

Free from the Burden of Self

by Rebecca Dixon

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Imagine there was a child who saw that everyone else carried around a bag of bricks all day. So, this child found a bag and a brick, and then, growing up, found bigger bags and more bricks, and went through life hampered by this bag that had to be carried everywhere.

No one could convince this person, or hardly anyone else, that it wasn't necessary to carry their bags of bricks. They wondered who would they be without them? How could anyone else understand or accept them without their bags of bricks?

Then, one day, our grown-up child sat under a tree watching the clouds go by, and saw how they were constantly changing, like everything else. Then suddenly the realization arose that the bag of bricks was useful in a few unusual situations, but just a burden all the rest of the time. Like everything else, the habit of carrying it was subject to change.

Here's a simple and clear poem by Morris Williams that illustrates what our friend saw. It's called:

Listen

I threw a snowball across the backyard.
My dog ran after it to bring it back.
It broke as it fell, scattering snow over snow.
She stood confused, seeing and smelling nothing.
She searched in widening circles until I called her.

She looked at me and said as clearly in silence
as if she had spoken,
I know it's here, I'll find it,
went back to the center and started the circles again.

I called her two more times before she came
slowly, stopping once to look back.

That was this morning. I'm sure that she's forgotten.
I've had some trouble putting it out of my mind.

The snowball broke as it fell, scattering snow over snow.

Our selves are like that snowball, made of components that arise and pass away. Stuck together, they can be useful, like the bricks in those bags, especially if you want to be walled in.

When you meditate, you see how quickly the mind and its memories, attitudes and moods change, thoughts and other states of mind coming and going and disintegrating like clouds in the wind. Or like snowballs landing on the snow.

The problem with the notion that we are a “self” is that we *cling* to it and this clinging is the core cause of our dissatisfactions in life. Not having what we want or having stuff we don’t want – that’s dukkha, and it’s all concerned with “I, me and mine.” The self.

That’s why the notion of self is such a burden. Because it makes us unhappy. We are confined by it. When we are free from the burden of self, we can be whatever we want.

This is a freedom that gladly considers our commitments, and the well-being of others. We just don’t have to keep believing anything in particular about ourselves. It’s a feeling of being lighter – enlightened.

In Zen and Tibetan Buddhism, full realization of anatta is considered almost equivalent to enlightenment. In the Western mindfulness tradition, determined practice gradually makes the idea of ‘self’ more and more transparent. We know it’s there, but we see through it.

The Buddha taught both these approaches. There is a sutta about a rich man who came up to the Buddha begging to be enlightened, because he couldn’t know when he would die. The Buddha’s all-seeing mind knew this man would die very soon, so he explained anatta and the core teachings. The man was instantly enlightened and did die shortly after.

In contrast, his aunt, who raised the Buddha after his mother died in childbirth, and who became the first Buddhist nun, asked to be taught how to seek liberation. The Buddha told her how to meditate and observe her states of mind. She became the abbess of a large sangha of nuns, and gradually attained enlightenment.

Maybe the most important thing to know about the teaching of anatta is that the Buddha never said there is no self. He certainly did not say that we don’t exist. When he was directly asked what the self was, he didn’t answer. What he frequently did say was that all the things we ordinarily think of as ourselves, are not a “self,” as an independent, permanent thing. Whatever we think is us is therefore not-self. This is a good exercise to do on retreat. Go through the list of what you think is you. They will fall like shreds of a snowball. There will be no “self” there.

Students in introductory classes are often quite moved when they see that their thoughts are not them. Thoughts just arise and pass away as we watch. We don't choose to think them, so they can't really be called "ours." This is often people's first major breakthrough: they are not their thoughts.

The next breakthrough is usually emotions. Feelings are so powerful that it almost makes sense to identify with them. Your might say they have charisma. But they're not us.

I occasionally have bouts of depression caused by medical issues. I sometimes need to take a prednisone taper. At the beginning the dose is strong and I feel happy, a bit manic. As it tapers off and ends, I get depressed. These depressions feel like they will never end. One evening when I struggled with the immobilizing mind fog of depression, I saw this was a mood, and not me. This was just another impermanent mindstate. I need to add that this experience is different than clinical depression, which usually needs the help of a professional.

Anatta also refers to objects of our consciousness, in other words, "things." Thich Nhat Hahn emphasized the lack of duality between the thing heard, and the entity hearing. There is just hearing. He called this "interbeing."

When I first came to the dharma everyone, Buddhists and everyone else, was excited by the idea of the interconnectedness of all things. Anatta or Emptiness can also be understood to mean that neither I nor any **thing** has a "separate self."

This is what is expressed in the poem about the snowball. Another common metaphor is waves of the ocean. When the snowball fell apart it returned to being the snow on the ground. When the wave subsides it reunites with the sea.

Another way to view anatta in regard to things is by contemplating *anicca*, or impermanence. All things are composed of elements in constant motion, and they all change, however slowly. To put it quite simply, we are verbs, and not nouns.

We and all 'things' are actually process, not substance. We understand the process by closely examining what we initially perceive as substance, or form. As we do so the appearance of solidity progressively falls away until we see just the process. This is famously expressed by the Heart Sutra saying, "Form is Emptiness, emptiness form."

On a month-long concentration retreat, I liked to meditate in the hall right after lunch, when it was empty and the foyer was being vacuumed. Initially the vacuum made a continuous sound. As the weeks went by and my concentration deepened, it became a series of hums. Then occasional clicks. Then silence.

Another important teaching says there are five skandhas, or collections, of things we think of as ourselves. Looking closely at each of them, we see they're all not "I". Their contents are empty. Like the sound of the vacuum. Basically, all our experience can be thrown into 5 categories: 1) material things, 2) our immediate liking them or not, 3) our perceiving what they are, and 4) thoughts and feelings about them.

Then there's the 5th category of experience which is just Awareness. This is where thoughts and feelings appear, and then fade away. This 5th skandha is called "rigpa," the open awareness that's often called the "ground" of all experience.

The Tibetan teacher Sogyal Rinpoche taught the practice of bringing attention to the space between the end of one thought and the beginning of the next – that's rigpa. Then, he says, "lengthen it."

The point, Rinpoche said, is that in the state of rigpa, "the awareness and the object of awareness are no longer separate and no subject called the 'self' can be found anywhere..." This is an essential insight into anatta

You know, sometimes my talks are about the teachings, and they tend to be a bit scholarly. Other times I talk about practice. On this topic, though, the teachings contain the practice.

Basically, pay attention to the quiet, empty mind, and in those moments you will see no "self." When you're deep in meditation, look for your self, and you will not find it.

All branches of Buddhism consider the Three Characteristics a fundamental teaching. All phenomena, all experience has these traits: anicca (or impermanence), dukkha (or the potential for mental suffering), and anatta ("not self").

These Three Characteristics are profoundly interrelated, which becomes apparent when you practice with each. And when you come to understand them deeply, they will no longer be part of your experience. Like the sound of the vacuum cleaner.

Then, either gradually or suddenly, you will be free from the burden of self.

Thank you