

# The Not-self Characteristic (Anatta-lakkhana-sutta) \_

Thus I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was living at Benares, in the Deer Park at Isipatana (the Resort of Seers). There he addressed the bhikkhus of the group of five: "Bhikkhus." — "Venerable sir," they replied. The Blessed One said this.

"Bhikkhus, form is not-self. Were form self, then this form would not lead to affliction, and one could have it of form: 'Let my form be thus, let my form be not thus.' And since form is not-self, so it leads to affliction, and none can have it of form: 'Let my form be thus, let my form be not thus.'

"Bhikkhus, feeling is not-self...

"Bhikkhus, perception is not-self...

"Bhikkhus, determinations are not-self...

"Bhikkhus, consciousness is not self. Were consciousness self, then this consciousness would not lead to affliction, and one could have it of consciousness: 'Let my consciousness be thus, let my consciousness be not thus.' And since consciousness is not-self, so it leads to affliction, and none can have it of consciousness: 'Let my consciousness be thus, let my consciousness be not thus.'

"Bhikkhus, how do you conceive it: is form permanent or impermanent?" — "Impermanent, venerable Sir." — "Now is what is impermanent painful or pleasant?" — "Painful, venerable Sir." — "Now is what is impermanent, what is painful since subject to change, fit to be regarded thus: 'This is mine, this is I, this is my self'?" — "No, venerable sir."

"Is feeling permanent or impermanent?..."

"Is perception permanent or impermanent?..."

"Are determinations permanent or impermanent?..."

"Is consciousness permanent or impermanent?" — "Impermanent, venerable sir." — "Now is what is impermanent pleasant or painful?" — "Painful, venerable sir." — "Now is what is impermanent, what is painful since subject to change, fit to be regarded thus: 'This is mine, this is I, this is my self'?" — "No, venerable sir."

"So, bhikkhus any kind of form whatever, whether past, future or presently arisen, whether gross or subtle, whether in oneself or external, whether inferior or superior, whether far or near, must with right understanding how it is, be regarded thus: 'This is not mine, this is not I, this is not myself.'

"Any kind of feeling whatever..."

"Any kind of perception whatever..."

"Any kind of determination whatever...

"Any kind of consciousness whatever, whether past, future or presently arisen, whether gross or subtle, whether in oneself or external, whether inferior or superior, whether far or near must, with right understanding how it is, be regarded thus: 'This is not mine, this is not I, this is not my self.'

"Bhikkhus, when a noble follower who has heard (the truth) sees thus, he finds estrangement in form, he finds estrangement in feeling, he finds estrangement in perception, he finds estrangement in determinations, he finds estrangement in consciousness.

"When he finds estrangement, passion fades out. With the fading of passion, he is liberated. When liberated, there is knowledge that he is liberated. He understands: 'Birth is exhausted, the holy life has been lived out, what can be done is done, of this there is no more beyond.'"

That is what the Blessed One said. The bhikkhus were glad, and they approved his words.

Now during this utterance, the hearts of the bhikkhus of the group of five were liberated from taints through clinging no more.

— [SN 22.59](#)

## Anatta and the Four Noble Truths

*adapted from a talk by Gil Fronsdal, October 1st, 2002*

People are often perplexed by the Buddha's teaching of anatta, or not-self. One reason is because in different religions and schools of psychotherapy and philosophy, as well as in everyday language, the word "self" is used in many ways. When people talk about "the self" without defining their terms, they may be unknowingly talking about different things.

So, to understand the Buddha's teaching of not-self, we must understand how the Buddha defined self, or, in his language, atta. First we must distinguish between two uses of the word atta. In some religious circles at the time of the Buddha, atta referred to a form of metaphysical self. A metaphysical definition of self is any theory of the real nature of self; for example, a permanent abiding essence that survives death, or a true self that is larger or more essential than the personality or the individual. In this sense atta could be translated into English as "the Self" or "the Soul." Quite distinct from the metaphysical use, atta was more commonly used as a reflective pronoun, like the English word "self" in such terms as "oneself" and "myself." In this latter sense it was used as a simple convention of speech, rather than referring to any metaphysical or essential idea of "the self."

