

Research Article

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The Doctrine of Not-self (*anattā*) in Early Buddhism

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Abstract: Anattā or the Not-Self is a very important concept of Buddhism, which distinguishes it from other religions. There are some ways to explain this doctrine and many debates were happened between Buddhist schools and between Buddhists and the Brahmanists on this issue. Early Buddhism analyse that self is the combination of five aggregates (skandhas), and each of them is not the self. Based on this explanation, Buddhists think wrongly that anattā is 'No-self. Deeply understand and practice of the not-self concept will help practitioners of Buddhism to be free from all sufferings. So, one needs to have a clear understanding on this concept. The purpose of this paper is to present a comprehensive view of Not-self (*anattā*) doctrine in Early Buddhism. All its related aspects are presented in succession. This article investigates the doctrine of anattā, it is also examined with other related doctrines in Early Buddhism. By analyzing method, the meaning of Not-self (*anattā*) in Early Buddhism is proposed by the author. (<https://www.abebooks.de/buch-suchen/titel/anatta/>)

Keywords: Self, non-self, no-self, not-self, Early Buddhism

Introduction

Not-self (*anattā*) is an attentive point of any religion because it is a core subject in many forms of spirituality, it is also the inner critic in Western psychoanalysis by the

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renowned thinkers such as Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Carl Rogers. The teaching of *anattā* is also a fundamental concept in early Buddhism and plays an important role for understanding the nature of human existence and rebirth.

The term Early Buddhism in this article refers to the teachings and monastic organization and structure, founded by Gautama Buddha. It is also called Pre-sectarian Buddhism or Original Buddhism implying that Buddhism that existed before the various subsets of Buddhism coming into being.

This doctrine appears in the Discourse on the Characteristic of Not-self (*Anattālakkhana Sutta*) (SN22.59, PTS 1980). It involves some difficulties, such as- how the continuity is maintained through the death to the rebirth of the person. How can people trace back all the past memories? How to explain the human free-will...? And the given responsibility of action (*kamma*) without self is difficult to understand even for monks.

This paper is an attempt to analyze the not-self doctrine in relationship with the doctrine of Dependent Arising (*paticca samuppāda*), the five aggregates (*pañca-khandha*) and to find the way to explain all the said-above logical difficulties

No-self or Not-self

Before analyzing the meaning of Not-self according to Early Buddhism, the translation into English of the term *anattā* needs to be discussed. This also helps us to understand deeply the implication of this term.

In Buddhist philosophy, *anattā* (*Pāli* term) or *anātman* (*Sanskrit* term) refers to 'not-self' or 'absence of independent self.' The prefix 'a' in *anattā* and *anātman* bears the negative meaning (Not). It rejects the real or permanent self. So, '*anattā*' conveys the meaning of negation of self or soul. The suitable English term for *anattā* is 'not-self'. Non-self, No-self are not appropriate.

Yet, the translation of *anattā* into 'no self' cannot be correct, because the grammar and syntax show that it is not a possessive adjective, but a descriptive compound, and if the translation for *attā* is "self", then the word

would mean 'not self' (Norman, 1997).

'No' and 'Not' have very different meaning, 'No' means never existence, 'Not' means denial of something. The 'Not' should be used instead of 'No'.

What does the not-self mean? The first it is not a permanent self. The second is nothing that pertains to that self. 'It is empty of self or what pertains to that self.' (Steven, 2015)

The Buddhist history in India shows that not all of the Buddhist sections agree with the *anattā* concept. *Vātsīputriya* claimed that the self (*pudgala*) existed. *Nyāya* School claimed that if there is no self, how can people trace back the memories? How can the *kamma* doctrine is understood in logic way? Because the being of this life is totally different with the being of past life. There should be a self; then the relationship between the doer and the recipient, can be explained and understood.

