

First Turning

Part One: The Empty Self

1. Introduction

Please be aware that this discussion will be **audio-recorded** and placed on the OzZEN website **Study Guide** along with the text. Therefore, it is implied that you give your consent to be recorded if you participate in the discussion.

I will pause at the end of each paragraph for questions and/or comments, like we do in the reading group on Friday mornings. I prefer a more participatory style of interaction rather than a lecture followed by Q&A. If there are no questions and comments I will read the next paragraph and so on.

This course will be focusing on the progressive stages of insight into Emptiness.¹ Emptiness is probably the most important teaching of Buddhism. “Emptiness” is a translation of the Sanskrit, “sunya”.

Our story starts with the famous The First Turning of the Dharma Wheel Discourse (Dhamma-cakka-pavattana Sutta), where the Buddha introduces us to the realisation of the pervasiveness of dukkha, the origins of dukkha, the

¹ Inspired by a book written by the Tibetan Buddhist monk, from the Karma Kagyu lineage, Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche Gyamtso, K. T. (2016). Progressive Stages of Meditation on Emptiness. Criccieth, Wales, Shrimala Trust.

cessation of dukkha and the path to be followed to the cessation of dukkha. This discourse was immediately followed by the Discourse on the Not-Self or Non-Self Characteristic (Anatta-lakkhana Sutta). As we will discover, this understanding of the “emptiness” of self is crucial to understanding the four truths, and the first level of insight into emptiness.

2. Three Stages in the Process of Understanding

Meditation is the third stage in the development of understanding. The first stage is to listen to or study the teachings, with an open mind. The second stage is to reflect on the teachings in order to clarify their true significance. In the third stage the realisation takes place at the level of our being – not intellectual understanding, but experiential understanding. In a sense this is putting the teachings into practice. Practice in the sense of being the teachings rather than thinking about the teachings (Gyamtsso 2016). As friends together in the dharma we can share our understandings with each other, but ultimately we must all come to our own understanding and realisation – because there are different interpretations of what this understanding and realisation is – as the Buddha said in his final discourse – “be a light unto yourself”! Do not depend on others - What is it ultimately that you *can* depend on?

3. The Buddha's Suffering

- a. The story of Siddhartha Gautama – the Buddha – the awakened one.
- b. At first he was hesitant to teach.
- c. Then he taught for the rest of his life and died without home or family and without having written a word.
- d. The teachings were later written down and formed the suttas and the Vinaya, the monastic rules.
- e. Commentaries on the sutras followed later and became known as the Abhidharma (higher teachings). This was the beginning of Buddhist philosophy and later the treatises followed.
- f. What did he wake up to? (each turning of the wheel will have a different answer).

4. The Four Truths or The Four Practice

Principles: First “Turning of the Dharma Wheel”)

In the first turning he awakens to the four truths, after inquiring into the nature of reality.² The “four” truths are not something you are required to believe, like a religious dogma, they are to be understood, practiced, and realised.

All schools of Buddhism have an allegiance to the four truths, though the precise interpretation of these commitments will differ. In the first turning the Buddha wakes up to the truth of dukkha (suffering). It is always

²The Four Practice Principles are a contemporary re-wording of the four truths.

here but according to the four truths it can also come to an end because it has a cause; hence, if we can free ourselves from the cause, we can free ourselves from dukkha.

- a. The truth of dukkha (suffering). What is this dukkha? It is more than pain:
 - i. Physical and Psychological Pain
 - ii. Change (Impermanence)
 - iii. Causal interdependence (Conditioning, as in karmic consciousness).

Dukkha is universal and all pervasive: “To be human is to live in dukkha” (Garfield 2015, 7-9). Even though the translation of dukkha as suffering, does not do it justice, from now on I will use the word suffering, rather than dukkha, but please bear in mind how all pervasive this suffering is.

- b. The origin of suffering.

