



Not Even One's Self is Belonging to Oneself

In the Dhammapada there is a profound verse:

"I have children, I have wealth,"
(thinking) thus the ignorant man is afflicted,
for even his own self is not owned by himself,
so how his children, how his wealth?" (Dhp 62)

which brings us straight to the core of the Buddha's teaching: nothing whatsoever can be held onto as one's self. If we can't own and control even what is most close, dear and personal to us, our very selves, how can the other things closest to us, our families and belongings be so?

Why is our self not belonging to ourselves? Because everything, our whole world, is impermanent, unstable. What we take as "my self" is wholly dependent upon various impermanent, unstable conditions. According to the Buddha, all conditioned phenomena have the nature to arise, change, and pass away. Children are born, grow up, and go away. Expensive cars are bought, become rusty and defective after some years, and then are sold or discarded. The newest model of mobile phone or laptop is outdated in a year or two, if it does not break down or get stolen earlier. All worldly happiness is based on unstable things, and therefore this happiness eventually will pass away and give way to suffering.

The wealth gained through hard work, the children raised, houses built; the positions, status and repute we have gained, our bodies—all these things that we so wholeheartedly identify with will change and part from us, or we will part from them. Therefore, from the ultimate viewpoint of the Dhamma, they are not leading to true happiness and are not of ourselves.

To give an example of children bringing affliction and suffering: in Sri Lanka many young people, in search of greener pastures, emigrate. Their parents raise them with much concern and expense and then have to let go of them. The children give up their Sinhala nationality and become citizens of foreign nations. Their grandchildren are complete foreigners. Expatriate Sinhalese parents sometimes complain that their children don't behave like Sinhalese children, but what else can be expected if their children don't grow up in Sri Lanka?

The wealth, the belongings that are amassed are not of oneself, not "mine." Tax officers, greedy children and spouses, jealous relatives, thieves, dishonest employees, internet scammers, economical crises, wars, terrorists, termites, cockroaches and rats, etc.—all can take away one's wealth. One always has to guard one's wealth and worry about it. And then, finally at death everything that one has amassed and has been able to hold on to has to be left behind.

Spouses and lovers are not self too: they will change in appearance; they are not as nice as one perceived them to be; they might run away with another; and they will get sick and die. The pretty young women or the handsome young man so craved for will after some years gain weight, get wrinkled skin and lose beauty. Attractive spouses are looked at by other men and women, and are often a source of jealousy and concern. When in love, only the nice aspects of the partner are perceived and focussed on, but when the strong feelings of romantic love fade, and the unpleasant habits of the partner become apparent, great disillusionment often takes place. This is why so many marriages fall apart after a few years, or if they don't, then it is often

for sake the children or out of respect for social and religious conventions. As an Italian proverb about marriage goes, “one year of fire, forty years of ashes.”

The Buddha said that he only teaches suffering and its cessation. Here are two abridgements of discourses given to laypeople which show how attachment to children and family gives rise to unhappiness.

Once King Pasenadi was dismissive when he heard that the Buddha had said that sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair are born from those who are dear. His wife, Queen Mallikā, after consulting with the Buddha, asked the king about his daughter: “Is Princess Vajirī dear to you?” The king agreed. Then the queen asked: “If the princess were to become ill or die, would sorrow and despair arise in you?” The king agreed again. Then the Mallikā said, “This is why the Buddha said that sorrow and despair are born from those who are dear.” The queen continued to ask the king about his other wife, his son, herself, and his country, and the king realized that the Buddha was right and highly praised his wisdom. (Piyajātika Sutta, MN 87)

Another time the householder Bhadraka asked the Buddha if he could teach him about the arising and cessation of suffering. The Buddha said that if he were to teach Bhadraka with reference to the past and future that it would lead to doubt, so he would teach him suffering and its cessation right there itself. He asked Bhadraka whether there were people in his village whose death and misfortune would cause him suffering. Bhadraka replied, “Yes.” Then the Buddha asked the opposite, whether there were people whose death and misfortune would not cause him suffering. Bhadraka again agreed. The Buddha asked why there was a difference. Bhadraka replied that he was attached to the people, particularly his son and wife, whose misfortune would cause him suffering but not to the others. The Buddha then told Bhadraka to methodically apply this same principle, which is seen, known and immediately attained and penetrated in the present, to the past and future. “Whatever suffering arose in the past and future, all that is rooted in desire, conditioned by desire, for desire is the root of suffering.” (Bhadraka Sutta, SN 42:11)

Returning to the Dhammapada verse, it continues by stating that the ignorant one (or “foolish one,” *bālo*), that is, one who does not understand and practise the teaching of the Buddha, is afflicted by suffering when he grasps children and wealth as “mine.” The ignorant person is blinded by deluded, distorted perceptions of beauty, permanence, happiness and self, and will suffer as a result. One suffers because one’s perceptions do not accord with actual reality. As the Buddha says in the Udāna (Ud 2.8):

The disagreeable in an agreeable guise,
The non-dear in the guise of the dear,
Suffering in the guise of happiness—
Overwhelm the one who is negligent.