We must keep both these uses of atta in mind in understanding the Buddha's teachings. On the one hand, he clearly did not accept any metaphysical definitions of "Self." On the other hand, he emphasized the suffering that can come with clinging to anything as belonging to or defining "myself." The Buddha's path of practice leads to the ending of this clinging.

The most common metaphysical "Self" against which the Buddha was arguing is implicitly defined in his Anatta Lakkhana Sutta, The Discourse on Anatta. For something to be atta, according to this view, it needed three components. It had to have complete control over the body, feelings, thoughts, impulses, intentions, consciousness, or perceptions. It had to be permanent. And it had to be blissful. In this discourse, the Buddha makes it clear that nothing in our psycho-physical experience has these three qualities and is therefore fit to be regarded as an atta or self.

Here in the modern West, this ancient Indian definition of the Self does not have much, if any, meaning. However, we have our own notions of what the self is or what it needs to be. In part these are the legacy of Western ideas of "soul," and in part they derive from the strong human drive to identify with certain things as defining what this self is. We identify ourselves with our thoughts, feelings, consciousness, volition, personal characteristics, or with a sense of continuity. Held lightly and provisionally, such identifications may be useful. Held tightly, they are self-limiting. If we expend the energy to cling to anything as the definition of the self, we will sooner or later suffer. In order to find a deeply abiding peace, we need to learn to let go of any attachment to or habit of fixating on self-identity.

Contrary to popular conception, we have no record of the Buddha ever saying, "There is no self." In the entire preserved volumes of the Buddha's discourses, in only one place did someone actually ask the Buddha: "Is there no self?" The Buddha refused to answer the question. The same person then asked: "Is there a self?" This too the Buddha declined to answer. What the Buddha did say repeatedly is that no particular aspect of our psycho-physical being qualifies as *atta* or the Self. Not our body, not our feelings, not our thoughts, not our dispositions, and not our consciousness.

The Buddha's teachings on self and not-self get even more subtle and fascinating. Aside from the specific definition of self he refuted in the *Anatta Lakkhana Sutta*, he argues that it is not useful to frame Buddhist practice through any conception of self. Views about the existence or non-existence of a self, or identifying the self with any characteristic or experience, even awareness itself, lead to a jumble of speculation. And more importantly, he claimed that they would not lead to liberation.

As an alternative to framing the spiritual life around the self, the Buddha suggests instead that we look at our experience through the framework of the Four Noble Truths, focusing honestly and directly on our suffering, the grasping that causes it, the peace or happiness that results from the release of grasping, and the way of living that supports a sense of well being.

The Buddha's teaching points us away from looking for the self, or trying to understand or improve the self. Instead it suggests that we pay attention to the fear, desire, ambition, and clinging that motivate the building of self identity. Perhaps we feel that we are defective in some way, and that our meditation practice will help us make or find a better self. Can we instead find the particular suffering that is connected with wanting to improve the self? Liberation entails releasing our suffering, not avoiding it, seeking relief from it or compensating for it. This doesn't necessarily mean that we dwell on our suffering, either; or that suffering never ceases. Indeed, the third Noble Truth reminds us that there is a cessation to suffering.

If you were to go to Africa to photograph the wildlife, you could walk all over the plains looking for the different animals. Or you could sit by the watering hole, where all the animals eventually come. Likewise, practice becomes very simple if we pay attention, carefully and non-reactively, to our suffering, that is, the contractions, restrictions and stresses in our body, mind and heart. For the sake of liberation, what you do and don't need to know will come to you if you simply watch your suffering and its cessation. You will see the grasping and you will see the possibility of genuine happiness that comes from releasing that grasping. May you know the peace of non-grasping to both self and no-self.