

09 Insubstantiality

In the last session I spoke about openness, the particular quality of mind needed to fully reflect upon the third characteristic of conditioned existence, insubstantiality, and enter the associated gateway to liberation of emptiness.

Openness *to other individuals* and the difficulties they face in life is an important part of the practice of openness. And that openness combines with sensitivity in order for us to fully appreciate other people's suffering with compassion.

Andrew Olendzki adds that we often ignore how our actions can inflict suffering upon others.

He writes:

“When a resource I consume runs out and I am left wanting more, there is indeed some moment of personal psychological disappointment before I successfully grasp for another helping. But there is also a price being paid somewhere—unseen by me—by someone struggling to provide that resource, and he or she may not be doing so freely, safely, or fairly. And when I turn away from reports of others in pain or need, because paying attention to the details of their situation is a source of unpleasant feelings for me, there is a moment of being uncomfortable before I am able to fasten my mind upon something more pleasant. But the suffering of the other remains, and likely deepens from my inattention...

Duhkha does not only mean that we feel unhappy some of the time. It also means that many of the things we do cause other people to suffer. When actions (or inactions) are tainted with various shades of greed, hatred, and delusion, they cause real harm. In a thoroughly interdependent world, one's own happiness cannot be built successfully upon the suffering of others.”

Olendzki is emphasising that we live in a ‘thoroughly interdependent world’. No one exists completely independently. No one is totally immune to the actions of others. This principle can be extended to all beings and to all of nature. But we don't see this. We lack clarity, awareness of the effects of our actions.

This is an important aspect of ‘insubstantiality’, or anatman, the third characteristic of conditioned existence. When we say that things are insubstantial we mean that they do not exist in their own right, completely independent of anything else. They are interconnected.

But first, let's turn to the meaning of the Buddha's teaching of 'anatman', which I translate as insubstantiality.

At the time of the Buddha a dominant teaching came from the Upanishads, scriptures taught by Brahmins, and associated with the origins of Hinduism.

The Upanishads said that there is an essence of the self that is fixed and immortal. That essence is called 'atman'.

In contrast the Buddha taught:

There is nothing in our experience that has a fixed and independent or separate self-nature.

The Buddha taught that everything in our experience exists in dependence upon conditions which are impermanent and changing.

There is no essence of anything, including the human being, that is fixed and separate and immortal.

This is the central teaching of the Buddha; pratitya samutpada (Sanskrit) or paticcasamuppada (Pali), dependent origination or conditionality.

The Upanishads taught '**atman**', that within a human being there is a fixed and separately existing, immortal essence of self.

Consistent with the teaching of conditionality, the Buddha taught '**anatman**', i.e., that within a human being there is no fixed and separately existing essence of self.

Indeed the Buddha taught that nothing whatsoever in our experience has a fixed and separate self-nature. Everything exists in dependence upon conditions. Everything is subject to change.

The Buddha asks us to examine our experience to see whether what he teaches is true.

The Buddha argues that if the self of atman, as posited by the Brahmins, really existed it would have three qualities; it would not lead to suffering; it would be under your complete control; and it would be permanent.

If the self of atman existed it would exist completely independently of anything else, immune to external influences, and therefore free of suffering, and it would be eternal and unchanging.

The Buddha further argues that if you search everywhere in your personal experience, you will not find Atman, the Self of the Upanishads.

If you examine everything in your experience – your body and sense experiences, feelings of pleasantness and unpleasantness, perceptions, ideas, thoughts, actions, and consciousness – you will find nothing that is permanent, nothing that is under your complete control, and nothing that is not conducive to suffering.

Does this then mean that we do not exist? That we are an illusion?

No, the **person** exists.

A person consists of the different aspects of experience that flow through time bound together in a dynamic bundle.

This dynamic bundle flows through time in dependence upon conditions including, crucially, our volitions, our karmic choices and their consequences.

Each person is a unique flowing bundle of the different aspects of experience. There is continual change but there is also a recognisable continuity.

But an unchanging element, an essence, the real ‘me’, a self in the sense of atman, is simply non-existent.

But, again, there is a person.

Paul Williams writes:

“The Buddha seems to have wanted to deny a particular sort of thing, a Self (Atman), which he saw as being at the root of the suffering of those who are unenlightened..

He did not want to deny the existence of persons.

He was not stating the absurdity that you and me and he himself simply do not exist, and we would all be better off realising this.

Persons exist, but as nothing more than practical ways of speaking about psychophysical bundles.”

I’m stressing this because I think we must be very careful when we talk about ‘no self’, or the ‘self’ as an illusion.

