

Specification content

The three lakshanas (three marks of existence): anatta.

Key terms

Skandhas: the five elements that constitute an individual

Sunnata: Pali term for 'emptiness'; also sunyata in Sanskrit

Key quote

This is the central doctrine of Buddhism, without understanding of which a real knowledge of Buddhism is altogether impossible. It is the only really specific Buddhist doctrine, with which the entire structure of the Buddhist teaching stands or falls. (Mahathera Nyanatiloka)



A Hindu practising yoga

quickfire

2.6 To what did Ajahn Chah compare existence?

The concept of anatta

Anatta is often translated as no soul or no self. This is not always helpful as we have seen with Milinda and Nagasena. Perhaps the most beneficial translation for understanding the idea of anatta is 'not-self'. Indeed, later Buddhist philosophy understands the principle of anatta to extend to all existence and directly relate to an absence of 'own being' (svabhava) or the 'emptiness' (*sunnata* Pali sunyata *Sanskrit*) of all conditioned phenomena. As anatta is one of the three marks of existence, it is therefore true of all existence and not just an individual; however, it is often the individual being that is the point of departure for understanding the concept.

The Buddha, when he reflected upon himself through meditation, could not find any one thing that was unchanging within himself. There was no evidence of the underlying soul or 'atman' that is found in Hinduism. Instead, the Buddha discovered that there are many things that combine to make a human being. The Buddha's view is totally materialistic in the philosophical sense and rejects outright an existence of an eternal, unchanging essence within an individual.

The concept of anatta appears to be totally unique. Others have agreed with this and have argued that it is anatta that makes Buddhism unique among world religions.

Ajahn Chah, a renowned Thai Buddhist monk, compared human life to an ice cube that slowly melts away until nothing is left. However, this does not mean that a Buddhist would deny human existence.

The idea of anatta invites further investigation, through meditative insight, into whom or what a person actually is. In other words, it is like a rediscovery of the self. Peter Harvey expresses it well when he points out there is a difference between what we may refer to as an eternal and unchanging metaphysical self (or soul, spirit) and a changing empirical self. Anatta, then, rejects the metaphysical self but in doing so *reveals* the empirical self.

Key quote

While a metaphysical self is not accepted, a changing empirical 'self' is accepted ... Reference to an empirical 'self' is simply a way of talking about the functioning personality-factors, not some reference to some hidden extra entity or structure. (Harvey)

Viewed in this way, anatta is very much a practical device, tool or vehicle for spiritual development. It is thus transformed from a philosophical statement into an empirical investigation. When not-self is seen in abstract it has the danger of losing its true perspective and value. If it were just a philosophical teaching or a theory then at face value it appears to be meaningless. It is only when, like anicca or dukkha it is experienced, that it actually becomes meaningful.

The question remains, however, 'if a person is anatta (not-self) and has no permanent and unchanging metaphysical self, then precisely what constitutes a human being?'

The Buddhist answer is that a person arises and functions according to the five groups known as **skandhas** (khandhas Pali). They are often used in association with the word upadana which is translated as 'clinging', an intensified form of the second Noble Truth tanha (craving or grasping).

Key terms

Citta: a term to describe mind or consciousness

Rupa: physical elements, 'form'

Sankhara: 'mental formations' or thought processing

Sanna: 'perception', interpreting the positive or negative experiences

Vedana: 'feeling', an awareness of positive or negative experiences

Vinnana: the decision-making element

quickfire

2.7 How many non-physical skandhas are there?

These five skandhas are:

1. **Rupa** (form) This refers to the physical aspect of existence. It includes energy, action and all activities of an individual. It relates to all five senses of human experience. It also refers to the non-extant matter surrounding us.
2. **Vedana** (feeling) These are really our reactions to the immediate environment. Reactions can be positive or negative. Reactions involve the senses and the emotions, which includes feelings of pain, pleasure and indifference or neutrality.
3. **Sanna** (perception) This is the medium through which the feelings recognised by vedana are actually interpreted (or misinterpreted) and given personal meaning. They include perception of form, sound, odour, taste, bodily impression, and mental impression. We tend to use language to give them labels, for example, cold, frightening, an ugly man, a fierce dog.
4. **Sankhara** (mental formations) This is a crucial group because it is the stage that initiates action. It determines how a person reacts to the experience that they encounter. For example, is this a happy experience? If so, how do I proceed?
5. **Vinnana** (consciousness) This is seen to be the base of all our experience. It expresses itself in relation to sanna. It is not, however, an independent entity and is driven by the other four formations. In turn, vinnana also determines how the other four groups are formed in the first place. The fifth group is sometimes referred to as **citta**, meaning mind, awareness or consciousness. At this stage, an overall decision of action may be made.

Note that only the first group is actually concerned with the physical world. The remainder are all within the realms of the psyche. As Nyanatiloka writes: 'The moral quality of feeling, perception and consciousness is determined by the mental formations.' Therefore, as with kamma (karma), it is the mind that is the real initiator of action.

Key quotes

What is called individual existence is in reality nothing but a mere process of those mental and physical phenomena ... These five groups, however, neither singly nor collectively constitute any self-dependent real ego-Entity, or Personality (atta). (Mahathera Nyanatiloka)

According to Buddhism, mind is nothing but a complex compound of fleeting mental states ... Each momentary consciousness of this ever-changing life process, on passing away, transmits its whole energy, all the detailed recorded impressions to its successor. Every fresh consciousness consists of the potentialities of its predecessors together with something more. There is therefore a continuous flow of consciousness without a stream without any interruption. The subsequent thought moment is neither absolutely the same as its predecessor – since that which goes to make it up is not identical – nor entirely another – being the same continuity of kamma energy. Here there is no identical being but there is an identity in process. (Narada Thera)