

The Not-Self Discourse

July 18, 2022

Five days ago, we celebrated the Buddha's first sermon—Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion—where he taught the four noble truths in the context of the noble eightfold path. He taught the duties with regard to those truths, and how completing those duties constituted his awakening. The result of that talk was that the leader of the five brethren, Kondañña—who became known as Añña Kondañña—gained the Dhamma eye: Whatever is subject to origination is all subject to cessation. To see that, he saw also what was *not* subject to origination, and that was *not* going to cease. In other words, he saw the deathless. He became the first member of the noble Sangha, and also the first member of the conventional Sangha of monks.

Well, the story doesn't end there. In the succeeding days, the Vinaya texts say that the Buddha taught the Dhamma to the remaining four brethren, so that they all gained the Dhamma eye. We don't know how many days it took. But there's a tradition in Thailand that on the fifth day, he gave his second recorded sermon, which we chanted just now. We know it now as The Not-Self Characteristic, but that's a name that was given later. In the Pali Canon, it's simply called Five, which stands for the five brethren. They all became arahants on hearing this sermon.

The Buddha had taught them earlier that suffering was the five clinging-aggregates. In the second sermon, he went through all five of the aggregates and pointed out how each was not-self. In the first part of the sermon, he focused on how none of the aggregates lie totally under your control. You can't have them always be the way you want them to be. Now, you can control them to *some* extent, which is why we can turn them into the path. But even with concentration, where you've got the aggregates as solid and as constant as possible, you still see there are some ups and downs. It's not quite perfect. You have to maintain those states of concentration. So the mind is still not totally free.

So that's the first attribute of self the Buddha was talking about: that it would be under your control, whereas these things were not totally under your control.

Then he went down a questionnaire. In the case of each aggregate, he asked, "Is this constant or inconstant?" It's inconstant. "And if it's inconstant, is it stressful or easeful?" It's stressful. "And if it's inconstant and stressful, is it proper to say, 'This is me, this is my self, this is what I am'?" No.

Notice, he's not getting the brethren to come to the conclusion that there is no self. He's asking to make a value judgment: Is this worth holding on to? Is it

worth clinging to as your identity? And as you've been practicing the path, you have been holding on to these things, and of course prior to practicing the path, you were holding on to them more unskillfully because you thought what you could get out of them was worth whatever effort you put into them. But here, the Buddha's finally saying, ultimately, No.

And then you have to reflect further, to draw some further conclusions.

This is what your experience is right now. This is what it's been in the past, made out of these same aggregates, and this is what it will be in the future, as long as you stay wandering, samsara-ing, moving from state of becoming to state of becoming. It's going to be made out of the same aggregates. Past, present, future, near and far, refined, gross, anywhere you can go, anywhere you might want to be reborn: It's all going to be the same aggregates.

This was the realization that made the five brethren all lose any interest in clinging to the aggregates anymore, so they let go. They all became arahants. The texts don't say that there was an earthquake. But it's one of those events that deserves to have an earthquake. The Buddha was able to teach people to gain total release.

So how does that reflect on us? What does it teach us? Well, for one, think about the fact that the Buddha taught the four noble truths first, and then the perceptions of inconstant, stressful, and not-self later, in the context of the four noble truths. And notice that he doesn't call them characteristics. He never calls them characteristics in the Canon. As I said, the title of the sutta that we know now was something added later. He called them perceptions—perceptions aimed at giving rise to a sense of dispassion—which, after all, is the duty with regard to that first noble truth: Comprehend it to the point of dispassion.

So even though he says that it's true that the aggregates have their pleasures—without their pleasures, we wouldn't have latched onto them—still, ultimately you have to come to the value judgment that they're not worth it.

Now, you do that within the context of the four noble truths, because as the Buddha teaches, when you're able to let go of the craving that leads to clinging, when you have dispassion for it, that's the cessation of suffering.

So these are perceptions that you apply to foster a sense of dispassion for the purpose of putting an end to suffering. If you had no idea that dispassion would lead to the end of suffering, you'd want to hold on. This is probably why all of us are still holding on to our aggregates, one way or another. You don't really believe the Buddha when he says that if you develop dispassion for these things, it's going to be true happiness. We still value our passions.

