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Part I

EARLY BUDDHIST TEACHINGS

MARIA HEIM

We begin with selections taken from the early Buddhist scriptures as they were recorded in the corpus of teachings preserved by the Theravada branch of Buddhism in a language called Pali. These teachings must be placed within the larger philosophical context of ancient India, where philosophers debated the nature and existence of the “self” (*atman*), a metaphysical core of the person that is the unitary and unchanging witness underneath the fluctuations of ordinary experience. Unlike the early Hindu texts known as the Upanishads, which posited and developed this idea, the Buddha emphatically rejected any notion of an unchanging self or essence to a person. The Buddha also rejected the notion of a soul, such as that posited by the Jain tradition. It is clear that the matter was hotly contested in ancient India.

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The early scriptural passages describe how the Buddha, in dialogues with his monastic disciples at various locales in his teaching career, denied that there is any enduring self or soul that exists apart from the ever-changing flow of phenomena that we experience and that constitute what it is to be a person. To be sure, humans experience a great deal of continuity, and the intuition of that continuity as being more or less stable is what gives rise to a sense of selfhood in the first place. But when the flow of experience is actually analyzed into its constituent parts, we find only changing and conditioned phenomena, not permanent and unchanging essences or cores. As our first selection puts it in an exchange of the Buddha with his close disciple, Ananda, our sensory experience of the world is “empty” of essence: neither the eyes with which we see, nor their visual objects, nor the act of visual contact between them has an unchanging essence or selfhood. None of our sensory experience is essential and enduring because it is highly conditioned by myriad factors that themselves come and go. In this sense, the world of our experience—that is, the only world we know—is empty of essences.

There are other ways to examine human experience besides analysis of sensory experience. Another classic Buddhist analysis disaggregates the human person into five “clusters” of phenomena, momentary phenomena that can themselves be

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further analyzed. Where Descartes divided persons into mind and body, Buddhists have found the five-cluster analysis to be more nuanced and metaphysically plausible, and therefore more useful. The five analytical categories are *bodily experience* (that is, how we experience the physical world), *perceptions* (which include sensation and naming what we experience), *feelings* (the hedonic valences of experience), *habitual traits* (the many ways our thoughts, dispositions, personalities, memories, motivations, and so on get put together), and *consciousness* (the fact of being aware).

The Buddha claims that close empirical examination will show that there is no permanent self over and above these collections of phenomena, and that none of them constitutes the self since none contains anything permanent and unchanging either. None of these changing clusters of phenomena examined separately is what we mean when we speak of “I,” “mine,” or “myself,” and together they account for the entirety of human experience. The next several passages included here suggest that when wise people similarly explore and analyze their experience as it occurs in these different modalities, they will agree with the Buddha that no essential core or self exists.

We find the five clusters vividly evoked in similes. Moment-by-moment bodily experience and feelings are like lumps of foam and water bubbles

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in their hollow and fleeting insubstantiality. A moment of perception is like a mirage in the desert, rising up one moment and fading the next. The habitual traits that make up our dispositions, thoughts, personalities, imaginations, memories, and ways of constructing reality are like the tightly packed sheaths of leaves that coil around one another to make the stem of the plantain plant, a stem that looks like a tree trunk but has no central core of heartwood. And any moment of consciousness is like a magician's trick or illusion, producing a partial and fleeting cognizance that appears to grasp reality, but that changes in the next moment.

Given that any notion of a permanent unchanging essence of a person dissolves under analysis, the Buddha then had to explain why it is that we have such a strong sense of "I," and a robust intuition of a stable self. He argues that such a notion of self is a construct, what he calls "constructing an 'I,' constructing 'mine,' and a tendency toward conceit." Built into language itself is this construct of "I" and "mine," pronouns that are probably needed at some level to get by day-to-day, but that are "conceits" that mask the myriad changing phenomena that constitute us.

Our final selection in this first section suggests that these constructs cause us anxiety as we grasp onto the things of the world, things that are inevi-

EARLY BUDDHIST TEACHINGS

tably impermanent and contingent on other things, and thus not lastingly attainable. Such external things, if conceived as ultimate enduring entities, do not actually exist. We are bound to lose them and feel loss and disappointment. In addition, we grasp onto states internal to us as if they will endure even after death, though all empirical evidence suggests that these are as unstable as anything else. Better to unshackle oneself from our obsessions of enduring selfhood in the first place, and free oneself of the anxiety and misery that attachment to such constructs entails. Disenchantment with the illusions we create leads to freedom from suffering and anxiety, and when such freedom is perfectly realized, the person achieves “nirvana,” complete liberation from all greed, hatred, delusion, and suffering.

