
THE CONCEPT OF NON-SELF IN THERAVADA BUDDHISM AND ITS RELATION TO HUMAN BEHAVIOR

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ABSTRACT

Anatta or non-self is one of the most important concepts in Theravada Buddhism. Anatta's main objective is to show that none of the five forms of self exists, and also none of the five aggregates be linked to the self. This realization concerning Anatta is devised to have a positive effect on how a follower of Buddhism experiences the world and alleviates suffering. This paper extends the concept of Anatta to contemporary society to understand how it can contribute to the improvement of human behavior and psychotherapy. This includes the fostering of mindfulness to develop empathy and create a therapeutic nexus between the patient and the therapist. It also provides techniques for coping with stress, and can act as a foundational basis for ethical and behavior and mollify the relentless pursuit of one's desires. Furthermore, it offers insights into Western psychology constructs and how to correct its weaknesses which are often focused too closely on the idea of the self.

Keywords: Anatta, Non-Self; Behavior; Buddhism; Psychotherapy

Introduction

The fast-paced nature of globalization has led to increased cultural dialogue among people from various backgrounds. Therefore, individuals from different parts of the world are eager to learn more about cultures in other parts of the world. However, as Brown et al. observe, despite the increased interest in other cultures, there continues to be a wide gap between how Western and Eastern philosophical systems and traditions are understood.¹ Anatta (non-self) is a good example of how some Eastern philosophical systems remain unclear among Western scholars.

Western scholars have begun gaining interest in the concept of Anatta, signifying a new sensitivity to its comprehension and acceptance in the Western world. Shin explains that by stressing the importance of viewing things, events, and phenomena from a non-self-perspective, Buddhism steers us away from all forms of desires and passion, allowing practitioners to reach Nibbana, a place free of suffering.² Van Gordon et al. expound further on this point of view noting, “the concept of Anatta clings to the belief that the state of delusional self or the art of being obsessed with oneself is the pioneer of all our suffering.”³ Based on such a viewpoint, the use of Anatta in Western philosophy and psychology could help alleviate various issues like altruism. Additionally, it could be effective in helping people overcome stress and its resulting negative emotions. Nonetheless, the vitality of the non-self-concept, especially concerning behavioral and psychological effects, remains vaguely understood. As Hoang acknowledges, it is important to note that differences in how Anatta is interpreted in different literature could be playing a role in the vague understanding and use of the concept in Western norms and beliefs.⁴ A good example is the concerns raised by Stout.⁵ He writes that it was unclear if Buddha intended to present a metaphysical argument against self, or only wished to provide human beings with an ideal tool to help them overcome their sufferings. The absence of a mutual agreement on a common meaning of the concept of non-self beyond the traditional conceptualization undoubtedly poses an issue for Western scholars.

The contents presented in this article will provide sufficient information on the concept of Anatta and its impact on behavioral research. To achieve this objective, the article will view Anatta from the perspective of one of the earliest traditions, Theravada Buddhism.

The Concept of Non-Self in Theravada Buddhism

The comprehension of Anatta should be based on the three critical concepts in Theravada Buddhism, namely Anatta, Dukkha, and Annica. Anatta, the concept of non-self, appears in many sutras. One illustration is in SN 22:59 (S iii 66), where Buddha expounds that all feeling, form, perception, consciousness, fabrications, and consciousness do not align with the concept of not-self. The same advice is provided by the sutta to monks practicing Dhamma. Anatta as it is presented in the Pali Canon applies to every individual's experience, including both tangible and intangible aspects. Therefore, it is important to delve deeper into the different suttas which discuss the nature and consequences of Anatta and Atta in Theravada Buddhism. The main suttas informing the situation are those found exclusively in the Sutta Pitaka, which comprises Samyutta Nikaya, Digha Nikaya, and Majjhima Nikaya.

Anatta in Digha Nikaya

Maha Nidana Sutta (DN 15) states that human beings are inclined to cling to the doctrines of self as an avenue of discerning one's becoming. Here, the teachings inform the tendency of people to be attached to feelings that lead to one's attachment to self. Maha Nidana Sutta contends that neither pain nor pleasure is delusional. DN 15 best captures Maha Nidana Sutta's position on the issue stating, "Having sensed a feeling of pleasure as 'myself,' then with the cessation of one's very own feeling of pleasure, 'my self' has perished." Therefore, from Nidana Sutta's view, the instability and inconsistency of one's feelings imply they cannot be relied upon to inform about the self.