So the English term of *anattā* should be 'Not self'. Edward Conze also used this term "Not-self" for *anattā* (Conze, 1971) and the same with Steven Collins in his book. (Collin, 1990)

The purpose of Not-self

The purpose of Not-self in Early Buddhism can be seen clearly through the relation between self and *dukkha*.

Dukkha is often translated into English as 'suffering' or 'dissatisfaction', however it is not fully correct. *Dukkha* has other meanings as impermanence, lack of freedom and imperfection

Dukkha is a real fact of life. This fact is the first thing one must comprehend (*pariññeyya*) and the following three truths are the result to this one. Any thoughtful person can see the life, in general, unsatisfactory. In Buddhist philosophy, *dukkha* is one of the three marks of existence (*ti-lakkhaṇa*), namely *aniccā*, *dukkha* and *anattā*:

"The Buddha taught: All compounded things (*saṅkhāras*) are impermanent (*sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā*). All compounded things are unsatisfactory (*sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā*). All states are not-self (*sabbe dhammā anattā*). "Bhikkhus, what is impermanent is suffering, what is suffering is not-self." (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2000, p.869).

According to Buddhist view, *Dukkha* is a real fact of the human life, because people attach to their self, they indulge the self too much and fight each other to protect their selves. As a result, they feel suffering when their selves are hurt and violated.

A self in common understanding can be described as happiness finding and misery avoiding that a human expects. However, this thing is illusion. Happiness is

impossible for the compounded things (*saṅkhata*); all things will be destroyed and cannot last forever. A person with greed, anger, and delusion cannot get real happiness in life.

So, it can be seen clearly that the Early Buddhism brought out the Not-self concept for the practical purpose. Leaving self-attachment and self-possession would bring humans being to happiness and escape the suffering.

"Selfishness is a powerful negative force that brings bad consequences, it is brought about by wrong views and the failure to perceive the realities of life, and then they will cause the sufferings for people. (Dhammanada, 1993, p.72)

The teaching of not-self is a tool for helping people to put an end to suffering and stress. To believe that 'I am this' is the origin of *dukkha*. This arises from the illusion of self. When there is no self there is no 'mine'. When there is no 'I', *dukkha* does not occur. Self, I, and *dukkha* are all inseparable. Venerable *Narada* used a short paragraph in the *Suttanta Piṭaka* to quote for his work: "This body is not mine, this am I not, this is not my soul (*N'etam mama, n'eso'ham asmi, n'eso me attā*)." (Narada, 1988, p.xi)

Thus, the Not-self doctrine is the base therapeutic of mind. The Buddha was less interested in metaphysics than in pointing the way to practical liberation from suffering. Human being has the tendency to develop the attachments to views and desires though the reinforcing notions of 'me' and 'mine'. This is the cause of their suffering and not-self can be used as a strategy for putting an end to clinging. It finally serves as an effective strategy on the path to the end of stress. (Bhikkhu Thanissaro, 2016)

Furthermore, the Not-self doctrine stands in objection to the ideas of Brahmanical philosophers who view self as an unchanging, non-physical and eternal entity called *ātman*. From Buddhist point of view, there is nothing permanent; everything is subject to decay and destruction. It is a rapidly shifting stream of momentary mental occurrences.

Self denial in Early Buddhism- What it really means?

In *Samyutta Nikāya* 4.10, there is a dialogue relating to the question of self existence. The Buddha kept silent with two questions of *Vacchagotta*: "is there a self? And is there no self? He explained, after that, to the venerable Ānanda as follows:

"If, Ānanda, when asked by the Wanderer: 'Is there a self?'. I had replied to him: 'there is a self', then, Ānanda that would be siding with those ascetics and Brahmins who are Eternalists"

“And if, Ānanda, when I was asked by him: ‘Is there no self?’ I had answered, there is no self this would have been siding with, those ascetics and Brahmins who are Annihilationists.”

“If, Ānanda, when I was asked by the Wanderer *Vacchagotta*: ‘Is there a self?’ I had answered, ‘there is a self’, would this have been consistent on my part with the arising of the knowledge that all phenomena are nonself?”

