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Anatta (No Self) in Buddhism Through the Lens of Modern Psychology

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Abstract

Anatta or selflessness is a core concept in Buddhism. Unlike other religions in the Buddha's era, Buddhism proposes that the world, including the self, is not impermanent but changes continually. Accepting that the self is an impermanent existence and adherence to the world, as we suppose it is permanent, is the root of suffering. While Buddhism is known as an ancient religion, dated over two thousand years ago, it is still practiced around the world in the present time. This paper discusses the importance of understanding the characteristics of self and the role of self in modern life. Also, to shed light on the alignments of anatta in modern psychology, self-help, supported by positive psychology, is analyzed in a way that explores the nature of anatta. Finally, the paper gives implications of anatta for one to reduce suffering by accepting possible changes in life and to help oneself recover from suffering.

Keywords: Anatta, Buddha's teaching, Concentration, ethics, Impermanence, Self-help.

1. Introduction

Anatta, also known as anattā in Pali or anātman in Sanskrit, is widely defined as "no self". This term is basically referred to as a core concept in Buddhism stating that nothing is unchanging or permanent (Gombrich, 2009). In fact, because humans recognize things as permanent, they attach themselves to the phenomena in the outside world, resulting in suffering and dissatisfaction (MacKenzie, 2012).

Anatta is generally related to three important concepts in Buddhism: Buddhist ethics or moral conduct, concentration, and wisdom or insight. Moral conduct in Buddhism outlines a person's behavior or activity (Barnhart, 2012). It is a system of moral duty and obligation describing what a person can and cannot do (Davis, 2016). Concentration, unlike Buddhist ethics, deals mainly with one's thoughts and thinking. One is supposed to concentrate on what they do or are doing to overcome their personal problems, suggesting that mindfulness may be a great help (Bucknell, 2022). Buddhist ethics and concentration are believed to develop one's understanding of themselves and the external world. When they understand themselves and the outside world, they can sympathize and respect the occurrences and beings in the environment (Sayadaw, 2016). In general, Buddhist ethics, concentration, and understanding assist personal development in resolving their own problems and aligning with the external world.

According to many scholars (e.g., Carlisle, 2006), anatta is a source of spiritual medicine to overcome personal suffering. This suggests that the nature of anatta consists of psychological processes, which can help one recover from mental problems such as stress, anxiety, and depression. For instance, Deane and Kavanagh (2012) made more in-depth reviews, mainly recommending that one use bibliotherapy and Internet sources to deal with their own sufferings. Yip (2024) showed that self-disclosure in online groups can alleviate depression and anxiety. Overall, anatta can suggest principles and techniques to help one overcome their own sufferings.

In modern society, a number of targets and intentions in diverse fields are set, forcing people to achieve and finalize them on schedule. As a result, the pressure from these duties and responsibilities is the leading cause of social stress and depression (Deane & Kavanagh, 2012; Scogin, 2003). This shows the value of anatta in modern life in terms of overcoming work- and family-related sufferings. However, although anatta is well-documented in the current Buddhist literature, it is commonly considered an old concept in terms of its origin. It is timely to figure out how anatta is in line with the current literature. A critical view of anatta in the light of modern psychology can persuade people that anatta can be used to deal with one's personal sufferings in modern life.

This paper aims to discuss the revival of Anatta, in the Buddha's teaching, in the light of modern psychology to assist one in handling psychological problems such as anxiety, stress, and depression. Buddhism, an ancient religion that arose in India, offers effective techniques that help one solve their own psychological problems and keep balance in modern society through three aspects: morality, concentration, and wisdom. The main research object in this study is the doctrine of non-self (anatta) of Buddhism. The very factor of not having an immutable self-nature in any dharma, including humans, shows an important relationship in the continuous change of awareness and behavior through improvement methods of self-help. The in-depth discussion in this paper is guided by the following questions: How are the mechanisms of anatta regarding modal conduct (or ethics), concentration,

and wisdom? How is it viewed in modern psychology in terms of helping oneself deal with personal psychological problems?

Although many people currently practice anatta, how it aligns with current science is underexplored. Evaluating and recognizing that anatta is embedded in science can illuminate the validity of this concept and its value in solving personal problems: Anatta, a Buddhist concept closely related to self-help, can provide therapists an alternative approach to treatment (Harvey, 2013). The results of this study will give insights that although anatta is an ancient approach, it is scientifically and practically applicable in modern society.

