THE PRACTICE OF ANATTA (Not-Self or No-Self)

by M. Lisa Buschmann

On one of the first visits I made to a Buddhist temple, the monk in his Dharma talk said that there is no such thing as a soul. I disagreed, and with my non-Buddhist background, I wanted to leave right then. But I didn't. I wanted to learn more. Over the years, I learned much more about Anatta, and now I accept it wholeheartedly.

The Buddha's basic teaching of *anatta* is that all things (dharmas) are without a self (Dhammapada 279). More specifically, the world is empty of a self, the five senses and sense-objects are empty of a self, and the intellect is empty of a self (Samyutta Nikaya 35.85). This is not an easy concept to comprehend. Essentially, it means that there is no permanent, separate essence or individual soul of anyone or anything. The word *anatta* is translated as not-self, non-self, or, especially in Mahayana Buddhism, no-self.

How can we not have a self? I have an identity, a personality, an individual lived experience that's separate from others; here is me and there is you. Also, the Buddha referred to himself and his past lives. If there is no self, then what takes a rebirth – how can we have future lives? How can the law of karma function?

According to the Two Truths doctrine, described in the Theravada Abhidharma and in Mahayana texts, there is conventional (or relative) truth and there is ultimate (or absolute) truth.

According to conventional truth, or relative reality, we do have a self. We have a body with its brain, nervous system and five senses, and we have a mind of our own. We need all this to navigate the physical dimension of time and space and protect and maintain our physical body.

But in absolute reality, or according to ultimate truth, that is, from the standpoint of one who has attained Nirvana, there is no self. The self of relative reality is ever-changing – the various aspects of the self arise and disappear over time – so there is no unchanging, permanent self. Not only beings, but also things (phenomena) have no unchanging, independent essence. In conventional reality, there are discrete beings and objects, but in ultimate reality, there are only processes, flows of activity.

This seems like an advanced teaching, difficult to comprehend and practice. But we all can practice *anatta*. There are many ways to practice. Here are several methods.

Contemplate what is "me," my self?

We think of our body, our mass of various human cells, as our self. But the body is not as solid as it seems; the boundaries between "me" and "not me" are not clear.

The body takes in and expels, or harbors matter that is not human: air, water, food, bacteria, viruses, fungi, parasites, microscopic skin mites, and the microbiome (yeasts, bacteria, fungi). Are these part of my self? Also, consider that fetal cells can remain alive in the mother's body

for her lifetime, that conjoined twins share parts of their bodies, and that human organs and other body parts can be transplanted.

If not the full body, is there a part of the body or a group of cells in the body that constitutes or contains the self, the essential "me"? We can maintain our identity, our concept of a self, even if we lose many body parts. What if, through medical science, we could substitute enough artificial body parts and systems to keep alive only the minimal human brain cells essential to maintain consciousness. Are those cells "me"? Could I find my self among those cells? Under a powerful microscope, we find that the cells are made of molecules, which are made of atoms. Where among the atoms is "me"? Is my self a certain group of atoms, or is it within atoms, maybe somewhere within the electromagnetic fields generated by the electrons?

What about DNA? Can our DNA contain or constitute our individual self? Consider that DNA can change through mutation, and that gene expression can change through epigenetic factors such as environment, diet and lifestyle. Identical twins share the same DNA except for some mutations. We leave our DNA behind wherever we go in our skin dander, shed strands of hair, saliva, urine and other body fluids, and our DNA remains in our bone marrow centuries after our body has died and been buried and "we" have been reborn in a new body. So, DNA doesn't contain or give rise to an unchanging individual self.

If we can't find the self in the physical body, then what about the mind? Is my mind my self? Over the several decades of our life, the mind changes radically from newborn to child to adult to senility. And during only a few seconds, the mind contains so many different thoughts and sensory impressions. The mind is a stream of thoughts that arise and disappear, changing constantly.