But it's useful to think about these perceptions as a way of chipping away at those passions, because the Buddha wants you to see that the passion and suffering go together. We have this strange wall inside. We know there's suffering but we don't see that it's connected to clinging. And often we don't see that it's connected to the craving. This is the problem with the mind. It puts up walls in places where it'd really benefit from tearing those walls down.

But at the same time, it's important to reflect that those three perceptions are applied within the context of the four noble truths. On their own, those perceptions couldn't tell you what to do. So things are inconstant. What do you do with that idea? Some people say, "Well, eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we may die." And if you don't know the four noble truths, that sounds reasonable. If something's not-self, you might say, "Well, to hell with it. I'm not going to care about it."

There was a monk who heard the Buddha's teaching about how the five aggregates were not-self, and he came to the conclusion that if the aggregates are not-self, then any action done by those aggregates is also not-self. And who's there going to be to reap the rewards or to be affected by the actions of what is not-self? It's an argument, basically, to say, "Hey, it doesn't matter what you do. There's nobody there, either to do the action or to receive the results of the action, so any action you want to do is fine." And if you simply said, "Well, reality is not-self" or "There is no self," that would be a perfectly reasonable conclusion.

You have to remember, though, that you apply these perceptions in the context of the duties of the four noble truths. That's when they show their true use. But that's how they're circumscribed.

Ajaan Maha Boowa once commented that he felt that what was recorded of the second sermon was incomplete because it talks about only how things that are fabricated are inconstant, stressful, and not-self, where there's more that has to be let go of. There's a sense of a knower that seems to be permanent. That has to be let go of, too. But apparently the five brethren were able to make that inference, that there was nothing worth holding on to at all. After all, the idea of a permanent knower is just a perception. So they reflected: They applied those perceptions of inconstant, stressful, and not-self not only to obvious levels of the aggregates, but also to subtler ones. Around that sense of the permanent knower there's a feeling of well-being. There's a perception. There's some fabrication going on, and there's consciousness. So there are subtle levels of aggregates there as well. In some cases, the Buddha says, *Sabbe dhamma anatta*, in order to get you to let go of even that permanent sense of the knower.

But apparently the five brethren were able to let go because they were able to reflect on what they were doing. After all, these three perceptions are aggregates, so they have to be dropped as well. The lesson here is that you really have to reflect. When you say that things outside are inconstant, stressful, and not-self, you have to turn around and ask, “Well, what’s going on inside as well?” When the mind is talking to itself about how bad fabrications are, ask yourself, “Wait a minute. The mind talking to itself is also a fabrication, so you have to turn and look at that as well.” This is one of the reasons why one of the prominent images of the Dhamma is that the Dhamma is like a mirror. You look out, but you also have to look back in. You act, but you also have to reflect on what you’re doing.

So learn to develop this all-around gaze. The five brethren were able to take what the Buddha taught and work out the implications, so that they were able to drop everything, including the path, once the path had done its work. Don’t try dropping the path too early, though, but there will come a point where you realize that there’s nothing else for the path to do. That’s when you have to drop it.

So always reflect, even when you’re just doing concentration practice. This is what directed thought and evaluation are all about. You direct your thoughts to the breath and then you evaluate how good the breath is. Then you evaluate how well the mind is staying with the breath. Ajaan Lee makes a comparison, that alertness is like a pulley. You pull a rope in one direction, then you pull the rope in the other direction. You look at the object of your mindfulness, and then you turn around and look at the mind watching the object of the mindfulness. Keep this double perspective.

Another image the Buddha gives is of a person sitting, looking at someone who’s lying down, or someone who’s standing, looking at the person sitting. You have to learn how to watch yourself. Learn how to reflect, because ignorance likes to hide in your blind spots—but if you don’t look all around, it’s hard to say a blind spot. It’s more like a blind hemisphere.

So take the five brethren as good example. We celebrate the fact that the Buddha was able to teach them, but we also celebrate the fact that they were able to follow him, work out the implications, and free their minds. The Buddha didn’t free their minds. They freed their own minds. He helped them. He gave them all the tools, and they learned how to use those tools well.

So think of all the Dhamma you’ve learned as tools, and watch yourself as you use those tools. That’s how you become a master.