

NOT-SELF
Q&A

Not-self Q & A

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Introduction

The Buddha first gave his not-self teaching to a group of his followers called the five brethren. They had already listened to his teachings on the four noble truths and had seen that those truths really were true: When you follow the noble eightfold path, you put an end to craving and clinging at least temporarily, and you glimpse the end of suffering. So when the Buddha gave them the not-self teaching, they knew what to do with it. They used it to put a total end to craving and clinging, and to gain total release.

In the centuries since, though, people have used the not-self teaching for many other purposes, often turning it into a no-self teaching to answer metaphysical questions about the nature and existence of a self. This raised a further question: no self in what sense? Is there no self at all? Is there a cosmic, interconnected self but no individual, independent self? A temporary self but no permanent self? A self in the conventional sense but not in an ultimate sense? The debates over these issues have never come to an end. And they don't put an end to clinging.

It's no wonder, then, that many people coming to Buddhism find the not-self teaching confusing. What follows is an attempt to get back as close as possible to what the Buddha himself taught about not-self in the oldest extant record of his teachings, the discourses in the Pāli Canon. There are sixteen questions and answers related to the topic of not-self, followed by readings from the Canon on which the answers are based.

I hope that this book will help clear up at least some of the confusion.

Not-self Q & A

1. When the Buddha talks about not-self, what does he mean by the word, “self”?

However you define what you are. The Canon lists many ways in which people of his time defined the self, such as having form (body) or being formless; as finite or infinite; surviving death, not surviving death, or as identical with the cosmos. These and any other way of defining what you are—such as separate, individual, or interconnected with others—would count as “self.” But the Buddha said that questions like, “What am I?” “Am I?” “Am I not?” were not worth paying attention to, which means they’re not worth answering. More important than trying to define what you *are* is knowing the *process* of how you go about defining what you are.

2. Why is it important to know that process?

Because it’s a prime example of how you cause suffering. If you can master the skill of not engaging in the process, you can free yourself from suffering.

3. So what is the process of defining your self?

You start with the raw material provided by five activities called “aggregates.”

- The form of your body as you sense it from within. This is an activity in the sense that you constantly have to assemble your sense of the body from sensations like energy, heat, cold, solidity, and space.
- Feelings: feeling tones of pleasure, pain, and neither pleasure nor pain.
- Perceptions: mental labels—visual images or words—that identify things as to what they are, what they mean, and how important it is to pay attention to them.

- Thought fabrications: intentional thoughts, urges, and emotions.
- Consciousness: awareness of the activities of the aggregates and of the six senses and their objects—counting the mind as the sixth sense.

From this raw material you assume a sense of yourself as:

- identical with one or more of the aggregates,
- their owner,
- being inside them, or
- containing them within you.

For example, you might identify yourself with your body or with your thinking. Or you might identify yourself as your individual consciousness, and at the same time think that you're the owner of the other aggregates. Or you might think of your self as a little being inside your body, making it function. Or you might identify as a cosmic consciousness that contains the other aggregates and all the beings of the world within you.

4. How does this process of assuming a self cause suffering?

Once you build a sense of self around any of the aggregates, you cling to that aggregate. And that's the Buddha's definition of suffering: clinging to any of the five aggregates. You suffer when you do this because you don't want the aggregate(s) to which you're clinging to change in any way outside of your control. Yet none of these activities lie fully under your control. They're inconstant and unreliable.

At the same time, the act of clinging is, in and of itself, suffering as well because it, too, is inconstant and it contains the hunger of craving within it.

This is why it's important to understand "self" in the term "not-self" as meaning *any* possible way of defining your self, because no matter what "I" or "my" you come up with, you're going to cling to it. The Buddha wants to help you to put an end to every possible way of clinging.

5. So the Buddha's not-self teaching is telling me to stop assuming a self?

Yes, but not so fast. "Not-self" is a perception that plays a role in the Buddha's larger strategy for putting an end to suffering, which is more effective than just telling you to stop.

His strategy is laid out in the four noble truths:

- The first truth: Suffering (or stress) is clinging to the aggregates.
- The second truth: Suffering is caused by craving.
- The third truth: Suffering can be ended, and an unchanging happiness can be found, when craving is totally abandoned.
- The fourth truth: Craving can be abandoned through the noble eightfold path: right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

The strategy lies in the fact that each of these truths carries a duty: If you want to put an end to suffering, you have to—

- comprehend suffering to the point of having no passion, aversion, or delusion around it;
- abandon all passion for craving;
- realize that suffering ends when craving is abandoned; and to do that, you have to
- develop the path.

6. How does the perception of not-self relate to these duties?

There are two stages:

First you follow the duties of the four noble truths to prepare the mind to be ready for the perception of not-self.

Then you use the perception of not-self to complete the duties.

We can break these two stages down into four:

- *You begin by developing right view about all four truths, and especially the third.* If you believe that suffering ceases when clinging ends—or even better, if, like the five brethren, you’ve already gained a glimpse of that cessation—you’re more likely to listen to the Buddha when he says that the clinging inherent in assuming a self is making you suffer. If you don’t believe this point, if you think that your happiness depends on identifying what you are, then you won’t be swayed by his reasons for perceiving the aggregates as not-self no matter how persuasively he argues his case. This is why you have to develop at least some basic right view about all four noble truths at the start of the path.

- *Then you develop the other factors of the path to get the mind in right concentration.* In particular, as you develop right effort and right mindfulness, you get hands-on experience in manipulating the aggregates. You see how you have to get some control over the way you breathe, over your feelings, perceptions, thought fabrications, and acts of consciousness if you want the mind to settle down with a sense of ease.

- *Then you refine your right view by reflecting on what you've done.* Once you're in right concentration, the stillness it provides allows you to see that it, too, is made up of aggregates. If you're focused on the breath as the topic of your concentration, the way you breathe counts as form; the pleasure and equanimity that come as the mind settles down count as feelings. Then the perceptions that hold you with the breath, the intentions that keep you focused on the breath, and your consciousness of all these things cover the remaining aggregates.

By developing the path in this way, you begin to comprehend what the aggregates are. This is an important step toward comprehending the first noble truth. You see for yourself that the Buddha was right about the *fact* of how aggregates play a role in shaping your experience.

In addition to the facts, you see how the Buddha was right about the *value* of the aggregates. A state of concentration yields the highest happiness the aggregates can provide, but it has its drawbacks. It's always ready to fall apart, so you have to keep working to maintain it. It also involves subtle clinging and craving.

- *When you're ready in this way, the Buddha teaches you to apply the perception of not-self to everything you experience to complete the duties of the four truths:* to comprehend that clinging is suffering, to genuinely feel dispassion for the objects of craving, and to fully develop the path. You're ready to realize the cessation of suffering.

7. Does this mean that, up to this point, you've been using perceptions of self to develop the path?

Exactly. The Buddha states outright that he simply points out the way. *You* have to follow it. It won't happen on its own. To follow it, you need a healthy sense of self to develop the skills it requires. Here the Buddha gives advice on how to develop that sense of self as a strategy: You create it to help do the work, and when the work is done, you let it go.

But instead of defining what this healthy self *is*, he describes how it *functions*. These functions fall into three categories:

- The self as agent, one who takes on responsibility for your actions and is confident that you can follow the path.
- The self as consumer, one who anticipates enjoying the results of the path as they ripen.

There's an interesting passage where the Buddha recommends cultivating a sense of self in this way even in connection with the perception of not-self: Your letting go of what's not you or yours will be for your long-term happiness and benefit.

- The third function is the self as commentator, who monitors the actions of the agent and consumer to make sure that you, as agent, are actually bringing about the results you want, and that you, as consumer, are aiming at the highest possible happiness.

