

The Characteristic of Non-Self

Anattalakkhaṇa sutta

In the second discourse following his enlightenment, the Anattalakkhaṇa sutta¹ (“Discourse on the Characteristic of Non-Self”), the Buddha set forth another of the core tenets of his teachings, the absence of a permanent substrate—a Self—that, unchanging, journeys from lifetime to lifetime as the core element of human personality and identity. Were there to be such a “Self,” he says, it would be permanent, not lead to affliction and sorrow, and amendable to our control. He applies these three criteria to each of the five skandhas in turn. Since he finds these factors do not apply to any of them, and since the skandhas are all and only the components of human personality, he concludes that there is nothing whatsoever that we can point to and say, “This is mine; I am this; this is my Self.”

Like virtually all texts claiming to be discourses of the Buddha, the sutta (Skt. sūtra) opens with Ānanda’s declaration, “Thus have I heard,” thereby asserting that he had been present at the sermon and could vouch for the authenticity of what follows as the words of the Buddha. In its repetitions (indicated here by ellipses points) and use of set phrases, the discourse—which was captured in writing only several centuries after the event—is clearly not a transcription of natural speech. Like all such texts, it is the product of a long history of oral recitation and chanting, in which the message has been recast in standardized formulas to aid in memorization.

Thus have I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling at Varanasi in the Deer Park at Isipatana. There the Blessed One addressed the *bhikkhus*² of the group of five thus: “Bhikkhus!”

“Venerable sir!” those *bhikkhus* replied. The Blessed One said this:

“*Bhikkhus*, form³ is nonself. For if, *bhikkhus*, form were self, this form would not lead to affliction, and it would be possible to have it of form: ‘Let my form be thus; let my form not be thus.’ But because form is nonself, form leads to affliction, and it is not possible to have it of form: ‘Let my form be thus; let my form not be thus.’

¹ This is the text of the second sermon as it was understood and transmitted in the Theravāda tradition. The text was written in Pāli, the canonical language of that school but not the language spoken by the Buddha. Clearly an early work, it was transmitted orally for several centuries following the death of the Buddha and was not committed to writing until perhaps the first century BCE, by which time, obviously, it had undergone significant redaction in order to aid in memorization and chanting.

² *Bhikkhus* (Skt. *bhikṣu*) are renunciants who have left the homeless life to pursue liberation and have “taken refuge” in the Buddha. The Buddhist community was too young at the time of this sermon for there as yet to be permanent abodes, e.g., monasteries, for the disciples, but in later years *bhikkhu* will mean precisely those who have taken monastic vows as prescribed in the Vinaya, the rules governing monastic life.

³ Here begins an analysis of the five *skandhas*: form, feelings, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness. These five constituents together comprise the person. Because in our ignorance we mistakenly take the *skandhas* for a permanent “Self,” and thus engender attachment and clinging to things that are “mine,” the *skandhas* are often referred to as the “Five Groups of Grasping.”

“Feeling is nonself . . . Perception is nonself . . . Volitional formations are nonself . . . Consciousness is nonself. For if, *bhikkhus*, consciousness were self, this consciousness would not lead to affliction, and it would be possible to have it of consciousness: ‘Let my consciousness be thus; let my consciousness not be thus.’ But because consciousness is nonself, consciousness leads to affliction, and it is not possible to have it of consciousness: ‘Let my consciousness be thus; let my consciousness not be thus.’

“What do you think, *bhikkhus*, is form permanent or impermanent?”

“Impermanent, venerable sir.”

“Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?”

“Suffering, venerable sir.”

“Is what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine, this I am, this is my self’?”

“No, venerable sir.”

“Is feeling permanent or impermanent? . . . Is perception permanent or impermanent? . . . Are volitional formations permanent or impermanent? . . . Is consciousness permanent or impermanent?”

“Impermanent, venerable sir.”

“Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?”

“Suffering, venerable sir.”

“Is what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine, this I am, this is my self’?”

“No, venerable sir.”

“Therefore, *bhikkhus*, any kind of form whatsoever, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, all form should be seen as it really is with correct wisdom thus: ‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’

“Any kind of feeling whatsoever . . . Any kind of perception whatsoever . . . Any kind of volitional formations whatsoever . . . Any kind of consciousness whatsoever, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, all consciousness should be seen as it really is with correct wisdom thus: ‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’

“Seeing thus, *bhikkhus*, the instructed noble disciple experiences revulsion toward form, revulsion toward feeling, revulsion toward perception, revulsion toward volitional formations, revulsion toward consciousness. Experiencing revulsion, he becomes dispassionate. Through

dispassion his mind is liberated. When it is liberated there comes the knowledge: 'It's liberated.' He understands: 'Destroyed is birth, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more for this state of being.'"

That is what the Blessed One said. Elated, those *bhikkhus* delighted in the Blessed One's statement. And while this discourse was being spoken, the minds of the *bhikkhus* of the group of five⁴ were liberated from the taints by nonclinging.

[translated from the Pāli by Bhikkhu Bohdi]

⁴ The five original disciples of the Buddha.