

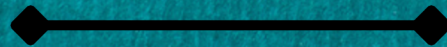
Insight Journal

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Revoicing the Buddha

Reflections and Sutta Study from

Mu Soeng



Monkey Fist Sutra

Obsessions Sutra

Not-Self Sutra



BARRE CENTER FOR
BUDDHIST STUDIES



Editor's Introduction

by William Edelglass

Since the early generations, Buddhists have been retelling the life-story of the Buddha and revoicing his teachings. These stories and teachings, often intertwined, have been shared in prose, poetry, images, sculpture, and drama. Today, these stories and teachings appear in film, comics, and animation as well as novels, dialogues, and treatises. Mu Soeng's recent book, *Revoicing the Buddha: Ancient Wisdom in a New Vernacular*, is in a long tradition of Buddhists giving voice to the teachings of the Buddha, seeking once again to bring the dharma alive for a new generation.

For almost three decades, Mu Soeng was Scholar in Residence at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies. Before that, he trained in a Korean Zen tradition, where he was ordained as a monk for more than a decade. *Revoicing the Buddha* draws on a lifetime of practice and study, teaching and writing. It is informed and inspired by particular Pāli suttas, rearticulating them with images, metaphors, and a style that still feels ancient.

This special issue of the *Insight Journal* consists of chapters from *Revoicing the Buddha*. It begins with Mu Soeng's "Introduction," in which he shares his understanding of what he takes to be the most fundamental teachings of the Buddha and his own project of presenting these teachings for 21st century readers. This is followed by three selections: "Monkey Fist Sūtra" (inspired by the Makkāṭṭa Sutta and the

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Udāna Sutta); “Obsessions Sūtra” (inspired by Anusaya Sutta and Sallatha Sutta); and “Not-Self Sūtra” (inspired by Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta and the Brāhmaṇa Sutta). These three selections—from the total of eighteen chapters in *Revoicing the Buddha*—illustrate Mu Soeng’s use of metaphor, image, and repetition in the style of early Buddhist texts. They are representative of his deep commitment to the Buddha’s radical critique of views, opinions, and attachments, as well as his prescription of how to let go of compulsion, aversion, and confusion. We hope you enjoy this revoicing of the Buddha.

William Edelglass

March 3, 2025



Revoicing the Buddha

by Mu Soeng

How would the Buddha speak if he were alive today? What vernacular would he use? What would he want to communicate to others? Interpreting the words of the Buddha has always been conditioned by the cultural, social, linguistic, and historical contexts in which his teachings have spread. Again and again, this situational response has been the ‘rewording’ of the Buddha’s message.

It is not simply a matter of Buddhist Pali or Sanskrit words translated into local languages, like Chinese, or Sinhalese, or Thai; or Korean. Rather, it has been a matter of each new Buddhist culture reinterpreting the words of the Buddha in response to their own particular context. In many cases, it has resulted in the reformulation of Buddha’s teachings as found in the earliest texts. Thus, as they were integrated with local worldviews, they were understood as “Buddhism” regardless of the ways it might deviate from the earliest teachings. At the same time, in the midst of all this change, each Buddhist culture has also produced monks, nuns, and thinkers who engaged deeply with the teachings and tried to maintain the spirit of the earliest texts. We can still see this today as Buddhism has gone global.

We can discern from available textual sources that the Buddha traveled widely throughout Magadha and the neighboring kingdoms and offered teachings in a public setting when he was in a town or village. The resulting corpus,

memorized and passed on orally for several generations before being committed to writing, runs into thousands of printed pages. By all accounts, these teachings were situational and spontaneous, in the sense of being offered in response to a question asked by a particular person with a particular need.

Since the Buddha traveled constantly, he met a lot of people and spoke to a wide variety of audiences. They included illiterate farmers and erudite Brahmin scholars; soldiers and merchants; courtiers and rulers. These people spoke a variety of dialects with the consequence that the Buddha employed those same local dialects and a variety of terms to address the same idea to different audiences.

This is helpful for understanding how the Buddha might speak to us today. The Buddha taught mostly within the geographical boundaries of the Magadhan and Kosala kingdoms. For about two hundred years before the Buddha's time, these kingdoms had been home to many shramana teachers (wandering ascetics) who were challenging the paradigms of the Brahmanical culture that was moving eastward into the kingdoms but not yet dominant.

The voices of these wandering ascetics were contesting the religious ideas of the time in a new vernacular. The most fundamental tension may be characterized as between a culture of acquisition and possession, and a culture of self-restraint and renunciation. Today we may understand this conflict as the fate of the individual in a society in determining how to live a life of depth, meaning, and flourishing. We also live today in a cacophonous tower of Babel with social media outlets in which each voice tries to drown out the other. But our search for personal meaning is as intense as ever.

Based on what we see in the early texts, we would expect that if the Buddha were to decide to teach today, he would employ the dialect and the vocabulary of today's audience to speak of the same core idea that he wanted to convey to audiences in his own historical time: the condition of the human being in the world.

The inherited historical and cultural varieties of the twenty-six-hundred-year-old Buddhist tradition invariably point to the difficulty of pinpointing any one core teaching. Each local variety of “Buddhism” is saturated with the color of its immediate context of folklore and legends. But today we are fortunate to have access to reliable translations from Pali and Sanskrit. Still, the issues of editing, revising, formalizing, and codifying the teachings throughout generations continue to haunt scholars who endeavor to discern a cohesive worldview embedded in the early texts. At the same time, it can be acknowledged that communication is slippery because different words in different languages suggest different meanings.

