

On the three characters of existence - Part two

In my previous article, I discussed the three characters of existence: impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and no self (Anicca, Dukkha, Anatta). These concepts are essential aspects of Buddhist wisdom that require continuous exploration for a deeper understanding.

In this article, I would like to delve further into these fundamental tenets, with a specific focus on the concept of no self.

The reason of focusing on no self is not only due to its complexity and difficulty in comprehension, but also because understanding it correctly according to the Buddha's guidance inevitably leads to insights into other significant concepts such as impermanence and unsatisfactoriness. In other words, a proper understanding of no self inherently involves comprehending impermanence and dukkha as interconnected aspects.

After the Buddha attained enlightenment, his first sermon centred on the Four Noble Truths, which stands as the foundational doctrine of Buddhism. Soon after, he expounded on the concept of no self (Anatta). During that time, this idea was considered radical and controversial because the prevailing belief among spiritual seekers in India was the concept of Atman (permanent self or soul). However, the Buddha repeatedly emphasised Anatta, making it a unique hallmark of Buddhism, and ever since, a comprehensive understanding of this doctrine has been a prominent path to liberation for Buddhist practitioners.

Now, let's delve into Anatta.

The term Anatta (an + atta) is translated as "no self," "not self," or "non-self." Various translators tend to stick with one of these terms

consistently when discussing Anatta. However, I prefer to use these terms case by case, depending on the context in each paragraph. This approach is not based on linguistic reasons but rather on the belief that the Buddha's teachings were tailored to specific listeners and contingent upon particular circumstances. Thus, although he used only the Pali term "Anatta," it likely carried similar but slightly different nuances and implications in each sermon.

Firstly, let's begin by using "not self" to understand Buddha's second sermon, the Anatta Lakkhana Sutta (SN22.59), which translates to "the characteristics of not self."

In this Sutta, the Buddha repeatedly mentions the term Anatta "not self" in relation to the five aggregates. According to the Buddha, these five aggregates are the fundamental building blocks that give rise to the false identification of self. Our notion of self is nothing more than an ongoing intermingling process among these five aggregates: body, feeling, perception, volition, and consciousness. The Buddha advises us to recognize that all these five aggregates are not ourselves.

For example, he tells his disciples, "You should clearly know that this is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself," regarding all these five aggregates. Why? Because they are uncontrollable, constantly changing, and their transient nature leads to unsatisfactoriness. Identifying them yourself is akin to holding fire in your hand, which is unwise. So, in this exposition, the term "Anatta" is used as an insightful strategy to gain freedom from suffering by relinquishing the delusive identification with these five aggregates. Therefore, in this case, "not self" is the appropriate application of Anatta. All five aggregates are not self. By dropping the habit of holding onto them as ourselves, we skilfully step into the realm of freedom.

You can try applying this teaching to yourself. For instance, when you experience unpleasant feelings, instead of identifying with

them, say to yourself with mindfulness, "This is not mine, this I'm not, this is not myself." You will feel a certain relief.

This is what I mean by stepping into the realm of freedom, which represents our true nature, usually forgotten and veiled. You can apply this method to any of the five aggregates. Initially, the effect may not be long-lasting, but it sets us in the right direction towards freedom. The only question is how diligent and sincere we are in practicing the Buddha's guidance.

At this stage of our discussion, you might have the following inquiry in your mind: "If these five aggregates are not my self, is there any other Self beyond this body and mind?" The answer is.... No. According to the Buddha, there is no self in anything, whether created or uncreated. Not only your body and mind are void of self, but all phenomena in this world are without self (sabbe dhamma anatta-Dhp279).

Now, you see I am starting to use the term "no self" instead of "not self." I believe that this term "No-Self" is suitable to refer to the Buddha's doctrinal and ontological declaration on the true reality of the whole world. Here, no self is equal to, devoid of self, or empty of self. We exist, but without a solid independent self. Rather, we exist as a flow of complex psycho-physiological combinations, just as a perpetual process with numerous intermingled elements. By "we," I mean everything, including human beings. The labels of "I," "you," and other names are mere designations for conventional reality without a solid independent entity. While such intellectual understanding can provide us with a liberating glimpse and perspective, true freedom from delusive identification with the self can only be attained through direct practice.

Let us negate false identification with our five aggregates by remembering "this is not mine, this I'm not, this is not myself," and continue deepening our understanding of the no self nature of

everything. However, let us also remember this insight should go hand in hand with the direct practice of meditation.

PS: Please take the above article as the tip of the iceberg; throughout the ages, many various ideas and opinions on Anatta have arisen. So, please be open-minded and be cautious about theoretical dogmatism. Only our ongoing real practice of meditation, as the Buddha did, will lead us to a true understanding of Anatta.

With metta
Bhante Anuttara