

The Not-self Discourse

July 30, 2021

In the full moon in July, we commemorate the Buddha's first sermon—Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion—not only because was this the Buddha's first teaching, but also because, at the conclusion of the sermon, one of the five brethren, who were his audience, gained the Dhamma eye and became the first member of the noble Sangha. The texts tell us that in the days following, the Buddha taught more Dhamma to the rest of the five brethren so that ultimately all five of them had attained the Dhamma eye.

Then the Buddha gave his second sermon, at least the second one recorded. We don't know what he taught the others in the meantime. The second sermon focuses on the topic of not-self. It was because of this sermon that all five of them became arahants. So their awakening was no longer partial. It was full. We're not sure exactly how many days after the full moon he gave this talk, but we might as well commemorate it tonight. It was about this time of year that he gave it.

And it's good to reflect on it. Unlike his later talks, where he usually starts with a question, here he starts with a statement: "Form is not self." He makes the same statement about the rest of the five aggregates: feeling, perceptions, fabrications, and consciousness. You might wonder why he brings up the topic of not-self. After all, all five of the brethren had attained the Dhamma eye, and one of the consequences of that attainment is that you let go of identity views—views in which you define yourself either as an aggregate, as the owner of the aggregate, as *in* the aggregate, or as having the aggregate in you. Yet, it turns out, there's still some unfinished business around the topic of not-self.

Sometimes you hear it said that stream entry is when you see that there is no self, but the fact that the Buddha had to give this talk to the five brethren shows that that's not true. The reason comes in another sutta, where a non-returner, a monk named Ven. Khemaka, explains what it's like to have abandoned identity views but not yet to have abandoned conceit. He says that even though you don't identify with any of the five aggregates as "I am this," still there's a lingering sense of "I am" around the five aggregates. In other words, when you let go of identity views, you let go of the "this" in "I am this," leaving a lingering sense of "I am."

The image Ven. Khemaka gives is of washing clothes. Even though the dirt is out, there's still the lingering smell of the detergent in the cloth. You put the clothes away in a hamper, and eventually the smell of the detergent goes away. In the meantime, it's still lingering around the cloth. In the same way, even when you

gain the Dhamma eye, there's still a sense of "I am" lingering around the five aggregates. So that's what the Buddha had to get his listeners to let go of.

He starts by saying with each aggregate: "If this really were your self, then it wouldn't lead to disease. You'd be able to say with regard to each aggregate: Let it be this way, let it not be that way." Now, to some extent, you *can* control the aggregates, but there's a lot that you can't. When the body gets sick, it doesn't ask permission. When your feelings turn from pleasure to pain, they don't ask permission. Your perceptions and thoughts can turn on you, and even your consciousness of good things passes away.

So the first argument is that these things don't lie under your control. The argument about control shows up only a few more times in the Canon. There's one great passage where a professional debater is coming to attack the Buddha on the question of whether the five aggregates are self. The debater claims that all activities have to be based on taking the aggregates as self. But, as the Buddha points out, "Kings control their property. Kings control their kingdoms, right?" The professional debater, of course, goes along with him, because he wants to appeal to the kings. In fact, he adds that it's right that kings control their kingdoms.

Then the Buddha goes on to say, "Kings say that this should be done, that shouldn't be done. But how about your body? Can you say it shouldn't grow old, it shouldn't get sick, and it shouldn't die?" The debater knows that he's already been beaten. That's another case where the Buddha uses the argument based on control, but it's pretty rare.

Much more common is the questionnaire that he then gives to the five brethren, which gets repeated many, many times throughout the Canon. In the case of each aggregate: "Is it constant or inconstant?" "It's inconstant." "That which is inconstant, is it easeful or stressful?" "Stressful." And then, "Is it appropriate to claim of that anything that's inconstant and stressful: 'This is me, this is myself, this is what I am'?" "No." Notice, he's not getting the five brethren to come to the conclusion that there is no self. He's simply making the point that each of the aggregates is not worthy of calling a self.

The question of whether there is or is not a self gets put off to the side. Just focus on the aggregate. But why is it important to focus on the aggregates? Because in the first sermon, the Buddha had already identified the aggregates, when you cling to them, as suffering. And one of the ways in which you cling, of course, is through your sense of self. In fact, all the other forms of clinging can be directly related to that sense of self. So in line with the four noble truths, the main topic of the first talk, he wants the five brethren to see that these are not worth

clinging to. They're not worth craving. Wherever there's craving and clinging for the aggregates, there's suffering.

