

Making nothing of it

We have all heard of the 3 characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and non-self. It is impossible for any of us, in our right minds, to deny that everything in this universe is impermanent. Whatever is impermanent is not satisfactory (or is suffering): we can never be fully satisfied with such a thing, even if we tenaciously grasp to it. Indeed, we keep grasping it because we are not satisfied with it!

Whatever is impermanent and unsatisfactory entails that there is no abiding entity behind it. It has no controlling factor, nor any kind of essence, whether we call it God, soul, or whatever. Everything that exists is a process. There are no entities. Of course, we may have concepts of an “entity,” but it is merely an idea to discuss or communicate some other ideas with.

Very often, the main hindrance to our understanding the higher reality that Buddhism or Buddhist meditation offers us is that of language. The kind of language we use, the kinds of questions we ask, often decide whether or not we will readily or really understand the nature of true reality.

For example, we often tend to ask questions like “Who created the world?” This is a loaded question, one that is wrongly put. We assume it is a “who” (some kind of entity) that “creates” the world. We assume that the world is “created,” and so we assume that there is also a “creator.” The world is “evolving,” a process; we are all processes, we are evolving beings. We are sets of conditions, physical and mental, working together to produce results which in turn become new conditions, and so on and on.

The problem is that whenever we assume something, especially about someone or even about ourselves, the situation is never really what we have assumed it to be. When we assume something to be “that,” it often turns out to be something else. This is a more tricky aspect of impermanence that we are troubled with but less likely to notice. Indeed, if we are able to notice this guile of impermanence, we would surely understand ourselves and the world much better.

Things are such that we cannot make sense of them unless we accept that they are impermanent, changing and becoming other. Interestingly, the key term here is “that.” We can rightly say, for example, “*that’s* the way it is.” And leave it at that, but this is not easy if we do not really understand what it is that we are letting go of.

Let’s use a simple figure: the hand takes the shape of whatever it grasps. The process of seeing, for example, is explained as the eye sending out some kind of rays which then takes the shape of what we see and comes back with it. Similarly with thought: mental energy conforms to its object (such as a thought) and then returns to the subject. Our idea is “formed of that,” which in Pali is *atam,mayatā*,¹ that is, the mental energy of the experiencer is physically shaped by the thing experienced. In modern terms, this may be said to be a *representational* view of perception.

The early Buddhist theory of perception, on the other hand, is *constructional*. We cognize sense-data through the sense-faculties, which are then perceived or recognized by checking them, as it were, against a memory bank of past experiences, so that we can make sense of it, form ideas and motivation for various actions. In other words, we do not really see even a representation of the external world, but construct our own private reality and live with that.

In simple terms, we can say that an understanding of *atam,mayatā* corrects our inner vision to see things as they really are. Otherwise, we are constantly pushed ahead or pulled back by the idea, “What is that?” meaning that something else out there is more interesting or more real than what is in here.

Try examining this. Thinking the mind is in the body, we say, “my mind” [pointing at the head] or “my mind” [pointing at the chest (the body)]. “It’s all in my mind.” Actually, it’s the other way around.

¹ Resolved as *tam* (“that”) + *maya* (“made of”) + *tā* (“-ness,” making it an abstract noun), lit “made of that.”

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The mind is *not* in the body, but that *the body is in our mind!* Even when we are *in* a body, “our” body, we are not really there if we do not have a conception of “body.” We can only truly know our body by constantly being mindful of it; then, we begin to know what it really is.

What do we know about our body? We can see it. We can hear it. We can smell it. We can touch it.

But, where does seeing occur?	In the mind.
Where does hearing occur?	In the mind.
Where does smelling occur?	In the mind.
Where does tasting occur?	In the mind.
Where do we feel touch?	In the mind.

When we think or know of the body, we do so through the agency of our minds. We have never known anything about our body except through our mind. So our entire life, from the very first day, everything we have ever known about our body and the world has happened in our mind. So, where is our body?

It does not mean that there is no physical world, but all that we can meaningfully say is that *our experience of the body and of the world happens within our minds.* It does not happen anywhere else. It is all happening here, and in this here-ness, that the world’s externality and separateness cease. When we realize that the whole world is in this body of ours,² its thingness, its thatness, its otherness, stop. We are better able to see its true nature.

This shift of vision is a simple but useful meditation tool we can use any time. It is very useful because it leads us on to see the true reality of the matter. As it were, it turns our world inside out, so that we are able to see that this body is indeed just a set of perceptions, and everything is seen in proper perspective. *It is all happening right here in our minds.*

Having said that, we are now ready for *atam, mayatā* to take us a step further. At first, *atammayatā* makes us realize that there is really no “that,” only “this.” Then, as we get used to this new level of reality, we soon realize that even the “this” is meaningless, that is, we begin to see the duality of subject and object, or the notions of self and other, as essentially meaningless.

In reality, *atammayatā* creates neither an objective observed “thing” known nor a subjective “observer” knowing it. There is neither a *representation* (“thatness”) of reality nor a *construction* (“thisness”) of reality: there is just *true reality.* It is the abandoning of the conceiving of “thatness” and “thisness,” of the observer and the observed, of subject and object, of duality. Hence, *non-identification* refers to the subjective aspect and *non-fabrication* to the objective. True reality transcends both.

Atammayatā is the realization that, in reality, there cannot be anything other than ultimate reality. There is *neither this nor that.* In completely letting go of *this* and *that*, the whole relative subject-object world, even at its subtlest level, dissolves away. Transcending both these extremes of perception, *atammayatā* refers neither to a state where the mind does not “go out” to the object and occupy it, nor to a fabricated virtual reality relative to the object. The roots of duality have been pulled out. All we see is *a spacious wholeness:* this realization is *true wisdom* and seeing wholeness is *true compassion.*

With this kind of understanding, we will find that a cryptic passage in **the Māluṅkyā,putta Sutta** (S 35.95) becomes clearer, as it is illustrative of *atammayatā*:

”When, Māluṅkyā,putta, regarding what is seen, heard, sensed and cognized by you,
in the seen there will only be the seen;
in the heard there will only be the heard;

² Cf **Rohitassa Sutta**: “Friend, in this very fathom-long body, endowed with perception and with mind, that I make known the world, the arising of the world, the ending of the world, and the way leading to the ending of the world” (S 2.26/1:62), SD 7.2: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/7.2-Rohitassa-S-s2.26-piya1.pdf>

in the sensed there will only be the sensed;
in the cognized there will only be the cognized,

then, Mālun̄kyā,putta, you are ‘not by that.’

When Mālun̄kyā,putta, you are ‘not by that,’ then you will ‘not be therein’.

When, Mālun̄kyā,putta, you are ‘not therein,’ then you will ‘be neither here nor beyond nor in between the two’.
(S 35.95.13/4:73), SD 5.9³

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha’s Example and Teachings]

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³ For as fuller understanding of this apparently cryptic communication between teacher and pupil in meditation language, see *Atam, mayatā*, SD 19.13: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/19.13-Atammayata-piya.pdf>