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Atha kho āyasmā ānando ... pe ... bhagavantam etadavoca—suñño loko, suñño loko ti, bhante, vuccati. Kittāvatā nu kho, bhante, suñño lokoti vuccatīti? Yasmā ca kho, ānanda, suññaṃ attena vā attaniyena vā tasmā suñño lokoti vuccati. Kiñca, ānanda, suññaṃ attena vā attaniyena vā? Cakkhu kho, ānanda, suññaṃ attena vā attaniyena vā. Rūpā suññā attena vā attaniyena vā, cakkhuviññāṇaṃ suññaṃ attena vā attaniyena vā, cakkhusamphasso suñño attena vā attaniyena vā... pe ... yampidaṃ manosamphassapaccayā uppajjati vedayitam sukhaṃ vā dukkhaṃ vā adukkhamasukhaṃ vā tampi suññaṃ attena vā attaniyena vā. Yasmā ca kho, ānanda, suññaṃ attena vā attaniyena vā, tasmā suñño lokoti vuccatīti. (*Samyutta* iv.54)

Sāvattthinidānaṃ. Taṃ kiṃ maññatha, bhikkhave, rūpaṃ etaṃ mama, esoham asmi, eso me attāti samanupassathāti? No hetam, bhante. Sādhu,

THE WORLD IS EMPTY

Discourses of the Buddha

THE WORLD IS EMPTY

Then Venerable Ananda approached the Buddha and said: “Sir, it is said that ‘the world is empty, the world is empty.’ In what respect, sir, is it said that the world is empty?”

“Ananda, it is said that the world is empty because it is empty of self or anything belonging to a self. What, Ananda, is empty of self or anything belonging to a self? The eye is empty of self or anything belonging to a self. Ananda, a visual object is empty of self or anything belonging to a self; visual awareness is empty of self or anything belonging to a self; and visual contact is empty of self or anything belonging to a self. Moreover, whatever is experienced, whether pleasant, painful, or neither pleasant nor painful, arises by means of contact with the mind and is empty of self or anything belonging to a self. Ananda, because it is empty of self or anything belonging to a self, the world is said to be empty.”

THIS IS NOT MINE; THIS IS NOT WHAT I AM;
THIS IS NOT MY SELF

This occurred at Savatthi. “Monks, what do you think: do you consider bodily experience in this way: ‘This is mine, this is what I am, this is my self?’”

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bhikkhave! Rūpaṃ, bhikkhave, netamaṃ mama, nesohamasmi, na meso attā ti evametamaṃ yathābhūtaṃ sammappaññāya daṭṭhabbaṃ. Vedanaṃ... saññaṃ... saṅkhāre ... viññānaṃ ‘etaṃ mama, esohamasmi, eso me attāti samanupassathāti? “No hetamaṃ, bhante. Sādhu, bhikkhave! Viññānaṃ, bhikkhave, netamaṃ mama, nesohamasmi, na meso attā ti evametamaṃ yathābhūtaṃ sammappaññāya daṭṭhabbaṃ... pe ... evamaṃ passaṃ... pe ... kataṃ karaṇīyaṃ, nāparaṃ itthattāyāti pajānātīti.
(*Samyutta* iii.165–166)

Sāvatthinidānaṃ. Nāhaṃ, bhikkhave, lokena vivadāmi, lokova mayā vivadati. Na, bhikkhave, dhammavādī kenaci lokasmiṃ vivadati. Yaṃ, bhikkhave, natthisammataṃ loke paṇḍitānaṃ, ahampi taṃ natthīti vadāmi. Yaṃ, bhikkhave, atthisammataṃ loke paṇḍitānaṃ, ahampi taṃ atthīti vadāmi.

Kiñca, bhikkhave, natthisammataṃ loke paṇḍitānaṃ, yamahaṃ natthīti vadāmi?
Rūpaṃ, bhikkhave, niccaṃ dhuvamaṃ sassataṃ

THE WISE AGREE

“No, sir.”

“Very good, monks! Bodily experience should not be considered in this way: ‘This is mine, this is what I am, this is my self,’ and instead it should be seen with correct understanding as it really is. What about perception, feelings, habitual traits, and consciousness? Do you regard them in this way: ‘This is mine, this is what I am, this is my self?’”

“No, sir.”

“Very good, monks! Consciousness should be seen with correct understanding as it really is: ‘This is not mine, this not what I am, this is not my self.’ Seeing in this way, what must be done is done, and one understands that existence has nothing further.”

THE WISE AGREE

This occurred at Savatthi. “Monks, I do not quarrel with the world. It is the world that quarrels with me. Monks, one professing the Teaching does not quarrel with anyone in the world. When the wise agree that something does not exist in the world, I too assert that it does not exist. And when the wise agree that something exists in the world, then I too assert that it exists.

“And what, monks, do the wise in the world agree does not exist, that I also assert does not exist?”

