

DON'T OWN THE PAIN

It is often said that one of the most difficult Buddhist teachings to understand is that of “not-self” (anatta). This may well be true, as it is also said that only the fully awakened one, the arhats, fully understands the nature of not-self. However, even as unawakened beings, we can have a very good idea of what not-self is. That is, if we allow ourselves to see and learn openly without being blinkered or blinded by any religion.

Just assume for a moment that we do not know anything. And here we are reading this article. How do we know how to read? A simple answer would be that we have learned English before. We need not even know any religion before. This knowledge comes from past experiences: it is the past.

How do we understand what this article is trying to say? This is a more difficult question: we can only know so much as we allow ourselves to know. If we allow our past knowledge of reading to flow through our minds like music, then we will fully enjoy it. In other words, just as this is written with feeling, it is read with feeling. Try reading this article (or listening to anyone) without superimposing any of our past ideas upon it: this is like reading this as if you have written it. You are likely to learn more from it.

Let's look at this in a different way. First, we need to define, be very clear, about what we are hurt about. “So-and-so caused pain in me: he abused me; he beat me; he defeated me; he stole from me!” What am I really reacting to? The event is long past; so I am not really reacting to the event. I am reacting to the memory of it.

A memory is something we choose to think about so often and in a way that reinforces itself. It is like the uroborus, a snake that bits its own tail. This is very painful for the snake! If we have accidentally hammered our thumb, and we keep remembering only the pain, this pain will crowd our minds, and cause us to suffer every time we think about it! This kind of pain must be left of the body level; then, it does not recur on the mental level. Although my body is sick, my mind will not be sick.¹

Now let us apply this principle a little deeper, to our own thoughts, especially negative ones. We think, “So-and-so has hurt me.” And then we allow our minds to collect other pains that we perceive has been done to us. We become more hurt. Then we tell our friends or anyone who cares to listen about our hurt. Each time we relate the story, our suffering is reinforced. Actually, WE are hurting ourselves by replaying an old painful tune.

While the pain from a hurting experience may be about the same from everyone when it occurs, each person reacts to it in a different way. Those who choose to remember it will suffer more than those who are willing to let go of the pain, even forgive those who have hurt us.

“He abused me! He beat me! those who harbour such thoughts	He defeated me! He stole from me!” their anger does not subside.	(Dh 3)
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“He abused me! He beat me! those who harbour <i>not</i> such thoughts	He defeated me! He stole from me!” their anger as such subsides.	(Dh 4)
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Why do we keep hurting ourselves even after the fact? We are hurt on account of our lust and greed, our hate and aversion, our delusion and ignorance. In short, we are hurt because of our ego or self. But where is the self? It is nowhere to be found.

¹ See Nakulapita Sutta (S 22.1 = SD 5.4): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/5.4-Nakulapita-S-22.1-piya.pdf>

We are hurt because we are thinking in terms of a PERMANENT self. But a self, if it exists, can only be either physical or mental. What is physical is impermanent; what is mental is impermanent, too. As such, the self is impermanent, our sufferings are impermanent. If we accept this fact, we will heal faster than those who keep reminding themselves of their hurt. This is where a spiritual exercise can be healing.

The next time you relax beside a lake, notice how ripples form on the water surface. A single leaf, flower, or object drops on the water, and ripples appear in waves moving outwards. Look closely and you see with your mind's eye that the water is not moving *outwards*: it is only the kinetic energy pushing the water *upwards* each time. The waves appear to move towards you: moving, yet not moving. There are really no waves, but only water pushed up and down in a patterned way.

Our minds work in the same way: we form ideas and emotions and take them to be real, and act or react accordingly. A simple way of exposing the falseness of such "doings" is to recall some childhood difficulties (such as fear, anger, etc) we have gone through. Most likely, we would think that we know better now and would have responded differently with that wisdom. The same reasoning should then be applied to our present condition: "What would I do if I were wiser now?"

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