Anatta in Majjhima Nikaya

Anatta is mentioned in Majjhima Nikaya suttas. A good example is the Alagaddupama Sutta which associates the awareness of the self with the concepts of perception, feelings, form, and consciousness. It discusses the individual self as being linked to the notions of feeling, form, perception, elements, and fabrications of consciousness. It is when they are aligned it is then that one can claim, “this is me, this is my self, and this is what I am.” Theravada Buddhism fails to offer insight into these issues of emptiness. However, it warns that the attachment to these groupings results in the delusional perception of self, which ultimately prevents them from aligning with Dhamma.

Anatta in Samyutta Nikaya

Samyutta Nikaya is vital in this discussion because it furthers the line of thought of Majjhima Nikaya about the delusional perception of self-relative to the five aggregations. Arguably, the sutra assumes people’s inability to control the five aggregates. It is important to acknowledge Samyutta Nikaya’s role in addressing one of Anatta’s most controversial aspects – whether the self exists. In this text, the Buddha fails to offer a response, as seen in SN 22 44:10, due to the unwillingness to align to either externalism or annihilationism. Notably, sutras in the Tipitaka do not sufficiently inform about the existence of the self. The Sutras in the Majjhima Nikaya are inclined to enlighten on certain aggregates or phenomena that are considered non-self. However, it is important to point out that considering all phenomena as not-self does not directly imply the non-existence of self. Thus, it is safe to assume the existence of the self as per Theravada Buddhism teachings remains a contentious matter.

Understanding the relationship between self and non-self is essential for grasping the nature of Anatta and its vitality in behavioral studies. The discussions above acknowledge that the Pali Canon fails to provide sufficient information on denying the existence of self. Buddha’s consistent refusal to provide answers to the issue can be linked to the question’s complexity and the tendency of “self” to have various meanings.

The lack of citations negating the presence of self offers researchers an opening to hypothesize that Theravada Buddhism denies only the conventional concept of Atman under Upanishads. However, the existence of a distinct self is not repudiated. DN 22's inclination to address the matter supports the above perspective.

At this point, it is vital to acknowledge that any consideration to align the five aggregates to the concept of self does not align with Buddha's teachings. Various scholars concur that the five heaps of clinging are impermanent. However, to a certain degree, this can be perceived as the self because their unification translates to a foundation for self-reflection. The statement implies the five aggregates are loose and separate components of the self, irrespective of the inconsistent and dynamic nature that resists identifying them with the self. Notably, such a perspective is difficult to rationalize because Tipitaka outrightly denies any association of the five aggregates to the concept of self. On the same note, one who concurs that the five aggregates are associated with the concept of self in whichever format implies the individual would experience destruction as soon as they experience Nibbana. However, Buddha vocally rejects an association between Nibbana and destruction in various suttas.

From the above discussions, an overview of Theravada Buddhism's texts indicates Anatta's meaning does not narrow down to the denial of self. Tipitaka and its contents categorically object to any correlation between the five aggregates and the concept of self, or cosmic self, as outlined in Upanishads. Buddha's refusal to expound on the existence of self-further cement this line of thought. As a result, the lack of or existence of self is immaterial from the dimension of the matter being analyzed.

The Adoption of Anatta by Modern Psychology

Anatta has begun to be used in modern psychology. Sedlmeier et al. acknowledge the increased use of different Buddhist meditation practices among mental health psychotherapists and mental health practitioners, with Anatta being a concept that is gaining popularity.⁶ Fulton and Giles note that Anatta can help the clients achieve emotional positivity, stability,

and mindfulness.^{7,8} Through Anatta's use, mental health experts can improve their clients' focus and attention, which suggest the importance of understanding Anatta from a psychotherapy standpoint.⁹ The authors inform how Anatta can be useful in modern psychology to enlighten an individual on the concept of attachment. Van Gordon et al. state that the concept of non-self can assist mental health practitioners in understanding patients' attachments.