Even though the aggregates are, in and of themselves, empty of self—that's one of the original meanings of the word *emptiness* in the Buddha's teachings—you can exert some measure of control over them, which you can use to develop the path to the end of suffering. So to whatever extent you have to create a strategic sense of self to exert that control, in the long run it's worth any stress or suffering it involves.

In this sense, both "self" and "not-self" are value judgments as to whether something is worth laying claim to. With some things, at some stages of the path, the answer is Yes, even though at a later stage of the path, when you no longer need those things, the answer will be No.

8. Does the perception of not-self play any role before it's applied to all experience?

All along the path. When you learn to identify with the right factors of the path, you're at the same time dis-identifying with any actions opposed to those factors. For instance, when you take on the precepts and practice concentration, you regard as "not-self" any desires to break the precepts or to follow distracting thoughts.

9. Is it possible to apply the perception of not-self in an unskillful way?

Yes, as when you use it to deny responsibility for your actions. There was a case in the Canon where a monk reasoned that, if all the aggregates were not-self, actions were not done by your self and there would be no self to be affected by them. This would mean that it didn't matter what you did, for you weren't responsible, no one could claim that they had been hurt by what you did, and there was no "you" to reap the consequences. The Buddha said the monk was a fool: "immersed in ignorance and overcome with craving."

10. When students were ready to apply the perception of not-self across the board, how would the Buddha teach them?

He advised that if you want to benefit most from listening to the Dhamma, his teaching, you should gather your mind into one and pay attention to see how what he was saying applied to what was actually happening in your mind.

His most common and effective way of teaching the perception of not-self was to start with a questionnaire.

Taking each aggregate in turn, starting with form, he would ask: Is it constant or inconstant? — Inconstant.

If it's inconstant, is it easeful or stressful? — Stressful.

If something is inconstant and stressful, is it proper to regard it as, "This is mine. This is my self. This is what I am?" — No.

He would then repeat the same formula, going deeper and deeper into the mind: to feelings, perceptions, thought fabrications, and consciousness. This covers all the possible objects of clinging and craving in the present moment.

The purpose of the questionnaire was to get you to let go of each aggregate in question as it appeared in your awareness.

But even if you let go of the aggregates in the present, you might possibly hold on to the expectation of happiness from aggregates in the future or on some higher plane of being. That's why the Buddha would follow the questionnaire by noting that this same reflection applies to all aggregates: past, present, or future; near or far; blatant or subtle. The conclusion that the aggregates aren't worth regarding as "me" or "mine" or "my self" applies to every possible aggregate throughout space and time.

In this way, the Buddha tried to cover every possible way that you could hold on to the aggregates.

11. What would be the result of listening to this teaching?

As we noted above, this teaching would work only if you believed in the third noble truth—that an unchanging happiness is possible. If you didn't, the facts of inconstancy and stress in the aggregates wouldn't faze you. If you saw them as offering your only hope for happiness, you'd keep holding on to them despite their limitations.

However, if you did believe in the third noble truth and were able to let go of your attachment to the aggregates as the Buddha recommended, he said that you'd incline the mind to the deathless, a dimension free from inconstancy and stress. As a result, you'd either—

- gain full awakening or
- cling to your perception of the deathless, which would lead to a lower level of awakening.

In the first case, you'd need no further instructions.

To deal with the second case, the Buddha would go beyond saying that the aggregates are not-self, stating that “All dhammas”—all phenomena —“are not-self.”

This teaching functions in two ways.

First, because “dhamma” covers fabricated or conditioned experiences, like the aggregates, as well as unfabricated experiences, like the deathless, this teaching warns you that even a realization of the deathless has to be regarded as not-self so that you'll remember to let go of any passion for it.

Second, once this teaching had functioned in that way, the fact that it, too, is a dhamma reminds you that it, too, has to be abandoned after it's done its work. After all, “not-self” is a perception. If you don't let go of it, you'll still be holding on to an aggregate, and that will get in the way of full release.

To use an analogy that's admittedly not from the Canon, the message “all dhammas are not-self” is like the recordings in *Mission: Impossible* that self-destruct after they've delivered their message.

12. But doesn't the teaching, "All dhammas are not-self," mean that nibbāna is not-self?

The Canon makes a distinction: The realization of nibbāna, or unbinding, is the highest of all dhammas, or objects of the mind. It's an action. Nibbāna itself is the ending of all dhammas. No actions, no aggregates are found there, which means that perceptions of self and not-self aren't found there, either. So they don't apply.

This doesn't mean there's no awareness in nibbāna. The Buddha describes a consciousness that's not known through the six senses, and that lies beyond the word, "all." It's like a beam of light that lands nowhere and so isn't reflected by any surface. It can't be detected by others, but that doesn't mean it isn't there.

13. You say that the Buddha put aside the questions, "What am I?" "Am I?" and "Am I not?" But couldn't you draw the logical conclusion from the statement, "All phenomena are not-self" that there is no self?

What purpose would that serve? You'd end up with a theory to adhere to and to debate, one that wouldn't induce you to let go of it. Unlike the teaching, "All phenomena are not-self," the view "There is no self" doesn't tell you to let go of it. Instead of being a tool to put an end to clinging, it becomes one more thing to cling to.

The Buddha classified his teachings into two sorts: those that should have inferences drawn from them, and those that shouldn't. For the purpose of putting an end to suffering, teachings of the second sort are just right as they are. And it's in this second sort that the perception of not-self falls: Think of the case of the monk who inferred that there's no self to act or to experience the results of actions. If you try to draw logical conclusions from teachings of this second sort, the Buddha said that you're slandering him. This is especially true if you use these teachings to answer questions he refused to answer.

14. But didn't the Buddha denounce people who refused to answer questions, calling them "eel-wrigglers"?

Eel-wrigglers were people who wouldn't answer the questions that the Buddha said every legitimate teacher should answer: What's skillful?

What's not skillful?

He himself refused to answer many other questions, but in each case he would explain why: Any attempt to answer the question would be unskillful—either irrelevant to putting an end to suffering or an actual obstacle. If you answer the question of whether or not you exist, you end up with the view “I have a self” or with the view “I have no self.” Either view, he said, was “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, you're not freed from suffering and stress.

15. What about people who say that they've had experiences in their meditation that prove that there is no self?

The Buddha wasn't among them. And it's hard to imagine what kind of experience, in meditation or out, could legitimately prove an assertion like that. Meditation is good for helping you see that when you do a certain action, you get certain results. For instance, it can prove that when you truly stop assuming a self, you experience happiness. But it can't prove either that there is a self or there is no self.

What often happens in cases like this is that meditators see the aggregates they identify as “self” falling away. For instance, if they identify with their internal conversations, there are states of concentration where those conversations fall away. If they identify with their consciousness, there are states where consciousness falls away. Yet even to see this happening doesn't prove there's no self. All it proves is that those aggregates can't be their self. But if they've been taught that seeing the “truth” of no self is an important spiritual milestone, they're likely to interpret their experiences in line with that view. What they've done, though, is to drop one object of clinging only to latch on to another. They fall into the thicket and fetter of views that the Buddha warned against.

16. I thought not-self was a characteristic of all existence, on a par with inconstancy and stress. How can it be just a strategy?

The Buddha never described inconstancy, stress, and not-self as characteristics. He called them perceptions. He also said that perceptions are insubstantial, like mirages. At best, they can give a partial sketch of the

reality they represent. This means that, to end suffering, you try to use for skillful purposes whatever truths they contain, as strategies to help you arrive at the reality of awakening. Then you have to put them aside, because even their truth can't contain that reality.

