

The Doctrine of No- Self in Buddhism

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ABSTRACT

Buddhism is a great religion in the world was born in India so far, and it has existed and developed for thousands of years. Buddhism has made many contributions to the historical flow of human thought, especially the present life of living being. So, the Buddha's words: "Dharma is the practical present without time..."¹ The Buddha attained enlightenment at the Bodhi tree, he preached the first Dhamma: The Four Noble Truth (Cattāri Ariyasaccāni) mentioned in the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (the Discourse on Turning the Wheel of Dhamma).²

After the five monks listened to the sermon on the Four Noble Truths, they all attained enlightenment. After that, the Buddha taught them the second sermon, the Sutra of Anatta.

The essence in the Buddha's teachings is that "all conditioned things are impermanent (aniccā)³, Suffering (dukkhā)⁴", and "all phenomena (dhammas) are non-self (anattā)".⁵ Therefore, there is a way (magga) of purification which the Buddha followed and others can similarly follow to reach a state free from sorrow. The path leading to the realization of Truth, Freedom, happiness, talks about the principle of Selflessness to eliminate the attachment to ego that is the basis of ignorance and afflictions, talking them further and achieving Arahantship, liberation from samsara is so called No-Self (anattā).

Keywords: The Four Number Truth, no-self

INTRODUCTION

The denial of the existence of a Soul, Self, or Atman is exclusive to Buddhism within the context of the history of human thought.⁶ According to the teachings of the Buddha, the concept of the self is an imaginary and false belief with no corresponding reality. Furthermore, the idea of the self is responsible for harmful thoughts such as 'me' and 'mine,' selfish desire, craving, attachment, hatred, ill-will, conceit, pride, egoism, and various other defilements, impurities, and issues. It is the root cause of all the problems that exist in the world, from interpersonal conflicts to wars fought between countries. In a nutshell, this erroneous viewpoint is the root cause of all the evil in the world.

The Buddha contends that if one were to believe in the existence of a permanent self, this would undermine the value of leading a moral life. More on this is coming up later. After he attained enlightenment, the Buddha

¹ Khuddaka, Nikaya. (1969). A short collection, Department of Religious Affair, Vietnam. Zen Master Thich Minh Chau in 1969.

² Vin. I. 11ff; S. V. 420ff; Oxford: PTS, tr., 1994: 356ff; Selected Suttas, Vol. I, Sagaing, Myanmar: Department of Research & Compilation, Sītagu International Buddhist Academy, 2004: 45-54.

³ Dh. V.277. ["Sabbe sankhārā aniccā."]; K. T. S. Sarao, *The Dhammapada: A Translator's Guide*. Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2009: 339; Daw Mya Tin, tr., *The Dhammapada: Verses & Stories*, Yangon: Myanmar Pitaka Association, 1995: 91.

⁴ Dh. V. 278 ["Sabbe sankhārā dukkhā."]

⁵ Dh. V. 279 ["Sabbe sankhārā anattā."]

⁶ WalpolaRahula. *What the Buddha Taught*, revised and Expanded Edition with Texts from Suttas and Dhammapada, New York: Grove Press, 1957, p. 51.

delivered his first discourse, which was called the *Dhammacakkappavattana sutta*.⁷ In this discourse, he explained the Four Noble Truths. The second sutta, known as the *Anattalakkhana sutta*, is where he lays out the fundamental tenet of his doctrine of the not-self (*anattā*). In this section, he begins by emphasizing that if there were a self, it ought to be independent, but no such thing can be discovered. The self is not the same as matter (*rūpa*). If matter were its own self, then the human body would not be susceptible to disease or injury; one ought to be able to say, “let my body be in this state.” My physical form should not be like this. However, this is impossible because the body is constantly shifting and evolving, and as a result, it is always accompanied by suffering and affliction. According to what it says, the self cannot be.

No-self means not being me, not mine, not clinging to something.

“Monks, *rūpa* is impermanent. What is impermanent is suffering. What is suffering is no-self. What is no-self, one must contemplate as it really is with right wisdom as: “this is not mine, this is not me; this is not myself”. By contemplating reality with right wisdom like that, the mind is freed from greed and has no attachment to defilements”.⁸

No-self means no longer have an ego, see the self is just illusion, dependently born, impermanent.

The reason why all dharmas present and exist is only the combination of conditions. All things come from many causes and many conditions in harmony to form. Nothing can take shape with only one cause or one condition. For example, a tree is grown by the combination of soil, fertilizer, water, trees, wind...to nourish the tree to grow. Without these conditions, a tree cannot live. Therefore, we cannot cling to anything because it is temporary, depends on conditions and does not exist independently.

