

## *The Essence of the Dhamma*

THANISSARO BHIKKHU

One of the most striking features of the Buddha's teaching is the way he calls into question the substantiality of things, and in particular things that people at large regard as having substance. The primary example is our sense of self. Most people have a sense that there's something substantial inside them that constitutes their true self. But this sense, the Buddha shows, is nothing more than a fabrication. It's the result of clinging to physical objects, such as the body, or to mental activities—feelings, perceptions, thought-fabrications, and consciousness—none of which have any substance or essence.

In a famous passage (SN 22:95), he compares physical phenomena to globs of foam floating down a river; feelings to bubbles caused by rain falling on water; perceptions to a mirage; thought-fabrications to the trunk of a banana tree, devoid of heartwood; and consciousness to a magic show. He notes that all of these things—which are called *aggregates*—are empty, void, and without substance or essence. The purpose of this sort of contemplation is to induce a sense of disenchantment and dispassion for these things—and, by extension, for any sense of self built around them—so that the mind can let go of them and find release.

The Buddha recommends a similar approach to our sense of the world. This, too, he says, is best regarded as a fabrication, based on contact at the six senses—counting the mind as the sixth—along with the feelings that arise based on that contact, all of which are constantly disintegrating (SN 35:82). They're empty of self or anything pertaining to self (SN 35:85). Again, the purpose of this contemplation is to induce a sense of disenchantment and dispassion for any sense of the world. This, too, can lead to release.

Over the centuries, people have been struck by the radical nature of these contemplations, and many have come to the conclusion that the Buddha was a thoroughgoing anti-substantialist or anti-essentialist: someone who denies that there's any substance or essence to anything at all. From this conclusion comes a further conclusion: that the Buddha's Dhamma, or teaching, is also devoid of essence. Aside from the core principle that nothing has any essence, this view holds, there is no unchanging substance or essence to define what's Dhamma and what's not.

Ever since this view was advanced, it has been used to justify changes in the Dhamma with the passage of time. Especially now that people in the West have taken an interest in the Dhamma, many of them have claimed that this view is not just a view. It's an established truth that supports the creative changes they feel the Dhamma requires. After all, they say, the Dhamma embraces change, and so the only authentic way to express the Dhamma is to foster what we see as positive changes in it.

Because this view has had an enormous impact on how Dhamma is taught and understood in the modern world, it's worth looking carefully at the

arguments used to support it, to see if they actually are in line with the Dhamma. Otherwise, if the Dhamma really *does* have an essence, we risk losing something of essential value when we change it.

There are three principal arguments for an essence-free Dhamma. The first, which originated in ancient India, is derived from the Buddha's teaching on dependent co-arising—his map showing the causes of suffering and how they can be brought to an end. From this teaching, the argument concludes that all things exist in dependence on conditions. Because their existence is dependent on other conditions that are constantly changing, that existence isn't inherent. Because all things lack inherent existence, the theory goes, they have no inherent nature or substance. So, given that the Buddha's Dhamma came into existence dependent on conditions, it too is devoid of substance.

The second sort of argument comes from Western postmodern academic philosophy. It's based on the premise that no words in any language can point to anything outside of the language, for each word's meaning is totally determined by its relationship to other words and the rules of grammar in that language. As a result, no word can point to any unchanging essence, for the relationships among words is always changing. Because the Buddha's Dhamma is composed of words, it can point only to other words, and not to any substance or essence. It has to change every time a different person describes it.

The third sort of argument, like the second, also derives from current academic views, and in particular from the scholarly study of Buddhism as a force in human history. One of the underlying premises of this field of study is that social forces are always taking on new identities and forms in response to changing conditions in their environment. To give a fair and unbiased treatment of these forces, one has to accept all their manifestations as equally valid. Any attempt to find an underlying essence in any social force is to fall into what is called the "essentialist fallacy," for that would favor one expression of that force in history over others. (Think, for example, of how pointless it would be to describe the past 150 years of American history by defining any particular political position as "essentially Republican" or "essentially Democratic.") Because Buddhism is a social force, it has no underlying essence. Dhamma is whatever a self-proclaimed Buddhist says that it is. No single way of defining or expressing the Dhamma is more valid than any other.

Even though these latter two sorts of arguments take their premises from current academic views outside of the Buddhist tradition, they derive some of their force within the Buddhist community from their affinity with arguments of the first sort, which came from within the tradition itself. To say that language and social forces are without essence is simply to extend the principle that all conditioned things are without essence. For this reason, we are told, Buddhists should accept—as part of their acceptance of the Dhamma—the principle that the Dhamma is without essence as well. There are virtually no limits to how far it can change and still be Dhamma.

It's worth noting, though, that at least one voice from within the Buddhist tradition wouldn't agree with this view: the Buddha's own, as recorded in the Pali discourses, our oldest extant record of his teachings. By his own account, the Buddha was not a thoroughgoing anti-essentialist. An important aspect of wisdom, he noted, was recognizing that some things have essence and others don't, and clearly understanding which is which.