All the Buddha's teachings are strategies. As he said, to gain any stage of awakening, you have to develop the factors of the path—including mindfulness, concentration, and discernment—and then escape from them through dispassion. That's so that the perceptions and thought fabrications going into those path factors don't hold you back.

He compared the path to a raft. You're at the bank of a river. The side you're standing on is dangerous; the other side is safe, but there's no bridge or boat to take you across. You make a raft from twigs and branches on this side of the river, and hold on to it as you swim to the other side. Once you've reached safety, you can let go of the raft. You don't have to carry it around on your head.

As the Buddha states explicitly, this side of the river stands for self-identity. The other side stands for nibbāna. What's implicit in the image is that you have to construct the path out of things you identify with: skillful versions of all the aggregates, including perceptions of self and not-self. You cling to them strategically as you cross the river. Then you can let all strategies go.

As for how you continue on your way after reaching safety, the Canon says simply that you still use the concepts of "I" and "me" without clinging to "I am" or "I am this." How you would manage to do that, it doesn't explain. But the image of the raft strongly suggests that when you're not weighed down with thoughts of self and not-self, you've been relieved of a burden. You're free.

Readings

Some different doctrines about the self in the time of the Buddha

"To what extent, Ānanda, does one define when defining a self? Either defining a self possessed of form & finite, one defines that 'My self is possessed of form & finite.' Or, defining a self possessed of form & infinite, one defines that 'My self is possessed of form & infinite.' Or, defining a self formless & finite, one defines that 'My self is formless & finite.' Or, defining a self formless & infinite, one defines that 'My self is formless & infinite.'

"Now, the one who, when defining a self, defines it as possessed of form & finite, either defines it as possessed of form & finite in the present, or of such a nature that it will (naturally) become possessed of form & finite [in the future/after death/when falling asleep], or the thought occurs to him that 'Although it's not yet that way, I will convert it into being that way.' This being the case, it is proper to say that speculation about a self possessed of form & finite obsesses him.

"The one who, when defining a self, defines it as possessed of form & infinite, either defines it as possessed of form & infinite in the present, or of such a nature that it will (naturally) become possessed of form & infinite, or the thought occurs to him that 'Although it's not yet that way, I will convert it into being that way.' This being the case, it is proper to say that speculation about a self possessed of form & infinite obsesses him.

"The one who, when defining a self, defines it as formless & finite, either defines it as formless & finite in the present, or of such a nature that it will (naturally) become formless & finite, or the thought occurs to him that 'Although it's not yet that way, I will convert it into being that way.' This being the case, it is proper to say that speculation about a self formless & finite obsesses him.

"The one who, when defining a self, defines it as formless & infinite, either defines it as formless & infinite in the present, or of such a nature that it will (naturally) become formless & infinite [in the future/after death], or the thought occurs to him that 'Although it's not yet that way, I will convert it into being that way.' This being the case, it is proper to say that speculation about a self formless & infinite obsesses him." — [DN 15](#)

"There are some contemplatives & brahmans who are adherents of eternalism, who proclaim an eternal self & cosmos on four grounds....

[One example:] "There is the case where a certain contemplative or brahman—through ardency, through exertion, through commitment, through heedfulness, through right attention—touches an awareness-concentration such that in his concentrated mind—purified, bright, unblemished, rid of defilement—he remembers many past lives, i.e., one birth, two... five, ten... fifty, a hundred, a thousand, a hundred thousand, many hundreds, many thousands, many hundred thousands: 'There I had such a name, belonged to such a clan, had such an appearance. Such was my food, such my experience of pleasure & pain, such the end of my life. Passing away from that state, I re-arose there. There too I had such a name, belonged to such a clan, had such an appearance. Such was my food, such my experience of pleasure & pain, such the end of my life. Passing away from that state, I re-arose here.' Thus he recollects his manifold past lives in their modes & details.

"He says: 'The self & the cosmos are eternal, barren, stable as a mountain-peak, standing firm like a pillar. And although beings transmigrate, wander on, die, & reappear, there still is that which is for eternity.'" — [DN 1](#)

"There are, monks, some contemplatives & brahmans who are annihilationists, who proclaim the annihilation, destruction, & non-becoming of an existing being [*sant satta*] on seven grounds. ...

[One example:] "There is the case where a certain contemplative or brahman is of this opinion, this view: 'When the self that is possessed

of form, made of the four great elements [earth, wind, water, fire], engendered by mother & father, is—with the breakup of the body—annihilated, destroyed, & does not exist after death, it's to this extent that the self is completely exterminated.' This is how some proclaim the annihilation, destruction, & non-becoming of an existing being."
— [DN 1](#)

Assuming a self

Ven. Sāriputta said: "Now, how is one afflicted in body & afflicted in mind?

"There is the case where an uninstructed, run-of-the-mill person—who has no regard for noble ones, is not well-versed or disciplined in their Dhamma; who has no regard for people of integrity, is not well-versed or disciplined in their Dhamma—assumes form to be the self, or the self as possessing form, or form as in the self, or the self as in form. He is seized with the idea that 'I am form' or 'Form is mine.' As he is seized with these ideas, that form changes & alters. From the change & alteration in his form, there arise in him sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair.

"He assumes feeling to be the self, or the self as possessing feeling, or feeling as in the self, or the self as in feeling. He is seized with the idea that 'I am feeling' or 'Feeling is mine.' As he is seized with these ideas, that feeling changes & alters. From the change & alteration in the feeling, there arise in him sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair.

"He assumes perception to be the self, or the self as possessing perception, or perception as in the self, or the self as in perception. He is seized with the idea that 'I am perception' or 'Perception is mine.' As he is seized with these ideas, that perception changes & alters. From the change & alteration in the perception, there arise in him sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair.

"He assumes fabrications to be the self, or the self as possessing fabrications, or fabrications as in the self, or the self as in fabrications. He is seized with the idea that 'I am fabrications' or 'Fabrications are mine.' As he is seized with these ideas, those fabrications change &

alter. From the change & alteration in the fabrications, there arise in him sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair.

"He assumes consciousness to be the self, or the self as possessing consciousness, or consciousness as in the self, or the self as in consciousness. He is seized with the idea that 'I am consciousness' or 'Consciousness is mine.' As he is seized with these ideas, that consciousness changes & alters. From the change & alteration in the consciousness, there arise in him sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair.

"This is how one is afflicted in body and afflicted in mind." — [SN 22:1](#)

"There is the case where an uninstructed, run-of-the-mill person—who has no regard for noble ones, is not well-versed or disciplined in their Dhamma; who has no regard for people of integrity, is not well-versed or disciplined in their Dhamma—assumes form to be the self. That assumption is a fabrication. Now, what is the cause, what is the origination, what is the birth, what is the coming-into-existence of that fabrication? To an uninstructed, run-of-the-mill person, touched by that which is felt born of contact with ignorance, craving arises. That fabrication is born of that. And that fabrication is inconstant, fabricated, dependently co-arisen. That craving... That feeling... That contact... That ignorance is inconstant, fabricated, dependently co-arisen....

"Or he doesn't assume form to be the self, but he assumes the self as possessing form... form as in the self... self as in form... or feeling to be the self... the self as possessing feeling... feeling as in the self... self as in feeling... or perception to be the self... the self as possessing perception... perception as in the self... self as in perception... or fabrications to be the self... the self as possessing fabrications... fabrications as in the self... self as in fabrications... or consciousness to be the self... the self as possessing consciousness... consciousness as in the self... self as in consciousness....