2. The Concept of Anatta

In India's context of cultural and religious diversity twenty-five centuries ago, the remarkable discovery of the Buddha in terms of human nature and the entire world related to non-self is considered unique. Anatta is one of the most profound teachings of the Buddha, yet it is also a foundation of Buddhist teaching (Harvey, 2013; Loy, 2009). Understanding the concept of non-self (anattā) allows one to understand all other related topics of Buddhist teachings.

In Buddhism, the doctrine that no permanent or fundamental entity can be called the soul is considered the definition of the self (Bronkhorst, 2009). Instead, individuals are composed of five aggregates or pañcakkhandha in Pali that constantly change and are certainly impermanent (Williams, 2008). Science acknowledges that the earth is moving, and we humans are aging every single second. Realizing the no-self (anattā) that is associated with impermanence (anicca) and suffering (dukkha) may enhance one's right view or direct knowledge of Buddhism (Harvey, 2013).

According to Collins (1990), anatta presents itself in three main forms. First, no self means no identity, viewing that there is no existence of self and/ or identification of who we are or what a phenomenon is. Second, when humans understand that there is no self, they are not conceited. In other words, they do not recognize themselves as better or worse than others. Finally, as there is no self, humans should not label things as right or wrong. That means, they do not believe they are right, and opposing views are wrong. These three forms of anatta are not separate but interrelated. The first two forms incorporate the third one.

Anattā emphasized selflessness through the specific analysis of the Buddha's existence. Accordingly, anattā denied for nothing considered 'I' or 'mine' in any human or other objects. In other words, faith in 'I' or the attachment to self is the origin of suffering (dukkhasamudaya), which assumes that things in the world are unchanged. Accepting change can help prevent one from suffering from unpredictable events and phenomena (Cloutier & Peetz, 2016). However, in reality, as change is unavoidable and sometimes unpredictable, humans are sometimes unsatisfied, resulting in suffering (Duchek, 2020), which Buddha mentioned in the exposition of the truths (Saccavibhanga Sutta in Pali).

The Buddha denied the existence of an endless and immutable soul because he thought the body and mind were constantly evolving (anicca in Pali) (Siderits, 2015). The Buddha did not accept eternalism (sassatadiṭṭhi in Pali) and skepticism or nihilistic view (natthikadiṭṭhi in Pali) but explained the Paṭicca-samuppāda (dependent origination). Therefore, the opinion that there is a regenerated soul in the next life and death ends is micchādiṭṭhi is not favorable in Buddha's teachings (Jones, 2020). Accepting rebirth in the next life may result in a perspective that the soul leaves the body after death and moves to another realm or existence. The belief that nothing is left after death makes them not believe in the fruit of karma. No concept of 'I' exists independently, but only name and form (nāma-rūpa in Pali) change restlessly under the circumstances (McCrea & Patil, 2010). The feeling of 'I' when we have invested a lot in life, cognition, desires - everything, is also a form of defilement due to craving (taṇhā in Pali) arising from ignorance (avijjā in Pali) (Siderits, 2021; Williams, 2008).

In predominantly Buddhist texts, the term Attā or Attan describes the ego or self. The use of the terms Atta, Purisa, and Puggala naturally in many different contexts shows the ego's denial in ancient Buddhist texts (Harvey, 2015). Later, the appearance of terms such as 'puggala', which means immutable subject or eternal soul, contributed to the formation of Anattā doctrine in later Buddhist documents (Bronkhorst, 2009; Harvey, 2012). The Buddhist viewpoint of anatta, which rejects the existence of an immutable, presents distinct differences when compared to Christianity and Indian religions. Moreover, this doctrine builds a base of Buddhist practice, leading to enlightenment and awakening (Hoang, 2019).

3. Two Main Forms of Anatta

To have a deep understanding of the anatta doctrine, it is necessary to view it in the two typical suttas in connected discourses (Nikāyasutta in Pali), including the characteristic of no-self (Anattalakkhaṇasutta in Pali) and the emptiness of the world (Suññatālokasutta in Pali). These two suttas present how the Buddha contemplated and argued about the truth of selflessness in humans within the five elements of nāma-rūpa (name and form), which constitute a human being without intrinsic entity and the emptiness of the world created by the existence of different and dependent conditions.