Additionally, it can aid in lowering the level of therapist bias. Concerning this issue, Van Gordon et al. states that as the therapist gains more knowledge about the concept of non-self, the chances are lower that the therapy sessions will be influenced by the therapist's selfhood.¹⁰

Besides Van Gordon et al. and Giles is another scholar who offers insight into the use of Anatta in modern psychology.^{11,12} From Giles' perspective, using Anatta is critical for helping mental health practitioners comprehend how mindfulness works. Giles adds that reliance on the non-self-concept in academic and clinical practice bears positive results in understanding more about mindfulness and attaining psychological well-being. Giles expounds further indicating the tendency "to ignore non-self-experience, teachers and practitioners are falling short of what mindfulness was originally intended to achieve."¹³ Hoffman backs Giles' observations noting that mental health practitioners without comprehending the non-self-concept are unlikely to fully understand their patient's needs, which could translate to poor patient outcomes.¹⁴ Herwitz acknowledges the positive impact Anatta can have on Westerners by helping them lower their reliance on prescription medicines that are the main go-to option for treating mental health issues. In support of this position, Herwitz states that "despite being a concept unfamiliar to most Westerners, participants generally endorsed the description of Anatta's not-self experiences as an approach they would be relatively likely to use in a difficult situation and they would find helpful for those situations."

Anatta's integration into practical psychology and psychotherapy is strongly endorsed as it can assist practitioners in comprehending the Buddhist needs and individuals who ascribe to Buddhist philosophical

principles. Additionally, it can lower patients' suffering by aiding them in adapting to a new orientation that distinctly differs from what they are used to in traditional approaches. Hick et al. is one author who expounds on this by linking the adaptation of mindfulness to the field of medicine and psychotherapy.¹⁵ In their scholarly work, Hick et al. indicate that various practices and concepts of mindfulness used in psychotherapy have been retrieved from psychology, with most of those interpretations drawn from Buddhism.¹⁶ Irrespective of the various dimensions in which the evaluation of mindfulness can take place, they can all be understood via Buddhist principles hence offering a good foundation for comprehending and scrutinizing an individual's desires, feelings, and sufferings.

Anatta is a concept widely used in psychotherapeutic environments and various meditation techniques. Kang best expounds on this matter by referring to Nyanaponika, an author of Theravada traditions, who defines Anatta as an effective tool in expanding awareness of reality's nature and understanding the importance of events that take place in an individual's life.^{17,18} Kang notes that Nyanaponika refers to Anatta as a tool of bare attention.¹⁹ He further describes the bare attention element that involves the processes of observing events and phenomena with the assistance of the six senses before making generalizations which transform practical objects into abstract concepts.²⁰ The author adds that relying on bare attention in the four areas of mindfulness, namely the body, mind, feelings, and mental objects, helps mediators acknowledge that the "self" in any situation cannot be distinguished from the psychosocial continuum. Therefore, from Nyanaponika's perspective, it is feasible to access Anatta by applying Anapanasati. Kang expounds further, indicating that mindfulness of breathing is essential in assisting individuals in understanding the human body's conditioned nature.²¹

Besides Nyanaponika, Dhiravamsa is another important thinker of the Theravada tradition. He explains that the use of Anatta can assist in guiding non-attached awareness practices, as noted by Clarke.^{22,23} The author notes that through the dynamic observation of one's emotions, feelings, and thoughts, the individual gains a new point of view about their

experiences. Dhiravamsa strongly contends that Anatta's nature could be acquired via sensory systems. Consequently, the concept of Anatta can be effectively used even by people without any background in Theravada Buddhism. Over time, people begin to realize that the "self" in every individual closely relates to the existence of experiences. Therefore, it is difficult to delink those experiences from the person because they are construed as eternal and separately existing phenomena.

Anatta's use is not limited to the discussion cited above but can also be effective in alleviating suffering. Tyson and Pongruengplant provide sufficient insight into this perspective. The two authors clarify that it is difficult for a person brought up in the West to understand Anatta's meaning because applying the idea of non-self requires the individual to embrace a new understanding of reality.²⁴ As Tyson and Pongruengplant argue, it is unreasonable for therapists in the Western world to use Anatta's principles in their teachings without undertaking comprehensive cross-cultural training that enlightens on handling stress and suffering in Theravada Buddhism.²⁵ In sum, without such cross-cultural training, Anatta's application will most likely be problematic and unsuccessful.