Still, from these teachings, we can see a picture of what the Buddha was trying to communicate to his audiences and how these teachings continue to be of great relevance to us today. In my view—perhaps a minority view—the core message of the Buddha may be summarized as a braiding of two interconnecting strands: the crafting of a noble person; and the crafting of a community of noble persons. The long-established homage to the “three jewels” of the Buddha (the teacher), Dharma (teaching from which a noble disciple-in-training in different times and places is inspired), and Sangha (the community of similarly inspired people) is a tribute to the two interconnecting strands.

We could say that the Buddha was trying to form a coherent, unified picture of human experience in which he emphasized the centrality of stress and anguish (*dukkha*) in human existence. His approach was phenomenological and existential. It was focused on the investigation of one’s personal experience and moved away from the metaphysical and conceptual frameworks of his time. His timeless insight into the dependent-arising of each phenomenon in interaction with other phenomena remains as true as ever.

The reworded sutras in this volume overlap with and cross boundaries between our contemporary vocabulary and

the selected Pali suttas in the hope that the Buddha's teaching as I understand it comes through.

All of the Buddha's core teachings in each new generation and each new geographical setting have required audiences to interpret for themselves. In requiring interpretation, they bridge time and distance. The core template in these teachings is that the mind, itself conditioned, is the primary author of one's destiny (of woe or well-being) and the authorship of the mind is as relevant today as it was in the Buddha's time, and all the generations since then.

The Buddha did not try to identify an underlying reality behind the phenomena, as some of his contemporary teachers were trying to do (or as religions often seek to do). Instead, he emphasized how humans could perceive their default mode of craving for phenomena which inevitably creates layers upon layers of mental defilements of greed, hatred, and delusion. This default mode entrenches a person into ignorance of the true nature of phenomena which is transience, insubstantiality, and stress.

Instead, the Buddha pointed out that when one understands and internalizes the nature of phenomenal things as embedded in impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and without substance, one becomes equanimous regarding their reactivity as pleasant or unpleasant with regard to objects of desire. One does not cling to them nor does one cling to views and opinions. When the root cause of ignorance is destroyed through cultivating tolerance, compassion, and wisdom, mental defilements are eradicated. It allows one to live a harmonious life by avoiding conflict and withdrawing the mind from the inner and outer turmoil caused by unwholesome views, unwholesome intentions, and unwholesome actions in regard to phenomenal things.

Today's levels of stress and anguish have become magnified multiple times over what they seem to have been in the Buddha's own time. Granted, we live in more complex times but our stress and anguish have also become correspondingly more complex. The fate of the individual in

the phenomenal world remains as fraught with anxiety and despair as it ever was.

Today we can think of the heart of the Buddha's teachings as an invitation to self-examination—examining our own consuming desires and addiction to them—and the harm they have caused us, individually and collectively. This inquiry opens up a new perspective on self-correction: the cultivation of mindfulness with regard to how the unwholesome can be transformed into the wholesome.

The recovery of the existential urgency in the Buddha's teachings and their exhortation for each person to take responsibility for crafting their life in response is my primary concern in the texts in this collection.

If a person (Pali: *puthujjana*; often translated as “an uninstructed worldling”) is in the grip of greed, hatred, and delusion, there must be a different way of living in the world because greed, hatred, and delusion are, definitionally, a condition of harm—harm to oneself and to others. In a morally oriented world, harm is a cycle of self-perpetuation unless modified by kindness, compassion, and empathy. It is only through the cultivation of these qualities that dukkha can be let go as the prevailing default human condition.

At the same time, human beings do not live in isolation, whether saints in the forest or householders. The tendency of humans living with each other is to manipulate others for the sake of self-interest and self-aggrandizement. For the Buddha, the vision of a community of noble persons was horizontal, non-hierarchical, non-coercive, and non-manipulative. It sought to empower each person to live “alone with others,” to interact with others with kindness and compassion, and without the dysfunction and harmfulness of unwholesome togetherness.

I believe there is a significant difference between what I take to be the Buddha's teachings in the earliest discourses with their envisioning of optimal human living and the many forms of “Buddhism” that have sprouted from their wide dissemination. This difference invites me to return to the

earliest available teachings. Fortunately, the fluidity of Buddhist traditions gives its admirers the opportunity for self-correction.

In this “self-correction” approach, the core message of the Buddha, as I understand it, is that nothing whatsoever in this phenomenal world is worth clinging to (epitomized in the Pali phrase of the Buddha: *sabbe dhamma nalam abhinivesya*). The task of a “noble” person is to let go of all varieties of clinging, from views and opinions to conceptualizations of identity and belonging, as well as varieties of hankering after food, sex, sleep, fame, and wealth.

This approach holds the view that human beings generally live in a stage of existential crisis, of one kind or another, because even as they may pursue spiritual practice, they typically turn away from investigating their layers of clinging. The Buddha’s suggestion for negotiating a way out of our existential crisis is to live a life of non-clinging. That way/path seems is still relevant to us today.

Today there are reasonably reliable translations of the vast textual corpus of the Buddha’s teachings in Pali and Sanskrit into English and European languages. At the same time, it can be acknowledged that communication is slippery because different words in different languages dissect the world in different ways.

The community founded by the Buddha was missionary in its orientation and scope. He sent his monks out to the four corners of the ancient Magadhan kingdom, and beyond, to spread the message of the four noble truths and the eightfold path. The Buddha offered a simple inspiration that could be easily presented to the average person without a specialist to interpret it for them. Of course, the success of the Buddha’s packaged teachings succeeded because the missionary monks were embodiments of the message. To paraphrase Marshall McLuhan, the medium was the message.

