

THE BUDDHIST TEACHING ON NON-SELF (ANATTA)

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1. The notion of the self assumes many forms, as for example, the monistic form in pre-Buddhist Upanisad thought, the pluralistic form in the Samkhya philosophy, and the materialistic form in Ucchedavada.

2. Nevertheless, the notion of the self can be brought under two main headings, namely, Spiritual Eternal-ism (sassatavāda) and Materialist Annihilation-ism (ucchedavāda). The first is based on the duality-principle: “The self is one thing, and the body is another” (aññaṃ jīvaṃ aññaṃ sarīraṃ). The second is based on the identity-principle: “The self and the body are the same” (taṃ jīvaṃ taṃ sarīraṃ).

3. In the teachings of the Buddha, ‘non-self’ is one of the three signs of sentient existence, namely:

(a) Impermanence (anicca)

(b) Suffering (dukkha)

© Non-self (anatta).

4. Their logical sequence is as follows: All conditioned phenomena are impermanent, what is impermanent is suffering, and what is suffering is non-self. The sequence of the three signs is logical, not chronological.

5. The conclusion that there is no ‘self’ is directly derived from the idea of impermanence:

“If anyone regards the eye (i.e. seeing) as ‘self’, that does not hold, for the arising and passing of the eye (i.e. seeing) is clear from experience. With regard to that which arises and passes away, if anyone were to think, my “self” is arising and passing away”, (such a thought) would be contradicted by the person himself. Therefore it does not hold to regard the eye as the self. Thus, the eye (or seeing) is (proved to be) non-self. (The same situation applies to the other sense-faculties)”. (Majjhimanikaya, PTS, III, 282, tr, O.H.D.A. Wijesekera).

Can feeling, for instance, be considered as my “self”? If it could be so considered, then when a pleasant feeling disappears and an unpleasant feeling appears, I have to admit that my “self” has changed, if it has not vanished completely.

6. Another meaning of non-self is the absence of control over what one possesses (avasavattitā):

If, for instance, the physical body be considered as ‘self’, then this physical body would not be subject to affliction. One should be able to say (with practical results): ‘Let my physical body be like this, let my physical body be like that’. Because the physical body is ‘non-self’, therefore, it is subject to affliction.

If anything could be called my own 'self', then I should have full control over it, so that it behaves the way I want it to behave. If something is really my own, I should be able to have power over it. Because we do not have full control over our possessions, when something adverse happens to them, it is we who come to grief. Therefore it is our possessions that really possess us.

7. The idea of non-self is derived from another perspective: As the Buddha says, "All living beings subsist on food" (sabbe sattā āhāraṭṭhitikā). There are four kinds of food:

(a) Material food (kabalīkāra-āhāra): food for the physical body.

(b) Sensory contact (phassa): there are six kinds, namely, eye-contact, ear-contact, nose-contact, tongue-contact, body-contact, and mind-contact. It is through these six sensory contacts that our sense-faculties partake of food. What is visible is food for the eye, what is audible is food for the ear, and so on.

© Mental volition (mano-sañcetanā): conation or the motivating aspect of our experience = the "will to live".

(d) Consciousness (viññāṇa): this is the food for the samsaric journey of individual life.

These four kinds of food, on which we subsist, show that our "individual life" is a process of nutriment, or a process of alimentation. It has to be kept going on by four kinds of food. If there were an unchanging self-entity within the individual, then it would not be necessary to keep it going by any kind of food.

8. Origin of the self-notion: According to Buddhism, the idea of self is not due to intellectual reasons. It is not the result of any philosophical investigation. The idea of the self has a purely psychological origin. The psychological origin of the self-idea can be traced to the cognitive process, that is, the way we cognize or perceive external objects:

"Depending on the eye and visible forms, eye-consciousness arises. The correlation of the three is sensory contact (impingement). With sensory contact as condition, there is feeling. What one feels, that one perceives. What one perceives, that one examines. What one examines, that one conceptually proliferates. Due to that perceptions and notions, born of conceptual proliferations, beset a man with respect to past, future and present visible forms cognizable through the eye."