The Buddha’s teaching of anatman was denying the existence of a very particular and limited kind of self. He was simply saying there is no fixed, unchanging, and separate self.

Yes, the idea that there is a fixed and separate self is an illusion. But it's risky to go beyond that statement to saying that the self in any sense is an illusion.

When someone says that the self is an illusion, it's easy to conclude that that nothing exists where we mistakenly believe there to be a self.

But something does exist there. A person exists there, an ever-changing flow of psycho-physical experience.

Or, as Andrew Olendzki says:

“It is not that a self does not exist, it is just that the self is as impermanent, interdependent, and self-less as everything else.”

And this means that the self is open to change and growth. It can grow and change and develop in ways that presently might be unthinkable.

The Buddha's teaching of anatman is a part of the Buddha's teaching on pratitya samutpada.

Pratitya samutpada is often described as the core teaching of the Buddha. In its most succinct form, it can be found in a pithy statement by the Buddha:

“This being, that becomes. With the arising of this, that arises. This not being, that does not become. With the ceasing of this, that ceases.”

(Samyutta Nikaya 12.37)

Pratitya samutpada is translated in several different ways. ‘Dependent origination’, ‘conditioned co-production’, ‘dependent arising’, ‘interdependent origination’, or simply ‘conditionality’.

All phenomena arise and pass away interdependently. This is a law of nature. It's the way things work.

In fact there is no such thing as a ‘thing’! Every ‘thing’ is a part of a ceaseless, changing flow of conditions.

This characteristic of insubstantiality, that nothing exists by itself, that everything exists in dependence upon conditions, operates everywhere we look and experience, including in nature.

Let me give you the example of the so-called ‘wood wide web’.

Science journalist Hasan Chowdhury tells us that the term Wood Wide Web, first popularised by the journal „Nature“, has come to describe the

complex mass of interactions between trees and their microbial counterparts underneath the soil.

Whilst trees may seem the epitome of self sufficiency and independence, in fact anchored to trees and forestry everywhere, and therefore forming them into an interdependent superorganism, is a very intimate relationship between the trees' roots and microbes called mycorrhizal fungi.

Once it was thought mycorrhizal fungi were always harmful to trees, but it's now known they have a mutual bond with tree roots, providing an interdependent, symbiotic connection from which both parties benefit.

Each provides something that the other needs; the fungi have minerals which the tree needs, and the trees have carbon (which is essentially food) which the fungi need.

The trees receive nitrogen for things such as lignin – a component which keep the trees upright, and various other minerals such as phosphorus, magnesium, calcium, copper and more.

In return, the fungi get the sugars they need from the trees' ongoing photosynthesis to energise their activities and build their bodies.

The connection runs so deep that 20-80% of a tree's sugar can be transferred to the fungi, while the transfer of nitrogen to trees is such that without the swap, trees would be very small.

What's more, using the fungal network, it has been documented that trees share food, and not just with trees of the same species, but with trees of all kinds of species, forming a social network such that growth rates for all are positively affected while seedlings face greater chances of survival.

Existing in a network of interdependent relationships, even when a tree dies it continues to give life.

In his book "The Songs of Trees" and in various articles, David Haskell writes about the death of trees.

He writes;

"There is life after death, but it is not eternal. Death does not end the networked nature of trees. As they rot away, dead logs, branches, and roots become focal points for thousands of relationships. At least half of

the other species in the forest find food or home in or on the recumbent [lying] bodies of fallen trees.

In the tropics, soft-wooded trees pyre [incinerate] their bodies in rapid, smokeless blazes of bacteria, fungi, and insects. Their fallen logs seldom last longer than a decade. Tropical trees with denser, heavier wood linger for a half century at most. The process of decay takes much longer in the acid cold of a near-Arctic bog. There a tree measures the river of its afterlife in spoonfuls fed to patient microbes over millennia. Between the extremes of tropics and poles, in the midlatitudes, a downed tree in a temperate forest might live in death as long as it stood in life.

Before its fall, a tree is a being that catalyzes and regulates conversations in and around its body. Death ends the active management of these connections. Root cells no longer send signals to the DNA of bacteria, leaves end their chemical chatter with insects, and fungi receive no more messages from their host. ***But a tree never fully controlled these connections; in life the tree was only one part of its network. Death decenters the tree's life but does not end it.*** [my stress]

The life and death of trees and the wood wide web illustrate the dynamic and open nature of insubstantiality or anatman.

Deep reflection on insubstantiality leads to the gateway to liberation of emptiness or sunyata, the topic of my next talk.