

## *Observe Your Concentration*

*July 13, 2020*

The Vinaya tells us that after the Buddha gave his first sermon, Añña-Kondañña gained the Dhamma eye. In the days after that, the Buddha gave more Dhamma talks. And two by two, the others of the five brethren gained the Dhamma eye as well. Then, a few days later, the Buddha gave the sermon that we call the Anatta-lakkhana Sutta, the Sutta on the Not-self Characteristic. That's a name that comes only in the commentaries. In the Canon, it's called The Five, for the five brethren. Of course, at the time, it wasn't given a name at all. It was just a talk that the Buddha gave. But it's on the topic of not-self. And it was while listening to this talk that the five brethren all became arahants.

Now, the tradition is that the Dhammacakkavattana Sutta, Setting the Dhamma Wheel in Motion, was given on the full moon night in July. So it was at some point in this time of year that the Anatta-lakkhana Sutta was given.

So it's good to think about it.

The Buddha starts out with an argument for anatta that he rarely gives anywhere else: You look at each of the aggregates and you realize that they don't fall under your control. You can't have it that your form will be a certain way, or your feelings will be a certain way. Perceptions, thought fabrications, consciousness: If they were your self, he said, you could have them be just the way you wanted them to be. Now, we can have *some* control over these things, but the problem is that the control is not total.

Then the Buddha goes on to give the questionnaire that he gave many, many times after that with each of the aggregates: Is it constant or inconstant? It's inconstant. When it's inconstant, is it stressful or is it easeful? If you're looking for happiness in it, then the fact that it's changing is not easeful at all. It is stressful. And then, instead of having them come to the conclusion from that that there is no self, the Buddha said simply, "Is it worthy of saying, 'This is me, this is mine, this is myself?'" He's having us pass a value judgment on each of the aggregates, as worthy of letting go. This is the questionnaire that enabled the five brethren to become arahants.

There's a Dhamma talk that Ajaan Maha Boowa gave years back where he said that there seems to be something missing in the sutta. If you compare what the Buddha taught to the five brethren with what he said about anatta in other places, there *is* something missing, because here he's simply saying that the aggregates are all not-self. That was enough for them to gain awakening.

In other places, though, he says, *Sabbe dhamma anatta*, all dhammas are not-self. Dhammas, here, would include not only fabricated things, like the aggregates, but also unfabricated things.

There's a passage in the suttas that explains why. It talks about how you can focus on the mind in concentration—and the five brethren were in concentration. It may be one of the topics that the Buddha had talked about in the period of time between the first and the second sermon. After all, in the first sermon, he mentions the five aggregates but doesn't define them. He names the factors of the noble eightfold path but doesn't define them. So maybe those were among the topics that were covered in the interim.

There's also a passage where the Buddha explains how it is that people can gain awakening while they're listening to a Dhamma talk. He basically says that they listen to the talk, they follow it, and they develop a sense of joy. From the sense of joy, the mind becomes serene; and when the mind is serene, it becomes concentrated. So, while you're listening to the talk on the aggregates, you can look at your mind in concentration and see that the concentration is made up of those same five aggregates.

That other passage in the suttas then goes on to explain that when you see the aggregates in the concentration, you then incline the mind to the deathless. If, when you encounter the deathless, you still have some passion for it, then you won't be fully awakened. You have the experience, but there is still some clinging. So you have to let go of that as well. This is the part that's missing in the *Anattalakkhana Sutta*.

But there's another passage in Ajaan Maha Boowa that explains why. He analyzes that attachment to what seems to be deathless. Even though you have actually had an experience of the deathless, you cover it over with some very subtle, subtle levels of aggregates. So it may have been the case that the question, "Are the aggregates worthy of being called self?" was an option for people to become arahants simply because they could see those subtle levels of the aggregates still there, covering over the experience of the deathless, and they were able to cut those away as well. Then the genuine deathless appeared. In other cases, though, people would miss those subtle aggregates, which is why the Buddha would then have to add that even the deathless should be regarded as not-self, so as to remove any remaining attachment to those subtle aggregates clustered around the deathless.

