

Not-self

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If you want to understand the Buddha's teachings on not-self, you have to see how those teachings fit into the context of the four noble truths. Remember that the four noble truths have their duties. Suffering, or stress, is to be comprehended. Craving, the cause of suffering and stress, is to be abandoned. The cessation of stress and suffering is to be realized. And the path to its cessation is to be developed.

So if we want to understand the perception of not-self, we have to see how it fits into those duties. For example, with comprehending suffering and stress, comprehending means to understand suffering and stress to the point where you have no more passion, aversion, or delusion toward them. And what is suffering and stress? It's clinging to the five clinging-aggregates, or more basically the clinging. The aggregates themselves are not the problem. The problem is in the clinging. We want to comprehend how our clinging is suffering and stress. And it's hard because we cling because we think that what we're clinging to is going to lead to happiness for us. It's going to be our satisfaction. And so we have to apply the perception of not-self to see that the things that we cling to cannot provide the satisfaction that we want.

But the real action in the four noble truths is to abandon craving, because that's the cause of the problem. You do that by developing the noble eightfold path. Now, in developing the path, you use the perception of not-self first with things that would pull you away. For instance, you may be afraid to observe the precepts because you're fearing loss of wealth, loss of health, loss of relatives. The Buddha has you remind yourself that those things are not under your control. You can't really hold on to them. They slip through your fingers, and losing them doesn't consign you to hell—whereas loss of right view or loss of virtue, would. So you regard the first three kinds of loss as not-self, but you hold on to the right view and virtue, which are parts of the path.

The same when you're practicing concentration: anything that would pull you away, you have to regard as not-self. You hold on, though, to the breath, or whatever your object of concentration is. You develop qualities of virtue, concentration, and discernment so that you can apply them to that problem of why you crave things even though the craving itself causes suffering and stress. After all, suffering is not going to end until you abandon the craving. In fact, that's

what the cessation of suffering is: the total abandoning of craving. So you have to look more carefully at the craving.

The craving the Buddha lists as the cause of suffering comes in three kinds: craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, and craving for non-becoming. In each case, he says, this is a kind of craving that leads to more becoming. For example, with sensuality craving, you have a desire for a particular pleasure. You like to fantasize about the pleasures, and in the fantasy, you create a world. There's the world in which that pleasure exists and can be attained. Then there's you in that world, who you hope would be able to attain it.

As for craving for becoming itself, sometimes we like the identity in that world in and of itself. It gives us a sense of power. We're able to function in a world where we understand what the world is all about. We know its ins and outs, and we're capable of manipulating them for whatever pleasure we want. The Buddha wants you to see that wherever there's a becoming, there's going to be clinging. The becoming itself is made out of events that really are not you or yours. You can see them arise and pass away. You can see that they're stressful in the fact that they arise and pass away. The fact that they arise and pass away means they can't be you, because if you can see something arising, it can't be you. You can't see yourself arise. You can't see yourself pass away. If you're there before it's arising and after it's passing away, it can't be you. And if it's not really under your power, it can't be yours.

The problem is you can't simply decide, "Okay, I'm going to crave to put an end to this becoming I've got," because that craving in itself turns into a clinging, and that creates more becoming as well. So what we have to learn how to do is to take these things apart, to see the process by which becoming comes into being. This is what the steps in dependent co-arising is for: They detail the constituent factors in process for how becoming comes about. When you take these things apart into their constituent factors, the things they depend on, you begin to realize that none of them are really worthy of holding on to—again, because they're inconstant, they're stressful, and they're not really totally under your control. You can influence them to some extent, but then you often find yourself pulled into things that, if you actually looked at the fine print, you wouldn't have signed on for.

Yesterday someone asked me, "How can you say that we identify with things that we think we control when we find ourselves identifying with fear?" Well, you're identifying with whatever the mind comes up with. In the process of identifying with that, then whatever it comes up with, you're going to be stuck with. If you try to destroy that identity, you create a new identity. That's setting

yourself up for the same sort of situation where you weren't really looking carefully at what you were getting when you signed on to have this identity in this particular world. So it's for seeing that the drawbacks of these things: That's what that standard of contemplation is for. You see things in terms of their origination, in terms of their passing away, how they come and go, based on causes, some of which you can control, some of which you can't.

And then you begin to look at the allure.

Why do you go for these things? A part of the allure is in that sense of control. And part of it, of course, is in whatever other pleasure you would create around it. So if you can see that these things are inconstant and stressful, you ask yourself, "Why would I want to identify with them?" That's the escape. And the escape is dispassion. Dispassion for what? Dispassion for your craving. That's how you get out of the process of becoming without falling into the trap of craving for non-becoming.

Now, the whole reason we do this is because of the promise of that third noble truth: that if you can let go of these things, if you can develop this dispassion, then you're free. The image they give in the Canon is of a fire. The fire is trapped in its fuel, not because the fuel is trapping it, but because the fire itself is holding on. If you can learn how to let go, the things that you cling to are not going to grasp after you. As Ajaan Lee used to say, "If you don't eat your plate of rice, the rice is not going to cry. You're the one who's attached to the food." But if you can get to the point where you don't need that food anymore, it's not going to come clinging after you. That's how freedom is found: by your letting go.

Now, the special feature of not-self is that it differs from inconstancy and stress in one important area, which is that, as the Buddha says, all fabricated things are inconstant, all fabricated things are stressful, but then when he gets to not-self, he says all phenomena—which would be fabricated or unfabricated—are not-self. That's because it is possible to cling to something unfabricated. You have an experience of the discernment that reveals to you the deathless, and you're going to hold on to that if you're not fully clear about what's happening. You have to learn how to let go of that, too. Only then will your release be total.

This is why, at the end of the path, you have to let go of the path. Ajaan Maha Boowa's example is of a ladder up to the roof of a house. You climb the ladder, rung by rung by rung, holding on to one rung and then letting go of the lower one, holding on to a higher one, letting go of the lower one, holding on to a higher one up, up, up to the top of the ladder. At that point, as long as you're holding on to the ladder, you can't get to the roof. But if you let go in the meantime, you're going to fall down to the ground. You have to let go at the right point, at the right

time. It's at that final point that all four noble truths eventually become things that you simply let go. As Ajaan Mun would say, the four noble truths then become one. And that one truth has one duty, which is to let go. Beyond that, as you get into the dimension that remains, where there is no clinging at all, there are no duties, either.

There's a passage in *Muttodaya*, the teachings of Ajaan Mun, where he says that the third noble truth is not the same thing as nibbana. It's the realization of nibbana. The realization of nibbana has its duty, which is that we have to realize it. But nibbana itself has no duties. And at that point, none of the three perceptions apply. No perceptions really apply at all. If you're going to say it's self, that would be clinging. If you say it's not-self, that's muddying up the waters of something that's really pure.

So when we understand that not-self is a perception, and it has its uses on the path, and that its uses are dictated by the four noble truths, that's when we can get the most use out of it. That's why the Buddha taught it to begin with. We're suffering because we're craving. We use this perception as a tool to abandon the craving, and then like any tool, we put it down when the work is done. Say you've been building a chair. Once you've finished with the chair, you're finished with the tools as well. You put them down. You're totally unburdened. That's the promise, and it's been made by someone who was always true to his promise. It's simply up to us to be true as well.