

## *Not-self in Context*

*December 29, 2020*

The question sometimes comes up: Why did the Buddha teach *anatta*, not-self? An answer you sometimes hear is that he awoke to the fact that there is no self. But in his descriptions of the awakening, he never says that. He always says he awoke to the four noble truths.

So the answer has to be that he taught not-self because of the four noble truths, and the question to figure out is where not-self fits into those truths. It fits under the fact that he saw in the first noble truth that suffering is clinging, and there are four kinds of clinging. The deepest and most tenacious is clinging to your ideas of self. If you put an end to clinging, though, there's no suffering. You do that by putting an end to craving. This means you also have to get rid of your ideas of self. That's what not-self is for. If you can get past your ideas of self, then there's no more suffering.

But you can't just drop your ideas of self, because your sense of self is part of your strategy for finding happiness—and it's going to be part of your strategy for following the path. Just as you engage in other forms of clinging on the path, you're going to cling to a sense of self for a while. But you've got to change your sense of self to make it a healthy one, just as you change your views to be healthy views and your habits and practices to be healthy habits and practices. Those are two other forms of clinging that you have to convert to the path.

This means that the teaching on not-self finds its meaning in the four noble truths and their duties, and it's a teaching that has to be used at the right time and at the right place. In that passage we chanted just now, the Buddha said the teaching that all dhammas are not-self is true whether there are Buddhas or no Buddhas. That might lead to the conclusion that it's a categorical truth—true across the board—and it is true across the board. But it's not always beneficial.

There are places in the Canon where the Buddha chided monks for applying not-self in the wrong place. There was one night when the Buddha was talking about how the five aggregates are not-self. One of the monks sitting in the assembly said to himself, "If the five aggregates are not-self, then what self is going to be affected by the actions of what is done by not-self?" In other words, he saw not-self as a way of getting around karma, saying if there's nobody there as the agent or as the recipient of an action, then you can do what you want. There's nobody who's going to pay the consequences.

The Buddha read the monk's mind and scolded him. He said, "There are some foolish people who think they can get around the teaching this way." Then he showed the proper use of the teaching: You see that there are things you cling to, and you're suffering because you're clinging to them. Not-self is to help you let go.

The Buddha took apart the sense of self in various ways to show that it's not worth holding on to. But this is at an ultimate stage of the practice. You see things changing, the things you thought were your self. And the question is: If they're changing—if you watch them arise and pass away—then they're not you. If they were you, then you wouldn't be there to watch them arise and you wouldn't be there after they passed away. When you start looking at the things you identify with, you realize that they come and they go like that.

That's one reason for letting go. The other reason is that you see they're not really under your control. They're partially under your control. This is what gives you room for using the aggregates as the path. But there are a lot of things they're going to do that you just simply can't control. That's another reason for not wanting to identify with them. Of course, you see identification as clinging, and you have to be willing to let go if you're going to find true happiness.

Those are some of the reasons why he says the aggregates are not-self. And even though the Buddha doesn't have you apply this teaching across the board until after you've developed some pretty strong powers of concentration, still he teaches it ahead of time so that you can apply it to other things that would pull you out of the concentration. If any distracting thought comes up, you realize, "Okay, it's there, but it's not going to be there after a while. Why latch on to it if latching on is going to involve suffering?" You've probably realized that thoughts come up in the mind, and at first they seem interesting and entertaining. They have a lot of potential, so you go into them. Then they turn on you. They get out of your control, which is another reason you don't want to hold on to them.

In the meantime, you do want to hold on to your concentration. The Buddha says to try to develop it so that you're really good at it. The image he gives is an archer who can fire accurate shots in rapid succession and pierce great masses. In other words, your discernment becomes quick and on target. You can pierce right through your ignorance. You want to get that good at your concentration. And to do that—it is, after all, a habit and practice that you develop—you have to have certain views about why it's worthwhile. Otherwise you can't do it.

So you do hold on to these things in the interim. You do have a sense of yourself as capable of doing this and that you're going to benefit. And you reflect on your practice. After all, you're the one who has to do it, and you're the one who's going to benefit from it. You want to make sure it's good, so you look

carefully at it. As the Buddha said, when you have a sense of yourself, you have a sense of what talents and skills you've developed in terms of conviction, learning, persistence, relinquishment, discernment, and what he calls quick-wittedness—in other words, your use of your intelligence to come up with solutions to problems that haven't been explained to you. You want to keep tabs on how well you're developing these qualities. That's called having a sense of yourself.

So all of these are things you're going to cling to for a while, just as you cling to the rest of the path. But ultimately, the duty with the path, after you've developed it, is to let it go as well. After all, it's something made out of the aggregates. Your concentration is made out of aggregates. Once your concentration gets really good, then you can start analyzing it, seeing that it, too, is inconstant, stressful, and not-self. That's the point where you can let go.

The Buddha has a passage where he talks about the five faculties. He says you see their origination, their passing away, their allure, their drawbacks, and the escape from them. That's interesting because usually he uses that five-fold analysis with things that are unskillful or attachments that are unskillful. Here he's focusing it on parts of the path. But after all, the path is something originated. It is going to pass away some day. So before it passes away, you want to make use of it and then get beyond it, while you can. That's when the teaching on not-self becomes something you apply everywhere, all around. So it has its time and it has its place—and it has its purpose, too. It's not that the Buddha simply ran across an interesting fact, "Oh, there is no self."

I know of one Dhamma teacher who once made fun of the idea that the Buddha was sitting under a tree and came up with, "Eureka! I don't exist." That's not much of an awakening because what would it lead to? There's no clear duty as to what you would do with the teaching that there's nobody there. It can easily turn into, "There's nobody of any worth there. There's nothing of any worth there. No actions are of any worth. The world is not of any worth." It'd get very depressing and very limiting.

Some people think not-self means that you don't have any power, that there's no agency. But the idea of no agency is something the Buddha criticized really, really strongly.

Yet if you see not-self in the context of the four noble truths, you realize there's a duty associated with it. It's something to be comprehended. You comprehend it by developing the aggregates so that you're skillful at making really good aggregates, i.e., a state of concentration and the rest of the factors of the path. Then you develop dispassion for that, too.

So in the context of the four noble truths, there are clear duties. And they're for the sake of happiness. In the meantime, the Buddha affirms the fact that you can make a difference.

So as you're on the path, you do make certain assumptions about yourself as being capable—that you can do this. You've got the potential to learn. You know you're going to have to be responsible, which is why you keep reflecting on what you're doing. And you assume that you're going to benefit. As the Buddha said, let go of what's not yours and it'll be for your long-term welfare and happiness. Notice that: *your* long-term welfare and happiness. There is a happiness that comes. At that point, though, you won't be concerned about whose happiness it is. It's just there.

But as you motivate yourself on the path, whatever sense or idea you have about yourself, remind yourself, whoever you are, that you're going to benefit. It's when you put the teaching on not-self in the right context that you get the most use out of it. So always keep that context in mind.