

BUDDHIST CONCEPT FOR TODAY'S LIVING (6) THE TEACHING OF SUNYATA: NON-SUBSTANTIALITY

Overcoming selfishness helps you find a world of new possibilities within!

Have you seen the patterns formed by sand dunes? Depending on the size and shape of the sand grains, the direction of the winds and the surface features of the land, shifting sands can form myriad dune patterns. The scaly or wavy patterns are constantly changing. Just like those ever-shifting sand patterns, everything around us (ourselves included) is constantly changing. And like dunes of sand, how things or people change is a function of their relations with their surroundings.

Nagarjuna, the Buddhist teacher believed to have lived in India sometime around the late second century and the early third century, expounded the teaching of *sunyata* (Jpn *ku*), which is variously translated as non-substantiality, void or emptiness. He developed the concept of non-substantiality from Shakyamuni's principle of dependent origination (Skt *pratityasamutpada*; Jpn *engi*).

Nagarjuna asserted that since everything arises and continues to exist by virtue of its relationship with other phenomena (i.e., dependent origination), it has absolutely no fixed or independent substance of its own (i.e., non-substantiality). Viewed from this perspective, there is nothing that cannot be changed. Nothing exists entirely on its own, and no form is absolute and immutable. The universe, then, is full of new situations at every moment.

This open-ended nature of the universe also applies to human beings. Our lives are full of new possibilities for the future. It all depends upon how we view ourselves—how well we recognize these possibilities—and what kind of relationship we create with our surroundings.

According to the perspective of non-substantiality, everything changes not only in its appearance or shape but also in its nature or meaning. A raft, for example, may be useful for a traveler to cross a river. But it would be foolish for him to carry the raft a long distance after crossing the river. The raft then becomes a heavy burden, an obstacle to his journey. In this sense, the concept of non-substantiality suggests that it is foolish for us to base our lives on and grow attached to things that we possess, such as wealth or position. Like the raft, they are only of immediate value, and attachment to them can even become a burden on our journey toward self-perfection. And from the standpoint of eternity, they are nothing at all.

The important thing is that we create a positive relationship with our ever-shifting surroundings at every moment and thereby create value. If we base our lives on the belief that there is permanent value and meaning in money or social status, our expectation will be miserably betrayed sooner or later. For example, we would be endangering ourselves if we were to cling to a bundle of dollar bills rather than a jug of water when walking across a desert. If we attach ourselves to material wealth while ignoring our spiritual well-being, we will eventually become miserable as well. At the same time, if we develop the ability to utilize material wealth to support our happiness and to benefit others, neither shunning it nor enslaving ourselves to it, our lives can be more fulfilling.

Nagarjuna's concept of non-substantiality points out that there is no absolute value—good or evil—assigned to the things or events in our lives. Their meanings are essentially what we make of them. No matter how painful or unfortunate an event we may encounter, we can still create a positive meaning from it, depending upon how we view it and what we

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do about it. Our views and resulting actions, however, are determined not merely by our intellectual understanding but by our essential consciousness or the state of our innermost being. This is where our practice of Buddhism can effect positive change.

The concept of non-substantiality also helps us discover within us a world of new possibilities. Sometimes we limit our potential, thinking that we will remain the way we are forever. "This is something that I was born with. It'll never change!" As the concept of non-substantiality illustrates, however, nothing is exactly the same from one moment to the next. As much as things may get worse, they may also get better. Changing our lives for the better is therefore always possible, and it is always up to us. In this sense, putting limitations on ourselves amounts to living under the illusion that our present self-image is a fixed reality. In reality, it is non-substantial and changeable.

Probably the most important implication of the teaching of non-substantiality is that we do not exist entirely on our own. The meaning of our lives—and our happiness—arises through our interconnectedness with those around us, with the community and world in which we live. An analogy used to describe this principle in Buddhism is that of two bundles of reeds that remain standing as long as they are leaning on each other. The implication is that there is no fundamental distinction between our happiness and that of others. To fall under the illusion that we are independent of others is to alienate ourselves from the world around us. This kind of selfishness becomes self-defeating. The concept of non-substantiality teaches that all things, including our lives, exist as they are only in the context of their relations with other phenomena. Nothing has an independent substance of its own. For instance, a human being in the vacuum of space will be quickly transformed into a lifeless mass—scorched to coal on one side by the direct rays of the sun and frozen on the other. Without air and water and other forms of life to provide nourishment, a human being will die. And in our modern world, few of us could easily survive without the system of commerce that surrounds us, which includes transportation, food distribution, etc. Many people are involved in these endeavors and all of us depend on them. To fail to recognize and appreciate this due to an illusion of independent identity will cause imbalance and unhappiness.

Isolated, our lives lose meaning. But depending upon how we relate to others and our environment, we can realize the infinite potential we possess and our own value to the world around us. In this sense, the most unfortunate are those who withdraw to the prison of their own self-centeredness and lock the door from the inside by insisting that their lives are fundamentally separate. In an ironic reversal of intent, those who seek absolute value in their own existence while ignoring the happiness of others are, in fact, voiding their lives of meaning and substance. With the absence of such relationships, all that remains is "non-substantiality" or "emptiness."

In the final analysis, the concept of non-substantiality is a teaching through which we awaken compassion and transcend our selfish ego so that we may actively engage with others. When we view the happiness of others as our own and extend them genuine care, our lives transform themselves from "emptiness" to "substance." In this regard, Nichiren Daishonin states: "To dwell in the seat of non-substantiality is to practice with selfless dedication" (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 737). As the Daishonin succinctly explains here, when we live for the sake of others' happiness with selfless dedication, we are putting the teaching of non-substantiality into action. As noted Buddhist scholar Hajime Nakamura explains, Nagarjuna himself esteemed and upheld the values of "thankfulness" and "the ideal of the bodhisattva."¹ He saw the importance of realizing the interconnectedness of all lives as

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well as of expressing appreciation and compassion in altruistic action. The concept of non-substantiality suggests that selflessness may be the shortest path to meaningful selfhood. □

*By Shin Yatomi, Associate Editor
based on the book Yasashi Kyogaku
(Easy Study), Tokyo: Seikyo Press*

1. Hajime Nakamura, *Indian Buddhism: A Survey with Bibliographical Notes*. Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers: 1987, p. 252.

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