In truth, in all things we cannot find an independent, free, and autonomous self that can master and control everything.

“Because this is present, that is present

Because this is not present, that is not present

Because of this is born, so the other is born

Because this ceasing, that ceases.”⁹

No-self means that everything in this world is not only to subject continually change, but also the focus of non-self. The existence of world is the chain of even that combined from component things. The Buddha’s last words were: “Subject to change are all things. Strive on with diligence.” Whatever is impermanent is suffering, and whatever is impermanent and suffering is also without an independent self. Those who realize the truth of these three facts of existence will be able to overcome suffering because their minds are freed from delusions of permanence, pleasure and the self.

In discussing his no-self doctrine, the Buddha did not just deny the existence of a substantial and permanent self behind or within the various constituents of human nature. He also described these constituents and, in so doing, showed that none of them could be considered a permanent substance or self.¹⁰

The past is no more, how can the Self-belong to memory, the future has not yet arrived, so how can there be a Self. To exist, the self must have clear characteristics, must be constant and unchanging, not random. But it does not have a certain shape, color, place, or location. The more I looked, the more I could not find it. The Self is nothing more than a label pasted on the five a continuous existence.

⁷ Both this one and the *Dhammacakkappavattana sutta* have been translated in *Three Cardinal Discourse of the Buddha*, by Navamolithera, The wheel no.17, Buddhist Publication Society, 1981. See also the Buddha’s first discourse (Bodhi Leaves B.L)

⁸ Samyutta Nikaya, III.

⁹ *Udāna*, edited by Paul Steinthal. London: The Pali Text Society, 1982, p. 2; *The Minor Anthologies of the Pali Canon, part II, Udāna: Verses of Uplift and Itivuttaka: As It Was Said*, translated by F. L. Woodward. London: The Pali Text Society, 1985, p. 2.

¹⁰ Donald W. Mitchell, *Buddhism: introducing the Buddhist experience*, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 37.

The Buddhist critique of the notion of a self on the claim that we never in fact experience an unchanging self, and that there is therefore no reason to posit an unchanging self-underlying experience. In other words, the idea that one exists as a permanent, unchanging self is born of faulty reasoning based on the failure to perceive the world as it actually is. This notion of self is born of delusion or ignorance. But there is another strand to the Buddhist critique of the notion of self which sees it as intimately bound up with craving and attachment.

According to the Dhammapāda:

“All mental and physical phenomena are impermanent”. Whenever through wisdom one perceives this, then one becomes dispassionate towards suffering. This is the road to purity. “All mental and physical phenomena are painful”. Whenever through wisdom one perceives this, then one becomes dispassionate towards suffering. This is the road to purity. ‘All things are no-self’. Whenever through wisdom one perceives this, then one becomes dispassionate towards suffering. This is the road to purity”.¹¹

No-self just a label affixed to the five aggregates with a continuous presence. Such determination helps people reduce the notion of viewing ‘self’ as an ultimate entity that dictates what we like and hates what we do like. That feeling of self enables people to separate themselves from the rest of the world. And it is also from those wrong feelings of love and hate that rise the thoughts and feelings that initiate the words and actions that lead to suffering. Discovering through direct experience, through analysis, through meditation that the “self” does not really exist, will be a journey to liberation. For example, someone says bad things about me. When I heard this, I immediately get angry and hate of that person. I ask myself why did he or she say like about me? I am not like that, I am not like this, I am like that...we see that anger also comes from clinging to the self. We value the self and do not want anyone to touch it, if it is touched, we feel suffer, but in fact everything is temporary and no-self, it is unreal. If we want to free from suffering, we need to practice on the path of the Four Noble Truth: The Noble Truth of Suffering, The Cause of Suffering, The Cessation of Suffering, The Path Leading to the Cessation of Suffering.

Buddha said, five aggregates: form, feeling, perception, volition and consciousness. The five aggregates are the five elements that make up a human being, however they are not real, no separate self-nature, the five elements depend on each other to manifest, it does not exist independently, permanently, unchanging so it is called no-self.

The Buddha taught us not to accept the five aggregates as self, not to take the body, feelings, perceptions, volition, consciousness is mine, it's me, it's my ego, my soul. These elements of the body, feelings, perceptions, and consciousness are inherently unreal, inherently impermanent, always in a state of change and becoming, it only has a name, but in fact it has no reality, no fixed, unchanging existence. If we don't see that truth, we develop an attachment to self and craving, from which arise other afflictions and create the kamma of suffering, reincarnation, birth and death.

