

“No-Self” 01-08-2024

Tonight I'm going to talk about the Buddhist concept of “no-self” (“*anatman*” in Sanskrit, or “*muga*” in Japanese). There are what's called the three marks of existence or the three seals of Buddhism. These are three central concepts that any Buddhist teaching is going to have. They are impermanence (“*anitya*”), dissatisfaction (“*duhkha*”), and selflessness or “*anatman*”. When you hear people say, “In Buddhism there is no self,” it could be kind of confusing because—here we are! But it doesn't need to be confusing.

We can look at the Buddha's teachings as a reaction to the world that he lived in. That world was pre-Hindu and the Upanishads and the Vedic texts were the common world-view. I'll quote from Rupert Gethin's book “The Foundations of Buddhism” (pgs. 133-134) to give some background:

“The Buddhist critique of the notion of self or *atman* is rooted in a specific historical context and initially directed towards particular understandings of the notion of self. [...] The standard term that the Upanishads use for the self in its ultimate nature is *atman*. [...] This ultimate metaphysical self is the unchanging constant underlying all our various and unstable experiences. As such it is indestructible and ultimately unaffected by any specific experience and quite beyond suffering [...]. Furthermore the immortal indestructible *atman* that is the ultimate self is, according to the early Upanishads, to be identified with the underlying ground of all reality known as *brahman*. In the final analysis I am not something different from the underlying ground of the universe itself. This is the famous Upanishadic equation of *atman* and *brahman*.”

So that was the worldview that the Buddha lived in. But his teaching was “*AN-atman*”, which means *no* permanent, unchanging, indestructible self. When that gets translated into English it is often translated as just “no self”, but there's more to it than that. I'll read from what Gombich has to say (in “What the Buddha Thought” pg. 9):

“It will be easiest to grasp my argument if I come straight to the main point, and say baldly that all the fuss and misunderstanding can be avoided if one inserts the word ‘unchanging’, so that the two-word English phrases become ‘no unchanging self’ and ‘no unchanging soul’. I shall explore the matter in detail later in the book, but here it suffices to say that for the Buddha's audience *by definition* the word *atman* referred to something unchanging; in that linguistic environment, to add a word meaning ‘unchanging’ would have been redundant. Thus, there are several ways of expressing this doctrine clearly and accurately in English. One can say, for example, ‘There is nothing in living beings that never changes’, or ‘There is no unchanging essence in living beings.’”

You often hear Buddhism talked about as the middle way. There are two meanings of the middle way. It can refer to the Noble 8-fold Path and how best to live one's life, and it also has a

metaphysical meaning referring to the middle way between eternalism and annihilationism. Eternalism means that there's a permanent, discrete "me" that is forevermore, and annihilationism, nihilism or materialism means that the individual will end at death and disappear completely with no causal continuity whatsoever. So the middle way is between those two. I will read the next part from Gombrich (pg. 10):

"The most basic point of the Buddha's teaching that we have so far displayed is that everything in our lives changes: that most of us have no experience of anything unchanging. [...] But is change random? Surely not. Even if we and everything around us change all the time, life could not go on if we didn't recognize continuities at every step. The change, in other words, is not random. The Buddha axiomatized this in the proposition that nothing exists without a cause.

Another, simpler way of saying that all phenomena exhibit non-random change is to say that *everything is process*. That is indeed, in my view, the Buddha's position."

So there's nothing that doesn't change. Who we are is constantly changing. But it's not random, it's not like who I am today disappears and somebody else appears in my place tomorrow. There's a continuity because of what I do—my actions. And not just what I do, but all the other conditions and causes that make up my life. So a very simple way to say that is, "it's a process." That we are an ongoing unfolding, ever opening and blooming, blossoming process. So that is really what I wanted to say. I don't want to talk too much. But I think this is important because we've all grown up with a Judeo-Christian background even if we aren't that specifically, it's our cultural milieu. And whether we like it or not, whether we ascribe to it or not, that's our background, our world-view. And that is very similar to the Vedic explanation of self, that there is a soul, there's a permanent unchanging soul. And so what happens is people come to the practice, and it's a physical practice that you can take up, and it's easy to do that with unexamined assumptions about your worldview. And after you do the practice for a while, things will not quite line up. And that's fine up to a point—until it's not. This is why I want to make these concepts accessible and stress their importance. Often meditation is presented as a form of self-help, as a way to improve yourself. And that's true, that is a huge aspect of it. But if that is removed from this kind of conceptual framework, it can only go so far, and there's the chance it will be misconstrued entirely and actually become an obstacle to the path, rather than a step along the path. You can end up further reifying and concretizing your habitual sense of self, rather than challenging it and deeply looking into it.

Another way of talking about the Buddhist concept of self is "dependent origination" and the principle of causality, which the Buddha expressed with the famous saying: "When this is, that is. From the arising of this comes the arising of that. When this isn't, that isn't. From the cessation of this comes the cessation of that." Things arise interdependently. And this process is explained in great detail with the teaching of the twelve link chain of dependent origination. We won't get into that now, maybe another time. But there is a place on this chain of becoming where volition enters into it, and the outcome can be influenced. And that's important because, there are causes and conditions, there's this constant unfolding, but we ourselves are part of the

causes and conditions of our own unfolding. We have volition and we can make certain choices about what we do and how we do things. We can practice, and we can change. We can influence the direction of the change.

One last thing about self and no-self is the idea of “two truths”, that there is a relative truth and an absolute truth. This is important when it comes to talking about self because if, as we’ve said, there's no unchanging self, then who am I to be having volition and doing something? Another way to say it would be “provisional self”. That who we are is a provisional self. We've arisen in this form for the time being for this one purpose, to play a role, to be who we are for now. And that's going to change, and that's fine. But that doesn't mean that we aren't who we are right now, even if it is provisional or relative. In the absolute sense, if you dismantle that provisional self, there's nothing there—other than the amalgamation of the causes and conditions that have come together to make me, Genryo, or Dad or whoever I am, whatever role I'm playing right then. But even as this provisional, relative self, we have the opportunity to hear these teachings, and to make choices; to do the physical work of practice, see into the true nature of self, and put an end to suffering. Or we can go the other way, and continue to reinforce our habits and misconceptions endlessly, with no hope of addressing the root cause of suffering.