The Buddha does not deny that there are beauty and happiness in the world but he says that the causes for these are impermanent, and that when one does not clearly see that they have arisen dependent upon unstable conditions and therefore will change and fall away, then one will be afflicted. Only when one sees things as they are—as impermanent, suffering, and not-self—then one will realize the true happiness of freedom from suffering. Only Nibbāna, the highest happiness, is unconditioned and therefore stable and lasting. But this highest happiness, like worldly wealth, has to be brought about by the right means, by effort. In the Āhara Sutta in the Saṃyutta Nikāya, the Buddha teaches that wisdom and liberation of the mind (*vijjāvimutti*) are due to a sequence of nourishing conditions (*āhāra*): associating with good people, hearing the True Dhamma, faith, wise reflection, mindfulness and awareness, restraint of the senses, right conduct, the four foundations of mindfulness, and the seven factors of awakening.

Turning to the findings of modern Western science, according to cognitive psychotherapy, depression—which is the most prevalent mental disease these days, reaching epidemic proportions in many developing countries—can be caused by unrealistic expectations about such things as married life and gaining wealth. These unrealistic expectations can lead to low self-esteem. In order to overcome the resultant depression, patients are taught to change their thought patterns and perceptions and make their minds more balanced and realistic. This psychotherapy is not new at all; it was already taught by the Buddha 2500 years ago. The Buddha taught in his very first discourse that not getting what one wishes is suffering. He described the distorted perceptions mentioned above. He also taught three kinds of self-esteem: “I am better,” “I am worse,” and “I am equal,” which are also all causes of suffering. However, in contrast to cognitive psychotherapy, which aims at alleviation through lessening irrational ideas and perceptions, the Buddha taught the full eradication of the suffering through developing deep calm and insight. When one perceives with wisdom that all things that one builds oneself on, and gets self-esteem from, are not as permanent, pleasant and self as they first appear to be, but, upon wise reflection, are seen as bound to fall apart and therefore leading to affliction, then the mind will not regard them as self and ultimately will dissociate itself from everything and be liberated.

Many people strive hard to become attractive like the movie stars they see on TV, or to have an expensive car and fancy phone like their neighbours and colleagues. They are influenced by advertisements with beautiful models and stars encouraging them to buy things they don't really need. When they can't achieve what they want, many feel that they are unsuccessful and become depressed. Ten years ago there were no mobile phones in Sri Lanka, and no one had to worry about earning the money for them, but now everyone needs to have one and needs to work harder—and to complain harder about “rising costs of living” to their employers—to get and keep it, which adds to mental suffering. Wisely reflecting on the real need and purpose of what one strives for will lead to happiness. When seeing pictures of beautiful movie stars and when reading about the financial successes of millionaires, instead of focussing on what, at first, appears to be their happiness and beauty, one may wisely reflect on the emptiness and suffering in the lives of these apparently “successful” people. Many movie and pop stars and millionaires go through divorces, are addicted to alcohol and other drugs, are suffering from stress, depression and other psychological problems, have to undergo painful plastic surgery operations to stay beautiful, have to compete with others to stay at the top, have heart attacks, etc. Furthermore, the pictures of the beautiful people one sees in magazines are not real in the first place. Besides the thick layers of make-up, nowadays pictures are manipulated with photographic computer software so that even a person considered quite ugly can be made beautiful. There is this appropriate verse in the Udāna (Ud 7.10):

The world is bound by delusion, it is regarded as if it were fine,¹
The fool bound to his acquisitions, enveloped by darkness,
Regards it as if it is eternal, but for one who sees, there is nothing.

