Buddhist Concepts

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Not-Self

In order to understand not-self, the concept of impermanence (anitya) in Buddhism must also be considered. All is impermanent. Everything is in a state of perpetual change. Nothing remains the same for two consecutive ksanas (the shortest imaginable periods of time). It is because things trans-form themselves ceaselessly that they cannot maintain their identity, even during two consecutive ksanas. Not being able to fix their identity, they are not-self; that is to say, devoid of absolute identity. Not having a fixed identity, A is no longer the A of the preceding ksana; this is why one says that A is not A. Impermanence is another name for not-self. In time, things are impermanent; in space they are devoid of a fixed identity. Not only are physical phenomena impermanent and without a separate self, but the same is true of physiological phenomena, for example our body, mental phenomena, and feelings.

Many people think that anatman and anitya are the basis for a pessimistic moral doctrine. They say, "If all things are impermanent and devoid of a fixed identity, why bother to struggle so hard to obtain them?" This is a misunderstanding of the Buddha's teaching. Buddhism aims at liberation through understanding. It is therefore necessary to examine the teachings of the Buddha from the point of view of understanding, and not to take his words too literally without understanding their meaning. Impermanence and not-self are important prin-ciples that lead to deep understanding.

Things and Concepts

The principle of not-self brings to light the gap between things themselves and the concepts we have of them. Things are dynamic and alive, while our concepts are static. Look, for example, at a table. We have the impression that the table itself and our concept of it are identical. In reality, what we believe to be a table is only our concept. The table itself is quite different. Some notionsówood, brown, hard, three feet high, old, etc.ógive rise to a concept of table in us. The table itself is always more than that. For example, a nuclear physi-cist will tell us that the table is a multitude of atoms whose electrons are moving like a swarm of bees, and that if we could put these atoms next to each other, the mass of matter would be smaller than one finger. This table, in reality, is always in transformation; in time as well as in space it is made only of non-table elements. It depends on these elements so much that if we were to remove them from the table, there would be nothing left.

The forest, the tree, the saw, the hammer, and the cabinetmaker are non-table elements, as are the parents of the cabinetmaker, the bread that they eat, the blacksmith who makes the hammer, and so on. If we know how to look deeply at the table, we can see the presence of all these non-table elements in it. The existence of the table demonstrates the existence of all non-table elements, in fact, of the entire uni-verse. This idea is expressed in the Avatamsaka system of Bud-dhism by the notion of interbeing.

The Interbeing of Things

Genesis in Buddhism is called interbeing. The birth, growth, and decline of things depend upon multiple causes and condi-tions and not just a single one. The presence of one thing (dharma) implies the presence of all other things. The enlight-ened man or woman sees each thing not as a separate entity but as a complete manifestation of reality. The twelfth-century Vietnamese Zen monk, Dao Hanh, said, "If one thing exists, everything exists, even a speck of dust. If one thing is empty, everything is empty, even the whole universe."

The doctrine of not-self aims at bringing to light the interbeing nature of things, and, at the same time, demonstrates to us that the concepts we have of things do not reflect and cannot convey reality. The world of concepts is not the world of reality. Conceptual knowledge is not the perfect instrument for studying truth. Words are inadequate to express the truth of ultimate reality.

The Vanity of Metaphysics

These preliminary remarks are the point of departure of Zen Buddhism. If concepts do not represent reality, then concep-tual knowledge of reality can be considered erroneous. That is demonstrated many times in Buddhism. The Buddha always told his disciples not to waste their time and energy in meta-physical speculation. Whenever he was asked a metaphysical question, he remained silent. Instead, he directed his disciples toward practical efforts. Questioned one day about the prob-lem of the infinity of the world, the Buddha said, "Whether the world is finite or infinite, limited or unlimited, the problem of your liberation remains the same." Another time he said, "Suppose a man is struck by a poisoned arrow and the doctor wishes to take out the arrow immediately. Suppose the man does not want the arrow removed until he knows who shot it, his age, his parents, and why he shot it. What would happen if he were to wait until all these questions have been an-swered, the man might die first." Life is so short. It must not be spent in endless metaphysical speculation that does not bring us any closer to the truth.

