, along with causally-originated phenomena.’”  
 — AN 6:104

So the perception of self—as agent, consumer, and commentator—plays an important role on many levels in developing the path.

Of course, the Buddha also makes use of the perception of not-self on the path. The uses are primarily three:

- In the beginning, it's applied to all things that would pull you off the path.
- Along the way, it's applied to any sense of unhealthy conceit that makes you look down on others whom you regard as inferior to you: This type of conceit can begin with issues around which lay people measure themselves against others—such as family status—and can persist up through the attainment of high levels of concentration (MN 113).
- On the most advanced level, you're encouraged to abandon all thoughts of "self" and "I" as you examine the processes leading to becoming as described in the Buddha's analysis of dependent co-arising, seeing them simply as events that can provide no lasting happiness. This is why the Buddha was so resistant to people who tried to read a "self" into the description of dependent co-arising, either in the role of someone who "owns" the factors of dependent co-arising or who "feeds" on those factors (SN 12:12; SN 12:35).

This means that, with regard to fulfilling the duty to develop the fourth noble truth, perceptions both of "self" and "not-self" play an important role, depending on the particular issues you're facing at different levels of the practice.

#### REALIZING CESSATION

As you begin performing the duty appropriate to the third noble truth, the issues surrounding perceptions of "self" and "not-self" get even more complex.

To realize the cessation of suffering, you have to abandon all clinging and craving for the aggregates. Now, the practice of the path relies on craving (AN 4:159), so there's a general principle that to fully perform the duty of the third noble truth, there comes a point where you have to abandon the fourth. More specifically, perceptions—even the perceptions employed by right view—count as aggregates, which means that perceptions of "self" and "not-self" have to be abandoned after they've done their work in helping you abandon your clinging and craving for other things.

The general point that the path ultimately must be abandoned occurs frequently throughout the Canon—in some cases metaphorically, as in the image of the raft that has to be abandoned after it has delivered you to the safety of the further shore, or the relay chariot that you leave behind when it delivers you to your destination (MN 22; MN 24). In other cases, this point is made more explicitly, as when the Buddha recommends applying a five-step analysis to the five faculties—which are a way of analyzing the path into the five qualities of conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment—so as to induce dispassion for them. This five-step analysis is a shortened version of the seven-step analysis applied to the clinging-aggregates in SN 22:57, which we discussed above. In this case, you should look for the origination of each faculty, its passing away, its allure, its drawbacks, and the escape from it (SN 48:3; SN 48:4).

This means that right view, to be right all the way to the end of the practice, has to be expressed in a way that, after having done its work in ending passion for all other things, it's forced to reflect back on itself in a way that it can develop dispassion for itself, allowing the mind to escape from it.

And this is precisely how right view functions when it's rightly expressed. It starts with the principle of action, and applies it first to wrong views, regarding them both in terms of their content and in terms of how they function in a causal series of actions: why people cling to them, and how clinging to these views leads them to act. As the Buddha states in DN 1:

“There, where any of those contemplatives & brahmans who are adherents of [a particular wrong view], they all experience that through repeated contact at the six sense media. For them, from feeling as a requisite condition comes craving. From craving as a requisite condition comes clinging/sustenance. From clinging/sustenance as a requisite condition comes becoming. From becoming as a requisite condition comes birth. From birth as a requisite condition, then aging-&-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair come into play. Such is the origination of this entire mass of stress & suffering.”

However, in seeing this truth, the Buddha has learned how not to cling to it, by viewing right view itself as a product of actions, starting, in this case, with feelings:

“With regard to this, the Tathāgata discerns that ‘These standpoints, thus seized, thus grasped at, lead to such & such a destination, to such & such a state in the world beyond.’ That the Tathāgata discerns. And he discerns what is higher than that. And yet, discerning that, he does not grasp at it. And as he is not grasping at it, unbinding [*nibbuti*] is experienced right within. Knowing, as they have come to be, the origination, ending, allure, & drawbacks of feelings, along with the escape from feelings, the Tathāgata, monks—through lack of clinging/sustenance—is released.” — DN 1

The Canon, in AN 10:93, gives a clear example of how expressing right view in terms that focus on the action of clinging to views allows for it to be turned on itself after it has done its work in gaining escape from other views.

The incident is this: Anāthapiṇḍika, a lay disciple of the Buddha's who has attained the first level of awakening, visits the adherents of other sects. After they have treated him with some disrespect, they ask him his views. He responds that he will be happy to tell them his views, but asks that they tell him theirs first. The sectarians express their views about the hot topics of the day, such as whether the cosmos is eternal or not, finite or infinite, etc. In each case, Anāthapiṇḍika then focuses on how the view is the product of action, and on the bad consequences of holding to it. For example:

“As for the venerable one who says, ‘The cosmos is eternal. Only this is true; anything otherwise is worthless. This is the sort of view I have,’ his view arises from his own inappropriate attention or in dependence on the words of another. Now this view has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently co-arisen. Whatever has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently

co-arisen: That is inconstant. Whatever is inconstant is stress. This venerable one thus adheres to that very stress, submits himself to that very stress.”