"Or he doesn't assume form to be the self... but he may have a view such as this: 'This self is the same as the cosmos. This I will be after death, constant, permanent, eternal, not subject to change.' This eternalist view is a fabrication.... Or... he may have a view such as

this: 'I would not be, neither would there be what is mine. I will not be, neither will there be what is mine.' This annihilationist view is a fabrication.... Or... he may be doubtful & uncertain, having come to no conclusion with regard to the true Dhamma. That doubt, uncertainty, & coming-to-no-conclusion is a fabrication.

"What is the cause, what is the origination, what is the birth, what is the coming-into-existence of that fabrication? To an uninstructed, run-of-the-mill person, touched by what is felt born of contact with ignorance, craving arises. That fabrication is born of that. And that fabrication is inconstant, fabricated, dependently co-arisen. That craving... That feeling... That contact... That ignorance is inconstant, fabricated, dependently co-arisen." — [SN 22:81](#)

Questions to avoid

"This is how one attends inappropriately: 'Was I in the past? Was I not in the past? What was I in the past? How was I in the past? Having been what, what was I in the past? Shall I be in the future? Shall I not be in the future? What shall I be in the future? How shall I be in the future? Having been what, what shall I be in the future?' Or else he is inwardly perplexed about the immediate present: 'Am I? Am I not? What am I? How am I? Where has this being come from? Where is it bound?'

"As he attends inappropriately in this way, one of six kinds of view arises in him: The view *I have a self* arises in him as true & established, or the view *I have no self* ... or the view *It is precisely by means of self that I perceive self* ... or the view *It is precisely by means of self that I perceive not-self* ... or the view *It is precisely by means of not-self that I perceive self* arises in him as true & established, or else he has a view like this: *This very self of mine—the knower that is sensitive here & there to the ripening of good & bad actions—is the self of mine that is constant, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change, and will endure as long as eternity.* This is called 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, & death, from sorrow,

lamentation, pain, distress, & despair. He is not freed, I tell you, from suffering & stress.

“The well-instructed disciple of the noble ones—who has regard for noble ones, is well-versed & disciplined in their Dhamma; who has regard for people of integrity, is well-versed & disciplined in their Dhamma—discerns what ideas are fit for attention and what ideas are unfit for attention. This being so, he doesn’t attend to ideas unfit for attention and attends (instead) to ideas fit for attention....

“And what are the ideas fit for attention that he does attend to? Whatever ideas such that, when he attends to them, the unarisen effluent of sensuality doesn’t arise in him, and the arisen effluent of sensuality is abandoned; the unarisen effluent of becoming doesn’t arise in him, and the arisen effluent of becoming is abandoned; the unarisen effluent of ignorance doesn’t arise in him, and the arisen effluent of ignorance is abandoned. These are the ideas fit for attention that he does attend to. Through his not attending to ideas unfit for attention and through his attending to ideas fit for attention, unarisen effluents do not arise in him, and arisen effluents are abandoned.

“He attends appropriately, *This is stress ... This is the origination of stress ... This is the cessation of stress ... This is the way leading to the cessation of stress.* As he attends appropriately in this way, three fetters are abandoned in him: self-identification view, doubt, and grasping at habits & practices.” — [MN 2](#)

“Monks, you would do well to cling to that clinging to a doctrine of self, clinging to which there would not arise sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, & despair. But do you see a clinging to a doctrine of self, clinging to which there would not arise sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, & despair?”

“No, lord.”

“Very good, monks. I, too, do not envision a clinging to a doctrine of self, clinging to which there would not arise sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, & despair.” — [MN 22](#)

The four noble truths & their duties

"Both formerly & now, it's only stress that I describe, and the cessation of stress." — [SN 22:86](#)

"Now this, monks, is the noble truth of stress: Birth is stressful, aging is stressful, death is stressful; sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair are stressful; association with the unbeloved is stressful, separation from the loved is stressful, not getting what is wanted is stressful. In short, the five clinging-aggregates are stressful.

"And this, monks, is the noble truth of the origination of stress: the craving that makes for further becoming—accompanied by passion & delight, relishing now here & now there—i.e., craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, craving for non-becoming.

"And this, monks, is the noble truth of the cessation of stress: the remainderless fading & cessation, renunciation, relinquishment, release, & letting go of that very craving.

"And this, monks, is the noble truth of the way of practice leading to the cessation of stress: precisely this noble eightfold path—right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.

"Vision arose, insight arose, discernment arose, knowledge arose, illumination arose within me with regard to things never heard before: ... 'This noble truth of stress is to be comprehended' ... 'This noble truth of the origination of stress is to be abandoned' ... 'This noble truth of the cessation of stress is to be realized' ... 'This noble truth of the way of practice leading to the cessation of stress is to be developed.'" — [SN 56:11](#)

A strategic sense of self as agent

Your own self is
your own mainstay,
for who else could your mainstay be?
With you yourself well-trained
you obtain the mainstay
hard to obtain. — [Dhp 160](#)

... I have taught you this path
having known
—for your knowing—
the extraction of arrows.
It's for you to strive
ardently.
Tathāgatas simply
point out the way.... — [Dhp 275–276](#)

Ven. Ānanda: “‘This body comes into being through conceit. And yet it is by relying on conceit that conceit is to be abandoned.’ Thus it was said. And in reference to what was it said? 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 and discernment-release, having directly known and realized them for himself right in the here-&-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 and discernment-release, having directly known and realized them for himself right in the here-&-now. Then why not me?’ Then he eventually abandons conceit, having relied on conceit. ‘This body comes into being through conceit. And yet it is by relying on conceit that conceit is to be abandoned.’ Thus it was said, and in reference to this was it said.”
— [AN 4:159](#)

A strategic sense of self as consumer

“And what 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 is not for the sake of alms food, 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, and death; by sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses, and 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 and not lax; my mindfulness established and not confused; my body calm and not aroused; my mind centered and 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](#)

“Monks, whatever’s not yours: Let go of it. Your letting go of it will be for your long-term happiness & benefit. ...

“Suppose a person were to gather or burn or do as he likes with the grass, twigs, branches, & leaves here in Jeta’s Grove. Would the thought occur to you, ‘It’s us that this person is gathering, burning, or doing with as he likes’?”

“No, lord. Why is that? Because those things are not our self nor do they pertain to our self.”

“In the same way, monks, the eye isn’t yours: Let go of it. Your letting go of it will be for your long-term happiness & benefit... The ear... The nose... The tongue... The body... The intellect’s not yours: Let go of it. Your letting go of it will be for your long-term happiness & benefit... Whatever arises in dependence on intellect-contact—experienced either as pleasure, as pain, or as neither-pleasure-nor-pain—that too isn’t yours: Let go of it. Your letting go of it will be for your long-term happiness & benefit.” — [SN 35:101](#)

A strategic sense of self as 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, 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 are doing a mental action, 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.

“Having done a mental action, 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](#)

“And how is a monk one who knows self? There is the case where a monk knows himself: ‘This is how far I have come in conviction,

virtue, learning, generosity, discernment, ingenuity.” — [AN 7:64](#)

The Blessed One said: “Even if a monk is not skilled in the ways of the minds of others [not skilled in reading the minds of others], he should train himself: ‘I will be skilled in reading my own mind.’

“And how is a monk skilled in reading his own mind? Imagine a young woman—or man—youthful, fond of adornment, examining the image of her own face in a bright, clean mirror or bowl of clear water: If she saw any dirt or blemish there, she would try to remove it. If she saw no dirt or blemish there, she would be pleased, her resolves fulfilled: ‘How fortunate I am! How clean I am!’ In the same way, a monk’s self-examination is very productive in terms of skillful qualities (if he conducts it in this way): ‘Do I usually remain covetous or not? With thoughts of ill will or not? Overcome by sloth & drowsiness or not? Restless or not? Uncertain or gone beyond uncertainty? Angry or not? With soiled thoughts or unsoiled thoughts? With my body aroused or unaroused? Lazy or with persistence aroused? Unconcentrated or concentrated?’