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avipariṇāmadhammaṃ natthisammatam loke paṇḍitānaṃ; ahampi taṃ natthīti vadāmi. Vedanā... saññā... saṅkhārā... viññāṇaṃ niccaṃ dhuvam sassataṃ avipariṇāmadhammaṃ natthisammatam loke paṇḍitānaṃ; ahampi taṃ natthīti vadāmi. Idaṃ kho, bhikkhave, natthisammatam loke paṇḍitānaṃ; ahampi taṃ natthīti vadāmi.

Kiṅca, bhikkhave, atthisammatam loke paṇḍitānaṃ, yamaṃ atthīti vadāmi? Rūpaṃ, bhikkhave, aniccaṃ dukkhaṃ vipariṇāmadhammaṃ atthisammatam loke paṇḍitānaṃ; ahampi taṃ atthīti vadāmi. Vedanā aniccā... pe ... viññāṇaṃ aniccaṃ dukkhaṃ vipariṇāmadhammaṃ atthisammatam loke paṇḍitānaṃ; ahampi taṃ atthīti vadāmi. Idaṃ kho, bhikkhave, atthisammatam loke paṇḍitānaṃ; ahampi taṃ atthīti vadāmi.

Atthi, bhikkhave, loke lokadhammo, taṃ tathāgato abhisambujjhati abhisameti; abhisambujjhitvā abhisametvā taṃ ācikkhati deseti paññapeti paṭṭhapeti vivarati vibhajati uttānīkaroti.

Kiṅca, bhikkhave, loke lokadhammo, taṃ tathāgato abhisambujjhati abhisameti, abhisambujjhitvā abhisametvā ācikkhati deseti paññapeti paṭṭhapeti vivarati vibhajati uttānīkaroti? Rūpaṃ, bhikkhave, loke lokadhammo taṃ tathāgato abhisambujjhati abhisameti. Abhisambujjhitvā abhisametvā ācikkhati deseti paññapeti paṭṭhapeti vivarati vibhajati uttānīkaroti.

THE WISE AGREE

Monks, the wise in the world agree that bodily experience that is permanent, stable, eternal, and not subject to change does not exist, and I too assert that it does not exist. So too the wise in the world agree that feeling, perception, habitual traits, and consciousness that are permanent, stable, eternal, and not subject to change do not exist, and I too assert that these do not exist. Monks, the wise in the world agree that this does not exist, and I too assert that it does not exist.

“And what, monks, do the wise in the world agree does exist, that I also assert exists? Monks, the wise in the world agree that bodily experience that is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change exists, and I too assert that it exists. So too the wise in the world agree that feeling and the rest, up through consciousness, that are impermanent, suffering, and subject to change exist, and I too assert that they exist. Monks, the wise in the world agree that this exists, and I too assert that it exists.

“Monks, in the world there occurs a mundane phenomenon. The Buddha realizes and understands it. Having realized and understood it, he describes, teaches, defines, points out, reveals, analyzes, and explains it.

“And what mundane phenomenon occurs in the world that the Buddha realizes and understands, and having realized and understood, describes,

EARLY BUDDHIST TEACHINGS

Yo, bhikkhave, tathāgatena evaṃ ācikkhiyamāne desiyamāne paññapiyamāne paṭṭhapiyamāne vivariyamāne vibhajiyamāne uttānikariyamāne na jānāti na passati tamahaṃ, bhikkhave, bālaṃ puthujjanaṃ andhaṃ acakkhukaṃ ajānantam apassantam kinti karomi! Vedanā, bhikkhave, loke lokadhammo ... pe ... saññā, bhikkhave ... saṅkhārā, bhikkhave ... viññāṇaṃ, bhikkhave, loke lokadhammo taṃ tathāgato abhisambujjhati abhisameti. Abhisambujjhitvā abhisametvā ācikkhati deseti paññapeti paṭṭhapeti vivarati vibhajati uttānikaroti. (*Samyutta* iii.138–140)

Ekaṃ samayaṃ bhagavā ayujjhāyaṃ viharati gaṅgāyanadiyā tīre. Tatra kho bhagavā bhikkhū āmantesi—

Seyyathāpi, bhikkhave, ayaṃ gaṅgā nadī mahantaṃ phenapiṇḍaṃ āvaheyya. Tameṇaṃ cakkhumā puriso passeyya nijjhāyeyya yoniso upaparikkheyya. Tassa taṃ passato nijjhāyato yoniso upaparikkhato rittakaññeva khāyeyya, tucchakaññeva khāyeyya,

A LUMP OF FOAM

teaches, defines, points out, reveals, analyzes, and explains? Bodily experience, monks, is a mundane phenomenon in the world that the Buddha realizes and understands, and having realized and understood, describes, teaches, defines, points out, reveals, analyzes, and explains.