*Those who regard  
non-essence as essence  
and see essence as non-,  
don't get to the essence,  
ranging about in wrong resolves.*

*But those who know  
essence as essence,  
and non-essence as non-,  
get to the essence,  
ranging about in right resolves. — Dhp 11–12*

The whole point of his teachings was to help people get to the essence, so he had to teach them how to distinguish what was essence from what was not. Now, the Pali word for essence—*sara*—also means heartwood: the part of the tree that's most useful and valuable because it's also the most lasting and impervious to change. So when the Buddha identified something as essence, he meant not only that it is impervious to change, but also that it had high and lasting value. To say that the Dhamma had no essence, in his eyes, would be to suggest that it had no lasting value at all. And although he did recognize that his teaching of the Dhamma wouldn't last forever (SN 20:7), he maintained that, as long as the teaching did last, it would lead those who followed it to something of essence. That something is release.

A discourse in the Canon, AN 4:245, identifies this release as the release touched with the right ending of *dukkha*: suffering or stress. Two other discourses, AN 8:83 and AN 10:58, state that all dhammas have release as their essence. A fourth discourse, AN 9:14, says the same of all thoughts and resolves: They have release as their essence. In other words, the extent to which any phenomenon or mental event has an essence depends on the extent to which it can lead to release.

The most extensive discussion of release as the essence of the Dhamma comes in MN 29 and 30, two discourses that explore the imagery of heartwood and essence by comparing different aspects of a monk's life to different parts of a tree. Material gain, honor, and fame are like the twigs and branches; consummation in virtue is like the outer bark; consummation in concentration, the inner bark; while knowledge and vision—the various powers that come with concentration—are like the sapwood.

MN 29 and 30 don't make the point explicitly, but if we compare their image of the tree with the statements about essence in AN 8:83 and 10:58, we can conclude that material gain, virtue, concentration, and knowledge and vision, when taken as ends in and of themselves, have no essence, just as twigs, etc., when taken from the tree, lose all connection with the heartwood. If, however, they stay with the tree and foster the heartwood, then to that extent they are connected with the essence of the Dhamma.

As for the actual heartwood of the Dhamma, MN 29 and 30 define it in two ways: as “non-occasional release” and “unprovoked awareness-release.”

These two ways of describing release basically make the same point: that the release that counts as the essence of Dhamma isn't subject to change. The first

description emphasizes that this release, once attained, is independent of specific occasions. It stands outside of time, so none of the changes of time can reach it.

The second description draws on a theory used in the Buddha's time to explain changes in nature: both in the physical world and within the mind. The theory is that physical and mental events occur when an underlying property (*dhatu*) is "provoked." Fires happen, for instance, when the fire property is provoked; wind storms, when the wind property is provoked. Within the mind, sensual desires flare up when the mental property of sensuality is provoked. In every case, an event caused by provocation ends when the provocation stops. This means that anything caused by provocation is destined, at some point, to cease. To say, however, that the release that comes with awakening is unprovoked means that it's not caused by provocation at all. It's not subject to conditions. Standing outside of time, it stands outside the possibility of ever ending.

This is why the way to release from suffering and stress is called, not the *cause* of release, but the *path* to release. The path is not a condition underlying the existence of release, but it does lead there. The Buddha himself made this point implicitly when he compared the path to an overgrown road through the jungle, and release to an ancient, abandoned city at the end of the road (SN 12:65). The road doesn't cause the city to be, but when cleared it enables people to enter and repopulate the city.

An important step in following the road to release is abandoning attachment to your sense of self and the world. This is why the Buddha focused so much of his teaching strategy on showing how our constructed sense of self and the world is without essence. To borrow the words of Dhp 11-12, he pointed out to people what non-essence is, so that they would abandon it and arrive at the essence.

But did this strategy entangle him in self-contradiction? By calling into question the essence of the self and the world, did he also inadvertently call into question the possibility that the Dhamma could have any essence? The Pali discourses contain no record of the Buddha's having been asked a question like this, but they do contain enough information on how he described release to show that the three sorts of anti-essentialist arguments carry no force against his assertion that release is the essence of the Dhamma.

With regard to the first sort of argument, we can see that release is not caused by dependent co-arising; it's experienced only when dependent co-arising ceases (SN 12:2). When attained, release is known independently of the aggregates and sense media that provide the raw material of our sense of self and of the world. Although it is experienced as a form of consciousness (DN 11), this consciousness—unlike ordinary sensory consciousness—is not known through the six sense media (MN 49). Because it's outside of space and time, this consciousness doesn't come under the aggregate of consciousness, which applies only to the conditioned consciousness experienced in terms of space and time: near or far; past, present, or future (SN 22:59). Release is also experienced as the highest bliss, but this bliss is not classed as a feeling (SN 36:19).

Because release is outside of the aggregates and sense media, it's not subject to the Buddha's description of the aggregates and sense media as being without essence. This means that the first sort of argument fails the test provided by Dhp 11-12, in that it doesn't recognize what is essence and what's not.