“If, on examination, a monk knows, ‘I usually remain covetous, with thoughts of ill will, overcome by sloth & drowsiness, restless, uncertain, angry, with soiled thoughts, with my body aroused, lazy, or unconcentrated,’ then he should put forth extra desire, effort, diligence, endeavor, relentlessness, mindfulness, & alertness for the abandoning of those very same evil, unskillful qualities. Just as when a person whose turban or head was on fire would put forth extra desire, effort, diligence, endeavor, relentlessness, mindfulness, & alertness to put out the fire on his turban or head; in the same way, the monk should put forth extra desire, effort, diligence, endeavor, relentlessness, mindfulness, & alertness for the abandoning of those very same evil, unskillful qualities.

“But if, on examination, a monk knows, ‘I usually remain uncovetous, without thoughts of ill will, free of sloth & drowsiness, not restless, gone beyond uncertainty, not angry, with unsoiled thoughts, with my body unaroused, with persistence aroused, & concentrated,’ then his duty is to make an effort in maintaining those very same skillful

qualities to a higher degree for the ending of the effluents.” — [AN 10:51](#)

Listening to the Dhamma

“Endowed with five qualities when listening to the True Dhamma, one is capable of alighting on the orderliness, on the rightness of skillful qualities. Which five?

“One doesn’t hold the talk in contempt.

“One doesn’t hold the speaker in contempt.

“One doesn’t hold oneself in contempt.

“One listens to the Dhamma with an unscattered mind, a mind gathered into one [*ek’agga-citto*].

“One attends appropriately.

“Endowed with these five qualities when listening to the True Dhamma, one is capable of alighting on the orderliness, on the rightness of skillful qualities.” — [AN 5:151](#)

Wrong & right use of the not-self teaching

A certain monk: “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: “Monk, one sees any form whatsoever—past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near—every form, as it has come to be with right discernment: ‘This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am.’

“One sees any feeling whatsoever... any perception whatsoever... any fabrications whatsoever...

“One sees any consciousness whatsoever—past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near—every consciousness—as it has come to be with right discernment: ‘This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am.’”

"Monk, knowing in this way, seeing in this 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."

Now, at that moment this line of thinking appeared in the awareness of a certain monk: "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?"

Then the Blessed One, realizing with his awareness the line of thinking in that monk's awareness, addressed the monks: "It's possible that a foolish 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?' Now, monks, haven't I trained you in counter-questioning with regard to this & that topic here & there? What do you think? Is form constant or inconstant?"—"Inconstant, lord."—"And is that which is inconstant easeful or stressful?"—"Stressful, lord."—"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, lord."

"... Is feeling constant or inconstant?"—"Inconstant, lord." ...

"... Is perception constant or inconstant?"—"Inconstant, lord." ...

"... Are fabrications constant or inconstant?"—"Inconstant, lord." ...

"What do you think, monks? Is consciousness constant or inconstant?"—"Inconstant, lord."—"And is that which is inconstant easeful or stressful?"—"Stressful, lord."—"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, lord."

"Thus, monks, any form whatsoever that is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: Every form is to be seen as it has come to be with right

discernment as: 'This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am.'

"Any feeling whatsoever...

"Any perception whatsoever...

"Any fabrications whatsoever...

"Any consciousness whatsoever that is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: Every consciousness is to be seen as it has come to be with right discernment as: 'This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am.'

"Seeing thus, the instructed disciple of the noble ones grows disenchanted with form, disenchanted with feeling, disenchanted with perception, disenchanted with fabrications, disenchanted with consciousness. Disenchanted, he becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion, he is released. With release, there is the knowledge, 'Released.' He discerns that 'Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.'"

That is what the Blessed One said. Gratified, the monks delighted in the Blessed One's words. And while this explanation was being given, the minds of sixty-some monks, through lack of clinging/sustenance, were released from effluents. — [MN 109](#)

Results

"Suppose that an archer or archer's apprentice were to practice on a straw man or mound of clay, so that after a while he would become able to shoot long distances, to fire accurate shots in rapid succession, and to pierce great masses. In the same way, there is the case where a monk... enters & remains in the first jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought & evaluation. He regards whatever phenomena there that are connected with form, feeling, perception, fabrications, & consciousness, as inconstant, stressful, a disease, a cancer, an arrow, painful, an affliction, alien, a disintegration, an emptiness, not-self. He turns his mind away from those phenomena and, having done so, inclines his mind to the property of deathlessness: 'This is peace, this is exquisite—the

pacification of all fabrications; the relinquishment of all acquisitions; the ending of craving; dispassion; cessation; unbinding [*nibbāna*].’

“Staying right there, he reaches the ending of the effluents. Or, if not, then—through this very dhamma-passion, this dhamma-delight, and from the total ending of the five lower fetters [self-identification views, grasping at habits & practices, doubt, sensual passion, & irritation]—he is due to arise spontaneously (in the Pure Abodes), there to be totally unbound, never again to return from that world.

“I tell you, the ending of the effluents depends on the first *jhāna*.’ Thus it was said, and in reference to this was it said.

“[Similarly with the second, third, & fourth *jhāna*; the dimension of the infinitude of space, the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness, & the dimension of nothingness.]” — [AN 9:36](#)

A non-returner still has a lingering sense of “I am”

Ven. Khemaka: “With regard to these five clinging-aggregates, there is nothing I assume to be self or belonging to self, and yet I am not an arahant [fully awakened one]. With regard to these five clinging-aggregates, ‘I am’ is found, although I don’t assume that ‘I am this.’ ...

“Just like a cloth, dirty & stained: Its owners give it over to a washerman, who scrubs it with salt earth or lye or cow-dung and then rinses it in clear water. Now, even though the cloth is clean & spotless, it still has a lingering residual scent of salt earth or lye or cow-dung. The washerman gives it to the owners, the owners put it away in a scent-infused wicker hamper, and its lingering residual scent of salt earth, lye, or cow-dung is fully obliterated.

“In the same way, friends, even though a noble disciple has abandoned the five lower fetters, he still has with regard to the five clinging-aggregates a lingering residual ‘I am’ conceit, an ‘I am’ desire, an ‘I am’ obsession. But at a later time he keeps focusing on arising & passing away with regard to the five clinging-aggregates: ‘Such is form, such its origination, such its disappearance. Such is feeling.... Such is perception.... Such are fabrications.... Such is consciousness, such its origination, such its disappearance.’ As he keeps focusing on the arising & passing away of these five clinging-aggregates, the

lingering residual ‘I am’ conceit, ‘I am’ desire, ‘I am’ obsession is fully obliterated.”

When this was said, the elder monks said to Ven. Khemaka, “We didn’t cross-examine Ven. Khemaka with the purpose of troubling him, just that (we thought) Ven. Khemaka is capable of declaring the Blessed One’s message, teaching it, describing it, setting it forth, revealing it, explaining it, making it plain—just as he has in fact declared it, taught it, described it, set it forth, revealed it, explained it, made it plain.”

That is what Ven. Khemaka said. Gratified, the elder monks delighted in his words. And while this explanation was being given, the minds of sixty-some monks, through lack of clinging/sustenance, were released from effluents—as was Ven. Khemaka’s. — [SN 22:89](#)

All phenomena are unworthy of adherence

When you see with discernment,
‘*All fabrications are inconstant*’—
you grow disenchanted with stress.

This is the path
to purity.

When you see with discernment,
‘*All fabrications are stressful*’—
you grow disenchanted with stress.

This is the path
to purity.

When you see with discernment,
‘*All phenomena [dhamma] are not-self*’—
you grow disenchanted with stress.