“No, venerable sir.”

“And if , when I was asked by him: ‘Is there no self?’ I had answered, ‘there is no self’, the Wanderer *Vacchagotta*, already confused, would have fallen into even greater confusion, thinking, ‘it seems that the self I formerly had does not exist now.’ (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2000, Pp. 1393-1394)

Through this dialogue, the Buddha’s view point on self and not-self is not rigid and extreme. In other words, the Not-self doctrine cannot be explained in the way of absolute negation of self, otherwise, it will put his doctrine the same with Annihilationism which means those who denied the rebirth and afterlife.

The *Sutta Nipāta* quoted: “Such a Bhikkhu who has turned away from desire and attachment, and is possessed of understanding in this world, has (already) gone to the immortal peace, the unchangeable of *Nibbāna*.” (Fausball, 1881, p.33)

So, the Not-self (*anattā*) doctrine does not bear the meaning of subject negation. It only implies that people should not adhere to the desires and lusts which are the reasons for their sufferings.

Early Buddhism also distinguished the difference between conventional (*sammuti sacca*) and ultimate (*paramattha sacca*) truths and ‘those who do not understand the difference between these two truths do not understand the profound essence of the doctrine of the Buddha.’ (Paul, 2008)

A statement is conventionally true if and only if it is acceptable to common sense and consistently leads to successful practice. A statement is ultimately true if and only if it corresponds to the facts and neither asserts nor presupposes the existence of any conceptual fictions. (Katie, 2013). They do not represent the two degrees of truth, of which one is superior or inferior to the other.

The *sutta piṭaka* is said to contain teachings mostly based on conventional terms (*voḥāra-desanā*). In contrast, the *abhidhamma piṭaka* is said to contain teachings mostly based on *paramattha*. (Y. Karunadasa, 2010)

Buddhism does not deny a self in the empirical sense but in ultimate reality. The Buddhist teaching of *anattā* does not proclaim the absence of individuality or self; it only says there are no permanent and individuality and unchanged self.

Not-self and five aggregates (*pañca-khandhā*)

The term *khandhā* means a mass, a heap (*rāsi*), a collection of separate componets. In Buddhist terminology *khandhā* has two meanings: (i) multipliable physic-psychological phenomena; (ii) something that hinders an obstacle. The first meaning is widely used and is especially applicable to the five *khandhas* as groups or aggregates; the second meaning is in Chinese translations of the word *skandha* as ‘陰’ which means hindrance, and ‘蘊’ means collection.

The ‘self’ in Buddhism is analyzed by the five *khandās*: *rūpa*, *vedanā*, *saññā*, *sankhāra* and *viññāna*. When these five elements come together, people will have the illusion of a permanent self. This illusion is the reason to cause suffering for people.

So, the birth of an individual is described in the *Pāli* language as ‘*khandhānaṃ paṭilābham...*’ ‘the acquisition of aggregates’, and in reflection on one’s former experiences, one’s accounts may run like this “I was born there, of such and such a name, in such a clan, such a class, enjoyed such a food, experienced such and such happiness and suffering, such was my life-spent.” (U. Silananda, 1998, p. 233)

Various schools of Buddhism interpret the *khandhās* in somewhat different ways.

Generally, the first *khandhā* is our physical form. The second *khandhā* is made up of our feelings, emotional and physical, and the senses - seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, and smelling. The third *khandhā*, perception, takes in most of what we call thinking - conceptualization, cognition, reasoning. This also includes the recognition that occurs when an organ comes into contact with an object. The object perceived may be a physical object or a mental one, such as an idea. The fourth *khandhā*, mental formations, includes habits, prejudices and predispositions. (Barbara O’Brien, 2017)

Consciousness (*viññāṇa*) - the fifth *khandhā* is awareness of or sensitivity to an object but without conceptualization, it merely confirms the presence of object, it arises when objects (*āyatana*s) come into contact with senses and will cease depending on the conditions, so, it is not a self. With the same argument, the rest of *khandhās* are not the self also. (Bhikkhuni Dhammanandā, 2007)

Viññāṇa appears when mind (*citta*) contact with objects (*ārammaṇa*), it is the link between mind and matter; it becomes contaminated *citta* leading people to the birth-death cycle (*samsāra*).

