

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 ksanas; 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 principles 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 notions—wood, brown, hard, three feet high, old, etc.—give rise to a concept of table in us. The table itself is always more than that. For example, a nuclear physicist 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 universe. This idea is expressed in the Avatamsaka system of Buddhism by the notion of interbeing.

The Interbeing of Things