The Buddha himself walked through the towns and villages of ancient India for nine months of the year. He stopped for three months in one location only because the

heavy monsoon rains made travel almost impossible on the roads and forest trails he traveled. He walked his talk, no possessions except the threadbare robe on his back, bare feet, thorny bushes, deadly snakes, and dusty road.

During his missionary walks, the Buddha spoke in the language of crops and growing seasons to the farmer. He spoke to the householder's stress as much as to the concerns of the merchants and the royal courtiers in his audiences.

The hallmark of the Buddha's teaching was that he employed parables and similes. Today, those ancient parables and similes function as a meme for contemporary Buddhist practitioners. They help evaluate the relevance of the teaching for us. As memes, these ancient parables and similes have enough elasticity for us to reword them in a new vernacular for our own time and place.

Because the Buddha taught orally, the community that grew up around him was held together in part by a network of memorization and interpretation. The monks specializing in memorization of the spoken words of the Buddha were called the *bhanaka* (Pali; reciters). But if memorization alone was to be the primary function, these communities would have most likely evolved along the lines of the Brahmin priesthood who memorized and recited the Vedas as exclusive specialists.

However, interpretation has remained a vital part of Buddhist communities. In each generation monks and nuns engaged in an interpretation of the Buddha's teachings to the best of their ability. Throughout the intervening millennia, the teachings of the Buddha have remained memetic. The function of a meme is to be "transformational" in the sense that if you "get" it, it makes a difference in how you think about yourself and the world around you. This is also the function of parables and similes in the apocryphal tales of Mulla Nasiruddin and the stories of the Zen masters that continue to hold a fascination for us.

The Zen Buddhist tradition speaks of "turning words" to indicate the possibility of a listener's mind jolted into recognition of some transformational insight while listening to

the words of a Zen teacher. For a Zen student, the task of personal transformation begins right there, with those turning words.

The teachings of the Buddha as presented in the rewordings in this collection can function in the same way that “turning words” did for a Zen student. A meme is different from codified knowledge, whether in religion or philosophy. A meme, in the way I am understand it in Buddhist context, is also a “turning word,” a matter of personal interpretation and personal rewording.

As a parallel tool, the words of the Buddha are “pointing to” rather than an injunction that makes demands. The well-known Buddhist teaching of distinguishing between the moon itself and the finger pointing to the moon comes to mind readily in how to engage with these words. They point to psychological truths in the human condition. As such, they inspire each person to look into their condition and figure out where the structures of their own psychological lives match the insights offered in the Buddha’s teachings. These words are meant to investigate the self, persuade the self, and change one’s own psychological structures. Any positive change must be a result of self-discovery rather than coercion.

Even as the Buddha taught that suffering (*dukkha*) is largely self-imposed, he did not ignore the biological aspects of birth, aging, sickness, and dying, but his broader concerns are with how each person creates their own layer of suffering through their peculiar cravings and clinging. His teaching has had a useful collaboration in recent decades with contemporary disciplines of psychotherapy, evolutionary psychology, and neuroscience, among others. Hence, it is in some ways even more relevant to the contemporary person’s need to understand their own mind.

The distinguished historian of Pali literature, Bimala Churn Law, has written, “*According to Indian tradition, a commentary means reading new meanings back into old texts according to one’s own education and outlook. It explains the words and judgments of others as accurately and faithfully as*

possible; and this remark applies to all commentaries, Sanskrit as well as Pāli.” (A History of Pali Literature, 200)

It is in this spirit that the collection of “sutras” in this issue is offered within the Zen-inspired genre of “understanding one’s own mind.” In a best-case scenario, in the practice traditions of Buddhism, the teacher plays the role of a guide to help the student understand one’s mind. This may be done through textual study, oral dispensation, group practice, personal practice, or another modality.

In putting this collection together, I am encouraged by the words of a contemporary Buddhologist, Florin Deleneau:

*“I have nothing against New Age approaches and re-interpretation of Buddhist philosophy in a new modern key. On the contrary! I think they should be as bold and creative as they choose to be. Such creativity is not only in tune with the paradigm of our times but also helps Buddhism develop as a living system of ideas and practices. What I feel rather objectionable is that (quite?) a few modernizing approaches present themselves as faithful reflections of traditional Buddhist doctrines and practices. Boldness should, I believe, be also directed at the admission that our modern adaptations, or at least part of them, may depart from the historically attested corpus of teachings and praxis.” (Florin Deleneau, Research Notes on Rebirth in Mainstream Buddhism: Beliefs, Models, and Proofs, *Bulletin of the International Institute for Buddhist Studies*, vol. 3, 2020).*

My reflections in these recreated sutras are not literal translations of traditional Buddhist doctrines. Nor is there any attempt or intention to invoke an “original Buddhism.” But the idea remains constant: the thought and practice of Buddha’s teaching is not theology; it is a toolkit for personal transformation, for understanding how one’s own mind has created its web of dukkha (stress and anguish) and how it alone

can get out of it. The great message at the core of the Buddha's teachings is that it is possible for the conditioned mind to liberate itself from its own conditioning.

I like to think of the sutras in this collection as yet another toolkit in the expanding library of Buddhist resources in the West that have been developing over the last two centuries. All of these toolkits share the common aspiration for understanding how the classical teachings of the Buddha may inform our lives today. These tools come in different shapes and sizes, different colors, guises, and heft but they all serve the same purpose: the conditioned mind to liberate itself.

