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The Buddhist Theory of No-Self (Anātman/Anattā)

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What is the self? Philosophers have long puzzled over this question. Some classic answers say that the self is a soul, or a body, or a psychology.^[1]

Some Buddhist philosophers have offered a different, surprising answer: *there is no persisting self*—nothing about us that remains the same at all times.

On this theory, if we look closely at reality, we do not find anything that could be a self of the sort we imagine ourselves to be.

This denial of the self is known as *anātman* (or *anattā*). *Ātman* and *attā* are (respectively) the Sanskrit and Pali words for “self,” and “an-” means “not.” This essay explores some of the basics of *anātman/anattā*.

1. The Self That Doesn't Exist

First, it is important to understand what *anātman/anattā* actually says. It does not claim that there are no human beings or that the person who delivers your mail is really a robot or a ghost.

Rather, *anātman/anattā* is a denial of ordinary claims about human identity. We *think* that our existence is some sort of deep, special fact. We believe ourselves to be unified, persisting beings who continue to exist from one moment to the next. We think we are something like a soul, or a body, or a psychology.

Specifically, we think that our self has some sort of *essence*. The essence of something is its core, defining characteristic(s) without which the thing could not exist. A square *essentially* has four sides: if a square loses or gains any sides, there is no longer any square.

If our self has an essence, then this essence is what *makes* us us. If you lose your essence, there is

no longer any you.^[2] But as long as your essence exists (whether that essence is a body, a soul, a psychology, or something else), you exist.

According to *anātman/anattā*, this idea of the essentially existing self is mistaken. There *is no* essence of what people often take to be the self.

Rather, the self is just the collection of constantly changing features, like the physical parts of your body and the sensations and perceptions that make up your mental life. There is nothing else about us that persists through these changes: all we are is a series of changes.

2. No-Self Versus the Psychological View

We can contrast the no-self view to another theory of personal identity. John Locke (1632-1704) offers a psychological theory of the self.^[3]

According to Locke, our psychology, which is made of things like our experiences, thoughts and memories, is our essence. As long as our psychology persists, Locke says, we continue to exist. So, if your psychology permanently ends, *you* end, even if your body were to remain alive.^[4] If, however, your memories, thoughts, and experiences were transferred to my body, and your own body was destroyed, then *you* wouldn't die: you'd continue to exist, albeit in a new body.

The no-self theorist replies that our psychological features are constantly changing, which means that there is no single collection of these features that persists over time. Moreover, there is nothing underlying all of these different psychological features that unifies them into one single thing.

The no-self theorists thus agree with David Hume (1711-1776), who argued that our sensations never include a distinct sensation of the self.^[5]

Hume says we experience *particular* sensations like the taste of a carrot or the sound of thunder or the warmth of a fire. But Hume and the no-self theorists claim that we only ever experience these particular states of consciousness: we do not have an additional experience of the self on top of these other experiences.^[6] All we are, therefore, is a bundle of particular intermittent sensations.

3. What Kind of Theory and for What Purpose?

One key question is what kind of thesis *anātman/anattā* is. Some philosophers treat it as a *metaphysical* thesis about *what sorts of things exist*. According to this view, *anātman/anattā* is like a

theory about whether unicorns exist. A good unicorn theory will say “no, unicorns don’t exist.” Similarly, *anātman/anattā* says that persisting selves do not exist.

Other philosophers think *anātman/anattā* is a *practical* thesis. It doesn’t tell us what exists but rather how to *understand* ourselves. We should not think of ourselves as having a persisting existence in the form of a soul, a body, a psychology, or anything else. Misconceiving of ourselves as persisting causes us to be attached to ourselves in detrimental ways, they argue.

The no-self theorists claim that by adopting this theory we can free ourselves from some of the misunderstandings that prevent us from enlightenment. The philosopher Buddhaghosa (5th century), for instance, describes full understanding as requiring “investigation of impermanence, suffering, and not-self.”^[7] The acceptance of the no-self theory will change us in various ways. It will for example help us become less egoistic and perhaps more altruistic.^[8]

Finally, some philosophers think we can accept *anātman/anattā* without having to say that selves do not exist in any sense. Selves still exist in a *conventional* sense: we can correctly say things like “I exist,” as long as we are merely speaking conventionally about combinations of ever-shifting properties, and not referring to essences with fundamental reality.^[9]

4. Conclusion

The idea of *anātman/anattā* can be difficult to grasp. There is significant disagreement about it even among Buddhist traditions. For instance, the Pudgalavādin Buddhists argued that persons exist, while selves do not exist.^[10] By this, they mean that there is a thing we can call a person, with properties distinct from the self, and it is only the latter which does not exist.

Whether the thesis is metaphysical or practical, and whether it tells us to deny that selves exist or just asks us to think about selves in a different way, one thing is clear: *anātman/anattā* is a striking denial of something that many of us take to be so obviously true that it needs no defense.

Notes

[1] For a discussion of these possibilities, see [Personal Identity: How We Exist Over Time](#) by Chad Vance.

[2] For a discussion of what might be essential to our existence, see [Origin Essentialism: What Could Have Been Different About You?](#) by Chad Vance.

[3] See [Psychological Approaches to Personal Identity: Do Memories and Consciousness Make Us Who We Are?](#) by Kristin Seemuth Whaley.

[4] For a contrary view according to which someone’s existence depends *entirely* on their living body and *not* on their psychology or mind, see [Are we Animals? Animalism and Personal Identity](#) by Kristin Seemuth Whaley.

[5] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1.4.6.4.

[6] Watson, “Self or No-Self,” 298-9.

[7] Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification* (Visuddhimagga), 724.

[8] For a discussion of altruism and the no-self theory, see Harris, “Does *Anātman* Rationally Entail Altruism? On *Bodhicaryāvatāra* 8:101-103,” Sridharan, “Selfless Ethics: The Equality of Non-Existence,” Goodman, “Consequentialism, Particularism, and the Emptiness of Persons: A Response to Vishnu Sridharan,” and Sridharan, “Utility Monsters and the Distribution of Dharmas: A Reply to Charles Goodman.”

[9] Siderits, “Buddhist Reductionism,” 456-7; “Buddhist Non-Self: The No-Owner’s Manual,” 299-302; Giles, “The No-Self Theory,” 186-8.

[10] Chadha, “Eliminating Selves and Persons,” 5-6.

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