Suffering is all pervasive because of ignorance or primal confusion about the true nature of reality: “This confusion, as the great 14th-15th century Tibetan philosopher Tsongkhapa felicitously puts it, is not mere ignorance, but the positive superimposition of a characteristic on reality that it lacks” (Garfield 2015, 9). In the first turning, this is ignorance of the four truths. Because of this ignorance, *tanha* (desire) arises. Desire can take the form of attachment (greed) or aversion (hatred). Desire for existence or non-existence. The source of this desire is ignorance. The good news is, if we can transform ignorance into wisdom, then desire will not arise, it will be extinguished.

So, the core problem is ignorance.³

So, suffering continues to arise because we consistently refuse to see reality the way it really is – it is always changing and there is no such thing as an independent *personal* self that does not change – it is empty of “intrinsic nature” - if there is a self – it is *interdependent* and always changing from moment to moment depending on context – hence if we have not awakened to the four truths, it is a process of ongoing suffering. As we will see below, *the kind of personal self that the Buddha is targeting here is the sense of a separate personal self that “owns” its thoughts and feelings and has some kind of independent agency and control over these thoughts and feelings.* This sense of having a separate personal self or ego-self, *feels* very real and because we consistently fail to see the nature of reality as it really is, as ongoing impermanence and conditioned interdependence, we suffer. One way of understanding “being caught in the self-centred dream” is the never-ending futile effort to control that which is uncontrollable. Suffering comes to an end when we stop imposing or taking our imaginary constructions of reality to be true.

³I do not have time to discuss the chain of dependent origination beginning with ignorance and the ideas of karma and rebirth.

In the first turning suffering is primarily explained by the notion of clinging to the five skandhas:

1. Material form (Pali, Skt. rūpa) consists of the physical elements (solidity, cohesion, heat, and air) that make up the body of a living being, and more subtle processes derived from these.
2. Feeling (Pali, Skt. vedanā) is the quality of experience that is hedonic tone, whether pleasant, painful, or neither. This is not the same as emotion, though it accompanies any emotion or sensory experience.
3. Perception/Conception (Pali saññā] Skt. samjna) is associative knowledge as cognition, mental labelling, interpretation, recognition, how one sees things.
4. Mental Formations/Constructing activities (Pali saṅkhāras, Skt. saṃskāras) are a range of mental responses⁶ to objects, with will or volition (Pali, Skt. cetanā) being the leading one, others being planning, lines of thought, emotions, habits.
5. Sensory or Dependent Consciousness (Pali viññānṃa, Skt. vijñāna) is discriminative consciousness, sensory discernment, awareness of sensory and mental objects, object-processing

intelligence." (from "Buddhist Philosophy: Essential Readings" by William Edelglass, Jay Garfield)

We identify with and mistake the skandhas for an independent personal self, but there is no independent personal self to be found. Mistaking the skandhas for a separate independent personal self is at the core of our ignorance and hence our suffering.

c. Cessation of suffering

Attachment, aversion, and ignorance are the fuel which keeps the fire of suffering burning – once the fuel supply ceases the suffering ceases – in the first turning Nirvana is simply the cessation or extinguishment of suffering. Remembering that suffering is another name for the separate personal self, we could say Nirvana is seeing clearly that an independent, separate, personal self or ego-self is an illusion. The illusion of the separate personal self *is* the process of suffering.

d. The path to the cessation of suffering

The good news is that the mind is not inherently ignorant, hence there is a path leading to the cessation of suffering by cultivating wisdom through the practice of philosophy and meditation and expressing this wisdom through compassionate action in the world. The eightfold path is as follows:

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|---------------------------|--------------|
| i. Right View | (Wisdom) |
| ii. Right Intention | (Wisdom) |
| iii. Right Speech | (Action) |
| iv. Right Conduct | (Action) |
| v. Right Livelihood | (Action) |
| vi. Right Effort | (Meditation) |
| vii. Right Mindfulness | (Meditation) |
| viii. Right Concentration | (Meditation) |

Right View and Right Intention are Wisdom (Prajna): seeing the nature of reality. In one sense, right intention follows on from right view but it is also said that all factors are mutually reinforcing. The next three are Right Actions, which are the foundation of Buddhist ethics. The final three are the factors of Right Meditation: Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration.