The most important to understand about the *khandhā* is that they are empty.. The person is conditioned by *nāmarūpa* (name and form). He relates to others and

cannot exist by himself, so he must be selfless and impermanent. The Buddha claimed:

“When there is a form, bhikkhus, by clinging to form, by adhering to form, such a view as this arises: ‘That which is the self is the world; having passed away, that I shall be permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change...’

“What do you think, bhikkhu, is form...consciousness permanent or impermanent?”

“Impermanent, venerable sir..”

“But without clinging to what is impermanent, suffering and subject to change, could such a view as that arise?”

“No, venerable sir.” (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2000, Pp.979-980)

What is normally thought as the ‘self’ by people is an agglomeration of constantly changing physical and mental constituents known as ‘*khandhās*’ (aggregates). The Buddha repeatedly emphasized not only that the five *khandhās* of being are “not-self,” but clinging to them also cause to suffer. (New World Encyclopedia, 2015)

“The five aggregates are ‘of impermanent nature, of painful nature, of selfless nature’ (aniccadhamma, dukkhadhamma, anattadhamma); (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2000, p.44)

Five aggregates are empty of self, but conventionally being called self. Seeing is not a self seeing, but is simply the experience of? being seen. Volition is not via a doer, but is simply action-activity-process, co-dependently arisen. Consciousness is not a self, it is simply auditory consciousness manifested dependent on ear, sound and attention, so on and so forth.

“Consciousness may exist having matter as its means (*rūpapaṭṭāna*), matter as its object (*rūpārammaṇam*), matter as its support (*rūpapatittham*) and seeking delight it may grow, increase and develop or consciousness may exist having sensation as its means...or perception as it means...or mental formations as its means, mental formation as its object, mental formation as its support and seeking delight it may grow, increase and develop. Were a man to say: I shall show the coming, the going, the passing away, the arising, the growth the increase or the development of consciousness apart from the matter, sensation, perception and mental formation, he would be speaking of something that does not exist” (Rahula, 1962, p. 25)

By linguistic approaching, Sasaki did an analysis of Ego-Concept through three Sanskrit terms: *māna*, *ātmi māna*, *ātma māna* with the meaning ‘pride’; however, he discovered that in Sanskrit equivalents, they were not confined to ‘pride’: going beyond the meaning of pride

they point to the inferiority of the self. Whatever pride or humility may be, he reckoned that with the development of Buddhism, old etymology of the words is forgotten or deliberately lost sight of.

Māna with the meaning pride has the equivalent term *omāno* (*una-māno*) meaning inferiority – complex. Besides, the original meaning of *māna* derived from the root ‘man’, originally means conception, imagination. So, the basic meaning of this term is the conception of oneself in relation to others, superior or inferior.

Asmi means ‘I am’, the compound ‘I am’ denotes the high attitude towards the individual existence. What, then, is *asmi* ‘I am’? It is “I have rūpa, rūpa is I myself, I myself is rūpa... and the same for the rest of four aggregates.” Sasaki concluded that *Asmi māna* indicates ‘I am the five aggregates’. (Sasaki, 1986, p.53)

To analyze the self into five elements, the Buddhists or Not-self theorists are also called reductionists, who consider that the existence of a person just consists in the existence of a brain and body, and the occurrence of a series of interrelated physical and psychological events. The parts exist but the whole does not. (Mark Siderits, 1997)

Buddhagosa had the same idea with the Buddhist reductionists when he said that:

“Hairs are mere conceptual fictions since they can be analyzed into color, shape, solidity, and smell. A particular smell, on the other hand, presumably remains as the terminus of any analysis and is thus a dhamma. (Ñāṇamoli Bhikkhu, 2011, p.359)

In short, the way of analyzing the self into five aggregates by the Buddha, is to show the truth of human’s suffering and open the way to escape this suffering.