The hope in this rewording/revoicing the teachings of the Buddha, as I understand them, is that the reader may find something insights that functions for them as a "turning word" and be personally transformative. The human proclivity to create our own suffering continues unabated in each one of us. And each one of us seeks ways to find relief from stress and anguish.

My hope is that in the suffocations of a complex society, a reader can reimagine these sutras as echoes of what was spoken and heard in the gardens of Lumbini, in the Jeta grove, and Anathapindika's park. Reworded for sure, but whispers carried on the wings of time.



Monkey Fist Sutra

by Mu Soeng

Inspired by *Makkata Sutta*, SN 47:7

and *Udana Sutta*, SN 22:55

“Friends, the monkey-catcher in the village takes a pot with a wide bottom and narrow opening and buries the pot in the ground to where the opening of the jar is just above the ground. Then he would put a piece of fruit or nuts at the bottom of the jar. The monkey would be attracted to the jar by the smell of the fruit or hunger or curiosity. The monkey reaches down into the narrow opening of the jar to grab hold of the treat. But its closed fist will not come out through the narrow opening. The monkey gets excited and frustrated, but it will not abandon the food in its fist. It lays down and howls. But it will not let go of the food it has grasped and thus get out of the trouble it has fallen into. Even when the monkey sees the catcher approaching, it will not abandon the food it has grasped in its fist.

“In the same way, friends, the closed fist of the human mind is not different from the monkey’s fist. Human beings close the hand of thought around their views, perceptions, and mental fabrications and cannot let go of what they have grasped.

“Friends, the liberation that I teach is opening the hand of thought. It is opening the closed fist of one’s own mind. This fist of the mind clutches itself around views, opinions, ideas, preferences, likes, dislikes, identities, passions, insecurities,

anxieties, unresolved issues, instability, uncertainty, confusion, unsatisfactoriness, and a general sense of unease.

“Human beings do not easily abandon what they have grasped just as the monkey does not. While the monkey has grasped onto fruit or nuts in the pot, human beings close their fist around something that is entirely ideational. They do not discern that their perception is not direct seeing but an idea of the seen through conditioned habits of perception. It is a misperception and as such ideational. What is being grasped is fictional because it is only an idea that is being grasped. It does not have the concreteness of what the monkey grasps.

“Friends, the grasping of something fictional gets further fictionalized by the fictions of I, me, mine. It becomes the case of a fictional grasper grasping something fictional. In this grasping, the grasper does not realize that they themselves are a momentary construct of their own grasping. The layers of fictional constructs are not fully understood and are hard to abandon.

“The monkey does not let go of the food he has grasped even when he sees the catcher approaching. Human beings do not open the fist of I-me-mine even when they see Yama, the lord of death, approaching. Their closed fist of I-me-mine becomes the ground of their re-becoming in the next lifetime. This closed fist is the clinging (*upadana*) and its power is as great as the power of craving (*tanha*).

“Friends, the grasping power of I, me, mine is subtle and insidious. And, therefore, its abandonment is equally difficult and frustrating. Why is it so? It is because an uninstructed person gives unwise attention to the appeal or the pleasurable that accompanies the sensory experience. Because of unwise attention, they get caught in the sticky trap of the perceptual object. In the sticky trap, there can be no freedom of mind just as the monkey surrenders his freedom to let go of the grasped food and pull out his hand.

“It is the case, friends, that human beings, when caught in the sticky trap, subtly and unknowingly yearn for more gratification than the object of grasping is capable of

delivering. They do not realize that instead of satisfying their desires, such experiences merely stir up more desire. Without wise attention to the closed loop of their experience, they normalize a habit of seeking satisfaction of desire through the pursuit of pleasure in the realms of the senses.

“For this reason, friends, you should not wander into what is not your proper range. In one who wanders into what is not their proper range, Mara gains an opening, Mara gains a foothold. And, friends, what is not your proper range? The five strands of sensuality are not your proper range. What five? Forms cognizable by the eye — agreeable, pleasing, charming, endearing, fostering desire, enticing. Sounds cognizable by the ear... Aromas cognizable by the nose... Flavors cognizable by the tongue... Tactile sensations cognizable by the body — agreeable, pleasing, charming, endearing, fostering desire, enticing.

“A noble disciple of the Tathāgata does not wander into the territory of the five strands of sensuality, as does the foolish monkey only to get stuck in the monkey trap. They pay wise attention (*yoniso manasikāra*) to what is foolish and greedy in their conditioning and do not act upon it. They do not wander in the pastures of seeking gratification in the things of the world that present themselves to their senses. By remaining mindful and fully aware of the danger of seeking gratification, they begin to undermine the mechanism by which the conditioned mind gets stuck to the objects of experience.

“They undermine the mechanism by changing their frame of reference through which sense experience is received and processed. They remain mindful and alert to their own foolish and greedy nature, and they do not grasp the promise of the sweetness of pleasure in which each sense input is wrapped. They recognize that the promise of the sweetness of pleasure is not their pasture and is outside their territory. They do not get stuck in the sticky trap of seeking gratification in the five strands of sensuality.

“Friends, from the discernment of one’s proper range of wandering and knowing the territory of one’s pasture comes

abandoning. From the abandoning of seeking gratification in five strands of sensuality a dedicated practitioner remains anchored in abandoning and breaks free of the [five] lower fetters.