The sectarians then ask Anāthapiṇḍika his view. He responds:

“Whatever has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently co-arisen: That is inconstant. Whatever is inconstant is stress. Whatever is stress is not me, is not what I am, is not my self. This is the sort of view I have.”

Thinking that they’ve caught him in his own trap, the sectarians say:

“So, householder, whatever has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently co-arisen: That is inconstant. Whatever is inconstant is stress. You thus adhere to that very stress, submit yourself to that very stress.”

However, Anāthapiṇḍika shows that this view allows him to escape from the trap by escaping from any attachment to it:

“Venerable sirs, whatever has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently co-arisen: That is inconstant. Whatever is inconstant is stress. Whatever is stress is not me, is not what I am, is not my self. Having seen this well with right discernment as it has come to be, I also discern the higher escape from it as it has come to be.”

When this was said, the wanderers fell silent, abashed, sitting with their shoulders drooping, their heads down, brooding, at a loss for words. — *AN 10:93*

In other words, when you have trained the mind to focus on the stress in clinging to anything brought into being, fabricated, willed, or dependently co-arisen, it’s a small step to reflect that even that right view is brought into being, fabricated, willed, or dependently co-arisen. There comes a point where its allure—its usefulness in freeing you from your attachment to other views—has served its purpose, so you see no more value in holding on to it, even though it’s true. This is how right view can be used to transcend itself. It focuses attention precisely on things that need to be comprehended and abandoned, and in doing so, it ends up focusing the same attention on itself.

The same point applies to the questionnaire on not-self and to the teaching that all phenomena are not-self.

With regard to the questionnaire, the focus is on the aggregates and the drawbacks of clinging to them. As the Canon notes, these aggregates cover the range of phenomena to which you can cling and thus create suffering. At the same time, they constitute the full range of raw material around which assumptions about self coalesce (SN 22:1). So in focusing directly on these aggregates, the questionnaire forces you to look at precisely what you’re using to create any sense of self to which you’ve been clinging. Its purpose is to induce a value judgment about what you’re focused on: that none of these things are worth clinging to. That’s how you develop the dispassion at which the teaching aims.

At the same time, if you’re following the questionnaire and applying it to your own mind with sufficient discernment, you have to reach a point where you realize that even the right view it espouses—“Any fabrications whatsoever that

are past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: All fabrications are to be seen with right discernment as it has come to be: “This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am”—comes under the aggregate of fabrication. It, too, when it has done its work, should become an object of disenchantment and dispassion. When dispassion is thoroughly all-around like this, it can lead to genuine release.

The same dynamic of focus and reflective focus holds for the statement, “All phenomena are not-self.” Here, though, the word “phenomena (*dhamma*)” has two meanings that cut through acts of clinging in two directions.

a) On the one hand, *dhamma* refers to any phenomenon, whether fabricated or unfabricated. As AN 9:36 indicates, the act of perceiving the five aggregates as not-self is, for some people, enough to gain full awakening. Letting go of the aggregates both in their role as objects of discernment and in their role of tools used along the path, these people can attain an experience of the deathless. If any passion and delight arise around the experience of the deathless—taking that experience as an object—they can detect the passion and delight as coming under the fabrication aggregate, so they can apply the perception of not-self to that passion and delight as well. That’s how they’re fully released.

Other people, however, focus too narrowly on the experience of the deathless, so when passion and delight arise for that experience, they misperceive them as part of the experience. This would lead them to assume that the passion and delight are unfabricated. Because the unfabricated does not fall under the aggregates, and because they have been applying the perception not-self only to the aggregates as they perceived them, they would not apply the same perception to the passion and delight that they wrongly perceive as part of the deathless.

It’s precisely this misperception that the knowledge, “All phenomena are not-self” is meant to cure. When this knowledge is applied even to the experience of the deathless, it can help detect the fabricated passion and delight around the deathless as actually separate from it. After all, these fabrications are dhammas, and they come from viewing the deathless as a dhamma. For this reason, the perception of not-self applies to them and to the aspect of the deathless experience that still takes that experience as an object of the mind. When this perception fully removes the last remaining act of clinging to these subtle mind-objects and events, all activity at the six senses ceases. Full awakening occurs with a full plunge into unbinding.

b) On the other hand, *dhamma* can also mean “teaching.” Thus the teaching, “All dhammas are not-self,” can apply to all teachings, itself included. This means that this teaching, too, should ultimately become an object of dispassion. Because it has this reflective quality, this statement is thus an ideal expression of right view for this stage in the practice in helping to lead to the all-around dispassion needed for release.