Not-self (*anattā*) and Dependant Arising (*Paticca samuppāda*)

The doctrine of not-self denies not only the self within the personality, but also the substance of the phenomenal world under the concept of Dependent Arising.

Dependent Arising raises the real essence of all *dhamma*, in other words, people can say

“This entire world is without nature of its own”. Absolutely everything changes from each *kṣaṇa* (刹那) and never have the ending” (Lee, 1995, p.3)

Everything depends on each other. Nothing exists as singular; sentient-beings (*sattva*) are not an exception. The Buddha summarized the Dependent Arising doctrine as follows:

“When this exists, that comes to be.
 With the arising of this, that arises.
 When this does not exist, that does not come to be.
 With the cessation of this, that ceases.” (Bhikkhu Bodhi 2000, p.517)

These four stanzas reflect the meaning of Dependent Arising. It is the general law to explain the birth and the decay of all *Dhamma*. Because of general law, it is hard to explain the birth and decay of moral defilements of human beings, so the Buddha added in detail the Twelve Conditional factors:

Ignorance (*avijjā*) conditions formations, formation (*sankhāra*) conditions consciousness, consciousness (*viññāna*) conditions mind and body, mind and body (*nāma-rūpa*) conditions the Six sense bases, the six sense bases (*sālayatana*) conditions contact, contact (*phassa*) conditions feeling, feeling (*vedanā*) conditions craving; craving (*taṇhā*) conditions clinging; clinging (*upādāna*) conditions becoming; becoming (*bhava*) conditions birth; birth (*jāti*) conditions aging and death (*jarā-marana*), the Lord Buddha taught. (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2000, p.533)

In this cycle, every link depends on the previous link and in return causes the next link in the chain. If the cause is destroyed, the resultant thing will also be destroyed. They do not have a real own essence (*asvabhāva*). Nothing outside or even within a human-being can last forever and exists independently. Not-self (*anattā*) and Dependent Arising (*paticca samuppāda*) therefore, have the same meaning.

People have the tendency to cling to their desire. When they look for the happiness, they consider their selves are real. This creates the craving and increases the clinging to worldly things.

Nibbāna is often conceived as the stopping of this vicious cycle. By removing the causes for craving, craving ceases. Therefore, with the ceasing of birth, death ceases. With the ceasing of becoming, birth ceases, and so on, until with the ceasing of ignorance, no *kamma* is produced, and the whole process of death and rebirth ceases. This is the practical meaning of the *paticca samuppāda*.

Not-self and *Kamma* & Rebirth

The combination of mind (*citta*) and matter (*internal rūpa*) is called a ‘life stream’. This life stream contains the *kamma* seed and becomes the subject factor of birth-death cycle.

More technically, the ‘*bhavaṅga citta*’ and ‘*Paṭisandhi citta*’ have the role to link life to life, according to *Theravāda Abhidhamma*.

The relationship between *kamma*, *citta*, and *taṇhā* as

three conditions for a person to take rebirth is revealed in *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (A.III, 76, 77). *Kamma* here is *kamma vipāka*, the results of one’s actions serving as the field; *citta* refers to *paṭisandhi citta*, the rebirth-linking consciousness is the seed; and *taṇhā* is craving that bound one to existence. Consciousness being one of the five *Khandhas*, is not a “being” or “*atta*”, it even not the mind – *nāma* or a complex mental phenomena. *nāma* or *citta* consist of four *khandhas*, to wit: *vedanākkhandha*, *saññānakkhandha*, *saṅkhārakkhandha* and *viññāṇakkhandha*. A *citta* or a state of mind is said to arise together with varied mental-factors which determine its quality. These mental factors include *vedanā*, *saññā* and *saṅkhāra* – volition. But this “bundle” what is called “mind”, even then is not fit to be called a being (*satta*). A being is ultimately consists of two constituents: *nāma*-mind and *rūpa*- body. (Bhikkhuni Dhammanada, <https://www.rongmotamhon.net/static/budsas/ebud/atta/ad05.htm>)

It would be better to consider the body as the self rather than the mind because the body may last for some tens or a hundred of years. But the mind or consciousness, (*citta*, *mana*, *viññāṇa*), arises and vanishes rapidly in every moment (*kṣaṇa*).

