

The essence of all things

Source: (**Aṭṭhaka**) **Mūlaka Sutta**, The nature of all things (in brief) SD 32.10, A 8.83.¹ by Piya Tan © 2010.

4.1 “**LIBERATION IS THE ESSENCE OF ALL THINGS**”

Finally, the Buddha declares, “**Liberation is the essence of all things**,” that is, the goal of the path (which the Commentary identifies as “the fruit of liberation,” *phala, vimutti*, AA 4:176). Finally, our consciousness, as it were, finds a “firm footing” (*ogadha*) only in nirvana, the death-free (*amata*), taking it as its object (in the path and fruition) and because it is “established” in nirvana. Outside of nirvana, as it were, we keep on roaming and wandering on, hindered by ignorance, fettered by craving.”²

In nirvana, all “things” as we know it come to a complete end, transcending both being and non-being.³ It is opposite of what we do and what happens in the “real” world. The name-and-form model is useful in showing us how we habitually *reify* our experiences, we “thingify” what are really events and processes. What does this mean?

This has to do with how we make sense of things. When we see a *form*, say, something yellow, edible and tasty, our minds at once give it a *name*: “banana!” The mind, of course, works in a more complicated way than this. Immediately upon experiencing a banana, we will detect a sense of pleasure at the eye-door, since we like bananas. (This immediate reaction has been conditioned by our previous banana experiences, so that we perceive yellow bananas as being delicious.) Each time, we respond in this manner, we reinforce our liking for bananas. This is how we accumulate and strengthen our latent tendencies.⁴

4.2 CONCEPTS ARE *NOT* THE ESSENCE OF ALL THINGS

4.2.1 In the course of our religious history, we have come up with interesting, even persuasive, notions to explain how the universe and life began, on the meaning and purpose of our lives, and so on. Out of our habitual *fear of death*, we introduced the notion of some kind of abiding entity, an enduring soul. Out of our persistent *need for security* and to explain how “things” began or happened, we resort to a God idea. Religious history regularly records how the God idea lies at the root of colonialism, cultural domination and mental pathology. Such an idea or being can hardly be “essence of all existence.”

But what does “all things” (*sabbe dhammā*) here mean? The Commentaries seem to take this as referring to “wholesome states” (*kusala dhamma*).⁵ I think **the Sabba Sutta** (S 35.23) gives a better explanation: all that we *have* to know with (the instruments or methods of knowing) are our 6 sense-faculties (the 5 physical senses and the mind), and all that we *can* know are the sense-objects.⁶ This is the *all* that we can ever truthfully and usefully claim.⁷

¹ SD 32.10: <http://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/32.10-Kim-Mulaka-S-a8.83-piya.pdf>

² (S 22.9.3/3:149, SD 28.7a) = (S 22.100.3/3:151, SD 28.7b).

³ **Kim Mūlaka S** (A 8.83) has only the first 8 questions; the full list of 10 questions appears in **Bhagavā Mūlaka S** (A 10.58/5:106 f), SD 67.4. [1.1]

⁴ See **Anusaya** (SD 31.3).

⁵ ItA 1:155; DhsA 69.

⁶ S 35.23/4:15 (SD 7.1).

⁷ For a fuller explanation on *sabba* and the “rooted” (*mūlaka*), see SD 57.20b (1.2).

4.2.2 Yet, this is enough. When we closely examine how our sense-faculties work, and the nature of the sense-objects, we *know*, or at least *sense*, that our life and world is completely a *sense-based* and *sense-made* world. In such a world, we sooner or later realize that however imperfect our senses may be, we are still capable of learning from such imperfections or suffering. The more we learn, the more we adapt, the more we evolve. In an important sense, we are working to *liberate* ourselves from the shortcomings of our senses, especially the mind behind the senses.

As such, it makes better sense (indeed the best sense), to work with the notion that “liberation is the essence of all things” than any theistic speculation or dogma. Speculations keep us in a circular rut. Dogma stops us from thinking for ourselves. The notion of liberation, on the other hand, entails that we evolve into better beings. Just as *survival* of a species is the essence of biological evolution, the *liberation* of the individual is at the heart of spiritual evolution.

4.2.3 Indeed, liberation is at the very heart of such discourses as **the Mahā Sārôpama Sutta** (M 29). The essence of all things is not the heaping up of concepts and dogmas, much less of proving them wrong or right, much less of attracting power, wealth, gain, honour or fame. Hence, the Mahā Sārôpama Sutta closes with these words:

So this holy life, bhikshus, does not have gain, honour, and renown as its benefit, or for the attainment of virtue as its benefit, or the attainment of concentration as its benefit, or knowledge and vision as its benefit.

But it is the unshakable liberation of mind that is the goal of this holy life, its heartwood, and its end.

(M 29,7/1:197), SD 53.8