Similarly, the Buddha would not have agreed with the premises underlying the second sort of argument, that the Dhamma is nothing more than language, and that language can point to nothing more than itself. As he maintains, the realm of all that can be described goes no further than the six senses (SN 35:23). However, it is possible to experience the dimension where the experience of the six senses ceases (SN 35:117). Because of the limitations of language, we can't say that anything remains or doesn't remain (or both or neither) in this dimension (AN 4:173). But the dimension itself does exist—you can say that much about it to indicate that it's not an impossibility.

There is that dimension, monks, where there is neither earth, nor water, nor fire, nor wind; neither dimension of the infinitude of space, nor dimension of the infinitude of consciousness, nor dimension of nothingness, nor dimension of neither perception nor non-perception; neither this world, nor the next world, nor sun, nor moon. And there, I say, there is neither coming, nor going, nor staying; neither passing away nor arising; unestablished, unevolving, without support [mental object]. This, just this, is the end of stress. — *Ud 8:1*

In fact, if this dimension didn't exist, the ending of suffering wouldn't be possible (Ud 8:3), and the Dhamma as a whole would be pointless. But one of the realizations on attaining this dimension is that it otherwise lies beyond the limits of what language can adequately describe (DN 15).

Yet language doesn't simply describe things. It can also be used to induce action. This is how the Buddha primarily used language with regard to release: to induce people to act in a way that will lead them to experience release directly for themselves. This is why he talked about release so often. Still, in doing so, he made heavy use of metaphor, paradox, and negation—focusing on what release is *not*—to show that it can't properly be captured in words.

What this means is that the Buddha claimed a range of experience lying outside the horizons of postmodern theories of language, which are based on the assumption that experience outside of space and time is impossible. However, postmodern theories can offer no proof that this assumption is true, which is why their claims have no force against the Buddha's. He might not be able to convince them when he claims that the word *release* refers to something outside of their range of experience, but their arguments against him can't invalidate his claim. The issue has to be settled by other means.

A similar point holds for the third sort of argument. When academics are talking about Buddhism and the Buddha is talking about Dhamma, they are talking about two very different things. Buddhism, for the majority of scholars, is a phenomenon of social history; Dhamma, for the Buddha, is release and the path to release.

The Buddha readily admitted that even though release isn't touched by time, his teachings on the path to release would, over time, be neglected and replaced by others. But he didn't regard that fact as a happy one. He compared changes to the teaching to changes in a drum whose wooden body is repaired by pegs every time it splits, to the point where the body is gone, and nothing but pegs remain

(SN 20:7). Just as a drum of pegs would be useless for summoning people from far away, in the same way, “replacement Dhamma” (*saddhamma-patirupa*) would be ineffective in leading to release.

Again, these are important claims, and they raise important questions: Did the Buddha actually reach release? Do his teachings actually lead there? Is he right in saying that other paths don’t? The historical method, even though it has taught us many other useful things about Buddhism, is incapable of answering these questions, which—when you come right down to it—are the most essential ones that anyone concerned about the end of suffering should ask about the Dhamma. To adopt the image of the tree, academics describing the history of Buddhism are, at best, reaching the twigs and branches. Just as it’s impossible to tell from a tree’s branches whether the trunk contains heartwood, it’s impossible—using the historical method—to know whether the Buddha was right: that the Dhamma does have an essence, and that his teachings share in that essence to the extent that they really do lead to release. So, like the linguistic philosophers who are in no position to tell whether the word *release*, in the Buddha’s mouth, points beyond language, historians are in no position to tell whether the Buddha actually attained release. The rules of the historical method have no force against his claim that he did.

When linguists and historians don’t recognize the limitations of their methods and claim that the Dhamma has no essence, they are actually doing harm—discouraging themselves and others from testing the Dhamma in practice to see if the Buddha’s claims about its essence is true.

So when we examine the three sorts of arguments maintaining that the Dhamma has no essence, we find that they have no affinity with the Buddha’s original teachings, and actually get in the way of the practice. From the Buddha’s point of view, thoughts and phenomena within the world of conditions *can* have essence to the extent that they point to the dimension outside. This is why his third noble truth—the total ending of suffering—is a truth; and why holding to this truth as an essential part of the practice. If, in line with the anti-essentialist arguments, you deny that the noble truths can have this sort of essence, then you close off the possibility of ever attaining release.

Of course, the mere fact that the Pali discourses make these claims about the Buddha and his teachings doesn’t mean that they’re true. But they do pose a challenge: Can you prove that they’re not? If, in the Buddha’s words, you’re not looking for heartwood, and would rather see the discourses simply as old texts circumscribed by the horizons of your views of language and history, you’re free to ignore their challenge.

But if you *are* looking for heartwood, for something of essence, then you’d be wise to respond to the challenge posed by the Buddha in the only way appropriate: by putting the Dhamma to the test in your own life. This means opening yourself to the possibility that essentialism is not always a fallacy, and that the Dhamma just might have an essence transcending your sense of self and the world. Only by widening your horizons will you have any chance of seeing whether there’s more to that essence than mere words.