Theravāda Buddhism went further to explain there is only the rebirth but does not have the self in this process:

“Misery only doth exist, none miserable;
 No doer is there, naught but the deed is found
Nirvana is, but not the man that seeks it
 The paths exist but not the traveler on it.” (Eliot, 1962, p.128)

So, there is no permanence in anything then, there is neither any continuity of the self. This explanation of *Buddhaghosa* in *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)* causes confusion for Buddhists.

The Buddhist law of *kamma* is based on the intentional actions through body, speech and mind of people. The results will be determined by the nature of actions. If the action is wholesome, the result will be pleasant. If the action is unwholesome, the result will be suffered for the persons who act these actions.

“Whatever sort of seed is sown,
 That is the sort of fruit one reaps:
 The doer of good reaps good;
 The doer of evil reaps evil” (Bodhi bhikkhu, 2000, p.328)

All that we take with us when we die are our good and bad deeds, and thus “we should be sure to accumulate merits, for in the next world, these are “the support for living beings”. (Bodhi bhikkhu, 2000, p.78)

Buddhists believe in the *kamma* law, any teaching which denies this law would open the door to irresponsible selfishness and non ethics. People can do bad things without any punishments.

In the *Samaññaphala Sutta*, the Buddha confirmed the *kamma* law against a group of six teachers; he affirmed the theory of *kamma* and rebirth without the support of the notion of a transmigrating of self.

However, if there is no-self, is the person in this life to inherit the *kamma* a different person in previous life? The Buddha never refutes a person (self) in birth-death cycle, he only refute a permanent self or soul.

In the *Milindapañha* (“Milinda’s Questions”), the Buddhist monk *Nāgasena* attempts to give the illustration for the King to understand the real meaning of reincarnation:

“He who is reborn, Nāgasena, is he the same person or another?”

“Neither the same nor another.”

“Give me an illustration.”

“In the case of a pot of milk that turns first to curds, then to butter, then to ghee; it would not be right to say that the ghee, butter and curds were the same as the milk but they have come from that, so neither would it be right to say that they are something else.” (Bhikkhu Pesala, 1998, p.43)

Not-self (*anattā*) and *Nibbāna*

Pāli grammarians take *nibbāna* as composed of *ni* + *va* + *na*. Here the negative particle *ni* means “out.” The root *va* is “to go” or “to blow,” and *na* is the suffix used to give an auxiliary sense; and the word is defined thus: “*nibbāti-etenā’ti nibbānaṃ*”-the aspirant goes out or becomes cool or extinct by the aid of this object. Hence it tends to the state of ‘Release’, and therefore it is called *Nibbāna*. (Vajiranana Thera, 1971, p.12)

Therefore, *Nibbāna* means ‘extinction’, it is the state without *dukkha*, the state of *rāga*, *dosa*, *moha* were extinguished, the state of peace due to having a cessation. This is not a cessation of life, but of defilements (*kilesa*) and craving (*taṅhā*). Sometimes it is explained as “the destruction of craving.” (Woodward, 2004, p.327)

The Buddha illustrated the concept of *nibbāna* as follow:

“Suppose, *bhikkhus*, there was a great tree, and all its roots going downwards and across would send the sap upwards. Sustained by that sap, nourished by it, that great tree would stand for a very long time. So, too, when one lives contemplating gratification in things that can be clung to, craving increases...Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering.