But if conceptual knowledge is fallible, what other instru-ment should we use to grasp reality? According to Buddhism, we only reach reality through direct experience. Study and speculation are based on concepts. In conceptualizing we cut reality into small pieces that seem to be independent of one another. This manner of conceiving things is called imaginative and discriminative knowledge (vikalpa) according to the Vijnanava-din school of Buddhism. The faculty that directly experiences reality without passing through concepts is called non-discrimi-native and non-imaginative wisdom (nirvikalpajuana). This wisdom is the fruit of meditation. It is a direct and perfect knowledge of reality, a form of understanding in which one does not distin-guish between subject and object. It cannot be conceived by the intellect nor expressed by language.

Experience Itself

Suppose I invite you to join me for a cup of tea. You receive your cup, taste the tea, and then drink a little more. You seem to be enjoying it. Then you put your cup on the table and we have a conversation.

Now, suppose I ask you to describe the tea. You use your memory, your concepts, and your vocabulary to describe the sensations. You may say, "It is very good tea, the best Tich Kuan Ying tea, manufactured in Taipei. I can still taste it in my mouth. It is very refreshing." You could express your sensation in many other ways. But these concepts and these words de-scribe

your direct experience of the tea; they are not the experience itself. Indeed, in the direct experience of the tea, you do not make the distinction that you are the subject of the experience and that the tea is its object; you do not think that the tea is the best, or the worst, of the Tieh Kuan Ying of Taipei. There is no concept or word that can frame this pure sensation result-ing from experience. You can offer as many descriptions as you like, but only you have had a direct experience of the tea. When someone listens to you, she can re-create for herself certain sensations, based on experiences that she might have had, but that is all. And you yourself, when you are describing the experience, are already no longer in it. In the experience, you were one with the tea. There was no distinction between subject and object, no evaluation, and no discrimination. That pure sensation is an example of non-discriminative wisdom, which introduces us to the heart of reality.

The Moment of Awakening

To reach truth is not to accumulate knowledge, but to awaken to the heart of reality. Reality reveals itself complete and whole at the moment of awakening. In the light of awakening, noth-ing is added and nothing is lost. Emotions based on concepts no longer affect us. If Bodhidharma is an ideal person, it is because he has broken the chains of illusion that bind us to the world of concepts. The hammer used to break these chains is the practice of Zen. The moment of awakening may be marked by an outburst of laughter, but this is not the laughter of someone who has won the lottery or some kind of victory. It is the laughter of one who, after searching for something for a long time, suddenly finds it in the pocket of his coat.

One day the Buddha was standing in front of the assembly at Vulture Peak. Everyone was waiting for him to begin his Dharma talk, but he remained silent. After a long time, he held up a flower, still not uttering a single word. Everyone in the assembly looked at him, but they did not understand at all. Then one monk looked at the Buddha with sparkling eyes and smiled. The Buddha said, "I have the treasure of the vision of the perfect Dharma, the marvelous spirit of nirvana, the reality without impurity, and I have transmitted them to Mahaka-syapa." The monk who smiled was, indeed, Mahakasyapa, one of the great disciples of the Buddha.

Mahakasyapa reached the moment of awakening when Buddha raised his flower. He truly saw the flower, and he received the "mind seal" of the Buddha, to use the Zen terminology. Buddha had transmitted his deep understanding from mind to mind. He had taken the seal of his mind and im-printed it on the mind of Mahakasyapa. The smile of Mahakasyapa was not a great outburst, but it was of the exact same nature and quality as the outbursts of laughter of the great Zen masters. Mahakasyapa arrived at awakening thanks to the flower and to his deep looking. Some Zen masters have at-tained awakening through a shout, a cry, or even a kick.

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