The Buddhist Educational Psychological Concept of
Anattā in Pāli Nikayas

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Abstract. “Anattā” is a key concept of Buddhist educational psychology, it has exerted a tremendous, profound and far-reaching influence upon the history of Mahayana and Hinayana Buddhist psychology. In this paper, the author will use Buddhist hermeneutics as research method to explain the philosophical and psychological concept of anattā, address the different interpretive strands, classical and modern, of this concept, and to interpret some of the widely identified problematics of this concept. Finally, there will be a summary of the basic characteristics of the “anattā” as the nature of human being.

Introduction

Robert H. Thouless, a renowned Cambridge University western psychologist, is known for his scholarship on the Theravada Buddhist psychology and western psychology. After made a comprehensive survey of Theravada Buddhist Pāli Nikayas, he said: “anybody with a good knowledge of psychology and its history who reads the Pāli Nikayas must be the fact that the psychological terminology is richer in this than any other ancient literature and that more space is devoted to psychological analysis and explanations in this than in any other religious literature.”[1] The concept of anattā is the foundation of Buddhist educational psychology that has been discussed in Pāli Nikayas, thus, this paper took this concept as its objects of research.

Description of Anattā in Classical Pāli Texts

The Buddhist educational psychological and philosophical Pāli term “anattā” (it is known as “anātman” in Sanskrit) is often translated as “no-self,” “not-self,” “no-soul,” or “no-ego” by western researches. A comprehensive survey of existing Pāli Nikayas shows that a number of Buddhist Pāli texts address the theory of anattā. The following is a list of major Pāli texts that relate to the concept of anattā:


According to these texts, beings and inanimate objects of the world are constructed (samskṛta), as distinguished from nirvāṇa, which is unconstituted (asamskra). The constituted elements are made up of the five skandha (aggregate) or building blocks of existence: the physical body (rūpa), physical sensation (vedanā), sensory perception (samjnā, sannā), habitual tendencies (samskāra, sakkāra), and consciousness (vijñāna, vinnāna). The last four of these skandhas are also collectively known as nāma (name), which denotes the nonmaterial or mental constituents of a being. Rūpa represents materiality alone, and inanimate objects therefore are included in the term rūpa. A living being composed of five skandhas is in a continuous state of flux, each preceding group of skandhas giving rise to a subsequent group of skandhas. This process is going on
momentarily and unceasingly in the present existence, as it will go on also in the future until the eradication of avidyā (ignorance) and the attainment of nirvāṇa. Thus, Buddhist psychology analysis of the nature of the person centers on the realization that what appears to be an individual is, in fact, an ever-changing combination of five skandhas. What we experience to be a person is not a thing, but a process; there is no human being, there is only becoming. When asked who it is, in the absence of a self, that has feeling or other sensations, the Buddha’s answer was that this question is wrongly framed: the question is not “who feels,” but “with what as condition does feeling occur?” The answer is contact, demonstrating again the conditioned nature of all experience and the absence of any permanent substratum of being.

Just as the human being is analyzed into its component parts, so too is the external world with which one interacts. This interaction is one of consciousness (vijnāna) established through cognitive faculties (indriya) and their objects. These faculties and their objects, called spheres (āyatana), include both sense and sense-object, the meeting of which is necessary for consciousness. These three factors that together comprise cognition—the sense-faculty, the sense-object, and the resultant consciousness—are classified under the name dhātu (element). The human personality, including the external world with which it interacts, is thus divided into skandha, āyatana, and dhātu. The generic for all three of them is dharma, which in this context is translated as “elements of existence.” The universe is made up of a continuous flux or flow (santāna). Every dharma, “dependently originating element,” that is, it depends for its origin on what had gone before it. Thus, existence becomes “dependent existence,” where there is no destruction of one thing and no creation of another. Falling within this scheme, the individual is entirely phenomenal, governed by the laws of causality and lacking any extraphenomenal self within him or her.

Buddhist psychological ideals of no-self were the opposite of Brahmanical beliefs concerning the continuity of the self. Hence, some Indian Buddhist schools modified the idea of no-self by, for example, positing the ālayavijnāna (storehouse consciousness) as that which undergoes rebirth. One widely accepted theory is the Sarvāstivāda school’s stance on karma (action) as the continuing force that sets in motion a new existence after death. According to this theory, an individual, during the course of his or her existence, is always accumulating fresh karma affecting every moment of the individual’s life. At death, the change is only comparatively deeper. The corporeal bond, which held the individual together, falls away and his or her new body, determined by karma, becomes one fitted to that new sphere in which the individual is reborn. The last thought-moment of this life perishes, conditioning another thought-moment in a subsequent life. The new being is neither absolutely the same, since it has changed, nor totally different, being the same stream (santāna) of karmic energy. There is merely a continuity of a particular life-flux; just that and nothing more. Sarvāstivāda school employed various similes to explain this idea that nothing transmigrates from one life to another. For example, rebirth is said to be like the transmission of a flame from one thing to another: The first flame is not identical to the last flame, but they are clearly related. The flame of life is continuous, although there is an apparent break at so-called death. [2]

Actually, the essence of this style of no-self idea is clearly expressed by Milindapanha in Pali canon: “it is not the same mind and body that is born into the next existence, but with this mind and body … one does a deed … and by reason of this deed another mind and body is born into the next existence.” [3]

Contemporary Research Achievements

In “The Not-self Strategy,” Thanissaro Bhikkhu suggests that the Buddha taught the anatta or not-self doctrine, not as a metaphysical assertion, but as a strategy for gaining release from suffering. If one uses the concept of not-self to dis-identify oneself from all phenomena, one goes beyond the reach of all suffering and stress. As for what lies beyond suffering and stress, the Canon states that although it may be experienced, it lies beyond the range of description, and thus such descriptions as “self” or “not-self” would not apply. [4]

In The Selfless Mind, Peter Harvey maintains that anattā is not meant as a psychological position. According to Harvey, one uses “not-self,” then, as a reason to let go of things, not to “prove” that
there is no self. There is no need to give some psychological denial of “self;” the idea simply withers away, or evaporates in the light of knowledge, when it is seen that the concept does not apply to anything at all, or as the suttas put it, when it is seen that everything is “empty” of self. A psychological denial is just a view, a theory, which may be agreed with or not. It does not get one to actually examine all the things that one really does identify with, consciously or unconsciously, as self or I. [5]

In the absence of an “anattā” one may ask how Buddhism accounts for the existence of human beings, their identity, continuity, and ultimately their religious goals. This is a widely identified problematique.

In using Buddhist educational psychological method to research this question, we can find that at the level of “conventional truth” (samvritisatya), Buddhism accepts that in the daily transactional world, humans can be named and recognized as more or less stable persons. However, at the level of the “ultimate truth” (paramarthasatya), this unity and stability of personhood is only a sense-based construction of our productive imagination. What the Buddha encouraged is not the annihilation of the feeling of self, but the elimination of the belief in a permanent and eternal “ghost in the machine.” Thus, the human being in Buddhism is a concrete, living, striving creature, and his or her personality is something that changes, evolves, and grows. It is the concrete human, not the transcendental self, that ultimately achieves perfection by constant effort and creative will.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Buddhist educational psychological concept of anattā is found in many Pāli texts of different Buddhist traditions. It will be helpful to summarize anattā as described in all these texts as follows:

(1) Anattā denies that there is anything called a self or soul in a human being that is a permanent essence of a human being.

(2) Anattā is the nature of human being. It is not to think even when involved in thought. It represents the ultimate first principle, it has a mysterious quality which cannot be known through any concept.

Abbreviations:


References