The anattalakkhaṇasutta (the characteristics of no self) is the second discourse of the Buddha, which abandons clinging to the false belief that there is 'the existence of self' and 'belongings of self.' This term refers to the concepts, emotions, or attributes that people often assign to themselves. However, from the Buddhist point of view, these concepts and the state of the mind do not have a fixed entity and cannot exist independently (Hugh, 2016; Norman, 2010). In Buddha's teachings, no self is explained thoroughly in the view of the real body-mind of the five aggregates (pañcakkhandha in Pali). The Buddha constantly aroused awareness of the problem through questions and answers to five mendicants: Is 'form permanent or impermanent? But if it's impermanent, is it suffering or happiness? But if it's impermanent, suffering, and perishable, is it fit to be regarded thus: "This is mine, I am this, this is my self?" (Snyder, 2006). Through asking the listener, the Buddha also created opportunities for the opposite person to contemplate and evaluate whether what he has raised is right or wrong and appropriate or inappropriate.

The Buddha slowly outlined the truth in the five elements as cleverly peeling off the banana peel. At the beginning of the sutta, he asserted: 'Form is not self.' The first reason is given for this assertion: 'If the form were self, it would not lead to affliction.' Next, he argued that one's form would be like this or like that, but the form still did not comply with one's wish (Abeysekera, 2000; Dhammika, 2006). Therefore, witnessing the evolution of the physical body spontaneously causes one to be disappointed and despair. For example, the fact that a woman is always afraid of changing her beauty over the years leads to aging. This change might affect her husband's interest of dispassionate toward their relationship. This case shows the closed association of misery and the change of the form.

As mentioned in Anattalakkhaṇasutta, the second factor in the five aggregates is vedanākkhandha (feeling), also non-self. Vedanā means feelings, sensations, or awareness anywhere on the body and mind have feelings such as hot, cold, aches, numbness, happiness or pleasant, and misery or unpleasant. Vedanāsutta distinguishes three types of feelings: (1) unpleasant feeling means the sense of uncomfortable), (2) pleasant feeling means a sense of comfort and happiness) and (3) neutral feeling means not happy and not miserable (Acharya, 2016). Under the guidance of the Buddha, one could understand that such feelings and feelings are also non-self, rising and ceasing constantly. Moreover, according to the law of dependent origination, vedanā (feeling) was born by contact (phassa in Pali) or contact leads to feeling (phassa paccayā vedanā') (Rahula, 2007). For example, when a man meets a beautiful woman, he tends to enjoy or like her. It is a kind of pleasant emotion, and it is reversed when one encounters an unpleasant situation (Harvey, 2015). These two individuals, whether beautiful or ugly, are just two sets of five aggregates, but different ways of expression indicate that even feelings are non-self.

Perception (saññā in Pali), the third element of the five aggregates, is also non-self. Thoughts and perceptions are referred to as ideas that arise in the mind because there is contact between the five sense-organs and the five external objects, recognizes, and labels (the shape of a house, fear of a ghost). Perception is also non-self because perception is a process of interpreting sensory information to understand the world around us, arising from the contact between objects and sense-organs correspondence (Johnson, 2021). It represents awareness and perception, distinguishing the world through the senses. In addition, perception also labels objects and forms experiences. For example, when someone mentions 'the sea', we immediately imagine the waves and white sandy beaches, or when smelling a scent, you distinguish it as the smell of incense, not the smell of flowers. Similarly, when listening to the temple bell, you are immediately aware of the chanting or meditation time and default yourself when listening to the sound like that. Perception is not fixed and changes over time and circumstances as it arises; it depends upon many sensory and mental processes (Ziv & Hadad, 2021). This shows that the perception is also impermanent and does not have a fixed entity. Therefore, perception is definitely selfless.

The fourth factor is formation (saṅkhāra in Pali). It represents conditioned things, volition, constructing activities, thinking, and psychological activities to create karma. An object triggers all types of mental imprints and conditioning. It includes conditional reactions that lead to bodily action, speech, and mental factors (Hanh, 2015). For example, when one is young, he or she met beggars and had to blame why they were in that situation. However, when he or she grows up more, stumbles in life, and sometimes fails to be broke, he or she turns to understand more about the beggars they met in their childhood. At this time, he or she becomes more compassionate and understanding about the beggars' situation as he or she is in the same situation. His or her saṅkhāra in his or her childhood has changed in the light of open-mindedness. This makes his or her willingness to lead to his or her actions now to help anyone without discrimination. The example shows that formation or Saṅkhāra constantly changes over time and under different circumstances and depends on what people experience (Bodhi, 2005). Humans can develop more in every stage of life by acquiring such experiences. Formation changes so quickly that we are unsure how to realize how mature we are. That is the answer to why we are sometimes honest but sometimes hate. Therefore, formation or saṅkhāra is not a fixed non-self entity but is subject to many factors from the living environment and external impacts (Waldron, 2003).