“Monks, while the Buddha is describing, teaching, defining, pointing out, revealing, analyzing, and explaining in this way, whoever does not know and does not see is a foolish ordinary person, blind, sightless, unseeing, and unknowing. What have I to do with them? And so it is too, in the cases of feeling as a mundane phenomenon in the world, as well as perception, habitual traits, and consciousness. The Buddha realizes and understands these, and having realized and understood, describes, teaches, defines, points out, reveals, analyzes, and explains them.”

A LUMP OF FOAM

On one occasion, the Buddha was staying at Ayujjha on the banks of the river Ganges. There he said to the monks:

“Monks, suppose this river Ganges was carrying along a large lump of foam and a man with good eyesight were to see it, reflect on it, and thoroughly investigate it. Seeing it, reflecting on it,

EARLY BUDDHIST TEACHINGS

asārakaññeva khāyeyya. Kiñhi siyā, bhikkhave, pheṇapiṇḍe sāro? Evameva kho, bhikkhave, yaṃ kiñci rūpaṃ atītānāgatapaccuppannaṃ... pe ... yaṃ dūre santike vā taṃ bhikkhu passati nijjhāyati yoniso upaparikkhati. Tassa taṃ passato nijjhāyato yoniso upaparikkhato rittakaññeva khāyati, tucchakaññeva khāyati, asārakaññeva khāyati. Kiñhi siyā, bhikkhave, rūpe sāro?

Seyyathāpi, bhikkhave, saradasamaye thullaphusitake deve vassante uduke udakabubbulaṃ uppajjati ceva nirujjhati ca. Tameva cakkhumā puriso passeyya nijjhāyeyya yoniso upaparikkheyya. Tassa taṃ passato nijjhāyato yoniso upaparikkhato rittakaññeva khāyeyya, tucchakaññeva khāyeyya, asārakaññeva khāyeyya. Kiñhi siyā, bhikkhave, udakabubbule sāro? Evameva kho, bhikkhave, yā kāci vedanā atītānāgatapaccuppannā... pe ... yā dūre santike vā taṃ bhikkhu passati nijjhāyati yoniso upaparikkhati. Tassa taṃ passato nijjhāyato yoniso upaparikkhato rittakaññeva khāyati, tucchakaññeva khāyati, asārakaññeva khāyati. Kiñhi siyā, bhikkhave, vedanāya sāro?

Seyyathāpi, bhikkhave, gimhānaṃ pacchime māse ṭhite majjhanhike kāle marīcikā phandati. Tameva cakkhumā puriso passeyya nijjhāyeyya yoniso upaparikkheyya. Tassa taṃ passato nijjhāyato yoniso upaparikkhato rittakaññeva khāyeyya, tucchakaññeva khāyeyya ... pe ... kiñhi

A LUMP OF FOAM

and thoroughly investigating it, it would appear to him to be empty, hollow, and without essential substance. For what substance could there be in a lump of foam, monks? Similarly, any bodily experience that a monk sees, reflects upon, and thoroughly investigates, whether past, present, or future, far or near, and so on, will appear to him, having seen it, reflected on it, and thoroughly investigated it, to be empty, hollow, and without substance. For what essential substance can there be in bodily experience?

“Monks, suppose that in autumn when it is raining and big drops of rain are falling, a water bubble appears on the water and then dissolves. A man with good eyesight would see it, reflect on it, and thoroughly investigate it. Seeing it, reflecting on it, and thoroughly investigating it, it would appear to him to be empty, hollow, and without essential substance. For what substance could there be in a water bubble, monks? Similarly, any feeling that a monk sees, reflects upon, and thoroughly investigates, whether past, present, or future, far or near, and so on, will appear to him, having seen it, reflected on it, and thoroughly investigated it, to be empty, hollow, and without substance. For what essential substance can there be in a feeling?

“Monks, suppose that in the last month of summer at the time of the midday hour, a shimmering

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siyā, bhikkhave, marīcikāya sāro? Evameva kho, bhikkhave, yā kāci saññā... pe