The Buddha's emphasis on seeing impermanence, suffering and not-self might seem negative, pessimistic and depressing, but this is not so at all. On the contrary, the Buddha is a realist and a true optimist because realistically seeing things as they actually are leads to true happiness, the happiness of liberation. Those who are just looking for worldly pleasures, status and material gain in life are the ones who will suffer and get depressed because of their unrealistic perceptions and expectations. Contemplating impermanence is not something recommended just for monks and nuns. In the Aṅguttara Nikāya (AN 5:57) the Buddha says: “A man or

¹ The word *bhabbarūpa* or *bhavyarūpa* means suitable, becoming, capable, handsome, right. It is mentioned in the Kālāmasutta as one of the criteria not to be used for accepting a teaching.

woman, whether lay or renunciant, should frequently reflect: `There will be separation and absence from all those who are dear and pleasing to me.'”

—Bhikkhu Nyanatusita

What Is the Real Sal Tree?

The sāla or sal tree is an important tree in Buddhism. The twin sal trees in the sal wood of the Mallans near Kusināra dropped their fragrant flowers upon the Buddha while he was lying on his deathbed (D II 137-8, S I 157, A II 79, Ud 37, Th 948, Ap I 101). According to the commentary to the Majjhima Nikāya (M-a IV 182), the Buddha was born in the Sal wood park at Lumbini (lumbinisālavanuyyāna); his mother giving birth while standing and holding the branch of a sal tree.



The important Mūlapariyāyasutta (M I 1), was taught by the Buddha while sitting at the root of the royal sal tree in the Subhaga grove at Ukkaṭṭha (M I 1 ff.). In the Gosiṅga Sutta, Sāriputta Thera described the sal wood of Gosiṅga as follows: “The Gosiṅga wood is delightful, the night is moonlit, the sal trees are all in blossom; it is like heavenly scents are wafting. What kind of Bhikkhu could illuminate this grove?” (M I 212). The Caṅkī Sutta describes how the Brahmin Caṅkī and other Brahmins of Opasāda village visited the Buddha while he was staying in the nearby sal wood, called the “Gods’ wood” (M II 164). The Brahmin Navakammika went to the Buddha while he was sitting meditating at the root of a sal tree in a sal wood (S I 179/SN 7:17). The Gavesīsutta (A III 214–18) was taught in a large sal wood that the Buddha noticed while travelling with a big group of monks on a road in the Kosala country.



The previous Buddha Vessabhū attained enlightenment under a great sal tree (D II 4). The tree is also mentioned in the suttas in relation to its wood, used for making boats (A II 201). In the Soṇaka Jātaka the sal is said to be a delightful tree with a straight trunk and leaves with a bluish lustre (J V 251).

The sal tree’s Latin name is *Shorea robusta*. The sal tree belongs to the Dipterocarpaceae family and is related to the hora tree (*Dipterocarpus zeylanicus*) of Sri Lanka. It grows naturally in the foothills of the Himalaya, such as in Terai region of Northern India and Southern Nepal, and also in central India in Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, etc. It can reach 35 meters high with a girth of 2.5m.

Large clusters of small, but pretty, fragrant, drooping white flowers cover the tree in spring, usually in April, depending on the altitude. In dry regions it loses its leaves in the dry season, which lasts from February to April. The seeds are dispersed through helicopter-like fruits. The wood is renowned for its robustness and durability. Being waterproof it is used as an outdoor wood, for railway sleepers, bridges, boats, etc, and also indoor for roof-beams, windows, etc. The resin is used for making wooden boats water proof, as an astringent and detergent medicine, and as an incense. Sal forests are prominent in Indian national parks such as the Bandhavgarh and Kanha tiger reserves in Madhya Pradesh.

In areas with regular forest fires, this fire-resistant tree grows in open stands with no other kinds of trees and no or little undergrowth, which would explain why the Buddha and arahants chose it as a convenient place to stay. The following description from the World Wildlife Fund describes the sal forest well:

“In the lowland parts of the Terai, you can sometimes end up in a forest comprising entirely of one tree species, the majestic sal tree. Standing in a sal forest is a completely different experience from the nearby diverse and dense jungles. The tree trunks are long and straight, and there is plenty of light. During spring, while the sal trees are in blossom, the air is filled with a strong, sweet and pleasant smell. Sal is a hardwood species that is unusually resistant to rotting and to attacks of hungry insects.”

Captain Forsyth, in his High land of Central India, described the Sal woods of the Kanha reserve as follows:

“Throughout the summer, the glossy dark-green foliage of sal reflects the light in a thousand tints, and first when all other vegetation is at its worst, a few weeks before the gates of heaven are opened in the annual monsoon, the sal selects its opportunity of bursting into a fresh garment of the brightest and softest green.”



