

The Doctrine of Anattā (not-self)

In considering the Buddha's teaching on 'anattā' it is important to recognize that there are two different ways in which this is referred to. This teaching can be skilfully used as a source of mental reflection first of all. In this sense, to consider that we cannot take permanent ownership or have ultimate control over things can help us to see our limits, keeping things in the proper perspective. We can also reflect on how we take things personally or form a self around inner things in a way that causes suffering or confusion in like fashion. These then are the application of the conventional truths of non-ownership or limited control implied by this doctrine.

Ultimately, however, this truth of anattā is one of the three characteristics of all phenomena, as penetrated by supramundane insight. In this case it is seen and comes to us naturally, rather than being consciously cultivated as a perception, it spontaneously arises as the impermanence and unsatisfactoriness of things is also seen. It is in this second sense that this truth is truly liberating. It is also in this second way that we avoid the danger existent in the first application of this teaching – that of dissociation. There is less danger in reflecting on the phenomenon of the world as anattā; but when it comes to turning this within and considering our own mental and emotional processes in this way, it can lead to a denial of responsibility and hence to improper custodianship over our own minds. Actually, it is possible, indeed necessary, to tame and discipline the unruly mind and to resolve mental issues, past or present.

Also, it is not possible to fully correct the biases, assumptions and self-making in our minds merely by seeing what we are doing. Knowledge does not necessarily give power. The roots of self-making lie beyond the reach of conscious thought, in automatic processes initiated by feeling: Craving for becoming (bhavataṇhā) is an intensification of our attachment to pleasant feeling; the craving to get away from or to not be (vibhavataṇhā) is similarly an intensified aversion to unpleasant feeling. These processes will keep their dominance in some form or another, no matter what we think. It is again the direct realization of anattā that is the solution and in the same way as in the previous example. This insight will naturally cause the mind to detach itself from phenomena, or is a result of this detachment.

What is this like? Let us consider an analogy that will also be relevant to the possible long-term results of the practice. Someone was explaining to me recently how she had entered into a commitment to celibacy within her marriage in order to further spiritual practice, but that the only way that this could be maintained was by her husband turning cold and aloof. This is like a mind trying to be the observer before it has developed the genuine detachment that comes around through seeing anattā. If this couple had also practised contemplation and meditation to the point where they no longer had desire then they could have maintained a close relationship without this leading to or indeed needing physical intimacy.

What this all means for a practitioner of Dhamma is that the meditation that leads to direct realization, in particular that centred on the body, becomes the priority and will guide their lives more than other reflective or intellectual pursuits. Why the body? It is very difficult for the mind to truly see the mind as not-self; it is, and should be,

working on itself rather than merely observing itself. And after all, where is the genuinely independent position from which to make such observations? How can we observe without our observations effecting what we are observing? We merely risk entering into an endless dialogue with ourselves and having two minds or more to talk to. Either that or we may enter into a passive state in which we cannot truly apply our minds for our own benefit or for the benefit of the world we live in.

It is also true that if we can see that the body is not-self spontaneously, then we can see all the objects of the mind in the same way. If we see this way then compassion naturally arises as well as wisdom, so there is no danger that we will go too far and become uncaring. What is also apparent is that the quality of the mind that sees like this is one that has no sense of self. There is an important distinction here between the quality of this liberated mind and the mind of samādhi, or of the brahmavihāras, that is similarly bright and empty but still have a sense of self. This is the teaching of anattā taken to its most refined level and the way the teaching was used by the Buddha to revise the understanding or advance the meditation practice of other practitioners well advanced on the Path.

Lastly, how far do we need to go with the contemplation of the body in order to begin to realize such truth? Do we need just to be aware of our bodies in the senses of movement and posture or do we have to look inside and thus threaten our passions? The answer will be different for each person. Although the passions may not need to be challenged early on, at least they need to be calmed in order for us to see clearly. This means that someone with good meditation or reasons for looking at the body other than desire, compassion for example, may at least fleetingly be able to see the body this way and experience some degree of liberating insight as a result. Someone who wishes to gain more lasting insight may then choose to go deeper and look inside the body. If they do this wisely then the delights of release will far outweigh the delights of sensuality.

I offer this for your reflection.

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