Now, this may all seem very abstract, but it makes a very practical point, even when you're not anywhere near seeing the deathless. When something really still and peaceful comes up in the meditation, don't immediately brand it as being the

goal. There may still be some subtle levels of aggregates covering it up. You see this everywhere—people saying that the sense of space around the events of your mind seems to be unconditioned. The unconditioned is everywhere, we’re sometimes told. Just tap into it. But you have to look at that supposed unconditioned. Is there still any level of stress in there? You have to familiarize yourself with it, stick with it for long periods of time. If you settle on saying that something is deathless and unconditioned when it’s not, then you cut off any further progress in the path.

So, whatever comes up in your meditation, even as you’re moving from one level of concentration to another, it’s the same issue: Get the mind really still, as still as you can, and then try to maintain that stillness, both to gain the strength that comes from a concentrated mind and to test it to see exactly where this, too, is fabricated. In some cases, it’ll be like going into a very bright room after having been in the dark. The light is so bright that you can’t see anything. As far as you’re concerned, there’s nothing in the room. But after a while, your eyesight will adjust, and you begin to see: “Oh yeah, there’s furniture here. There are things here, simply I hadn’t adjusted to the light yet to see what was there.”

So the test always is: Is there a level of stress going on? One way of testing for it is to see: Is there any up and down? That’s how the ajaans have noted that if an experience has to be maintained—if there’s any stress coming up, stress going down, even if it’s subtle—the fact that you have to maintain it means that it’s fabricated. If it’s fabrication, it’s not the goal.

A question came up recently, “When the Buddha was on his quest, he was able to recognize that even in the attainments that he learned from his first teachers—the dimension of nothingness, the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception—were not the deathless. How was he able to see that these things were not the deathless? Was it because he’d become a stream-enterer in a previous lifetime when he was studying under another Buddha?” The Canon doesn’t say. The Canon simply says that he recognized that those states weren’t deathless.

But if we try to throw the reasons back to previous lifetimes, it doesn’t encourage us to look at what’s actually going on right before our eyes. That’s what the Buddha was able to do—he saw right before his eyes that this attainment was fabricated, so it couldn’t be the deathless. It couldn’t be the goal.

That’s what you want to look for: “Am I doing anything to maintain this?” Look very carefully, and get used to doing this as the mind settles down, because that’s how you move safely from the first jhana to the second jhana. You realize that to maintain the mind in the first, you have to use directed thought and evaluation. In other words, you have to talk to yourself on a very subtle level about

what's going on. But the directed thought and evaluation is not a constant drone. There'll be some comments, and then you'll watch. There'll be some comments, then you'll watch. You begin to realize that just the watching on its own is a lot more restful. Then you can ask yourself, "Can you stay there without the comments?" When you find that you can, then you can move into a deeper concentration. Then you repeat the process.

You stay here, and you begin to sense that even the rapture, which is one of the reasons you like the concentration to begin with, is becoming a bit much. And again, the rapture comes in waves, then it goes. It comes in waves, and it goes. How about focusing on the state of mind when it goes? Now, sometimes you're not able to maintain your balance that way, so you go back to where you were before. But when you find that you can maintain your balance in the new, more subtle level, you go for it. You keep this up all the time.

Settle in, then watch. Look for any subtle variations in the level of stress, and drop whatever it is that's causing the stress. This is how we progress in the meditation, by developing our powers of alertness and awareness, knowing how to ask the right questions and focusing on what's happening right now. You don't have to make any assumptions about what attainments you may have had in a previous lifetime. If you think about how they were there, you may get careless this time around. If you think that you have no attainments from a previous lifetime, you may get discouraged. Previous lifetimes are not the issue right now. What's happening right now: That's what you've got to watch.

So watch. Be still in order to see clearly, and ask the right questions in order to gain insight. This is how tranquility and insight work together to improve your concentration, to move you further along until there's no further to go. One of the reasons you'll know is because you've gotten really good at watching what's happening in the mind on really subtle levels. Your ability to observe your own mind here in real time: That's what deepens your meditation and guarantees the results.