This is the path
to purity. — [Dhp 277–279](#)

“All phenomena [*dhamma*] are unworthy of adherence.” — [AN 7:58](#)

Unbinding & the realization of unbinding

“Among whatever dhammas there may be, fabricated or unfabricated, 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—is considered supreme. Those who have confidence in the dhamma of dispassion have confidence in what is supreme; and for those with confidence in the supreme, supreme is the result.” — [AN 4:34](#)

“All phenomena [*dhamma*] have unbinding as their final end.” — [AN 10:58](#)

“Whatever is the ending of passion, the ending of aversion, the ending of delusion: This is called—

the unfabricated... the unbent...
the effluent-less... the true... the beyond...
the subtle... the very-hard-to-see...
the ageless... permanence... the undecaying...
the surface-less... non-objectification...
peace... the deathless...
the exquisite... bliss... rest...
the ending of craving...
the amazing... the astounding...
the secure... security...
unbinding...
the unafflicted... dispassion... purity...
release... the attachment-free...
the island... shelter... harbor... refuge...
the ultimate. — [SN 43:1-44](#)

Upasīva:

One who has reached the end:
Does he not exist,

or is he for eternity
free from dis-ease?
Please, sage, declare this to me
as this phenomenon has been known by you.

The Buddha:

One who has reached the end
has no criterion
by which anyone would say that—
for him it doesn't exist.
When all phenomena are done away with,
all means of speaking
are done away with as well. — [Sn 5:6](#)

The all, which equals the world of the six senses, is empty of self

Then Ven. Ānanda went to the Blessed One and on arrival, having bowed down to him, sat to one side. As he was sitting there he said to the Blessed One, "It is said that 'the world is empty, the world is empty,' lord. In what respect is it said that 'the world is empty?'"

"Insofar as it is empty of a self or of anything pertaining to a self: Thus it is said, Ānanda, that 'the world is empty.' And what is empty of a self or of anything pertaining to a self? The eye is empty of a self or of anything pertaining to a self. Forms.... Eye-consciousness.... Eye-contact is empty of a self or of anything pertaining to a self. And whatever there is that arises in dependence on eye-contact—experienced as pleasure, pain or neither-pleasure-nor-pain—that too is empty of a self or of anything pertaining to a self.

"The ear is empty....

"The nose is empty....

"The tongue is empty....

"The body is empty....

"The intellect is empty of a self or of anything pertaining to a self. Ideas.... Intellect-consciousness.... Intellect-contact is empty of a self or of anything pertaining to a self. And whatever there is that arises in dependence on intellect-contact—experienced as pleasure, pain or

neither-pleasure-nor-pain—that too is empty of a self or of anything pertaining to a self.

“Thus it is said that ‘the world is empty.’” — [SN 35:85](#)

The Blessed One said, “Whether or not there is the arising of Tathāgatas, this property stands—this dhamma-steadfastness, this dhamma-orderliness: ‘All fabrications are inconstant.’

“The Tathāgata directly awakens to that, breaks through to that. Directly awakening & breaking through to that, he declares it, teaches it, describes it, sets it forth. He reveals it, explains it, makes it plain: ‘All fabrications [*saṅkhāra*] are inconstant.’

“Whether or not there is the arising of Tathāgatas, this property stands—this dhamma-steadfastness, this dhamma-orderliness: ‘All fabrications are stressful.’

“The Tathāgata directly awakens to that, breaks through to that. Directly awakening & breaking through to that, he declares it, teaches it, describes it, sets it forth. He reveals it, explains it, makes it plain: ‘All fabrications are stressful.’

“Whether or not there is the arising of Tathāgatas, this property stands—this dhamma-steadfastness, this dhamma-orderliness: ‘All phenomena [*dhamma*] are not-self.’

“The Tathāgata directly awakens to that, breaks through to that. Directly awakening & breaking through to that, he declares it, teaches it, describes it, sets it forth. He reveals it, explains it, makes it plain: ‘All phenomena are not-self.’” — [AN 3:137](#)

Nothing beyond the all can be described

“Monks, I will teach you the all. Listen & pay close attention. I will speak.”

“As you say, lord,” the monks responded to the Blessed One.

The Blessed One said, “What is the all? Simply the eye & forms, ear & sounds, nose & aromas, tongue & flavors, body & tactile sensations, intellect & ideas. This, monks, is called the all. Anyone who would say, ‘Repudiating this all, I will describe another,’ if

questioned on what exactly might be the grounds for his statement, would be unable to explain and, furthermore, would be put to grief. Why? Because it lies beyond range.” — [SN 35:23](#)

Ven. Mahā Koṭṭhita: “Being asked if, with the remainderless fading & cessation of the six contact-media, there is anything else, you say, ‘Don’t say that, my friend.’ Being asked if... there is not anything else... there both is & is not anything else... there neither is nor is not anything else, you say, ‘Don’t say that, my friend.’ Now, how is the meaning of your words to be understood?”

Ven. Sāriputta: “The statement, ‘With the remainderless fading & cessation of the six contact-media, is it the case that there is anything else?’ objectifies the unobjectified. The statement, ‘... is it the case that there is not anything else... is it the case that there both is & is not anything else... is it the case that there neither is nor is not anything else?’ objectifies the unobjectified. However far the six contact-media go, that is how far objectification goes. However far objectification goes, that is how far the six contact-media go. With the remainderless fading & cessation of the six contact-media, there comes to be the cessation of objectification, the stilling of objectification.” — [AN 4:173](#)

But what lies beyond the all can be experienced

“Therefore, monks, that dimension should be experienced where the eye [vision] ceases and the perception of form fades. That dimension should be experienced where the ear ceases and the perception of sound fades. That dimension should be experienced where the nose ceases and the perception of aroma fades. That dimension should be experienced where the tongue ceases and the perception of flavor fades. That dimension should be experienced where the body ceases and the perception of tactile sensation fades. That dimension should be experienced where the intellect ceases and the perception of idea fades. That dimension should be experienced.” — [SN 35:117](#)

The Buddha: “Having directly known the all as the all, and having directly known the extent of what has not been experienced through the allness of the all, I wasn’t the all, I wasn’t in the all, I wasn’t coming forth from the all, I wasn’t “The all is mine.” I didn’t affirm the all. Thus, brahmā, I am not your mere equal in terms of direct knowing, so how could I be inferior? I am actually superior to you.’

Baka Brahmā: “If, good sir, you have directly known the extent of what has not been experienced through the allness of the all, may it not turn out to be actually vain and void for you.’

The Buddha:

“Consciousness without surface, without end,
luminous all around,

has not been experienced through the earthness of earth... the liquidity of liquid... the fieriness of fire... the windiness of wind... the allness of the all.” — [MN 49](#)

Consciousness without surface, without end,
luminous all around:

Here water, earth, fire, & wind have no footing.

Here long & short,

coarse & fine,

fair & foul,

here name & form

are brought to a stop without trace.

With the cessation

of [the aggregate of] consciousness,

each is here brought to a stop. — [DN 11](#)

“Just as if there were a roofed house or a roofed hall having windows on the north, the south, or the east. When the sun rises, and a ray has entered by way of the window, where does it land?”

“On the western wall, lord.”

“And if there is no western wall, where does it land?”

“On the ground, lord.”

“And if there is no ground, where does it land?”

“On the water, lord.”

“And if there is no water, where does it land?”

“It doesn’t land, lord.”