Seyyathāpi, bhikkhave, puriso sārattiko sāragesī sārariyesanaṃ caramāno tiṇhaṃ kuṭhāriṃ ādāya vanaṃ paviseyya. So tattha passeyya mahantaṃ kadalikkhandhaṃ ujumṃ navamṃ akukkukajātaṃ. Tamenamṃ mūle chindeyya; mūle chetvā agge chindeyya, agge chetvā pattavaṭṭiṃ vinibbhujeyya. So tassa pattavaṭṭiṃ vinibbhujanto pheggumpi nādhigaccheyya, kuto sāraṃ. Tamenamṃ cakkhumā puriso passeyya nijjhāyeyya yoniso upaparikkheyya. Tassa taṃ passato nijjhāyato yoniso upaparikkhato rittakaññeva khāyeyya, tucchakaññeva khāyeyya, asārakaññeva khāyeyya. Kiñhi siyā, bhikkhave, kadalikkhandhe sāro? Evameva kho, bhikkhave, ye keci saṅkhārā atītānāgatapaccuppannā... pe ... ye dūre santike vā taṃ bhikkhu passati nijjhāyati yoniso upaparikkhati. Tassa taṃ passato nijjhāyato yoniso upaparikkhato rittakaññeva khāyati, tucchakaññeva khāyati, asārakaññeva khāyati. Kiñhi siyā, bhikkhave, saṅkhāresu sāro?

Seyyathāpi, bhikkhave, māyākāro vā māyākārantevāsī vā catumahāpathe māyaṃ vidamseyya. Tamenamṃ cakkhumā puriso passeyya nijjhāyeyya yoniso upaparikkheyya. Tassa taṃ passato nijjhāyato yoniso upaparikkhato rittakaññeva khāyeyya, tucchakaññeva khāyeyya, asārakaññeva

A LUMP OF FOAM

mirage appears. A man with good eyesight would see it, reflect on it, and thoroughly investigate it. Seeing it, reflecting on it, and thoroughly investigating it, it would appear to him to be empty, hollow, and without essential substance. And so it is with perception, monks. For what essential substance can there be in a perception?

“Monks, suppose a man wandering around seeking heartwood, desiring heartwood, and searching for heartwood would take up an ax and enter a forest. There he would see a large straight and young plantain trunk without shoots. He would chop it down at the root, and having cut it at the root, would lop off the top. Lopping off the top, he would separate the leaf sheaths. Continuing to separate the sheath of leaves, he would never find sapwood, to say nothing of heartwood. A man with good eyesight would see this, reflect on it, and thoroughly investigate it. Seeing this, reflecting on it, and thoroughly investigating it, it would appear to him to be empty, hollow, and without essential substance. For what substance could there be in a plantain trunk, monks? Similarly, any habitual traits that a monk sees, reflects upon, and thoroughly investigates, whether past, present, or future, far or near, and so on, will appear to him, having seen it, reflected on it, and thoroughly investigated it, to be

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khāyeyya. Kiñhi siyā, bhikkhave, māyāya sāro?
Evameva kho, bhikkhave, yaṃ kiñci viññāṇaṃ
atītānāgatapaccuppannaṃ... pe ... yaṃ dūre santike
vā, taṃ bhikkhu passati nijjhāyati yoniso upaparik-
khati. Tassa taṃ passato nijjhāyato yoniso upaparik-
khato rittakaññeva khāyati, tucchakaññeva khāyati,
asārakaññeva khāyati. Kiñhi siyā, bhikkhave,
viññāṇe sāro?

Evam passam, bhikkhave, sutavā ariyasāvako
rūpasmimpi nibbindati, vedanāyapi ... saññāyapi ...
saṅkhāresupi ... viññāṇasmimpi nibbindati. Nib-
bindaṃ virajjati; virāgā vimuccati. (*Samyutta*
iii.140–141)

Sāvatthinidānaṃ. Atha kho āyasmā rāhulo yena
bhagavā tenupasaṅkami; upasaṅkamtivā... pe ...
ekamantaṃ nisinno kho āyasmā rāhulo bhagavan-

HOW TO KNOW AND SEE

empty, hollow, and without substance. For what essential substance can there be in habitual traits?

“Monks, suppose a magician or a magician’s apprentice were to perform an illusion at a crossroads, and a man with good eyesight were to see it, reflect on it, and thoroughly investigate it. Seeing it, reflecting on it, and thoroughly investigating it, it would appear to him to be empty, hollow, and without essential substance. For what substance could there be in an illusion, monks? Similarly, any moment of consciousness that a monk sees, reflects upon, and thoroughly investigates, whether past, present, or future, far or near, and so on, will appear to him, having seen it, reflected on it, and thoroughly investigated it, to be empty, hollow, and without substance. For what essential substance can there be in consciousness?

“Seeing in this way, monks, a learned and worthy disciple grows disenchanted with bodily experience, feeling, perception, habitual traits, and consciousness. Being disenchanted, he becomes dispassionate, and rid of passion, he is freed.”

HOW TO KNOW AND SEE

This occurred at Savatthi. The Venerable Rahula approached the Buddha, honored him, sat down to one side, and asked him this: “Sir, how should one

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taṃ etadavoca—kathaṃ nu kho, bhante, jānato
kathaṃ passato imasmiñca saviññāṇake kāye
bahiddhā ca sabbanimittesu ahañkāramamañkāra-
amānānusayā na hontīti?