So, too, *bhikkhus*, when one dwells contemplating danger in things that can be clung to, craving ceases.... Such is the cessation of this whole mass of suffering...” (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2000, p. 591) (<https://www.wisdompubs.org/book/connected-discourses-buddha/selections/connected-discourses-part-ii-suffering-or-tree-0>).

According to this view, *nibbāna* is merely a state that does not have ‘the individual self’ as its aim; it is the state of selflessness. It exists when there are no defilements (*kilesa*), no greed, hatred and illusion to be existed. When *rāga*, *dosa*, *moha* are removed, a *viññāṇa* become pure and is not impacted by a given object, then the birth-death cycle is also stopped completely. This description is relative because by nature, *nibbāna* is indescribable.

To attain *nibbāna*, one also has to get rid of the belief of self (*sakkāya-diṭṭhi*); this is also the main purpose of *anattā*, a condition to experience the *nibbāna*.

Not-self with Eternalism and Nihilism

In the *Kathāvatthu*, self view is said to be divided into two groups: nihilism (*ucchedavāda*) and eternalism (*sassatavāda*). (Davids, 1915, p.65). They represented the two extreme views which people need to avoid.

Eternalism is the view that there is an eternal self. This self would continue to exist after death. On the contrary, Nihilism is the view that there is no self that perishes after death. In the Buddha’s account, the Middle Way involves the avoidance of two extremes, eternalism and nihilism.

Self and not-self are both illusions need to be avoided, they are considered as two extremes- nihilism and eternalism. We should dismiss the idea of self or an eternal soul, (eternalism), and nothing exists after death (nihilism). The Buddha rejected two the extreme views. Things change by when its conditions on which they depend disappear. This is why the eternalist view is considered wrong.

The Nihilists claim that there is no life after death. This view belongs to a materialistic philosophy. The teaching of *kamma* is proving that the Buddha rejected nihilism; Buddhism accepts ‘an existence’ not in the sense of an eternal state, but in the sense of a rebirth phenomenon. Therefore, Buddhism is a kind of Middle path between two extremes. (Siderits, 1997)

In other word, to reject the permanent self means to negate the two extreme views which are the confirmation for self theory.

Not-self Theory and Its Problems

The Memory issue

Memory and recognition might be thought to present insuperable difficulties.

“If there is no self how is it then that detached moments of consciousness can remember or recognize things which have been experienced a long time ago.” Remembrance, as Vasubandhu in his *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* says, “Is a new state of consciousness directed to the same object, conditioned as it is by the previous states.” That the experience of A is not remembered by B is because the series of states conventionally designated as A is different from the series designated as B.

This explanation, however ingenious, does not explain memory fully. Memory or recognition is not merely a revival of the object of the previous state, but there is the added consciousness that ‘I have experienced it before.’ (Murti, 2009, p.33)

Memory of an object is not only records of the sensory aspects of the object but also records of the sensory signals and the emotional reaction to the object. It means when object is recalled, people remember not only the sensory data but also the emotional data, the past reactions relating to that object. That is not simply a new state of consciousness directed to the same object, conditioned as it is by the previous states as claimed by *Vasubandhu*.

Śaṅkarācārya had another view on this issue. He thought that in memory, there is the presupposition of the continual identity and persistence of the individual doing the remembering. There is only one individual who experiences the events, persons, objects and thoughts of a particular life. People cannot remember the memories of others, but their own experiences. Thus there is a continuity of the experiencer. There is only one continuous experiencer, not many extending back in a randomly assembled causal chain. (Morales, 1999) Through memory issue, *Śaṅkarācārya* confirmed an continuous existence of self.

Naiyāyikas reckoned that memory belongs to the soul (self) which possesses the character of a knower; the soul is competent to recollect a thing because it possesses the knowledge of the three times- past, present and future. (Vidyābhusana, 1913)

The ‘Subject’ issue

The first issue if ‘Not-self’ then who does all the things that happens in life, who practices dhamma and who takes rebirth? Who is being liberated?