It is at the stage of feeling that the latent tendency for the ego-consciousness arises. As the process of cognition continues, the ego-consciousness gets further entrenched and solidified. The original percept is now converted to a concept. The ordinary unenlightened person identifies his ego-consciousness with one or more of his five aggregates, as: "This is mine", "This I am", "This is my own self". The first is due to craving, the second is due to conceit, and the third is due to wrong view. (Madhupindika Sutta in Majjhimanikaya)

9. Why the idea of self persists in the world: Although the origin of the self-notion is purely due to psychological reasons, it can be buttressed and strengthened by many other factors, such as desire for

self-identity, self-protection, and self-assurance. This means we have a deep-seated craving that provides an emotional attachment to the belief in a permanent self.

10. In this connection, the Buddha refers to two kinds of anxieties (*paritassanā*). One is the anxiety due to absence of something external (*bahiddhā asati*). The other is the anxiety due to the absence of something within us (*ajjhataṃ asati*). It is this latter kind of anxiety that a person who believes in a self comes to experience, when he is told that there is no such self. For the idea of a permanent self gives a person a sense of identity, a sense of security, and a sense of certainty. When he is told that there is no such self, he comes to grief, and experiences an inner vacuum, a sense of complete loss.

11. The notion of non-self and the notion of emptiness: For early Buddhism “non-self” and “empty” (*suñña*) are identical. The world is “empty” because it is completely devoid of a self (*atta*), or of anything that pertains to a self (*attaniyena*).

12. The problem of the putative over-self: Is there a self outside the five aggregates, a self that transcends the five aggregates?

There are some scholars who maintain that the Buddha did not deny the self. In their opinion what the Buddha denied is the empirical self, not the transcendental self. One canonical passage often cited by them is where the itinerant philosopher Vacchagotta asks the Buddha, whether the self exists or not. In each case the Buddha remained silent. This silence on the part of the Buddha was interpreted by some scholars to mean that the Buddha did not want to “shock a weak-minded hearer” by saying that there is no self. In point of fact, the correct position is seen from the same discourse when the Buddha told Ananda, his close disciple, why he decided to remain silent:

‘If, Ānanda, when Vacchagotta asked, ‘is there a self’ I had said, ‘there is a self’, then I should have been one of those who hold the doctrine of eternal-ism. But if I had replied ‘there is no self’, then I would have been one of those who hold the doctrine of annihilation. And if, when Vacchagotta asked, ‘is there a self’, I had replied, ‘there is a self’, would it have been in accordance with the knowledge that all things are without self?’

‘No, Lord’.

‘If I had said, ‘there is no self’, the bewildered Vacchagotta would have got still more bewildered, thinking, ‘then did my “self” exist before, and now it does not exist anymore’. (Atthatta Sutta in Samyuttanikaya).

The correct conclusion to be drawn from the above dialogue is that that the Buddha keeps himself aloof from the spiritualist and the materialist versions of the self.

13. The early Buddhist theory of knowledge and the self-theory: Buddhism recognizes many levels of knowledge. But nowhere is it stated that a transcendental self becomes the object of any kind of higher knowledge. For Buddhism the object of higher knowledge is not a higher reality, such as the Transcendental Self, or the Cosmic Soul, or the Creator God, but the precise nature of the world of experience, the world we experience with our six sense faculties.

14. Jhana Experience and the self-theory: Jhana experience means the higher stages of mental concentration or unification of the mind. Nowhere is it claimed that a transcendental self comes to be known in any stage of jhana experience.

15. Nibbāna and the self-theory: Realization of Nibbāna is not the discovery of the transcendental self. It is in fact by understanding, that there is no self, that Nibbānic experience is realized.

16. Buddhism itself claims that the doctrine of non-self is unique to Buddhism. In a Buddhist discourse, called “Shorter Discourse on the Lion’s Roar”, it is clearly stated that no religious teacher, other than the Buddha, was aware of the doctrine of non-self.” ‘Non-self’ is the unique discovery of the Buddha, and it is the crucial doctrine that separates the Buddha’s own teaching from all other religious and philosophical systems.