“In the same way, where there is no passion for the nutriment of physical food... contact... intellectual intention... consciousness, where there is no delight, no craving, then consciousness does not land there or increase. Where consciousness does not land or increase, there is no alighting of name-&-form. Where there is no alighting of name-&-form, there is no growth of fabrications. Where there is no growth of fabrications, there is no production of renewed becoming in the future. Where there is no production of renewed becoming in the future, there is no future birth, aging, & death. That, I tell you, has no sorrow, affliction, or despair.” — [SN 12:64](#)

Principles for interpreting the teachings

“Monks, these two slander the Tathāgata [the Buddha]. Which two? He who explains a discourse whose meaning needs to be inferred 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 inferred. These are the two who slander the Tathāgata.” — [AN 2:24](#)

“There are these four ways of answering questions. Which four? There are questions that should be answered categorically [straightforwardly yes, no, this, that, across the board]. There are questions that should be answered with an analytical answer [defining or redefining the terms]. There are questions that should be answered with a counter-question. There are questions that should be put aside. These are the four ways of answering questions.” — [AN 4:42](#)

Now, at that time a baby boy was lying face-up on Prince Abhaya’s lap. So the Blessed One said to the prince, “What do you think, prince? If this young boy, through your own negligence or that of the

nurse, were to take a stick or a piece of gravel into its mouth, what would you do?"

"I would take it out, lord. If I couldn't get it out right away, then holding its head in my left hand and crooking a finger of my right, I would take it out, even if it meant drawing blood. Why is that? Because I have sympathy for the young boy."

"In the same way, prince:

[1] "In the case of words that the Tathāgata knows to be unfactual, untrue, unbeneficial [or: not connected with the goal], unendearing & disagreeable to others, he doesn't say them.

[2] "In the case of words that the Tathāgata knows to be factual, true, unbeneficial, unendearing & disagreeable to others, he doesn't say them.

[3] "In the case of words that the Tathāgata knows to be factual, true, beneficial, but unendearing & disagreeable to others, he has a sense of the proper time for saying them.

[4] "In the case of words that the Tathāgata knows to be unfactual, untrue, unbeneficial, but endearing & agreeable to others, he doesn't say them.

[5] "In the case of words that the Tathāgata knows to be factual, true, unbeneficial, but endearing & agreeable to others, he doesn't say them.

[6] "In the case of words that the Tathāgata knows to be factual, true, beneficial, and endearing & agreeable to others, he has a sense of the proper time for saying them. Why is that? Because the Tathāgata has sympathy for living beings." — [MN 58](#)

Eel-wriggling

"There is the case where a certain contemplative or brahman doesn't discern as it has come to be that 'This is skillful' or that 'This is unskillful.' The thought occurs to him: 'I don't discern as it has come to be that "This is skillful" or that "This is unskillful." If I—not discerning as it has come to be that "This is skillful," not discerning as it has come to be that "This is unskillful"—were to declare that "This

is skillful" or that "This is unskillful," that would be a falsehood on my part. Whatever would be a falsehood on my part would be a distress for me. Whatever would be a distress for me would be an obstacle for me.' So, out of fear of falsehood, a loathing for falsehood, he doesn't declare that 'This is skillful' or that 'This is unskillful.' Being asked questions regarding this or that, he resorts to verbal contortions, to eel-wriggling: 'I don't think so. I don't think in that way. I don't think otherwise. I don't think not. I don't think not not.'" — [DN1](#)

Two questions put aside

Then Vacchagotta the wanderer went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, exchanged courteous greetings with him. After an exchange of friendly greetings & courtesies, he sat to one side. As he was sitting there he asked the Blessed One: "Now then, Master Gotama, is there a self?"

When this was said, the Blessed One was silent.

"Then is there no self?"

A second time, the Blessed One was silent.

Then Vacchagotta the wanderer got up from his seat and left.

Then, not long after Vacchagotta the wanderer had left, Ven. Ānanda said to the Blessed One, "Why, lord, did the Blessed One not answer when asked a question by Vacchagotta the wanderer?"

"Ānanda, if I—being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer if there is a self—were to answer that there is a self, that would be conforming with those contemplatives & brahmans who are exponents of eternalism [the view that there is an eternal, unchanging soul]. If I—being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer if there is no self—were to answer that there is no self, that would be conforming with those contemplatives & brahmans who are exponents of annihilationism [the view that death is the annihilation of one's existence]. If I—being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer if there is a self—were to answer that there is a self, would that be in keeping with the arising of knowledge that all phenomena are not-self?"

"No, lord."

“And if I—being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer if there is no self—were to answer that there is no self, the bewildered Vacchagotta would become even more bewildered: ‘Does the self I used to have now not exist?’” — [SN 44:10](#)

The raft

“Monks, there are these five faculties. Which five? The faculty of conviction, the faculty of persistence, the faculty of mindfulness, the faculty of concentration, the faculty of discernment. When a disciple of the noble ones discerns, as they have come to be, the origination, the passing away, the allure, the drawbacks, and the escape from these five faculties, he is called a disciple of the noble ones who has attained the stream: never again destined for the lower realms, certain, headed for self-awakening.” ...

“When—having discerned, as they have come to be, the origination, the passing away, the allure, the drawbacks, and the escape from these five faculties—a monk is released from lack of clinging/sustenance, he is called an arahant whose effluents are ended, who has reached fulfillment, done the task, laid down the burden, attained the true goal, laid to waste the fetter of becoming, and who is released through right gnosis.” — [SN 48:3–4](#)

[Ven. Mahali:] “And what, lord, is the cause, what the requisite condition, for the defilement of beings? How are beings defiled with cause, with requisite condition?”

[The Buddha:] “Mahāli, if form were exclusively stressful—followed by stress, infused with stress and not infused with pleasure—beings would not be infatuated with form. But because form is also pleasurable—followed by pleasure, infused with pleasure and not infused with stress—beings are infatuated with form. Through infatuation, they are captivated. Through captivation, they are defiled. This is the cause, this the requisite condition, for the defilement of beings. And this is how beings are defiled with cause, with requisite condition.

“[Similarly with feeling, perception, fabrications, & consciousness.]”

“And what, lord, is the cause, what the requisite condition, for the purification of beings? How are beings purified with cause, with requisite condition?”

“Mahāli, if form were exclusively pleasurable—followed by pleasure, infused with pleasure and not infused with stress—beings would not be disenchanted with form. But because form is also stressful—followed by stress, infused with stress and not infused with pleasure—beings are disenchanted with form. Disenchanted, they become dispassionate. Through dispassion, they are purified. This is the cause, this the requisite condition, for the purification of beings. And this is how beings are purified with cause, with requisite condition.

“[Similarly with feeling, perception, fabrications, & consciousness.]”
— [SN 22:60](#)

“In seeing six rewards, it’s enough for a monk to establish the perception of inconstancy with regard to all fabrications without exception. Which six? ‘All fabrications will appear as unstable. My mind will not delight in any world. My mind will rise above every world. My heart will be inclined to unbinding. My fetters will go to their abandoning. I’ll be endowed with the foremost qualities of the contemplative life.’

“In seeing these six rewards, it’s enough for a monk to establish the perception of inconstancy with regard to all fabrications without exception.”

“In seeing six rewards, it’s enough for a monk to establish the perception of stress with regard to all fabrications without exception. Which six? ‘The perception of disenchantment will be established within me with regard to all fabrications, like a murderer with a drawn sword. My mind will rise above every world. I’ll become one who sees peace in unbinding. My obsessions will go to their destruction. I’ll be one who has completed his task. The Teacher will have been served with goodwill.’

“In seeing these six rewards, it’s enough for a monk to establish the perception of stress with regard to all fabrications without exception.”

“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'll be endowed with uncommon knowledge. I'll become one who rightly sees cause, along with causally-originated phenomena.'