The fifth factor is consciousness (viññāṇa in Pali), and the last factor in pañcakhandha (five aggregates), represents the distinction of its components and aspects the perception, the primary stage consciousness of objects through the six senses. This factor helps identify what we hear, smell, taste, touch, and intension. It plays the role of receiving information from the recognition senses (Bodhi, 2000). When making eye contact with an image object, eye-consciousness (cakkhuviññāṇa in Pali) receives data on information about that picture. For example, when the ear receives any sound, ear-consciousness (sotaviññāṇa in Pali) arises to realize the difference between each type of sound to inform the brain what I hear, such as the sound of the wind, the sound of thunder, and the sound of the rain. This fact is available for distinguishing images, colors, tastes, pleasant or uncomfortable feelings, and wholesome or unwholesome thoughts. Consciousness cannot operate independently but needs to combine with many other factors such as basic senses or rūpa in Pali (e.g. body, eye, and ear), emotions (vedanā in Pali), thinking or saññā in Pali (e.g. perception), and formation and volition (saṅkhāra in Pali) (Hoa, 2007). When one falls asleep fast, consciousness also works, but it works more weakly than when you are awake (Wisadavet, 2011), suggesting that consciousness is also impermanent and non-self because it changes continuously.

Overall, human beings keep clinging to the five aggregates and attached to the concept of 'I' and 'mine,' but, in actual fact, humans are constituted of five aggregates, of which none is considered essential. The statement: 'This is not mine, I am not this, this is not myself.' shows that the self can be expressed in different forms, including "mine," "I," and "myself" (Gombrich, 2011; Tan, 2023). When a wrong view arises that there is something of 'mine' (e.g. my house), people believe that all the external phenomena are real. In other aspects, a Buddhist follower practices reflection on the core of things what is considered as self or what belongs to a self. A close examination of the selflessness of five aggregates indicates that all these factors co-exist and require conditions (Laumakis, 2008; Paul, 2004). This reflection disillusioned practitioners, discharging, not attached form, feeling, perception, choices, and consciousness. Therefore, learning abandoned clinging to any conditional phenomena or form allows one to be freed from all the defilements. The meditator who attained enlightenment, the truth of selflessness (anattā in Pali), and reached the fruit of liberation (nibbāna in Pali), as the first five of the mendicants (Bhikkhus in Pali) who have

gained insight into the true nature of existence after understanding the characteristics of no-self (Anattalakkhaṇasutta in Pali).

In a Buddha's teaching called Suññataloka Sutta in Pali, the Buddha denied 'what belongs to self' that involves material elements or external phenomena. When Venerable Ananda asked Buddha why this world is empty, he answered that even because the cognitive subject means the eye and the cognitive object that the appearance is empty includes eye-consciousness (cakkhuviññāṇa in Pali) and form (nāma in Pali) is empty (Bodhi, 2000). Because these phenomena are the existence of interconnection and emphasize a structured analysis of perceptual experience. Because of the eye, there is awareness of the eye, and the eye perceives the object. Moreover, the Buddha explained that loka (world) consists of six sensory experiences entirely non-self because there is no-self (atta) and 'what belongs to self.' (Christian, 2017). The central meaning of this sutta emphasizes the emptiness of the world because if there is no 'self,' it does not exist the concept 'myself,' which means five aggregates are non-self, six sense organs are non-self, and six external objects are non-self (Mathers et al., 2013).

Through the analysis of the selflessness of the five aggregates in the characteristics of no-self (Anattalakkhaṇasutta in Pali) and the selflessness of the world in Suññatalokasutta (Madhumita, 2017), the Buddha argued systematically and logically to build no self (Anattā) doctrine closely. These two phenomena, subject to cognitive processes, mean that the existence of humans throughout the five aggregates is non-self, and the object of awareness means that the world is also empty. However, it is crucial to note that the non-self of Buddhism does not mean nothing exists, no afterlife, no reincarnation, or no fruit of karma. This understanding differs Buddhism from annihilationist schools (Buswell & Lopez, 2013; Harvey, 2013). When Buddhists understand specific practice methods at a deeper level, the attachment to the views on 'self' and 'myself' is less. They begin to realize the truth of life, which is impermanent, and become discharging the external world and seek peace of mind. They accept to let things go when they do not need such things anymore and minimize the self in their personal life. The ultimate enlightenment is the disappearance of this invisible but mysterious 'self.' (Bogoda, 2013). The Buddha witnessed that there was no authentic self, but the fact that people living in a solid physical world should the concept of 'selfless' are complicated to understand and accept. What is perceived as a 'self' that is merely a collection of momentary, conditioned dhammas that arise and pass away in rapid succession. Thus, the idea of an immutable, eternal self is a misconception (Kempton, 2018; Smith, 2010).