Yaṃ kiñci, rāhula, rūpaṃ atītānāgatapaccuppan-
naṃ ajjhataṃ vā bahiddhā vā oḷārikaṃ vā sukhu-
maṃ vā hīnaṃ vā paṇītaṃ vā yaṃ dūre santike vā,
sabbaṃ rūpaṃ netam mama, nesohamasmi, na
meso attā'ti evametam yathābhūtaṃ sammap-
paññāya passati. Yā kāci vedanā ... yā kāci saññā... ye
keci sañkhārā... yaṃ kiñci viññāṇaṃ atītānāgatapac-
cuppannaṃ ajjhataṃ vā bahiddhā vā... pe ... sabbaṃ
viññāṇaṃ 'netam mama, nesohamasmi, na meso
attāti evametam yathābhūtaṃ sammappaññāya
passati. Evaṃ kho, rāhula, jānato evaṃ passato
imasmiñca saviññāṇake kāye bahiddhā ca sabbani-
mittesu ahañkāramamañkāramānānusayā na hontīti.
(*Samyutta* iii.135–136)

Evaṃ vutte, aññataro bhikkhu bhagavantaṃ
etadavoca—siyā nu kho, bhante, bahiddhā asati
paritassanā'ti? Siyā, bhikkhūti—bhagavā avoca. Idha

LETTING GO OF ANXIETY

know and how should one see both this body with its consciousness and all external appearances, so that constructing an ‘I,’ constructing ‘mine,’ and the tendency toward conceit do not occur?”

“Rahula, one sees with correct understanding, as it really is, bodily experience of any kind—whether past, present, or future, internal or external, gross or subtle, base or exalted, far or near—that is, all bodily experience, in this way: ‘This is not mine, this is not what I am, this is not my self.’ And one sees with correct understanding as it really is any kind of feeling, any kind of perception, any kind of habitual traits, and any kind of consciousness, whether past, present, or future, internal or external, and so on, indeed, all consciousness as: ‘This is not mine, this is not what I am, this is not my self.’ In this way, Rahula, one knows and sees both this body with its consciousness and all external appearances in such a way that constructing an ‘I,’ constructing ‘mine,’ and the tendency to conceit do not occur.”

LETTING GO OF ANXIETY

A certain monk asked the Buddha this: “Sir, can there be anxiety about something external that does not actually exist?”

EARLY BUDDHIST TEACHINGS

bhikkhu ekaccassa evaṃ hoti—ahu vata me, taṃ vata me natthi; siyā vata me, taṃ vatāhaṃ na labhāmīti. So socati kilamati paridevati urattāliṃ kandati sammohaṃ āpajjati. Evaṃ kho, bhikkhu, bahiddhā asati paritassanā hotīti.

Siyā pana, bhante, bahiddhā asati aparitassanāti? Siyā, bhikkhūti—bhagavā avoca. Idha bhikkhu ekaccassa na evaṃ hoti—ahu vata me, taṃ vata me natthi; siyā vata me, taṃ vatāhaṃ na labhāmīti. So na socati na kilamati na paridevati na urattāliṃ kandati na sammohaṃ āpajjati. Evaṃ kho, bhikkhu, bahiddhā asati aparitassanā hotīti.

Siyā nu kho, bhante, ajjhattaṃ asati paritassanāti? “Siyā, bhikkhūti—bhagavā avoca. Idha, bhikkhu, ekaccassa evaṃ diṭṭhi hoti—so loko so attā, so pecca bhavissāmi nicco dhuvo sassato avipariṇāmadhammo, sassatisamaṃ tatheva ṭhassāmīti. So suṇāti tathāgatassa vā tathāgatasāvakassa vā sabbesaṃ diṭṭhiṭṭhānādhiṭṭhānapariyuṭṭhānābhinivesānu-sayānaṃ samugghātāya sabbasaṅkhārasamathāya sabbūpadhipaṭinissaggāya taṇhākkhayāya virāgāya nirodhāya nibbānāya dhammaṃ desentassa. Tassa evaṃ hoti—ucchijjissāmi nāmassu, vinassissāmi nāmassu, nassu nāma bhavissāmīti. So socati kilamati paridevati urattāliṃ kandati sammohaṃ āpajjati. Evaṃ kho, bhikkhu, ajjhattaṃ asati paritassanā hotīti.

LETTING GO OF ANXIETY

“There can be, monk,” replied the Buddha. “In such a case, one thinks, ‘Oh, I had it! Oh, I don’t have it! Oh, it might be mine! Oh, I am not getting it!’ One then sorrows, feels distress, wails, beats one’s breast, cries, and falls into confusion. In this way, monk, there is anxiety about something external that does not really exist.”

“Then can there be a lack of anxiety, sir, about something external that does not actually exist?”