5. Emptiness of the Separate Personal Self (Anatta-lakkhana Sutta/Discourse on the Non-Self Characteristic”)

The first stage of the progressive insight into emptiness focuses on the emptiness of self – referred to as “not-self” or “non-self”. However, importantly, this also implies the emptiness of the other. Pause. If we could really get this in our marrow, what a difference it would make!

Tell the story about the rowboat.

In the Discourse on the Non-Self Characteristic, the Buddha defines the five skandhas as **non-self** because they cannot be controlled and they are impermanent and they are therefore a source of suffering if we identify with them. Therefore, he advises that we should observe all the skandhas in the following way: any kind of form, feeling, perception, formation, or sense consciousness should be seen as they really are with the right wisdom, thus:

“this is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self”.

In other words, when we observe the skandhas with right wisdom, there is no permanent, independent, and continuous self to be found. There is no *owner* of thoughts, feelings and actions behind the thoughts, feelings and actions. All we can see is impermanent, moment flux.

So, in the text of this discourse on the non-self, the Buddha points to all five skandhas to show that they have **these three characteristics: conditioned interdependence, impermanence and hence empty of self (non-self)** – they lack a permanent, independent autonomous self. Once we demonstrate there is no self, then we can say, well, who then is suffering? When we look for such a self, a permanent and independent owner, of our thoughts, feelings, and actions, we can’t find it. We can also ask, who therefore is born and who therefore dies?

"Whenever anyone claimed any item, whether physical or mental, as “Self,” the Buddha always critically examined

the claim, to argue that the item is really an-atta (Pali, Skt. an-atman): not-Self, a non-Self, not a Self."

"Equivalent to saying something is “not-Self” is to say it is “empty” (Pali *suñña*, Skt. *Sunya*) of Self and what belongs to Self (S. IV.54)." (from "Buddhist Philosophy: Essential Readings" by William Edelglass, Jay Garfield)

In the First Turning, the ultimate cause or origin of suffering is ignorance or confusion over self-identity. Desire arises because we are conditioned to believe we need to make a non-existent self-identity called “me” happy. However, in reality, there is no fixed personal self, called “me” – there is no “experiencer”, of feelings, no “hearer” of sounds, no “thinker” of thoughts, and no “controller” of actions. If we follow the path – we see that suffering arises because we are trying to make a non-existent entity happy. When we stop the pursuit of trying to make a non-existent self, happy, our conduct is also transformed – we stop being caught in the self-centred dream – therefore we stop *accumulating*⁴ karma leading to nibbana - the end of suffering – we are literally extinguished and hence are no longer reborn into the wheel of samsara, or, we experience peace of mind in this life.

Finally, and this is something we will explore in the second part of this talk, it must also be remembered that, although the Buddha says the self is **not the skandhas**, he

⁴ There will still be residues of karma arising from the past, but not getting caught in these residues leads also to the extinguishment of historical karma.

does not anywhere in the discourses deny the existence of self.

6. Discussion or Take-Home Practice: Meditations on the Emptiness of Self

- a. The four truths are to be realised or understood.

What does this mean?

- b. How does the philosophy of non-self, guide your practice of meditation? How does the practice of meditation inform the philosophy of non-self?
- c. Meditate on the following in regard to all the five skandhas: “this is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self”.
- d. Given the emptiness of Self, and therefore the emptiness of Others, what ultimately can we rely upon?

References:

- Garfield, J. L. (2015). Engaging Buddhism: Why It Matters to Philosophy. New York, Oxford University Press.
- Gyamtsso, K. T. (2016). Progressive Stages of Meditation on Emptiness. Criccieth, Wales, Shrimala Trust.