Then the Buddha goes on to expand the range of the discussion. In the beginning he had them focus on the aggregates in the present. But then he says goes on to say that any instance of the aggregates, past, present or future, near or far, refined or coarse: All of them should not be seen as myself.

This is an interesting move, and very few people have noticed what he's done.

He starts out by focusing on the present moment. Then he has the brethren extend their minds everywhere they can think of: anyplace in time, past, present, or future; anyplace in space, near or far. The point being that you could say, "Well, what I'm holding on to right here and now is not good, but maybe there's something else out there that I could hold on to someday that wouldn't have these drawbacks." So here the Buddha's asking the brethren to reflect that everything out there in all the dimensions of space and time is just the same kind of aggregates.

There's a passage elsewhere where he says that when you recollect your past lives, that's all you recollect: aggregates. The recollection itself is aggregates, the things you're recollecting are aggregates, and they're all passing away, passing away. You can't go back and latch on to them. And no matter what you might gain in the future, it would be the same sort of thing. You can't really legitimately latch on to any aggregate anywhere at all.

It's in this point that the Buddha's reflection becomes overwhelming. There's no place to hang on. At all. Now, it depends on the listeners how far they're willing to follow the Buddha here, if they're still willing to let go, let go, let go of everything that they can cast the mind to, seeing that the aggregates are not worth clinging to, not worth even craving to begin with. When you can do that, that's how there's awakening to another dimension. As long as you're holding on to anything, even your concept of that further dimension—which is what you experience in stream entry, or when gaining the Dhamma eye—there's going to be suffering. Even that you have to let go of.

So when there's no place for the mind to focus its desires, this realization undercuts all possible craving, because as the Buddha said in the definition of craving, it delights here, delights there, focuses here, focuses there. It always has a place, always has a location, whether physical or mental. The purpose of the questionnaire is to deprive the mind of any possible location in which craving can land.

Then, when you let go all around, the Buddha says you're released everywhere. An interesting concept. The mind is usually focused someplace. It has a location—

if not a physical location, then a mental location. But here you're trying to deprive it of any possible location at all. This is how the five brethren became awakened.

Over the years, the Buddha gave the same questionnaire to others. In some cases, such as the case of the debater, people would listen to it and it would go right past them. Other people would listen to it and gain the Dhamma eye. Other people would listen to it and gain full awakening. It all depended on how thoroughly his listeners were able to let go, how willing they were to cast their minds not only on the present moment, but also in all directions in space and time, and see that there's no place worth going. That's when they'd be willing to let go of all idea of place.

In the case of the five brethren, the conclusion of the second sermon says that through non-clinging all five gained release.

Again, it wasn't an issue of coming to the conclusion that there is no self. It was simply gaining release through not clinging to anything. That's the logic of the not-self teaching. It deprives you of places to cling, and it does that because, when you see things in terms of the four noble truths, you see that the clinging is suffering, and that you cling because of your craving. When you can undo the craving, then there's release from clinging and suffering. And that release is unassailable.

So it's in the light of the third noble truth—that suffering ends when craving ends—that this questionnaire makes a lot of sense. Otherwise, the questionnaire would be cutting the knees out from under you and giving you nowhere to go. If you don't see things in terms of the four noble truths, that prospect would be scary. But within those terms, the Buddha's saying that if you learn how not to *want* to go anywhere—present or past or future, near or far—that's when something really good opens up.

So it's good to commemorate the second sermon because it reminds us that the Buddha's teachings are effective. When you practice in line with them, they can promise something really good.

Other people have benefitted from them over the years. And we have every right to benefit from them as well. It's just a question of what you're going to continue to hold on to. As long as the path hasn't been completed, you hold on to the path. First you've got to learn how to let go of everything except the path, and then when that's done, you can focus on your attachment to the path. When you can let that go, then your letting-go is all around. You're released everywhere.

So look at your attachments right now, to see which ones are really worth holding on to in the light of what can happen when you can let go. This is why, even though there's no formal holiday associated with this event, it's a good one to

keep in mind every year—and, of course, to keep in mind every day as you keep on practicing.