17. When it comes to other Buddhist doctrines, such as kamma, causality, rebirth, Buddhism refers to parallel doctrines in other religions. However, when it comes to the doctrine of non-self we do not find similar references to parallel doctrines. This is the most convincing evidence which shows that the doctrine of non-self is unique to Buddhism. Yaśomitra, a celebrity of the Sautrāntika school of Buddhism, categorically asserts that in the whole world there is no other religious teacher who proclaims a doctrine of non-self. (Abhidharmakosavyakhyā Sphutartha of Yasomitra, ed. U. Wogihara , p. 697).

19. Ācariya Buddhaghosa, the Theravada commentator (6th century CE) says that the characteristics of impermanence and suffering are known whether Buddha-s arise or not, but the characteristic of non-self is the province of none but a Buddha. The Buddha, in some instances shows non-selfness through impermanence, in some through suffering, and in some through both. Why is that? while impermanence and suffering are both evident, non-self is not evident and appears impenetrable, hard to illustrate, and hard to describe. (Vibhaṅgaṭṭhakatha, PTS, 49-50).

20. The doctrine of non-self is recognized by all Schools of Buddhist thought. Therefore, if there is a Buddhist doctrine on the basis of which we can speak of the transcendental unity of Buddhism, it is the doctrine of non-self. The doctrine of non-self unites all Schools of Buddhist thought and separates them from all non-Buddhist religions.

21. It is the Buddhist doctrine of non-self that sets Buddhism equally aloof from spiritual eternal-ism (sassatavāda) and materialist annihilation-ism (ucchedavāda).

22. The Buddhist doctrine of non-self provides a new dimension to the concept of person. Buddhism explains the concept of human personality without postulating a non-changing substantial basis.

23. The Buddhist doctrine of non-self provides a new dimension to psychology as well. If “psych” means the “inner unchanging self”, then Buddhist Psychology is a psychology without the “psyche”.

24. The Buddhist doctrine of non-self provides a new dimension to ethics as well. An ethics based on non-self is the surest foundation for an ethics that eschews all forms of selfishness and ego-centricity.

25. Buddhist philosophy shows why the belief in a self is not valid. Buddhist psychology shows how the belief in a self originates. Buddhist ethics shows how the belief in a self can be eliminated. Nibbāna, the Highest Goal of Buddhism, shows where the belief in a self is completely transcended.

26. The self-view and the origin of all speculative views:

The self-view, as we have already noted, emerges purely due to psychological reasons. Once arisen, it becomes the base for the emergence of myriad philosophical views, concerning the nature of the world. Hence the Buddhist monk Isidatta tells Citta, the householder:

“Now, householder, as to those diverse views that arise in the world ... and as to these sixty-two views set forth in the Brahmajāla (Sutta), it is owing to the self-view that they arise and if the self-view exists not, they do not exist” (Saṃyuttanikāya, PTS, IV 526 ff).

27. When we have the ‘self-view’, we have ego-centricity. When we have ego-centricity, our ideational framework through which we perceive the world, is conditioned by the egocentric perspective. When we look at the world through the lens of ego-centric perspective, we see what we want to see, not what is actually there. What we see is determined by our own desires.

28. Accordingly, all metaphysical, theological, theosophical views are but rationalizations of our deep-seated desires and innate anxieties. Some of these views and ideologies, as we know, are couched in beautiful and captivating language. They appear very lofty and profound, incredibly magnificent and awe-inspiring. Nevertheless, the Buddhist position is that they are nothing but external manifestations of man’s obsessive desires to satisfy his innermost yearnings and compulsive urges.

29. Strictly speaking, Buddhism is not a philosophy. Rather, it is a meta-philosophy, that is, a philosophy that explains the very nature of philosophy. When Vacchagotta, an itinerant philosopher, asked the Buddha whether he has any view, the Buddha said: I have not come to any view (ditthim anupagatam), but I have viewed (ditthan ca Tathagatena).

30. According to Buddhism, what exists is not the self (atta), but the idea or notion of the self (attavada). Therefore, what comes to an end is not the self, but the idea or notion of the self. For, what does not exist, cannot come to an end.