Yet non-self as a Buddhist concept, can be used to compliment the self in modern psychotherapy rather than replace it.²⁶ Michalon expounds on the same, showing that more therapeutic potential is unlocked when a psychotherapist uses the concept of self and non-self simultaneously as opposed to viewing them antagonistically.²⁷

Behavioral Research on Anatta and Its Behavioral Implications

An analysis of the existing literature affirms Anatta can be fruitful for behavioral research because of its various implications concerning human behavior. First, understanding Anatta's overall meaning can be effective in helping people to be socially responsible. Cantor expounds on the issue by acknowledging Anatta's important role in inducing socially responsible behavior.²⁸ It does so because the path to enlightenment, as guided by Anatta, demands the individual to act socially responsibly, which also aligns with the foundational concepts of social psychology.

Notably, the aspect of social responsibility aligns with the economic theory perspective. An analysis of the Western perspective on economics shows they prioritize the concept of self-interest. In contrast, Buddhism resists this perspective and emphasizes the non-self, as Zsolnai acknowledges.²⁹ On the same note, Zsolnai enunciates the nexus of Anatta's concepts with Western economics can provide an alternate perspective on economic processes that would guarantee society's overall well-being as opposed to the individual accumulation of wealth.³⁰

The other behavioral implication of Anatta is evident when distinguishing between actions performed by the individual and those performed by others. Dogen best captures this line of thought, noting that to be enlightened means eliminating the impediments between oneself and others.³¹ Theravada Buddhism offers additional insight that many of the issues linked to the self are temporary and delusional constructs. When an individual successfully manages to use the concept of Anatta to eliminate the impediments between self and others, they commendably achieve self-integration, as argued by Colzato et al.³² Thus, in this scenario, Anatta's use increases the probability of the individual gaining higher levels of empathy as well as a fresh point of view on their personality and behavior.

Anatta's third implication in behavioral research is associated with the issues of stress, coping, and suffering. In the Western way of life, stress arises due to an individual's inability to handle mental and emotional pressure. In Theravada Buddhism, Shin indicates stress emanates from an individual's frustrations and ultimately leads to suffering.³³ The Pali Canon states that such suffering arises due to a person's incapacity to satisfy their desires. Anatta helps mitigate such suffering because it comprehends that all people's desires are inherent and linked to the self. Tyson and Pongruengphant note that it is the association of this self to one or all five aggregates where Anatta comes in and provides the individual with strategies they can embrace to cope with stress and alleviate their suffering.³⁴ The use of Anatta in psychotherapy alongside the individual's ability to embrace it in their daily lives can be essential in helping them

overcome stress and prevent all forms of suffering.

Conclusion

It follows from this discussion that Anatta should not be considered as a concept intended to strictly refute the existence of self. The Buddha has always evaded this question. In Theravada Buddhism, Anatta's main objective is to show that none of the five forms of self exists, and that none of the five aggregates could constitute the self.

Yet Anatta can have a positive impact on behavioral research. As envisaged in Anatta, the adoption of mindfulness can be an important tool for Western practitioners due to its ability to develop empathy and create a therapeutic nexus between the patient and the therapist. A good comprehension of Anatta could also help offer insight into various Western psychotherapy and psychological constructs. An analysis of the content further shows Anatta's behavioral implications. The first illustration is Anatta urges people to pursue socially responsible behavior. The second example is that when the self is viewed from Anatta's perspective, the individual is ideally placed to reflect on their own personal actions while also understanding others' perspectives. Lastly, a good application of Anatta can assist people in coping with stress, which can be helpful in the alleviation of their suffering.

Anatta can act as a foundational basis for ethical and behavioral concepts. Teaching people Anatta would help them know the concept of self is not merely delusional but also closely associated with the five heaps of clinging. Such a comprehension could be the cue to liberating those who cling too strongly to the concept of self. Through the same understanding of Anatta's concepts, people can appreciate the importance of abandoning the relentless pursuit of their desires, especially those that arise from the five aggregates. Thus, they would understand the freedom that emanates from disengaging with one's passions. By embracing Anatta, people's basis of negative emotions can be eliminated, allowing them to live freely without the danger emotions of frustration and anger.