The theory of selflessness (anattā) is the fundamental doctrine of all Buddhist practices. The self is not actually permanent because its five components always change. Understanding that the self and world are impermanent may help reduce one's suffering as one accepts change and loss.

4. Impacts of Anatta on Dealing with Psychological Problems

The critical discussion of anatta in previous sections suggests that one should practice letting go of physical and mental attachments and sufferings. In other words, it is essential to view selflessness in light of internal and external phenomena to achieve inner peace and a balanced mind. It is also well acknowledged in the current literature that one can help oneself overcome one's negative mind together with a therapist's treatment. In fact, a therapist's assistance works only when one helps himself or herself, suggesting an alignment between modern psychology and anatta in Buddhism. This Buddhist approach shows the potential of using techniques for transforming physical and mental afflictions based on the doctrine of anatta. In particular, this point shows the interconnection and interrelation between the people and the external social relations. No individual can exist independently as human beings cannot survive if he does not breathe in and out. All phenomena arise, maintain, and cease according to the law of impermanence. There is constant change and movement of many processes of the mind relating to psychological states into positive ones.

Self-help is a psychological therapy that practitioners can do in their own time to improve mental problems such as stress, anxiety, and depression. Accordingly, self-help can yield positive effects on human psychological problems. As a result, patients can recover and rehabilitate from their complications. This therapy is closely related to many Buddhist solutions, which are based on the theory of selflessness and can handle psychological and human problems, specifically the practice of threefold training. It includes practicing ethical behaviors (sīla in Pali), developing calmness (samādhi in Pali), and clearly understanding oneself and the world (paññā in Pali). This leads to releasing attachments and suffering physically and mentally and realizing the selflessness of all internal and external phenomena to achieve inner peace. Self-reliance emphasizes the importance of human beings in most cases that can contribute to their happiness and take responsibility for their own lives (Baumeister, 1987; Chen et al., 2024; Díaz & González, 2012; Warburton, 2016).

Self-help therapies in modern psychology show some interconnections with Buddhist practice that include morality, mindfulness, and wisdom. These practices help humans overcome internal and external obstacles by thoroughly recognizing the law of dependence, which is the origin of all physical and psychological phenomena. Transforming negative emotions into mental factors is related to the effectiveness of self-help in treatment (Wagner et al., 2024). Both self-help and selflessness are closely connected in practice based on human interactions and the external world. Although anatta is one of the core principles of Buddhism arousing awareness of the impermanence of the world and self, it does not mean there is nothing that exists (Harvey, 2013, 2015). On the contrary, understanding the person with no immutable or intrinsic self leads to liberation from samsara, which means practitioners can overcome bad moments (Wilson, 2010). This shows that all phenomena do not have a fixed entity but are only a combination of changing factors.

Self-help and selflessness seem to be contradictory. However, a close examination of no self shows that it eradicates itself in recognition and emphasizes personal development like selflessness. However, self-help methods can be directed to the non-self because several self-help techniques related to mindful and meditative practices help patients realize the essence of impermanence and release their clinging (Nguyen, 2017). Adjusting cognitive awareness to letting go allows one to have self-awareness regarding adjusting behavior and viewpoint of changing personal actions. They courageously overcome themselves and give up bad habits. Self-help methods cannot succeed if the instructor does not specify that there is existence and constant change in themselves every moment

(Koivunen, 2022). Therefore, patients realize this constant change and grasp the best state to develop people within them (Clark-Jones, 2012). No self potentially enhances the effectiveness of self-care techniques (Wagner, 2024).

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Buddhist approach to self-help presents three Buddhist practices related to self-help methods in modern psychology. The involvement of sīla (discipline) in changing the awareness and behavior from akusala (unwholesome) actions to kusala (wholesome) actions plays a foundation in the self-help treatment process. From ethical rules, followers began to have a new perspective on themselves and the world. They focus on controlling emotions from the inside without blaming external objects. That is the function of concentration (samādhi). From the morality of the sīla and the calm of samādhi, paññā (wisdom) arises as an objective result. All troubles and dirt, often called defilements, began to be clean and pure. The right knowledge promotes the effect of a proper perception of people and reality without wrong views. When the mind is calm, the patient feels helped and liberated from suffering or harmful emotions. In Buddhism, this state is understood as liberation (vimutti).

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