"In seeing these six rewards, it's enough for a monk to establish the perception of not-self with regard to all phenomena without exception." — [AN 6:102-104](#)

"Now suppose that in the last month of the hot season a mirage were shimmering, and a man with good eyesight were to see it, observe it, & appropriately examine it. To him—seeing it, observing it, & appropriately examining it—it would appear empty, void, without substance: for what substance would there be in a mirage? In the same way, a monk sees, observes, & appropriately examines any perception that is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near. To him—seeing it, observing it, & appropriately examining it—it would appear empty, void, without substance: for what substance would there be in perception?" — [SN 22:95](#)

The Blessed One said: "Suppose a man were traveling along a path. He would see a great expanse of water, with the near shore dubious & risky, the further shore secure & free from risk, but with neither a ferryboat nor a bridge going from this shore to the other. The thought would occur to him, 'Here is this great expanse of water, with the near shore dubious & risky, the further shore secure & free from risk, but with neither a ferryboat nor a bridge going from this shore to the other. What if I were to gather grass, twigs, branches, & leaves and, having bound them together to make a raft, were to cross over to safety on the other shore in dependence on the raft, making an effort with my hands & feet?'

"Then the man, having gathered grass, twigs, branches, & leaves, having bound them together to make a raft, would cross over to safety on the other shore in dependence on the raft, making an effort with his hands & feet. Having crossed over to the further shore, he might think, 'How useful this raft has been to me! For it was in

dependence on this raft that, making an effort with my hands & feet, I have crossed over to safety on the further shore. Why don't I, having hoisted it on my head or carrying it on my back, go wherever I like?' What do you think, monks? Would the man, in doing that, be doing what should be done with the raft?"

"No, lord."

"And what should the man do in order to be doing what should be done with the raft? There is the case where the man, having crossed over, would think, 'How useful this raft has been to me! For it was in dependence on this raft that, making an effort with my hands & feet, I have crossed over to safety on the further shore. Why don't I, having dragged it on dry land or sinking it in the water, go wherever I like?' In doing this, he would be doing what should be done with the raft. In the same way, monks, I have taught the Dhamma compared to a raft, for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of holding on to. Understanding the Dhamma as taught compared to a raft, you should let go even of Dhammas, to say nothing of non-Dhammas." — [MN 22](#)

"The great expanse of water stands for the fourfold flood: the flood of sensuality, the flood of becoming, the flood of views, & the flood of ignorance. The near shore, dubious & risky, stands for self-identity. The further shore, secure & free from risk, stands for unbinding. The raft stands for just this noble eightfold path: right view... right concentration. Making an effort with hands & feet stands for the arousing of persistence." — [SN 35:197](#)

"Then, Sāriputta, you should train yourselves: 'There will be no I-making or my-making conceit-obsession with regard to this conscious body. There will be no I-making or my-making conceit-obsession with regard to all external themes. We will enter & remain in the awareness-release & discernment-release where there is no I-making or my-making conceit-obsession for one entering & remaining in it.' That's how you should train yourselves. When there is in a monk no I-making or my-making conceit-obsession with regard to this conscious body, no I-making or my-making conceit-

obsession with regard to all external themes, and when he enters & remains in the awareness-release & discernment-release where there is no I-making or my-making conceit-obsession for one entering & remaining in it, he is called a monk who has cut craving, has ripped off the fetter, and—from rightly breaking through conceit—has put an end to suffering & stress.” — [AN 3:33](#)

For one whose conceit is abandoned,
whose knot of conceit is dispersed,
no knots exist

at all.

He, beyond any concept, wise,
would say, “I speak”;
would say, “They speak to me.”

Skillful,
knowing harmonious gnosis
with regard to the world,
he uses expressions
just as expressions. — [SN 1:25](#)

Effluents ended,
independent of nutriment,
their pasture—emptiness
& freedom without sign:
their trail,
like that of birds through space,
can’t be traced. — [Dhp 92](#)

Glossary

Arahant: A “worthy one” or “pure one;” a person whose mind is free of defilement and thus is not destined for further rebirth. A title for the Buddha and the highest level of his noble disciples. Sanskrit form: *Arhat*.

Āsava: Effluent; fermentation. A tendency that flows out of the mind, leading to further rebirth. The Canon identifies three types: sensuality, becoming, and ignorance.

Brahmā: An inhabitant of the highest heavenly realms of form or formlessness.

Brahman: A member of the priestly caste, which claimed to be the highest caste in India, based on birth. In a specifically Buddhist usage, “brahman” can also mean a fully awakened person, conveying the point that excellence is based not on birth or race, but on qualities attained in the heart and mind.

Dhamma: (1) Event; action; (2) a phenomenon in and of itself; (3) mental quality; (4) doctrine, teaching; (5) object of the mind; (6) the realization of nibbāna. (There are passages describing nibbāna itself as the abandoning of all dhammas). When capitalized in this book, Dhamma means teaching. Sanskrit form: *Dharma*.

Dukkha: Pain, suffering, stress. Sanskrit form: *Duhkha*.

Gotama: The Buddha’s clan name.

Jhāna: Mental absorption. A state of strong concentration, devoid of sensuality or unskillful thoughts, focused on a single physical sensation or mental notion which is then expanded to fill the whole range of one’s awareness. Jhāna is synonymous with right concentration, the eighth factor in the noble eightfold path. Sanskrit form: *Dhyāna*.

Kamma: Intentional act. Sanskrit form: *Karma*.

Māra: The personification of death, temptation, and all forces, within and without, that create obstacles to release from the round of rebirth..

Nibbāna: Literally, the “unbinding” of the mind from passion, aversion, and delusion, and from the entire round of death and rebirth. As this term also denotes the extinguishing of a fire, it carries connotations of stilling, cooling, and peace. (According to the physics taught at the time of the Buddha, the property of fire exists in a latent state to a greater or lesser degree in all objects. When activated, it seizes and clings to its fuel. When extinguished, it lets go and is unbound.) Sanskrit form: *Nirvāṇa*.

Pāli: The name of the oldest extant complete Canon of the Buddha’s teachings and, by extension, of the language in which it was composed.

Saṅkhāra: Fabrication. The process by which the mind intentionally constructs its experiences (whether or not it is aware of what it is doing), and the constructed experiences that result.

Tathāgata: Literally, “one who has become authentic (*tatha-āgata*),” or “one who is really gone (*tatha-gata*),” an epithet used in ancient India for a person who has attained the highest religious goal. In the Pali Canon, this usually denotes the Buddha, although occasionally it also denotes any of his fully awakened disciples.

Abbreviations

<i>AN</i>	<i>Anguttara Nikaya</i>
<i>Dhp</i>	<i>Dhammapada</i>
<i>DN</i>	<i>Digha Nikaya</i>
<i>MN</i>	<i>Majjhima Nikaya</i>
<i>SN</i>	<i>Samyutta Nikāya</i>
<i>Sn</i>	<i>Sutta Nipata</i>

References to DN and MN are to discourse (sutta); references to Dhp, to verse. References to other texts are to section (nipāta, samyutta, or vagga) and discourse.

Further readings

available on dhammatalks.org:

["No-self or Not-self?"](#)

["Questions of Skill"](#)

["First Things First"](#)

[*Selves & Not-self*](#)

["The Wisdom of the Ego"](#)

["The Not-self Strategy"](#)

["The Limits of Description: The Not-self Strategy Revisited"](#)

["The Logic of Not-self"](#)

["Just Right as It Is"](#)

["Deep like the Ocean"](#)

["A Beam of Light that Doesn't Land"](#)

[*Skill in Questions*](#)

["The Dhamma Eye"](#)

["Things as They Can Be"](#)

["Truths with Consequences"](#)

[*The Mirror of Insight: "Two truths?"*](#)