

The Four Noble Truths and Anatta

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Last week we began talking about the application of the teachings of the four noble truths to the three marks of existence taught by the Buddha. The Buddha's teachings on the four noble truths focused on the first mark of existence, that all that exists is subject to and characterized by suffering. By extension, the four noble truths also apply to the other two marks of existence. Last week I talked about the four noble truths as they might be applied to the second mark of existence, *anicca*, or impermanence. This week we will take up the thorny problem of the third mark of existence, *anatta*—non-self.

The earlier Hindu traditions link the self to the feeling “I am.” Possibly the main philosophical difference between Hinduism and Buddhism is that the concept of *atman* —the idea of an eternal self or soul—that is central to Hinduism was rejected by the Buddha. This was a revolutionary turn. Terms like *anatta* (not-self) and shunyata (voidness) are at the core of all Buddhist traditions. The permanent cessation or dropping away of the reification of the perceived self is integral to enlightenment.

The first noble truth:

Extending the Buddha's original teachings on the four noble truths to this third mark of existence, we encounter the truth of non-self; nothing in our experience can be identified as *I, me, or mine*. This follows the Buddha's teaching that our entire experience and existence arises as the five skandhas or aggregates: form, sensation, perception, formation, consciousness.

In terms of form, what does that mean? Isn't my body me? What about my brain? My house or car? You can use the process of inquiry to investigate whether this is really true. How about your body, as it is constantly changing, cells being born, aging, dying. Are you your spleen? Can you be found in your lungs, your stomach? If you lose an eye or an arm is there somehow “less of you?” If your car is stolen, do you disappear? When we are convinced that this form is “who I am,” we are invested in maintaining the body—we worry about exercise, about nutrition, about signs of illness, weakness, and aging. Of

course there is nothing wrong with taking good care of your body: it is our home after all. But it is no more “who you are” than your house is “who you are.”

What about your leanings, your preferences, isn’t that what you are? The things you love or hate, the things you are uninterested in, all of your tendencies this way and that way: don’t they define “you?” When we believe that our preferences is who we are, we tend to try to develop “better preferences.” Much of education is really about this effort. More education, higher refinement means a “better” or wider set of preferences. But that is not really who you are, is it?

Maybe you are really your sensations: the cool air on your arm, seeing a sunset, tasting a meal. But sensations are, well, impermanent and varied. Can “you” really be found in your sensations? When the sensation is gone, what is left of you? When we believe that we are our sensations, we are bound up in seeking preferred sensations or new sensations and avoiding unpleasant or unwanted sensations. We chase after the new and exciting, or sometimes the familiar and comforting. We try to organize our lives so that we can manage the sensations that we encounter. But that is not who you are, either.

Ah, but certainly your mind, your emotions, your memories, your dreams and nightmares are who you really are. And when you inquire: Are your thoughts “truly who you are?” Well, if you have been meditating even a short time you can see what a chaotic stream that is, how volatile and unpredictable and unstable. Is that who you are? Which thoughts can you identify as “me.”? This notion leads to a confused and desperate attempt to control our thoughts and to somehow maintain “the best or highest thoughts.” We think there are “problems” with our thoughts and emotions: therapy is based on this notion. And yet, our thoughts and feelings are too unstable to be considered who we are.

At any rate, what about your consciousness, the witness of all your experience? Surely that must be me, it must be mine, it is who I really am. So, how would you describe yourself in these terms? What can you say about your consciousness? Isn’t it, too, ephemeral, changing, subject to suffering, old age, and death? When we believe that consciousness is “who we are,” we often set out on the spiritual path, seeking higher or better states of consciousness, looking for a secure place to rest, for an identification as the one who has attained the highest state of consciousness. This is a subtle trap. So let’s just stop for a moment. What is your state of consciousness right now? Is it agitated or quiet? In motion or still? Is it even there? What can you really say about it after all?

The Buddha criticized even *conceiving theories* of some unitary soul or identity immanent in all things as unskillful. According to the Buddha's teaching, all thoughts about self are necessarily, whether the thinker is aware of it or not, thoughts about one or more of the five *aggregates*.

The second noble truth:

What arises in response to the truth of non-self? Identifications with that which we think of as I, me, mine; Aversions to that which is not I, me, or mine; and ignoring whatever is not somehow related to being, I, me, or mine. Attachment and longing, and the sense of lack. The trance of being and having, getting and losing.

We see threats to that which is identified with the self, we defend and guard it. We are told to love ourself, but what would that mean? In moments of crisis we scramble to assemble a self, to figure out “who we are” in this situation. We cobble together the bits and pieces of our conditioning and pray they look coherent and whole, that they will “get us through.”

Yet there is no place we can look, and nothing to find, that we can really identify as our “self,” as “me,” as “mine.” A great deal of suffering is caused by our attempts. It makes a joke of “self-improvement” and yet, we do see change over time, sometimes quite transformational. The trick is in believing that “change over time” implies “something that is changed.” It would be more accurate to say “you are change itself; you are the both the instrument and the music of it.”

So we are unskillful because of our natural responses to the truth of non-self, anatta; we misunderstand its meaning in our lives.

Of course, in practical terms, we accept the conventional designation of a self: When a police officer says, is that your car? You don't answer, “it can't be because there is no self here.” We don't say, “You can't do that to *whatever it is I think I am right now*.”

And yet, we cannot argue that there is “nothing there” either.