“Friends, the immediate reward of abandonment is that one does not fall into fear over what is not a ground for fear. They do not fear the approach of Yama, the lord of death, in the way that the foolish monkey fears the hunter approaching the trap where he is stuck. The fear is abandoned in a noble practitioner because the passion for the property of [physical] form has been abandoned. . . passion for the property of feeling has been abandoned. . . passion for the property of perception . . . passion for the property of fabrications. . . passion for the property of consciousness has been abandoned.

“Then, owing to the abandonment of passion, the support for consciousness [of I-me-mine] is cut off, and there is no base for consciousness. Consciousness, thus unestablished, not proliferating, not performing any function, is released. Owing to its release, it stands still. Owing to its stillness, it is contented. Owing to its contentment, it is not agitated. Not agitated, the practitioner is totally unbound right within. The noble disciple discerns that ‘Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.’

“For one knowing in this way, seeing in this way, friends, there is the opening of the fist, and abandoning of whatever is being grasped therein. It is opening the hand of thought. This opening of the hand of thought, friends, is the letting go of all ideational formations and their fictional grasping. It is discernment that leads to the abandonment of whatever creates causes and conditions for stress and anguish.

“But, friends, once views, opinions, ideas, preferences, likes, dislikes, identities, passions, insecurities, anxieties, unresolved issues, instability, uncertainty, confusion, unsatisfactoriness, and a general sense of unease have been abandoned, have been let go, they must not be replaced by another set of views, opinions, ideas, preferences, likes,

Monkey Fist Sutra

identities, and passions. Opening the hand of thought means one trains in what to focus on, what to turn away from, what to enhance, what to let go of, what to cultivate, and what to renounce. This is the immediate ending of fermentations and lamentations."



Obsessions Sutra

by Mu Soeng

Inspired by *Anusaya Sutta*, AN 7.11

and *Sallatha Sutta*, SN 36.6

“Friends, the habitat of the conditioned mind is like a beehive. The bees are buzzing around in a dark cave-like colony where each bee makes its nest to store food and its eggs and larvae. They all share the common purpose of making honey. The beehive of the conditioned human mind is also buzzing around with seven kinds of obsessions that cross-pollinate with each other and whose purpose is to burrow deeply into the channels of greed, hatred, and delusion.

“What are these seven obsessions? It is the obsession with sensual gratification (*kāma-rāgānusaya*), with resistance (*paṭighānusaya*), with views (*diṭṭhānusaya*), with uncertainty (*vicikicchānusaya*), with conceit (*mānānusaya*), with passion for becoming (*bhava-rāgānusaya*), and with ignorance (*avijjānusaya*). These are the seven obsessions.

“Friends, an obsession is an underlying or latent tendency (*anusaya*). This tendency compels the conditioned mind to keep returning to whatever it is obsessed with. In the working of an obsession, the attentional processing in the conditioned mind lies down over and over again with the object of obsession to keep it close and not let go.

“What does it mean that the attention lies down with the object of obsession? It is a rumination that fosters repetitive thinking about the same thought. Friends, the characteristic of

such repetitive thinking is to take delight in the thought of what is pleasant and not let go of those thoughts because they bring sensory delight to one's conditioned mind. But these thoughts also turn sad and dark when one repetitively thinks about having to deal with the loss of what's pleasant and delightful to oneself. One becomes fearful in such scenarios; rumination becomes an obsession in the other direction.

"Friends, you see the attachment of little children to their little toys. When they go to bed at night, these little children clutch their toys and insist that they stay with them even when they sleep. In human beings, an obsession works the same way: wanting to hold on to what they are obsessed with and continue to ruminate on the object of their obsession.

"Friends, whatever one stays obsessed with, that's what one is measured by. Whatever one is measured by, that's how one is classified. Whatever one is classified by, that's how one is defined. Whatever one is defined by, that's what one is in the grip of. Whatever one is in the grip of, that's what one cannot let go. Whatever one cannot let go, that's what is the source and origin of sorrow and lamentation for that person.

"A child clutching their favorite toy while sleeping at night is called childish by the adults and measured as such. A *puthujanna*, an uninstructed person, is defined by the wise as such, as someone not willing or able to let go of the object of their obsession through their ignorance.

"Friends, when the attention lies down with the object of obsession, it is embedded in the passion for acquisition and possession. This passion is what the attention lies down with. The conditioned mind takes pleasure and delights in a form, a feeling, a perception, fabrication, or ideation. Sensing pleasure and delight, they feel as if joined with it. When the feeling of as-if-joined-with-it is there, they feel an identification with it: this is me; I am it. This identification means the lying down of the identifier with the identified. The identification with whatever form, feeling, perception, fabrication, or ideation one takes pleasure and delight in is perceived as the source of happiness.

“Friends, when one takes pleasure and delight in a form, one seeks to keep it close to oneself, seeks possession of it, develops a passion for it, and becomes obsessed with not letting it go. If one stays obsessed with form, one is measured by form. . . classified by form. . . defined. . . in the grip of. . . cannot let go.

“If one stays obsessed with pleasure and delight in feeling. . .

“If one stays obsessed with pleasure and delight in perception. . .

“If one stays obsessed with pleasure and delight in fabrications. . .

“If one stays obsessed with pleasure and delight in consciousness. . .

“This is the obsession of sensual gratification. It is the mind’s fascination with planning sensual pleasures. But it may be that the planning mind is more attached to fantasies about sensual pleasures than to the actual experience of pleasure. Why is it so? The fantasies convert themselves into a feeling as if it is happening inside the body. This is how mental pleasure turns into a tactile sensation.