“There can be, monk,” replied the Buddha. “In such a case, one does not think, ‘Oh, I had it! Oh, I don’t have it! Oh, it might be mine! Oh, I am not getting it!’ And so one does not sorrow, feel distress, wail, beat one’s breast, cry, or fall into confusion. In this way, monk, there is a lack of anxiety about something external that does not really exist.”

“Sir, can there be anxiety about something internal that does not actually exist?”

“There can be, monk. In this case, one holds the view: ‘That which is the self is the world. After death I will be permanent, stable, eternal, and not subject to change, and I will remain so forever and ever.’ This one listens to the Buddha or a disciple of the Buddha professing the Teaching for the removal of all speculative positions, standpoints, obsessions, convictions, and tendencies, for the ceasing of all habitual traits, for giving up all attachments, for

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Siyā pana, bhante, ajjhattaṃ asati aparitassanāti?
Siyā, bhikkhūti bhagavā avoca. Idha, bhikkhu,
ekaccassa na evaṃ diṭṭhi hoti—so loko so attā, so
pecca bhavissāmi nicco dhuvo sassato avipa-
riṇāmadhammo, sassatisamaṃ tatheva ṭhassāmīti.
So suṇāti tathāgatassa vā tathāgatasāvakassa vā
sabbesaṃ diṭṭhiṭṭhānādhiṭṭhānapariyutṭhānābhini-
vesānusayānaṃ samugghātāya sabbasaṅkhārasamat-
hāya sabbūpadhipaṭinissaggāya taṇhākkhayāya
virāgāya nirodhāya nibbānāya dhammaṃ desen-
tassa. Tassa na evaṃ hoti—ucchijjissāmi nāmassu,
vinassissāmi nāmassu, nassu nāma bhavissāmīti. So
na socati na kilamati na paridevati na urattāḷim
kandati na sammohaṃ āpajjati. Evaṃ kho, bhikkhu,
ajjhattaṃ asati aparitassanā hoti. (*Majjhima*
i.136–137)

LETTING GO OF ANXIETY

eliminating all craving, and for the sake of dispassion, ceasing, and nirvana. And this occurs to them: ‘So I will be cut down, I will be destroyed, I will cease to exist!’ One then sorrows, feels distress, wails, beats one’s breast, cries, and falls into confusion. In this way, monk, there is anxiety about something internal that does not really exist.”

“Then can there be a lack of anxiety, sir, about something internal that does not actually exist?”

“There can be, monk,” replied the Buddha. “In such a case, one does not hold the view that ‘That which is the self is the world. After death I will be permanent, stable, eternal, and not subject to change, and I will remain so forever and ever.’ This one listens to the Buddha or a disciple of the Buddha professing the Teaching for the removal of all speculative positions, standpoints, obsessions, convictions, and tendencies, for the ceasing of all habitual traits, for giving up all attachments, for eliminating all craving, for the sake of dispassion, ceasing, and nirvana. And it does not occur to them that ‘I will be cut down, I will be destroyed, I will cease to exist!’ One then does not sorrow, feel distress, wail, beat one’s breast, cry, and fall into confusion. In this way, monk, there is no anxiety about something that does not exist internally.”

EARLY BUDDHIST TEACHINGS

Related Commentaries

WHY A PERSON IS LIKE A CHARIOT

Although the following selection is not considered by most Theravada Buddhist traditions to be a canonical text, it is among the very best known Buddhist passages in the world. The celebrated *Questions of Milinda* and the chariot metaphor it contains are widely cited in introductory textbooks on Buddhism and philosophical texts everywhere. The dating of the text is uncertain, but scholars think it came together in the early centuries of the Common Era. The text depicts a dialogue between a Bactrian Greek king, Milinda (thought to be Menander, a king ruling over a province in the wake of Alexander the Great's advance into the northwestern region of the Indian subcontinent), and a Buddhist monk, Nagasena. While scholars are not certain that the text is based on an actual historical event, the legend of the debate has traveled far and wide and evokes the fascinating possibility of an ancient encounter between West and East.

King Milinda comes to the discussion as a skeptic. In the classic Indian model of a philosophically curious and learned king, he has initiated a debate with the wise monk Nagasena in his quest for wisdom. Our selection takes up the moment when the

WHY A PERSON IS LIKE A CHARIOT

debate is first joined. Nagasena introduces himself by denying himself. That is, he notes that his name is Nagasena, but that “Nagasena” is just a name, and underneath there is no “person” to be found, where “person” here means an enduring selfhood. Milinda is taken aback. How can there be no person present? What accounts for the sense of personhood on which everyday interactions rely? How can there be any sense of moral responsibility if there is no continuous moral agent? And why would a monk like Nagasena engage in religious practice and development if there is no underlying self that he is developing?