Some aspects of our minds seem to persist over lifetimes; in particular, parts of one's personality such as habits, talents, preferences, tendencies and memories, can reappear in or flow into future lives, as evidenced in the Jataka stories of the Buddha's past lives. Do these traits constitute the self? They change over countless lifetimes as we live and learn in different environments with different bodies and different experiences. And, other people can share many of the same personality traits. Because personality characteristics are subject to change, are not entirely unique to a person, and are not permanent, they don't form a stable basis for a self.

The Buddha taught that results of our karmas can manifest in future lives, so the imprints of our karmas persist over lifetimes. But karmas are constantly being created and exhausted (when the results manifest), so our karmas are like an ever-changing stream of activity.

The Buddha taught that personal experience is through the Five Aggregates:

Form (object as detected by a sense organ or mental sensory impression),
Feeling (pleasant, unpleasant or neutral),
Perception (distinguishing, identifying an object, recognizing sensory information),

Mental formations (conditioned responses, fabrications, emotions, narratives, evaluations, intentions, choices), and
Consciousness (awareness of objects through sight, hearing, smell, taste, or tactile impression, or awareness of mental objects).

You can gain a better understanding of your mind by contemplating how it functions through the Five Aggregates. For example:

Notice how extremely fast it works.
Pay attention to how you experience your own body as an object through the Five Aggregates.
Try to discern your attachments to certain things and your aversions to certain things as experienced through the Five Aggregates.
Contemplate the stress you feel as a result of aversions (for example, fear of pain or humiliation) and attachments (for example, worrying about losing what you like).
Notice how your mind is so busy and consumed by the activities of the Five Aggregates.
See how it is a stream of activity, ever-changing.

Try to imagine how peaceful it would be to let go of the Five Aggregates. Practicing deep meditation gives a little taste of such a peaceful state. Over time, we come to discover that it's more satisfying than worldly pleasures. But, It's so difficult to let go of the Five Aggregates due to our primal need to perceive and understand the physical world in order to survive.

Contemplate the Buddha's teaching that the Five Aggregates are not your self and do not belong to you (Majjhima Nikaya 22, Samyutta Nikaya 22.1, 22.85).
In meditation, try to find whether you have a self, an existence, beyond the Five Aggregates. Try to notice any moments of meditation without thoughts, without any particular object, just awareness, and investigate the awareness itself. Is this awareness a "self" or "me"? Consider: without any object, concept, or "other" to distinguish from a self, can a self exist?

Contemplate a physical object
Choose an object to focus on, such as a cup, a chair, or a carrot. Contemplate how it came into existence, how it arose from various causes and conditions. It arose dependent on the existence of so many things, which in turn are dependent on countless other things. Thus, every object is interdependent, and exists in relation to other things.

Contemplate on the impermanence of the object – how it eventually will cease to exist.

For example, we see a wooden chair. Consider the many causes and conditions that resulted in the manufacture of the chair. Then consider where the wood in the chair was before it was manufactured – part of a tree. And decades before that? The tree arose from a seed plus all the nourishment needed for the seed to become a tree (sun, rain, soil). And where was the seed before that? It came into being on another tree. The web of causes and conditions flows back in time, on and on. Now, go forward in time. What happens to the chair after it is thrown away,

a few hundred or thousand years in the future? Through various causes and conditions, it turns into a clump of soil or ash.

The objects that we assume to be stable, permanent objects are instead processes, a flow of activities, from the causes and conditions from which the object arises to the causes and conditions of change and decay that result in something we would not recognize anymore as the same object.

Even if we analyze an object at a certain point in time, every object is made of smaller and smaller parts, down to subatomic particles. Under an electron or atomic force microscope, objects are only a mass of atoms; there's no essence or identity of the object at the molecular or atomic level, except for the chemical elements. If a chemical element is examined at the subatomic level, the subatomic particles do not retain the identity or "self" of the element.

How does a mass of atoms become an identifiable object?
Contemplate how we identify an object visually though light patterns, how we identify an object we hear by sound patterns, and how we identify an object by its cohesion, parts, distinct qualities and/or function.
Remember how you learned to name objects. We were conditioned to distinguish and label objects in our environment from our infancy so we could navigate our physical world.
This is the Buddhist concept of *nama-rupa*, name and form.
But this is the projection of our mind, classifying sensory impressions into distinct objects with names. In other words, we assign an identity, or a "self," to these impressions. We have done this over countless past human lives.
Contemplate: other than our collective human agreement as these forms and names, do they have a "self"?