“Friends, it is the case that pleasure and pain have their common origin as tactile sensations. One is welcome, the other is not welcome. What is welcome is accepted with delight. What is not welcome is met with resistance. But it is also the case that one develops a habit of considering a fantasy of sensual pleasure as the only escape from pain. Its behavioral consequence is to be pulled forward by pleasure and to be pushed back by pain. When one is pulled forward, its characteristics are eagerness and seeking reward. When one is pushed back, its characteristics are resistance and digging in. Both create their own kind of obsession grooves within the conditioned mind.

“What is the obsession of resistance, you may ask? Just as if someone were shot with an arrow and, right afterward, were shot with another one, so that they would feel the pains of two arrows. In the same way, when touched with a feeling

of pain, the uninstructed person sorrows, grieves, laments, and becomes distraught. So, they feel two pains, physical and mental. As they are touched by a painful feeling, they are resistant to it. They want it to go away. Any resistance-obsession regarding that painful feeling obsesses them. Touched by that painful feeling, they delight in sensuality, in a negative way. Why is that? Because the tactile sensations of both pleasure and pain are experienced as mental symptoms as well as physical ones.

“Friends, the uninstructed person claims ownership of the inventory of their mental storage, whether pleasurable or painful, as ‘me and mine’: ‘These feelings are mine; these emotions are mine; these thoughts are mine.’ They do not discern any escape from painful feelings aside from securing nullifying alternate sensual pleasure. They remain ignorant of the origination, passing away, allure, drawback, or escape from two wounds from two arrows, the physical and the mental. This ignorance leads to an obsession with securing nullifying alternate sensual pleasure. They are joined, I tell you, with pain resistance-obsession.

“Friends, in their obsession, they feel an identification with it: this is my pain; I am in pain. They do not understand that the identification amplifies their physical pain many times over in their own mind. Thus, their obsession is with the amplification within the conditioned mind.

“Friends, you must understand that identification with sensual pleasure or sensory pain are both aspects of the same obsession. Both are amplified within the conditioned mind so that the actual experience of pleasure and the actual experience of pain is much smaller than their amplification.

“In the same way, friends, the uninstructed person sorrows, grieves, laments, and becomes distraught when they are obsessed with views, with uncertainty, with conceit, with the passion for becoming in their ignorance that all these obsessions are happening only in their conditioned mind through identification: this is me; I am it.

“Friends, a noble disciple of the Tathāgata does not amplify. They remain equanimous in the midst of the arising of sensual pleasure or a painful feeling. Without amplification, they do not claim ownership of what’s arising from conditioning processes. They do not give in to sorrow and lamentation, to stress and distress. They distinguish between the physical and the mental, and do not allow the mental to become ascendant. They renounce the amplification of the mental. This is the ending of their sorrow and lamentation.

“Friends, sensing a feeling of pleasure, a noble disciple senses themselves disjoined from it. Sensing a feeling of pain, they sense it disjoined from them. Sensing a feeling of neither-pleasure-nor-pain, they sense it disjoined from them. This is how a well-instructed disciple of the noble ones is disjoined from birth, aging, and death, from sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses, and despairs.

“Friends, this disjoining is not a denial but a delinking between the physical and the mental. This is making the wise distinction between the physical sensation and its amplification in the mind. This is making the wise distinction between remaining equanimous in the face of phenomena as it is unfolding and obsession with it through amplification in the conditioned mind.

“Friends, an obsession is a conglomerate of the underlying tendencies in the conditioned mind for wanting, privileging, holding [on to X], and attaching [to X]. It is in this sense of the self-created matrix that the Tathāgata uses the term obsession.

“Friends, the Tathāgata speaks of the obsession of views, the obsession of uncertainty, the obsession of conceit, the obsession of passion for becoming, and the obsession of ignorance in the same way he speaks of the obsession of sensual passion and the obsession of resistance.

“Friends, the obsessions with views, uncertainty, conceit, becoming, and ignorance start as mental itches but create their own obsession-grooves in the conditioned mind just as the sensations of pleasure and pain create their own

tactile sensations. What starts as a mental itch turns into a physical symptom. They then feed into the underlying tendencies in the conditioned mind for wanting, privileging, holding, and attachments. These, in turn, become obsessions.

“Friends, with this understanding of one’s own conditioned mind, if one doesn’t stay obsessed with form, one is not measured by form. . . not classified by form. . . defined. . . in the grip of. . . let go. Letting go of the obsession with form is the ending of sorrow and lamentation for that person.

“If one doesn’t stay obsessed with feeling. . .

“If one doesn’t stay obsessed with perception. . .

“If one doesn’t stay obsessed with fabrications. . .

“If one doesn’t stay obsessed with consciousness. . .

“Friends, with this training in not staying obsessed with anything, a noble disciple of the Tathāgata stays equanimous while letting go of all ruminations as soon as they arise. They do not cling to mental itches when they arise. They nip the evil in the bud. When a person is not obsessed with anything, that’s not what one is measured by. Whatever one isn’t measured by, that’s not how one is classified. Whatever one is not classified by, that’s not how one is defined. Whatever one is not defined by, that’s not what one is in the grip of. Whatever one is not in the grip of, that’s what one can let go. Whatever one can let go, that’s what is the ending of sorrow and lamentation for that person.

“Friends, with the ending of sorrow and lamentation, the noble disciple dwells alone, secluded, heedful, ardent, and resolute. They cultivate compassion for their passion for possession, acquisition, identification, and obsession with pleasure, pain, views, uncertainty, conceit, becoming, and ignorance. They cultivate disenchantment for any object of possession, acquisition, identification, and obsession. They cultivate psychological homelessness for phenomena coming into their field of perception and cognition.