The Buddha preached the sutras about no-self so that we can have correct perception, right view, right thought, and help us have wise intention (dependent origination, impermanence, and no-self). No-self is the nature of reality, to see that nature clearly requires insight. If you want to have the wisdom to change the truth about no-self, you need to practice. No-self is not a philosophical concept, not a thought based moral principle. Intelligent people can only understand part of the principle of no-self. Only those who are enlightened and achieved wisdom can truly understand and see the true no-self nature of all phenomena.

The Buddha's purpose in explaining the principle of no-self is to help practitioners to get rid of ego attachment, destroy illusions, delusions, eliminate afflictions, and achieve enlightenment and liberation.

Such an understanding helps people reduce the notion of viewing “Self” as an ultimate entity that forces us to want what we like and hate what we do not want. That feeling of “Self” makes people separate from everyone. And it is also from those wrong feelings of love and hate that arise the thoughts and feelings that are the starting point for words and actions that lead to suffering. Discovering through direct experience, through analysis, through meditation that the “Self” does not really exist (or the No-Self), will be a path to liberation.

¹¹ Dhammapāda, ed. Suriyagoda Sumangala, 1914, PTS, vv. 277, 278, 279.

“Bhikkhus, material form is not self. If material form were self, this material form would not lead to affliction, and it could be had of material form: ‘Let my material form be thus; let my material form be not thus’. And it is because material form is not self that is therefore leads to affliction, and that it cannot be had of material form: ‘Let my material form be thus; let my material form be not thus’.” likewise, “feeling is not self..., perception is not self..., formations are not self..., consciousness is not self...”¹²

Body is not a self. If body were a self then it might be that it would not lead to sickness; then it might be possible to say. ‘let my body be like this, let my body not be like this.’ But since body is not a self, so it leads to sickness, and it is not possible to say, ‘let my body be like this, let my body not be like this.’ Because of self-grasping, many problems arise. If someone touches our house, wife, children, property or rights, we immediately get angry of fear losing them and suffer. A person who practices no-self becomes humble, not arrogant, not boastful, so he is loved by everyone, when no-self is gone, all suffering disappears. Therefore, one should know that no-self is nirvana. Because nirvana is a state of no more suffering.

Dhammapada verse 18 teaches that:

Just as a mighty boulder

Stirs not with the wind,

So, the wise are never moved

Either by praise or blame.

The wise person here is the one who clearly understands the principle of no-self. One the path of practice, no-self is very important and necessary for us to overcome all suffering and reach happiness.

CONCLUSION

In the Dhammapada Buddha taught:

“Sons have I; wealth have I”

Thus, is the fool worried.

Verily, he himself is not his own.

Whence sons? Whence wealth?¹³

In this verse of the Dhammapada, the Buddha said: because of ignorance, people live in madness, so they suffer and are depressed, and from there they are mistaken and affected by their loved ones: parents, children, property, career, fame, lust, good food... So people are dominated and enslaved by kamma. The kamma that originates here is only for people who follow the five desires, who are passionate about craving, thirst for death, delusion, insanity, and clinging to the self so lead to suffering, birth and death in the six realms.

From then on, when we mistakenly accepted “my children and my property”, we had to protect and preserve it. Because we think that “my children and my property” are permanent, eternal, and immutable, but do not realize that what is “my children and my property” is very impermanent, temporary and very dangerous. One day “my children, my property” will be lost according to the law of impermanence, then we will be very sad and suffering. Because we do not look up to good things, wholesome, truth and keep pursuing evil, unwholesome things, without seeing the danger, degradation, and destruction languishing in sensual pleasures. That is the root cause of all suffering and trouble. Because we do not understand suffering and the cause of suffering, we are forever in the cycle of reincarnation.

¹² Bhikkhu Nanmoli, The Life of the Buddha, Buddhist Publication Society, 1992, pp. 46-47.

¹³ Dhammapāda 62.

It is to understand the teaching of selflessness and dependent origination, that our existence is a long chain of connection, individual and others are two but not one, one individual cannot survive alone.

Because people build their thoughts on the right self, they are led to seek to protect the self, accompanied by greed, anger, ignorance, etc., leading to economic and political competition...so the world always takes place the war was brutal, killing each other, creating a crazy world filled with pain, killing and fear. Buddha taught that all things are born from cause and effect, ignorance and ego create the things that exist in this world. We do not cling to “I, mine” with anything. Wise people know this and live peacefully, happily and liberated.

The teachings of anattā brings happiness in our lives, if everyone and every family understands clearly and practices this teaching, they themselves always live in peace, overcoming all suffering, human communities will always be filled with love for humanity

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