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Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammasambuddhasa

Summary - The Anatta Lakkhana Sutta

The Discourse on the Not-self Characteristic is a record of a teaching given by the Buddha describing the unsatisfactory, impermanent and not-self nature of the five groups i.e. rupa, vedana, sanna, sankhara and vinnana in Pali, or usually translated into English as form, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness.

This translation is by U. Dhamindo

Anatta Lakkhana Sutta

Thus have I heard: The Bhagava was at one time residing at Benares in the Deer Park at Isipatana. There the Bhagava addressed the group of five bhikkhus saying:

"O Bhikkhus," and they replied to him, "Bhadante".

Then the Bhagava said:

"The corporeal body (rupa) (1), bhikkhus, is not-self (anatta) (2).

If the corporeal body, bhikkhus, were self, then this corporeal body would not become painful, and one would be able to say, 'Let my corporeal body be thus, let my corporeal body not be thus'. But since the corporeal body is not-self so it becomes painful, and no one can say, 'Let my corporeal body be thus, let my corporeal body not be thus.'

"Feeling (vedana) is not-self. If feeling, bhikkhus, were self, then this feeling would not become painful, and one would be able to say, 'Let my feeling be thus, let my feeling not be thus.' But since feeling is not-self so it becomes painful, and no one can say, 'Let my feeling be thus, let my feeling not be thus.'

"Perception (sanna) is not-self. If perception, bhikkhus, were self, then this perception would not become painful, and one would be able to say, 'Let my

perception be thus, let my perception not be thus,' But since perception is not-self so it becomes painful, and no one can say, 'Let my perception be thus, let my perception not be thus.'

"Mental formations (sankhara) are not-self. If mental formations, bhikkhus, were self, then these mental formations would not become painful, and one would be able to say, 'Let my mental formations be thus, let my mental formations not be thus' but since mental formations are not-self so they become painful, and no one can say, 'Let my mental formations be thus, let my mental formations not be thus.'

"Consciousness (vinnana) is not-self. If consciousness bhikkhus, were self, then this consciousness would not become painful, and one would be able to say 'Let my consciousness be thus, let my consciousness not be thus.' But since consciousness is not-self so it becomes painful, and no one can say, 'Let my consciousness be thus, let my consciousness not be thus.'

"Bhikkhus, what do you think - Is the corporeal body permanent or impermanent?"

"Impermanent, Venerable Sir."

"Now what is impermanent, is it unsatisfactory (dukkha) or satisfactory (sukha)?"

"Unsatisfactory, Venerable Sir,"

"Now what is impermanent, what is unsatisfactory, what is transitory, is it fit to be perceived thus: "This is mine, this is I, (3), this is my self?"

"No, Venerable Sir."

"Bhikkhus, what do you think - Is feeling permanent or impermanent?"

"Impermanent, Venerable Sir."

"Now what is impermanent, is it unsatisfactory (dukkha) or satisfactory (sukha)?"

"Unsatisfactory, Venerable Sir."

"Now what is impermanent, what is unsatisfactory, what is transitory, is it fit to be perceived thus: "This is mine, this is I, this is my self?"

"No, Venerable Sir."

"Bhikkhus, what do you think - Is perception permanent or impermanent?"

"Impermanent, Venerable Sir,"

"Now what is impermanent, is it unsatisfactory (dukkha) or satisfactory (sukha)?"

"Unsatisfactory, Venerable Sir."

"Now what is impermanent, what is unsatisfactory, what is transitory, is it fit to be perceived thus: 'This is mine, this is I, this is my self?'"

"No, Venerable Sir."

"Bhikkhus, what do you think - Are mental formations permanent or impermanent?"

"Impermanent, Venerable Sir."

"Now, what is impermanent, is it unsatisfactory (dukkha) or satisfactory (sukha)?"

"Unsatisfactory, Venerable Sir."

"Now what is impermanent, what is unsatisfactory, what is transitory, is it fit to be perceived thus: 'This is mine, this is I, this is my self?'"

"No, Venerable Sir."

"Bhikkhus, what do you think - Is consciousness permanent or impermanent?"

"Impermanent, Venerable Sir."

"Now what is impermanent, is it unsatisfactory (dukkha) or satisfactory (sukha)?"

"Unsatisfactory, Venerable Sir."

"Now what is impermanent, what is unsatisfactory, what is transitory, is it fit to be perceived thus: 'This is mine, this is I, this is my self?'"

"No, Venerable Sir."

"So, bhikkhus, whatever corporeal body whether past, future, or present; whether gross or subtle; whether in oneself or in others; whether inferior or superior; whether far or near; must, with right understanding of things as they really are be regarded thus; 'This is not mine, this is not I, this is not my self.'"

"So, bhikkhus, whatever feeling whether past, future, or present, whether gross or subtle; whether in oneself or in others; whether inferior or superior; whether far or near; must, with right understanding of things as they really are be regarded thus: This is not mine, this is not I, this is not my self."

"So, bhikkhus, whatever perception whether past, future, or present, whether gross or subtle; whether in oneself or in others; whether inferior or superior; whether far or near; must, with right understanding of things as they really are be regarded thus: 'This is not mine, this is not I, this is not my self,'"

"So, bhikkhus, whatever mental formations whether past, future or present, whether gross or subtle; whether in oneself or in others; whether inferior or superior; whether far or near; must, , with right understanding of things as they really are be regarded thus: 'This is not mine, this is not I, this is not my self.'"

"So, bhikkhus, whatever consciousness whether past, future, or present; whether gross or subtle; whether in oneself or in others; whether inferior or superior; whether far or near; must, with right understanding of things as they really are be regarded thus: 'This is not mine, this is not I, this is not my self.'"

"Seeing thus, bhikkhus, the learned disciple of the Noble Ones becomes weary of the corporeal body, weary also of feelings, weary also of perception, weary also of mental formations, and weary also of consciousness. Being weary he becomes detached, being detached he becomes free, being free the knowledge arises, 'I am free.'

"And he knows, 'Rebirth is no more, I have finished practising the life of purity (brahmacariya), done is what should be done; for attaining the goal (of arahatship) I have nothing more to do.

This is what the Bhagava said, delighted the group of five bhikkhus rejoiced at the Bhagava's words.

And while this discourse was being given the minds of the group of five bhikkhus were liberated from defilements through clinging no more.

Notes

1. The word rupa refers to everything made of the four primary elements. (i.e. the earth element, the water element, the fire element, and the air element). But here it refers mostly to the corporeal body which arises together with the remaining four aggregates of clinging.

Vedana (feeling), is not used here in the sense of "emotions", but, refers only to the pleasant, the unpleasant, and the neither

pleasant nor unpleasant feelings that arise, only one at a time, with every consciousness (i.e. eye consciousness, ear consciousness, nose . . . , tongue . . . , body . . . , and mind consciousness.)

Perception recognises or perceives an object by means of a mark. It enables one to recognise colours such as blue, white, or red. It can also wrongly recognise a rope as a snake.

Mental formations include faith, energy, intention, greed, hatred, delusion, non-greed, non-hatred, non-delusion, mindfulness, etc., which prepare, arrange or accomplish actions. There are fifty mental formations.

Consciousness is that which is aware of an object.

2. To understand the word not-self (anatta) it is best to first explain the words self and soul (atta) which not-self negates. Whichever way, self, or soul is believed in it is always said to be permanent, undying and undecaying. The teaching of anatta is aimed at showing that the view that there is a self, soul, or atta is not based on direct experience and thus a wrong view.
3. "This is I" and later "This is not I" are literal translations from the Pali, but in English they would be "This is me" and "This is not me".

U.D.