“This is their liberation: liberation from an obsession with seeking possession and acquisition. This liberating dispassion is the difference, this the distinction, this the

distinguishing factor between the well-instructed disciple of the noble ones and the uninstructed person. They can protect their minds from obsessions. Desirable things don't charm their mind, undesirable ones bring no resistance. Their acceptance and rejection are scattered, gone to their end, and do not exist. Knowing the dustless, sorrowless state, they discern rightly, have gone over to beyond becoming."



Not-Self Sutra

by Mu Soeng

Inspired by *Anattalakkhana Sutta*, SN 22.59
and *Brahmana Sutta*, AN 9.38

“Friends, the Brahmin priesthood to the west claim that the Brahman is a cosmic self, an eternal, unchanging, substantial entity. They claim it encompasses the entire cosmos. They claim that the Atman is the individual self, a particle share of the Brahman that inhabits each person’s body/form. In their claim, the Atman is what essentializes each person and it is the true inhabitant in a person. They claim it exists beyond the limitations of time and space because it shares all the attributes of the Brahman. They claim the Atman to be a fixed, permanent, and enduring self that migrates from one bodily inhabitation to another.

“Friends, the Tathāgata is a shramana and, like most shramana teachers, disagrees with the Atman-Brahman claim because he sees it as a social argument for the sake of social power rather than a religious clarification. As a shramana ascetic, the Tathāgata has done extreme mortification of the body and has explored every single particle in this fathom-long body. He has not found anything resembling the Atman particle that remains fixed and enduring amid all the radical cellular changes. He has found that at the cellular level of the body, there is constant change like a mountain stream rushing downhill. He has found that within this constant change, the

solidity of matter is an illusion. This is the direct knowledge and vision of the Tathāgata.

“Friends, in this knowledge and vision, the Tathāgata speaks from personal experience. He sees that a person is composed of the five aggregates (khandha; skandha) and the six senses (salayatana) that are unique to a human being. A person is a conglomerate (nama-rupa) of these properties that are always in a state of dynamic emergence from interacting with each other. There is no ownership of this dynamic emergence because it is always dependently arising (patticasamuppada; pratitya-samyutpada). It is named and called a person (puggala; pudgala) in its functioning but it does not own the five aggregates and the six senses. What ownership can there be in a mountain stream rushing downhill?

“Friends, there is an agency in the functioning of the five aggregates in their inner and outer aspects but it is entirely self-generated. There is no outer agency nor is there an outer ownership like that of an Atman-Self. The agency-functioning of the five aggregates in a person is the most marvelous thing in the universe when moving in a wholesome direction, and the most destructive when moving in an unwholesome direction. Either movement is like a hand shaping the rubber foam in different shapes.

“Friends, the Tathāgata invites his disciples to explore their experience of the agency-functioning of the mind and the body as he has done himself. And find out for themselves the entire universe disclosed in such exploration. That is why he does not make ontological or metaphysical claims about anything that cannot be discovered in a person’s direct experience of the mind-body structure.

“Friends, the Tathāgata’s rejection of the Atman/Self claim is not nihilism, nor is it denial for its own sake. It is simply a rejection of a speculative view. One cannot be nihilistic about something that cannot be found in the phenomenal experience of a human being. The Tathāgata speaks from the perspective of the deepest exploration of the

human mind-body system. In this exploration, nothing is hidden. All is illuminated. No Atman particle is to be found here.

“Friends, the functioning of a person should be understood as the physical part— eyes, ears, nose, tongue, tactility—functioning as receptors of stimuli; and the mental part— hedonic tone (Vedana), perceptual awareness (sanna), active thinking (sankhara), and knowing faculty (vinnana)—functioning as reifiers or processors of the stimuli that have come in. The complexity and intricacies of the mutual causality of the receptors, stimuli, and processing generates an inner agency which is the functional self of a person. A functional or enactive self is not an abstraction but embodies the experience of the five aggregates and the six senses. The functional self is an experiencing self. And the experiencing self is a minimal self because it is primordial awareness entwined with self-awareness. The Tathāgata affirms the functional self of a person. It is a network of causes and conditions. It is a dynamic functionality of its own. It arises interdependently but there is nothing self-existent or static here. There is no ownership here. The agency is not ownership. A human being, then, is a story written by the network of performative and interlocking selves.

“Friends, a person’s functioning in the world is either wholesome or unwholesome, or a painful mix of both. The pointing to the lack of ownership in the five aggregates and the six senses does not negate a person’s functioning in the world. This functioning in the world is the focus of Tathāgata’s teaching. This is how the Tathāgata speaks of anatta as the “not-self” in any or each of five aggregates and six senses. A form lacks a self-existent essence (atman), a feeling lacks a self-existent essence ... a perception ... a formation ... a mentality lacks a self-existent essence. But together they function in the world as a person together with the six senses. Speculation about a substantial Atman-Self as the true agent of a person is ignorance of how a person functions in the world.

“Friends, as agents of their processes, each person functions in the world in a wholesome or unwholesome way, in ignorant ways or wise ways. When they function wholesomely, they are creating an ethical agent-self. When they function unwholesomely, they are creating a deluded agent-self. Functioning in the world through a wholesome or unwholesome agency is a matter of actions leading to consequences. Creating an ethical self brings a person happiness while creating a deluded self brings them stress and anguish. Neither the ethical self nor the deluded self is a fixity. The deluded self can be purified and the ethical self can be protected. This functioning of the human person as an ethical self or a deluded self is what the Tathāgata addresses.

