

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

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On one of the first visits I made to a Buddhist temple, a 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; I am here and you are there. 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, viruses, 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 our 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, yet they are separate persons. We leave our DNA behind wherever we go in our skin dander, shed hair strands, saliva, urine and other body fluids, and our DNA remains in our bone marrow centuries after our body has died 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 geriatric. 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, virtues, and tendencies often reappear in or flow into future lives, as we read 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.

There is another aspect that persists over lifetimes. The Buddha taught that results of our actions will manifest in the future – the imprints of our karmas carry over to future lives. But karmas are constantly being created and exhausted (when the results manifest), so our karmas are like an ever-changing stream of activity.

What about the continuity of experience, does that constitute the self? 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 other 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 things that you like).

Notice how your mind is so busy and consumed by the activities of the Five Aggregates.

Observe how it is a stream of activity, ever-changing, a series of events that arise and disappear.

Contemplate the Buddha's teaching that the Five Aggregates are not your self and do not belong to you because each of the Five Aggregates are impermanent and thus lead to suffering. (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 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 dust.

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 a powerful 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. And 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 through 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 at some level 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. And to survive in this challenging world, we must focus on our self to take care of our bodies and other personal 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 take our mind off of our self and our difficulties 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. Also, 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 conflicted to some degree about focusing on others' well-being or serving others, perhaps as a result of negative experiences such as exploitation, trauma, neglect, abuse, or discrimination. Some of us are concerned about sacrificing precious time to assist other people, when our own needs aren't being met.

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 need for validation and desire for reciprocation. Altruism, focusing less on self and more on the well-being of others – all living beings – is a method of practicing 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 the challenging environments we encounter and perhaps a less-than-perfect upbringing, 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. This manifests as focusing on I, me, mine, and myself, for example in self-criticism or attention seeking.

To heal feelings of 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. Using these methods to heal trauma, self-neglect or low self-esteem are positive steps on the path of the Dharma. It's important to notice harsh self-criticism and learn to be gentler with ourselves. For example, when we make a mistake, rather than letting our inner voice bully us, we train our inner voice to speak to us like a dear friend or guru. We can calm our emotions by taking the approach of a scientist investigating our inner critic, reflecting on its source (such as harshly critical or controlling parents, perfectionism, past bullying, abuse or exclusion, or fear of rejection or failure), and reflecting on how the self-criticism is harmful to us. We can investigate what happens when we make a mistake, asking ourselves, what am I afraid of, what do I fear might happen? We can create a habit of self-acceptance, positive self-talk, after making a mistake. We transform our inner voice to help us rather than hurt us.

We can learn to have self-compassion by developing our compassion towards animals or towards any person we see who is suffering, having difficulty or making a mistake, and then contemplating that our body and mind deserve such compassion, too.

After doing these practices, we might find that when we are less critical of ourselves, we are less critical of others.

Healing an inflated self-esteem, or egoism, involves developing more self-awareness, such as recognizing one's own weaknesses; noticing the arising of pride, superiority, or desire for authority; being aware of expectations of admiration or special treatment; recognizing attachments to privilege, status or rank; and noticing instances of contempt, lack of empathy, performative humility, and strong aversion to criticism.

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 unhealthy thoughts, and helps us calm our mind enough to skillfully address them. It's difficult to admit to ourselves that we have them, while it's not helpful to berate ourselves for having them, 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, as an opportunity to learn and improve ourselves. Therefore, while it seems paradoxical, the more unhealthy thoughts 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). Unless we're enlightened, we all occasionally have egoistic or unhealthy thoughts, and if we think that we don't, then we should caution ourselves not to be like the 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, aggravating self-criticism or low self-esteem, use the mindfulness technique of focusing on the present moment, and think: "In this moment, everything is perfect; I am now practicing mindfulness, 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.

Keep in mind that each and every moment that we are practicing mindfulness, awareness of thoughts, or any Dharma activity, we are making merit, the worthiest thing we can do, so feelings of low self-worth fade away.

As one works on healing self-esteem, it is therapeutic to engage in volunteering and helping others while practicing lovingkindness and compassion and making efforts to avoid seeking attention or comparing oneself with others.

During this healing process, we learn to discern self-criticism from reflection on mistakes, 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 fixating on I, me and mine not only affects our self-esteem, but also our emotions. For example, when a threat to our self or what is ours 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* (called 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 has made mistakes and offended others. Remember that we all are products of causes and conditions. 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, happiness and freedom from suffering. With regard to those who harm or upset you, remember that someone who is truly peaceful and happy will 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; that person 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 virtue that overcomes jealousy and leads us closer to enlightenment.

When we experience failure or feel the stress of striving to be successful in our various roles, such as employee, leader, student, teacher, parent or partner, we can practice equanimity by contemplating that these roles and successes are tools to gain stability in our day-to-day life and to perform social duties, but are not the ultimate purpose of our life.

Also, contemplate that pleasant and unpleasant events in our lives are our own creation, the results of our own karmas, are impermanent, and are opportunities for learning. So, there is no

need to feel devastated by failures or elated by successes. Contemplate how our attachments (for example, to success) and aversions (for example, to failure) make us feel exhausted. 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 ruminating over the past or worrying about the future.

### **Contemplate the illusion of our self in a dream**

Reflect on your self in the dream state and your self in the waking state. 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, are 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 clinging to “me,” “my” merit, enhancing altruism and selflessness, which bring us closer to the wisdom of *anatta*.