Selfless service
While we may be able to comprehend that we don't have an unchanging, permanent, individual self, and that objects lack an unchanging, independent essence, it's very difficult to sustain that awareness. This is because it's inconsistent with the way we have always processed sensory information. It's even more difficult when, worried about our survival and well-being in a challenging world, we feel we have to focus on our self to meet our own needs. In addition, modern Western culture places so much emphasis on personal appearance, personal achievement, competition, self-reliance, and individualism, and this makes us focus even more on our individual self than in other cultures, which have more emphasis on collective well-being. Yet the more we focus on our self, the more we mull over our problems and shortcomings and the more stress we feel.

We can we take our mind off of our self and our problems by focusing more on others. For example, we can engage in volunteer activities, or find other ways to serve or help others, beyond our family and friends. Aso, we can simply make an effort to remember, wherever we are, to be kind and considerate to others, be aware of others' needs, offer to help, and express appreciation to others. Thinking of the happiness we bring to others, we feel uplifted, sharing in

their happiness. And, we become more aware of interdependence, interconnectedness, and our commonalities with others, so we don't feel so separate from other beings. These kinds of selfless thoughts, words and actions help us to loosen our grip on the concept of a separate self.

Healing self-esteem

Some of us may feel a bit conflicted about focusing on others' well-being or serving others, perhaps as a result of trauma, neglect, abuse, discrimination, or opportunists or other negative experiences helping others. Some of us are concerned about feeling subservient or sacrificing precious time to assist other people.

In Buddhism, we focus on others and help them with a perspective of serving the Dharma: making merit by virtuous activity that benefits all beings. And we do so with a motivation of lovingkindness and compassion for the other person without any expectation, as opposed to people-pleasing, where there is a need for validation and expectation of reciprocation. Focusing less on self and more on the well-being of others – all living beings – is a practice of interdependence and *anatta*, seeing all beings and objects as interrelated flows of activities.

It's much easier to practice this if we have a healthy self-esteem – neither a low self-esteem nor an inflated one. Given our less-than-perfect upbringing and/or the challenging environments we encounter, most of us have at least occasionally a tendency toward either inflated or low self-esteem, and many of us have a bit of both as a habit of focusing on I, me, mine, and myself.

To heal a low self-esteem, generally one needs more self-care, self-compassion and self-kindness, and to learn to think positively about oneself and focus on one's strengths and personal boundaries. To the extent one uses these methods for healing low self-esteem, previous trauma or self-neglect, they are positive steps on the path of the Dharma. Healing an inflated self-esteem, or egoism, involves developing more self-awareness, such as recognizing one's own weaknesses; noticing the arising of feelings of pride, superiority, or a desire for authority, recognition, admiration or special treatment; and noticing instances of judgment of others, aversion to criticism, lack of empathy, and performative humility.

To heal self-esteem, the practice of mindfulness is paramount to becoming more self-aware and less dependent on validation from others. Mindfulness helps us notice more of our egoistic or unhealthy thoughts. It's difficult to face them, and it's not healthy to dwell on them, but it's also unhealthy to deny them. We can remind ourselves that each one that we notice is a step forward on the path of the Dharma, an act of merit, and an opportunity to learn. While it seems paradoxical, the more we notice, the more purified our mind becomes. Remember the teaching, "Not to do evil, to cultivate merit, to purify one's mind, this is the Teaching of the Buddhas." (Dhammapada 183). If we think that we don't have egoistic or unhealthy thoughts, then we can remember not to be like an ostrich hiding its head in the sand, thinking that we are hiding our flaws by refusing to see them when they are there for all to see.

However, to avoid being overwhelmed by them, or if we are experiencing low self-esteem, use the mindfulness technique of focusing on the present moment, and think: "In this moment,

everything is perfect; I am remembering the Dharma and that's all that matters; I am a new person in each moment." This is also a practice of *anatta*, recognizing the ever-changing self: a flow of thoughts that change each moment.