In Sri Lanka, Thailand and other Buddhist countries there is confusion as to the identity of the sal tree. What is called “sal” in Sri Lanka and Thailand is a beautiful tree with many large fragrant pink flowers and large, melon-size woody round fruits hanging from its trunk



and branches. This is not *Shorea robusta*; instead, it is the cannonball tree, *Couroupita guianensis*, native to the jungles of Northeastern South America. It was introduced to Asia in colonial times, probably as a curiosity by the plant loving Victorian British. It is quite a different tree from the sal tree that grows in northern India and Nepal and is not related to it. There are no reports of cannonball trees forming groves and they are not growing in the wild in Asia. It is not possible

to stay under a cannonball tree because of the heavy fruits falling down and the fallen, rotting flowers forming a slippery sludge on the forest floor.



From Impermanence to Liberation

By Bhante Henepola Gunaratana

Buddha's contemporaries like Heraclites saw the impermanence of everything and said that one cannot step into the same river twice. We don't really know anything else they may have said about impermanence, nor do we know what they did with their knowledge of impermanence. Mere theoretical knowledge of impermanence does not do anything for us, unless it is used for some purpose. The ancient Greeks seem to have stopped right there, apparently without knowing what to do with this knowledge.

When I was in the Buddhist Vihara in Washington D.C. there was a little baby boy. He was only ten days old. His father brought him to the Vihara very often. This very tiny little baby appeared to be very happy to see me. When he began to crawl he crawled towards me and affectionately stretched his hands towards me to be lifted and be carried. He grew up like my own child. One day, when he was almost ten years old, and I returned to the Vihara from one of my trips, he came to me and wanted to hug me. I told him, "You are big, and you are unhuggable." The boy said: "Bhante, let us face facts. Everything is impermanent. I am grown up and you cannot hug me any more."

Not only philosophers and scientists but also even this little boy knows that everything is impermanent.

Mathematics

Almost twenty-five or thirty years ago a very good friend of mine took a walk with me. He was a very serious meditator. So, whenever he and I were together, we would discuss something related to meditation. During this particular walk I said to him that everything is impermanent. Being a mathematician he asked me, "What about mathematics? Is mathematics impermanent too?"

I was quiet for a while, thinking how best to answer his question, when he said, "I don't think of mathematics as impermanent."

Ever since then, I have been thinking about it. I always thought he was right. "Yes mathematics is something permanent."

Then one day this thought occurred to me again during my meditation paying attention to impermanence. I saw that impermanence does not exist in isolation by itself. There must be some thing to be impermanent. If there is nothing there is no impermanence. In the absence of anything, impermanence does not make any sense. Then I asked myself "How about mathematics? Can mathematics exist by itself without any object to work with?"

Just as impermanence does not make any sense without any object, mathematics does not make any sense if there are no objects in the entire universe for the mathematics or mathematicians to work with. If there are no beings to make use of the application of mathematics, then all the theories of mathematics don't make any sense.

As long as objects exist, impermanence exists. Similarly, as long as objects exist, mathematics exists. Because the objects are impermanent, the mathematics that uses those impermanent objects is also impermanent. So, from that perspective, mathematics cannot be permanent.

We can all understand impermanence superficially. But deep down in our subconscious mind a sense of permanence is lurking. So we keep patching up our broken teeth, wrinkled dry skin, brittle nails, grey hair, hunched backs, weak eyes, impaired hearing, becoming sick, breaking bones and many other things caused by impermanence in this fragile body. Similarly our moods, our feelings, our thoughts, our perceptions, and our memories all go through many changes in every moment. We take medicines, see mental health specialists, and do many other things, including meditation, to correct our minds. While we are doing all this, impermanence is still going on crushing everything inside our body and mind very systematically. While all the organs, all the cells, nervous system, quality of blood, capacity of oxygen content in the lungs and the bone structure are going through this very rapid and unmistakable change, no matter how much we patch up on the surface and beneath the skin, impermanence is working its course very consistently underground or inside the body and mind. Nothing on earth, no science, no technology, no magic can help to stop this change. It keeps burning everything systematically.

Seeing impermanence is the key that opens our mind to see suffering, and non-self. The moment we understand this very clearly, our mind opens to the fact that things change without leaving a trace behind to trace the path that impermanence has taken. This is called signlessness. This awareness evaporates the desire for anything impermanent. It also evaporates our hatred or resentment from our mind. Then naturally, this clean mind becomes fully aware of not having any immovable mover, which sometimes is called self or soul by some people. This element of Dhamma, this steady intrinsic nature of all, this law of Dhamma is known in Buddhism as emptiness of self. Seeing impermanence with wisdom is the key to nonattachment, cessation and abandonment.