“Friends, a functioning self, either wholesomely or unwholesomely, is a performative self, an enactive self, and a behavioral self because each functioning has a consequence, beneficial or harmful. Each functioning brings happiness or suffering in equal proportions. If there was no functioning self and if the Atman-Self was a fixed, permanent, enduring self, nothing could be changed because only what is fluid and unfixed can be changed, for better or for worse.

“Friends, all species are gifted with a functional self. Each species has primordial awareness through which they perceive the world around them according to the genetic specificity of their species. Each species has its primordial volition which moves their bodies around in the world in search of food and comfort according to their genetic specificity. They cannot change their inherited genetic programming of how they move in the world.

“Human beings alone are gifted with the additional layer of self-awareness through which they are conscious of themselves as the knower of a known object. But self-awareness is a gift of their biological system and not independent of it. There is no extraneous owner of self-awareness.

“Friends, human beings also have the biological gift of a knowing consciousness (mano) through which they

discriminate between choices to be made in the construction of views, intentions, and enactments. The knowing consciousness in human beings is far superior to simple awareness in other species but it is an emergent condition as part of the human biological system. That is why it does not possess an eternal substantial element like in the Atman claim.

“Friends, in the dhamma taught by the Tathāgata, the Atman claim is the declaration of a narrative self that thrives on the narratives of I, me, mine. This narrative self is rooted in ignorance of the basic functioning of the five aggregates and the six senses. It delights in appropriating the functioning of the five aggregates and the six senses and projecting them into an acquisition and possession of an owner-self.

“Friends, when the owner-self imagines itself as standing outside the experiencing self, it creates an inflated sense of its own centrality. It becomes deluded in its understanding of the experiences of the mind and the body. Its inflated sense causes it to chew and feed upon the experiences of the five aggregates and the six senses as belonging to I, me, mine. It causes endless dukkha which is entirely the consequence of the inflated sense of a narrative self.

“Friends, in the anatta teaching of the Tathāgata, the primordial awareness and knowing consciousness are in a relationship of mutually dependent arising. It is a relationship of networks without ownership. It provides the core of experiencing in human experience. It has a capacity for constructing views and intentions but it is also capable of witnessing without discrimination and without indulging in speculative views. This is the minimal self of a person. It is not the owner of conditioning but it can be an agent for wholesome or unwholesome engagement with the conditioning. As an agent without ownership, the minimal self is a functional self, an enactive self, and an experiencing self.

“Friends, the agency of the experiencing self can regulate itself into one-pointed awareness (ekagatta) which allows itself to stay in a deep flow state without awareness of time or space. In that state, there are no discriminatory or

speculative views. But if the agency of the experiencing self allows itself to become distracted and scattered, it lets itself be gripped by each passing distraction. It becomes the monkey mind which cannot be still even for a moment and must keep moving without knowing what it is moving toward.

“Friends, the consequence of monkey mind conditioning in human beings is the emergence of a narrative self which does not happen to other species. It is because other species do not have the developed language systems that are gifted in the human person. When the narrative self allows its awareness to become scattered and distracted, it engages in constructing speculative views. The cascading speculative views can go on endlessly in a narrative self about the imagined reality of an Atman or a Brahman or both or none of them. It becomes their egoic self of I, me, mine narratives. But in its underlying ignorance, the egoic self does not realize that it is a conceptualized self. It exists only in the imagination of the ego. But, once put into place, it becomes the root source for all turmoil and strife in the human experience. The narrative-self concocts misguided scenarios through its ignorant views, opinions, and speculations. It imagines the Atman as an object outside the experiences of the five aggregates and the six senses. Through such imagination, the Atman-Self becomes an other-power in its association with the Brahman-Self.

“Friends, the Tathāgata rejects claims about the efficacy of an other-power which the Brahmanical tradition subscribes to gods in the sky. In their estimation, the gods have omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence. They have the time and interest to intervene in human affairs if properly propitiated. From this estimation, they construct a relationality of the Atman with the Brahman with gods in the sky as the mediators.

“Friends, in his knowledge and vision, the Tathāgata speaks of self-power that lies within each person and through which they can be knowers of the processes in their internal and external worlds. This exploration is not based on hearsay,

attribution, speculation, or inference. When a person explores their experience of five aggregates (khandha—form, feeling, perception, formation, and mentality) and the six senses (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, mind) through investigative wisdom, it is seen clearly that physical and mental phenomena arise and pass away in a vast interrelated network of causes and conditions. The causes and conditions also arise based on a prior network of causes and conditions of dependent arising. In this cauldron of change, no self-existent essence like the Atman can be found. This insight becomes their self-power to liberation (vimutti/vimukti) which is liberation from ignorance (avijja/avidya) about the dependently-arising phenomena in the nama-rupa and the external world.

“Friends, the Tathāgata points out that whether one speaks of a narrative self or a functional self or any of other cognates, it is always a sense of self. There is never ever a concretized self in any of the experiences in the mind-body system. A narrative self and a functional self are both linguistic designations to facilitate human understanding but are not meant to be reified.

“Friends, the Tathāgata speaks of a conditioned self which is kept in place by corruptions of a narrative self, and the functional self which has been purified of the corruptions of the narrative self. The functional self is a discipline of sila, samadhi, and panna. It is an antidote to greed, hatred, and delusion that are corruptions of the narrative self. The Tathāgata speaks of the poignancy and discontent of the human condition. And how a person can overcome it in this very life with their own effort. The Tathāgata is a doctor who prescribes a medicine but it is up to a person to medicate themselves. Or not.”



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