Nagasena replies with the famous chariot metaphor, whereby he shows how a person is like a chariot in that it can be broken down into its component parts without finding a substantial, enduring essence or self. None of the parts has an essential self, and a chariot is just a collection of parts arranged in a certain way, to which we affix the conventional label “chariot.” That we give this name to this arrangement does not entail that it has an enduring essence. Like a chariot, a person is a collection of five clusters, the bodily experiences, perceptions, feelings, habitual traits, and consciousness that we have been considering, and the name we give to any particular collection of these is just a conventional label.

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Atha kho Milindo rājā yenāyasmā Nāgaseno tenupa-sankami, upasankamitvā āyasmatā Nāgasenena saddhiṃ sammodi, sammodanīyaṃ kathaṃ sārāṇīyaṃ vītisāretvā ekamantaṃ nisīdi. Āyasmā pi kho Nāgaseno paṭisammodi, yeneva rañño Milindassa cittaṃ ārādhesi. Atha kho Milindo rājā āyasmantaṃ Nāgasenaṃ etad-avoca: Katham bhadanto ñāyati, kinnāmo si bhante ti. Nāgaseno ti kho ahaṃ mahārāja ñāyāmi, Nāgaseno ti maṃ mahārāja sabrahmacārī samudācaranti, api ca mātāpitaro nāmaṃ karonti Nāgaseno ti vā Sūraseno ti vā Vīraseno ti vā Sihaseno ti vā, api ca kho mahārāja sankhā samaññā

WHY A PERSON IS LIKE A CHARIOT

We include a few additional pages from this text that describe the human person as a continuous line of development from a tender baby to an old person, ever changing within a single causal sequence of events over time, but lacking a single enduring essence underlying the changes. Nagasena makes use of other analogies: just as a lamp flame glowing all night is neither the same nor different over time, a person over time is neither the same nor entirely different. Much as milk turns to curds, curds to butter, and butter to ghee, an individual human life is a constant stream of causally connected changes, neither the same nor entirely different over time.

* * *

Then King Milinda approached Venerable Nagasena, and drawing near, addressed him cordially, exchanged polite and friendly greetings, and sat down to one side. Nagasena pleased King Milinda with his cordial greetings in reply. Then King Milinda asked: “How are you known, sir, what is your name?”

“I am known as Nagasena, great king, and my fellow monks call me Nagasena. Parents give names like Nagasena, Surasena, Virasena, or Sihasena, and yet this ‘Nagasena’ is just a word, an appellation, a designation, a common usage—that is, it is a mere name and no person is found here.”

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paññatti vohāro nāmamattaṃ yadidaṃ Nāgaseno ti,
na hettha puggalo upalabbhatīti. Atha kho Milindo
rājā evamāha: Suṇantu me bhonto pañcasatā Yonakā
asīti sahaṣṣā ca bhikkhū, ayaṃ Nāgaseno evam-āha:
na hettha puggalo upalabbhatīti, kallaṇ-
nu kho tadabhinanditun-ti. Atha kho Milindo rājā āyas-
mantaṃ Nāgasenaṃ etadavoca: Sace bhante
Nāgasena puggalo nūpalabbhati, ko carahi tumhākaṃ
cīvara-piṇḍapāta-senāsanagilānapaccayabhesajja-
parikkhāraṃ deti, ko taṃ paribhuñjati, ko sīlaṃ
rakkhati, ko bhāvanam-anuyuñjati, ko magga-
phala-nibbānāni sacchikaroti, ko paṇaṃ hanati, ko
adinnaṃ ādiyati, ko kāmesu micchā carati, ko musā
bhaṇati, ko majjaṃ pivati, ko pañcānantariyakam-
maṃ karoti; tasmā natthi kusalaṃ, natthi akusalaṃ,
natthi kusalākusalānaṃ kammānaṃ kattā vā kāretā
vā, natthi sukaṭadukkaṭānaṃ kammānaṃ phalaṃ
vipāko, sace bhante Nāgasena yo tumhe māreti
natthi tassāpi paṇātipāto, tumhākaṃpi bhante
Nāgasena natthi ācariyo natthi upajjhāyo na-tthi
upasampadā; Nāgaseno ti maṃ mahārāja sabrah-
macārī samudācarantīti yaṃ vadesi, katamo ettha
Nāgaseno, kinnu kho bhante kesā Nāgaseno ti. Na hi
mahārājāti. Lomā Nāgaseno ti. Na hi mahārājāti.
Nakhā-pe-dantā taco maṃsaṃ nahāru aṭṭhī aṭṭhi-
miñjā vakkhaṃ hadayaṃ yakanāṃ kilomakāṃ
pihakāṃ papphāsaṃ antaṃ antaṅgaṃ udariyaṃ