

Dharma Drum Mountain Toronto: Selected Readings from the *Samyukta Āgama*

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Who Is the “I” You Think You Are?

On the Five Aggregates, Non-Self, and Contemporary Identity Anxiety

In this era of information explosion and rapid AI evolution, we curate countless versions of the "self" online every day. But when the filters are stripped away, who is the "real" me? The words the Buddha spoke to the five ascetics 2,500 years ago are a key which can help us to unlock the deepest doors of our inner being.

I. The Opening Inquiry: Three Questions, Three Shackles of Suffering

We begin by quietly reflecting on three questions:

1. When you strip away all masks and filters, how do you perceive your own anxiety? What does it feel like to face your rawest self?
2. Since all things are constantly changing, what does "happiness" actually mean?
3. How do we settle that lingering sense of "lack"—the feeling that something is always missing?

In Buddhism, these correspond to the three types of suffering (*dukkha*): the suffering of suffering (*dukkha-dukkhatā*), the suffering of change (*viparināma-dukkhatā*), and the deepest level, the suffering of conditioned states (*sankhāra-dukkhatā*). Examining these aren't meant to be depressing. In fact, the "Great Doubt" is the starting point of a lifetime of exploration.

II. The Buddha's Awakening: A Profoundly "Scientific" Observation

Much like our world today, Prince Siddhartha's world was filled with social inequality and political oppression. The difference, though, is that today we have added a layer of digital anxiety. Yet, the root of pain remains the same. Under the Bodhi tree, the Buddha didn't pray to a god. Rather, he made "scientific" observations regarding the truth of human existence.

The Core Observation: The Twelve Links of Dependent Origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*)

1. Ignorance (*avijja*)
2. Volitional formations (*saṅkhāra*)
3. Consciousness (*viññāṇa*)
4. Name and form (*nāma-rūpa*)
5. The six sense fields (*saḷāyatana*)
6. Contact (*phassa*)
7. Feeling tone (*vedanā*)
8. Craving (*taṇhā*)
9. Clinging (*upādāna*)
10. Becoming (*bhava*)
11. Birth (*jāti*)
12. Old age and death (*jarā-maraṇa*)

He discovered the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination, which operate in two directions:

the blueprint of how life unfolds across past, present, and future. He realized they operate in two directions:

- The Forward Process (arising of suffering):
From ignorance → volitional formations → consciousness → name-and-form ...
→ birth → aging and death, culminating in the full mass of suffering.
- The Reverse Process (cessation of suffering):
Tracing backward: aging and death arise because there is birth; birth because of becoming; becoming because of clinging... ultimately back to ignorance: not seeing reality as it truly is.
When ignorance ceases, the entire chain dissolves.

To describe this realization, the Buddha used a beautiful metaphor: the “ancient path of the sages.” This is the dependent origination, which was not invented, but rediscovered. Like a traveler finding an ancient road in the wilderness that leads to a serene city—that city is Nirvāṇa, and the path is the Noble Eightfold Path.

III. The *Anattalakkhana Sutta* (The *Non-Self Characteristic Sutra*), the Teaching at Deer Park — The Five Aggregates Are Not Self

In the *Samyukta Āgama*, after his awakening, the Buddha did not remain in solitude. With gratitude and compassion, he went to Deer Park to teach the five companions who had practiced with him.

- His first teaching: the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* (Turning of the Wheel of Dharma), establishing the Four Noble Truths.
- His second: the *Anattā-lakkhaṇa Sutta*—the teaching on non-self.

the Buddha asked a question that cuts to the core:

"Form is not-self. If form were self, form would not lead to affliction, and one could say to the form: 'Let my form be thus; let my form not be thus.'" (SA, 34).

If your body were truly "you"—if you were the master—you could command it never to get sick or age. But you cannot. Therefore, the body is not "you." It is like a machine functioning on its own, while we mistakenly believe we are the driver.

IV. Analyzing the Five Aggregates (*Pañca-kkhandha*)

The "Self" is actually a collection of five changing components:

1. **Form (Materiality):** The physical body and the material world.
2. **Feeling (Sensation):** Pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral sensations.
3. **Perception:** Recognition, labels, and concepts.
4. **Mental Formations:** Volition, impulses, and the "will" that creates karma.
5. **Consciousness:** The faculty of awareness that arises through the senses.

The "Self" is merely the "coming together" of these five aggregates in each moment. You are not a static entity. Rather, you are a dynamic, ever-changing process.

V. The Three-Step Argument: From Impermanence to Liberation

The Buddha uses three logical steps to dismantle our attachment:

1. **Impermanence (*Anicca*):** Is this constant? No, the five aggregates arise and perish in every moment.

2. **Suffering (*Dukkha*):** Can constant change bring stability? No, this flux creates an inherent "un-peacefulness."
3. **Non-Self (*Anatta*):** Since it is stressful and uncontrollable, can it really be called "Mine"? If we cannot master it, why cling to it?

These insights were revolutionary. At the time, Indian philosophy (*Upanishads*) believed in an eternal **Atman** (True Self) characterized by **Saccidānanda**: Being (*Sat*), Bliss (*Ānanda*), and Sovereignty/Control (*Ātman*). The Buddha used our clear lack of Control as an entry point to shatter the illusion of an eternal self.

VI. Living the Practice: Letting Go in Daily Life

The Lesson of "Walking": A story tells us of a student who was too tired to walk. His companions said, "We can do many things for you, but we cannot eat, sleep, or walk for you." There are many things you cannot control. For instance, your body gets sick, emotions fluctuate, and thoughts wander. They don't follow your orders. So how can they be "you"?

Three Points for Daily Reflection:

- **Concept:** Impermanence is suffering.
- **Practice:** When you are in pain, tell yourself: "This is a sensation in the body, it is not 'me' suffering." Observing the *resistance* to pain is more powerful than observing the pain itself.
- **Mindfulness:** Instead of saying "I am angry," try observing that "a feeling of anger has arisen." This shift in language is the first step toward freedom.

Conclusion:

Your body, emotions, and thoughts happen *to* you, but they are not *you*. In the midst of the flux, there is only the quiet observation of the process. Realizing this is letting go; and letting go is true freedom.