As one works on healing self-esteem, it is therapeutic to engage in volunteering and helping others while practicing lovingkindness and compassion and avoiding comparing self with others or seeking attention. We then can learn to discern inflated self-esteem from self-confidence, self-absorption from self-awareness, self-neglect from selflessness, and worthlessness from no-self.

Develop the Brahmaviharas (the Four Immeasurables)

Our habit of focusing so much on I, me and mine not only affects our self-esteem, but also our emotions. For example, when a threat to me or what is mine arises, we feel angry, hateful or jealous. This locks us into a strong feeling of separateness between self and other.

We can counteract these feelings and develop more connectedness with others by contemplating and practicing the Brahmaviharas (the Four Immeasurables in the Mahayana tradition): lovingkindness, compassion, altruistic joy, and equanimity. Practicing lovingkindness is an antidote to feelings of hatred and contempt, practicing compassion is an antidote to anger and aggression, practicing altruistic joy is an antidote to jealousy, and practicing equanimity can be an antidote to many afflictions, including attachment and arrogance.

We can also integrate practice of anatta with the Brahmaviharas/Immeasurables.

For example, when you see a person for whom you feel contempt or hatred, try to see the person as an ever-changing flow of thoughts, afflictions, and karmas who is temporarily deluded and confused but who eventually will be enlightened. See yourself also as an ever-changing flow of thoughts afflictions and karmas, temporarily deluded and confused, who in the past was similarly afflicted with strong negative emotions. The person is a reminder to us not to isolate self from others. Then, with lovingkindness, wish that person quickly find a way to progress on the path of the Dharma and find true happiness and enlightenment.

When you see someone who is suffering or stressed, or someone who makes you feel angry or upset, remember the causes of their suffering – attachment and craving, that arise due to the habit of focusing on I, me, mine and myself. Remember that you also have this habit. Wish that you both overcome this habit and attain enlightenment soon. Feeling compassion for the person, wish them peace and happiness. Remember that someone who is truly peaceful and happy would not harm others.

When you see someone enjoying something you wish you had, remember that we all are creators and recipients of our own karmas; they created the good karma to have that enjoyment. Try to join in, or reflect, the joy that person is feeling just as you would feel joy if your own child was experiencing joy. Contemplate why you easily feel joy for your child but not for other people. When you see a person doing something virtuous, try to overcome any

feelings of envy by remembering that he is making merit, making the world a better place, which benefits everyone. With these practices, we train our mind to see interdependence rather than strictly distinct self and other. These are practices of altruistic joy, rejoicing in the good or happiness of others, a merit that overcomes jealousy and leads us closer to enlightenment.

When we experience failure or feel the pressure of trying to meet goals and be successful in our various roles, such as employee, leader, spouse, teacher, or parent, we can practice equanimity by contemplating that these roles, goals and successes are tools to gain stability in our day-to-day life but are not the ultimate purpose of your life. So, there is no need to feel devastated by failures or elated by successes. Contemplate how exhausting our attachments (for example, to success) and aversions (for example, to failure) are. Remember that failures and problems are steps on the path of the Dharma, and that this path is the ultimate purpose of life. Contemplate the freedom of an enlightened person, an arahat, selflessly engaging in the world to help others, free from fixation on I, me and mine, free from attachment to anything, fully living in the present rather than mulling over the past or worrying about the future.

Contemplate the illusion of our self in a dream

When we are in a dream, we experience our body, our personality, our emotions, other beings, dangers, and objects in the dream as if they are real. But when we wake up, we realize they were not real, but were only the activity of the mind. We created everything in our mind. Similarly, when enlightenment occurs, we awaken from the illusion of conventional reality and realize that our separate, individual self and the physical world as we see it now, is not real but only the activity of the mind.

Dedicate merit

At the end of your Dharma practice, meditation or prayers, offer the merits of your practice to all beings or to specific people whom you wish to help. This reduces the feeling of “my” merit, enhancing altruism and selflessness, which bring us closer to the wisdom of *anatta.*