Discovering impermanence the Buddha, independently, without anybody's support, went a few steps further and with his profound wisdom he saw that not only is it impossible for a man to step into the same river twice, but he also saw clearly that the same man cannot step into the same river twice. And yet, even this knowledge doesn't do any service to us.

The Buddha is the only one who saw the connection between impermanence and suffering and the elimination of suffering. He did not try to stop impermanence by attaining enlightenment. He knew that it is an impossible and unattainable goal. So, the Buddha not only saw that everything is impermanent, he also realized that impermanence has a very direct

relationship with suffering. It is not impermanence itself that causes suffering, but the clinging to impermanent things that causes suffering, and by not clinging to impermanent things that suffering can finally be brought to an end.

It is not simply because things are impermanent that we suffer, but it is because of our attachment to impermanent things that we suffer. The Buddha points out in Mahāsuññata Sutta that suffering arises from the attachment to impermanent things.

“I do not see even a single kind of form, Ānanda, from the change and alteration of which there would not arise sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair in one who lusts for it and takes delight in it.” (MN 122)

This passage clearly states that suffering arises from the attachment to form not because the form is impermanent but because we are attached to impermanent form. When we attain full enlightenment we do not suffer. This happens not because we make any impermanent thing permanent. This happens only when we give up our attachment to impermanent things. Impermanent things continue to be impermanent whether we attain enlightenment or not. We don't stop their impermanent nature that exists whether the Buddhas come into existence or not. If impermanence itself causes suffering even after attainment of enlightenment, the enlightened individual would continue to suffer because he or she has not been able to stop impermanence being impermanent. Suffering can be stopped by not being attached to impermanent things, but it is impossible to make impermanent objects permanent.

The nature of the Dhamma

“Bhikkhus, whether Tathāgatas appear or do not appear, there is this established element of Dhamma, this fixed law of Dhamma. All that is conditioned is impermanent. To this a Tathāgata fully awakens and fully understands. So awakened and thus understanding, he announces, points out, declares, establishes, expounds, explains, classifies and clarifies it: all that is conditioned is impermanent.

“Bhikkhus, whether Tathāgatas appear or do not appear, there is this established condition of Dhamma, this fixed law of Dhamma. All that is conditioned is unsatisfactory. To this a Tathāgata fully awakens and fully understands. So awakened and thus understanding, he announces, points out, declares, establishes, expounds, explains, and clarifies it: all that is conditioned is unsatisfactory.

“Bhikkhus, whether Tathāgatas appear or do not appear, there is this established condition of Dhamma, this fixed law of Dhamma. All dhammas are without self. To this a Tathāgata fully awakens and fully understands. So awakened and understanding, he announces, points out, declares, establishes, expounds, explains, and clarifies it: all dhammas are without self.” (A I 286)

“Seeing thus, impermanence, suffering and selflessness of all conditioned things, one becomes disenchanted with everything. Disenchantment leads to dispassion towards everything. With a dispassionate mind one sees cessation of everything. With this insight or wisdom one lets go of attachment. This is how one becomes insightful into reality. Alternately being dispassionate, he liberates himself from suffering. Being liberated, he knows that he is liberated, has ended birth, has lived the noble life, has done what was to be done, and there is nothing more to be done. This means attaining full liberation from suffering begins with perfect awareness of impermanence.

Here we must remember that disenchantment does not mean anything negative. It is the positive and mature attitude of someone who is spiritually grown into spiritual adulthood. The Buddha has given a very meaningful simile of children playing with sand castles on beaches.

While making castles and playing with them children imagine that they are real castles. After a while, they grow tired of playing with these castles. Then they break them and scatter them here and there. Adults watching them playing with the sand castles are amused, reflecting on the nature of the children's minds. Neither the adults nor children are disgusted or disappointed with the sand castles. They simply let the castles go.

Likewise, the attachment to impermanent objects (feelings, perceptions, thoughts and consciousness) is the cause of suffering. Because things are changing without any prior notice, unsatisfactoriness arises. Since there is nothing to stop or control impermanence, the realization arises that there is no self. Seeing with wisdom this entire process, mindful meditators are disenchanted with all conditioned things.

So the Buddha used the knowledge of impermanence to gain liberation from suffering and attain permanent peace. Other philosophers saw impermanence and yet still stayed in saṃsāra. They did not know what to do with the knowledge of impermanence.

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