ENDNOTES

¹ Kirk Warren Brown, David Creswell, and Richard Ryan, *Handbook of Mindfulness: Theory, Research, and Practice*, Reprint (The Guilford Press, 2015). 120.

² Kiseong Shin and Wesley Ariarajah, *The Concept of Self in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity and Its Implication for Interfaith Relations* (Pickwick Publications, 2017).

³ Van Gordon, W., Shonin, E., & Griffiths, MD. The self and the non-self: Applications of Buddhist philosophy in psychotherapy. *RaIIS-IT* 11 (2015).

⁴ Nguyen Quy Hoang, "The Doctrine of Not-self (anattā) in Early Buddhism." *International Review of Social Research* 9, no. 1 (2019).

⁵ Jerry Stout, "A comprehensive study of anatta and its relative truth within Buddhism." PhD diss., 2006.

⁶ Peter Sedlmeier et al., "The Psychological Effects of Meditation: A Meta-Analysis.," *Psychological Bulletin* 138, no. 6 (November 2012): 1139–71, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0028168>.

⁷ Paul R Fulton, "Anatta: Self, non-self, and the therapist." *Mindfulness and the therapeutic relationship* (2008): 55-71.

⁸ James Giles, "Relevance of the no-self theory in contemporary mindfulness." *Current Opinion in Psychology* 28 (2019): 298-301.

⁹ Ibid, 122.

¹⁰ Ibid, 344

¹¹ Ibid, 233

¹² Ibid, 298.

¹³ Ibid, 122.

¹⁴ Steven B. Hall, Ryan G. Baird, and Jon Czarnecki, "Engendering Flexible Social Identities as the Basis of Organizational Resiliency." (2016).

¹⁵ Steven Hick, Thomas Bien, and Zindel Segal V, *Mindfulness and the Therapeutic Relationship*, 1st ed. (The Guilford Press, 2010).

¹⁶ Ibid, 34.

¹⁷ Chris, Kang, "Anatta and meditation." *BuddhaZine* (1999).

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Ven Nyanaponika, *Pathways of Buddhist Thought: Essays from The Wheel*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2013).

²¹ Ibid, 34.

²² Ibid, 52.

²³ Ibid, 65.

²⁴ Peter Clarke, *Encyclopedia of new religious movements*. Routledge, 2004. P. 14

²⁵ Ibid, 65.

²⁶ Paul Tyson and Rana Pongruengphant. “Buddhist and Western perspectives on suffering, stress, and coping.” *Journal of Religion and Health* 46, no. 3 (2007): 351-357.

²⁷ Ibid, 47.

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²⁹ Max Michalon, “Selflessness” in the service of the ego: Contributions, limitations and dangers of Buddhist psychology for western psychotherapy.” *American journal of psychotherapy* 55, no. 2 (2001): 202-218.

³⁰ Ibid, 73

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³³ Jennifer Cantor, “Vision and Virtue in Psychoanalysis and Buddhism: Anatta and its implications for social responsibility.” *Psychoanalytic Inquiry* 28, no. 5 (2008): 532-540.

³⁴ Ibid, 433.

³⁵ Laszlo Zsolnai, *Ethical Principles and Economic Transformation - A Buddhist Approach (Issues in Business Ethics, 33)*, 2011th ed. (Springer, 2011).

³⁶ Dogen, I. *Schobogenzo (Y. Yokai, Trans.)*. New York, NY: Weatherhill. 1976.

³⁷ Lorenza S. Colzato et al., “Loving-Kindness Brings Loving-Kindness: The Impact of Buddhism on Cognitive Self–Other Integration,” *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* 19, no. 3 (March 17, 2012): 541–45, <https://doi.org/10.3758/s13423-012-0241-y>.

³⁸ Kiseong Shin and Wesley Ariarajah, *The Concept of Self in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity and Its Implication for Interfaith Relations* (Pickwick Publications, 2017).

³⁹ Ibid, 102.

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