As we have been studying in the Diamond Sutra the Buddha repeatedly instructs Subhuti in the paradoxical turn: (p. 80)

Third noble truth:

In conventional terms there would be the cessation of anatta through the application of the fourth noble truth, *marga*, the 8-fold path. Follow this path, and non-self would cease. In Brazier's version of the four noble truths, the third noble truth, *nirodha*, is better translated as the *containment* of our reactions to anatta. Anatta is not about nihilism: the denial of self actually only affirms the self. The formula is: *I deny...whatever*. Rather, *nirodha* applied to anatta is realizing how many of our conceptions about who we are are written in the air; constructions or fabrications that are strongly believed. Are you an honest person? Are you always late? Do you have a son? What do these ideas about yourself really apply to? When you look more closely, who is it that is "always late," who is it that "is honest," who is it that "has" a son? Who is it that all of these stories are being told *to*? When we really actualize this understanding, all notions of who we are, of a self, simply fall away, in exactly the way our belief in Santa Claus simply fell away as we grew up.

The fourth noble truth:

The fourth noble truth is the truth of *marga*, the eightfold path. Last week we talked about this notion of "right view" as *wise, clear, compassionate* view, and so on. It is what a life looks like when the self steps out of the way, when the entire sense of self is revealed to be a fiction. To see the situation clearly, rather from a self-centered perspective, is *right view*. To realize the ongoing aspiration to serve life, without self-centered ambition, is *right intention*. From this right view and right intention arises selfless *right speech, right action, right livelihood* completely naturally. In turn these ways of being arouse *right effort*, these practices result in *right mindfulness* and *right concentration*. It is only possible when we abandon our feeble constructions of who we think we are, our false beliefs about what is *I, me, or mine*.

It means the dropping away of the need to be special, to stand out, to go first; or to abase oneself, to put oneself down. You do not have a special kind of badness, lack, or defectiveness, nor a special holiness or virtue. You are only streaming *skandhas*: form, sensations, perceptions, mental formations, consciousness.

There is a kind of wonder in it. *I am not who I think I am.*

Because there is enormous potential for misunderstanding this mark of existence as sanction for anarchy or indulgence or destructive behavior, the Buddha emphasized the importance of the precepts. They do not so much as tell us what to do as raise an ongoing

inquiry: how are my actions, words, and thoughts aligned with what is wholesome and beneficial for myself and others? You can see the challenge in it, once the idea of “myself” falls away.

The morality of anatta

When we comfort someone in pain, when we hide, when we feel embarrassed, when we are angry with someone, we typically do so out of some notions of ourselves and of the self of others. That is what is so surprising in doing the exercise Flint has suggested, of making any statement about who you are, and being met with, I know it seems that way to you. And when it is repeated, being met with, I know that's not who you are. It's a bit disorienting. We depend on our assumptions about who we are. We use those assumptions to organize our experience: someone speaks and we are insulted, something doesn't work the way we expected and we are angry, something is lost and we feel diminished or bereft.

The Buddha's view of a person as “stream” does not see personality as chaotic, but as a lawful dynamic pattern which only changes as supporting conditions change. In spite of the changes taking place as a person, some patterns are repeated, even over many lives, before they are worn out or replaced by others in accordance with the law of dependent origination. This law basically says that “everything arises together, dependent on causes and conditions.” The complex of conditions in any moment arises out of an interaction of those processes internal to a person's own stream of psychological processes, that is, past or present karma, with those from the external world. Some of the external conditions will in turn be influenced or generated by internal processes. Thus the person-process both changes and is changed by its environment. We contribute to the causes and conditions of the emerging moment. (Wikipedia)

We know that as we are growing up, when we encounter things that scare us, overwhelm us, hurt us, or fill us with joy or grief, conditioning develops, little pieces of strategy, protection, vulnerability, or management. These pieces or parts of conditioning fall into systems that form up what we think of as our “self.” Among them are alliances and conflicts, parts that are out in plain sight and some that are hidden away. Although they often fear and resent each other, and constantly try to win our attention and agreement, none of them can really be considered “me.” But sometimes we also get a glimpse beyond that system of conditioning and its many parts to another vista. It is not some better, bigger part that is “the real me.” Instead, we experience a vast spaciousness that has no

boundary, that is beginningless and endless. Within that vast spaciousness, everything we perceive, sense, think, speak, and experience arises. And although we may blend with those parts that are arising, in a very deep way, we know that is not who I am. Because we are not limited in the ways our conditioning suggests, and there is nothing we can point to that locates the self. When we identify with, blend with, and believe in our conditioned parts, we have fallen into an innocent, but costly mistake. It is important to be awake. When you encounter a piece of conditioning that is distracting you from who you really are, you can engage it in the same exercise Flint has used with pairs. Ask it what it wants to tell you, and then respond, I know it seems that way to you. It will probably be insistent, and then you can respond to it by saying, I know that's not who I am.

There is an actual contemplative practice, taught by Nisargadatta and other Advaita Vedanta teachers of persistently asking “What am I?” I should caution you that the Buddha taught that this practice was a waste of time. In fact, if you do it long enough, you will exhaust yourself spinning in circles, because there is no answer. Simply turn toward whatever is arising, confident that “you are not that,” and meet it with fearless curiosity. It’s actually funny to imagine that we can somehow locate something that we can call a self; what would that be? Where would it be? And yet, in our lives, we move forward “as if” we exist and we have the highest responsibility to do so with care. This is the fundamental core of the Buddha’s teaching.