We've already noted that one of the reasons why the Buddha refused to take a stand on the existence of the self was so that he would be free to advise his followers to make use both of perceptions of self and of perceptions of not-self as strategies for developing the fourth noble truth. Another reason is that they would then be free to drop both of those perceptions to fully complete the duty with regard to the third. The way he expressed his teachings on not-self gave him the freedom to do just that. And it encourages listeners to use and then abandon these perceptions in the most skillful way.

The same cannot be said, however, for the statement, "There is no self." To begin with, it's a generality that lacks the precise focus of the Buddha's two ways of using the concept of not-self. Instead of focusing your attention on actions going on in your mind, it points outward as a general claim about what does or doesn't lie behind experience—which, from the Buddha's point of view, would be a distraction.

At the same time, the statement, "There is no self," lacks the reflective quality of the two statements of right view. Instead of focusing on itself, it aims its focus into the social arena, where views like this are asserted and discussed. Instead of encouraging you to look at views as actions, or to examine the mental states motivating you to make such a generality, its function is to assert the sort of position that's taken for the sake of debate. It's the type of view that ends implicitly or explicitly in the stock phrase, "Only this is true; anything otherwise is worthless," and that would entangle you in needless controversies. Instead of focusing attention on how it, too, needs eventually to be abandoned, the statement, "There is no self," becomes something to hold on to and defend.

Even if you don't assert this statement to others, the fact that you introduce it into your internal dialog can get you entangled as well. If that dialog is at all responsible, you have to work out the implications of this statement vis-à-vis your practice as a whole: If there's no self, who's going to do the practice on days when causes and conditions push the other way? And if other people have no self, what's wrong with harming them? There would just be aggregates pushing other aggregates around. Issues like this get you further and further away from the task of inducing dispassion for how you're causing yourself suffering here and now.

This is why the Buddha calls views of this sort a "thicket," a "wilderness," a "fetter," and a "writhing" of views that don't free you from suffering and stress.

In short, the statement, "There is no self," lacks the two features necessary for a skillful expression of the teaching on not-self:

- (a) the proper focus and
- (b) the proper reflective dynamic.

Lacking these two features, it doesn't encourage you to abandon it, which is why it's easy to fetter yourself with it.

This means that trying to force the Buddha's teachings to answer the question of whether there is or isn't a self is not just a waste of time. It actually interferes with the practice of the teachings. The Buddha wanted to be free to advise his

students how to use concepts of self and not-self in following the duties of the four noble truths. And he wanted for them to be free to abandon such concepts as part of completing those duties. For this reason, the duties of the four noble truths *require* that you not take a stand on whether a self exists or not.

Instead, you take the Buddha's teachings on not-self as he expressed them—so as to have the proper focus and the proper reflective dynamic—and you apply them to the ways in which you're suffering right now. It's in this way that they can serve their original purpose and help you reach the overall aims of his teachings: dispassion and release.

Looking at how the Buddha's teachings on not-self function, we can derive two further lessons about his general teaching approach.

1. These teachings show us why the Buddha insisted some of his teachings should not have logical inferences drawn from them. These are teachings that are meant not simply to be descriptive, but also to be performative: Their focus is on what they can get you to *do*. To draw logical inferences from them would be to divert them from their focus, and actually to create more fetters for the listener. This is why the Buddha said that those who draw logical inferences from such teachings are slandering him.

2. There are many passages in which the Buddha states that the fully awakened person has attained the ultimate truth—the release of nibbāna (MN 140)—but there are also passages saying that such a person is at the same time beyond true and false (Sn 4:8; Sn 4:9; AN 4:24). This sounds like a paradox, and these passages were probably meant to sound paradoxical so as to provoke thought. But the paradox can be easily resolved. When you attain awakening, you reach the truth of a reality: the reality of release. But to get there, you needed to use the verbal truths of right view, which—because they are fabrications—you have to abandon at some point so as to be totally free from fabrications. This is why right view has to be expressed in ways that lead to a value judgment—that all fabrications deserve to be abandoned—and in ways that that judgment can be applied to themselves. Once you've attained full freedom, you don't need them any more. Even though they're true, they don't have the same value for you that they did when you were following the path. That's how you're beyond them.

As the Buddha states in his simile of the raft, once you've arrived at the further shore, you feel appreciation for the raft that got you there, but see no need to carry it further on your head. You're free to go anywhere you like, with nothing at all to weigh you down.