The not-self concept will lead to the four issues as follows:

The first issue is what it is that acts? This amounts to specifying which of the various ultimately real components that make up a person is the agent of a deed. The second issue is to describe exactly what it is that experiences the consequences of the original action. This amounts to specifying which of the various ultimately real components that make up a person is the experiencer of the consequences of the deed. A third issue is to give some account of the sense in which the agent of the original deed is the same as the eventual experiencer of the consequences. A fourth issue is to explain how and where the potential consequences of an action are “stored” until such time as they are realized as consequences that are capable of being experienced. (Hayes, 1989, p.3 <http://www.unm.edu/~rhayes/Lecture08.pdf>)

From the Western philosophy, it is not logical to raise both doctrines of Not-self and *Nibbāna* at the same time because who attains *nibbāna* if there is not-self”

Moreover, referring to the *sūtra* of the Burden-bearer, the Buddha said:

‘I will teach you the burden, its taking up, its laying down and the bearer of the burden. The five *khandhās* (which are the range) of grasping are the burden. Craving takes up the burden. The renunciation of craving lays it down. The bearer of the burden is the person: this venerable man, with such and such a name, born so and so, of such and such a clan, who sustains himself on this or that food, experiences these pleasures and pains, lives for just so long, terminate his life-span in just this way.’ (Conze, 1983, p.125)

People could make a comment that here the person was distinguished from the five *khandhās*. If a person and their *khandhās* were identical, then the burden would carry itself, which is absurd.

Śaṅkarācārya of *Vedānta* showed the inconsistencies of the Buddhist concept of self: “if there is not-self, an innocent being is suffering for the crime of another in the law of *kamma*, this notion would be the same of original sin in Christianity religion, and this view is not in the harmony with Indian view of ethics.” If there is no being who is performing an action, there can certainly be no being to experience the results of that action. Anything short of such a rigid causal requirement would be unjust.” (Morales, 1999)

If there is no self that persists through time, then the result of my actions are not going to have any effect on me because the self that carried out those actions no longer exists.

By logic view, if one attempts to deny the existence of the self, then in this very denial, he is asserting the existence of a self who is doing the negation.

Naiyāyikas proved the existence of self in *Nyāya sūtra* by using the unity of consciousness:

A thing perceived previously by the left eye is recognized now by the right eye. This would have been impossible if the soul were identical with the left eye or the right eye on the principle that the seat of recognition must be the same with the seat of perception. Consequently, we must admit that there is the soul which is distinct from the left and the right eyes and which is common seat of perception and recognition. (Vidyābhusana, 1913)

Eyesight and sense of touch are two different feelings, if they happen with the same object, it must be the self (subject) in behind to combine these feelings. , Without self, the unity of consciousness cannot be done.

The Free Will and Self

The status of free will is one of the most significant issues relating to Not-self theory. Buddhists believe that humans have free will. Will or volition is one important factor in 12-links of Dependent Origination --‘mental formation’ (*Saṅkhāra*).

The doctrine of not-self does not allow for an entity that functions as the subject of the will. This theory relies on the view that *skandhas* are causally related and has not an individual subject. So, if the will does not exist in isolation from previous causal influences, and there is no subject that is independent of this causal influence, then it is not clear to what extent Buddhist philosophers can legitimately claim that people have free will. (Emmanuel, 2013, quoted from Joerg Tuske p. 425)

Although, human beings are not entirely free, because they are imprisoned by mental *kilesas* (defilements) such as *lobha*, *dosa*, *moha*, which in turn stem from their ignorance of the true nature of reality; they lead their lives under the domination of these defilements with the bondage to their resultant suffering. But in certain cases, some positive wills such as will for liberation, for saving the relatives, for obtaining some difficult tasks in life... still exist in human mind. These wills are the motive for them to be directed toward the liberative purpose.

One of the important paths in the Eightfold Path (*Ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo*) is right effort (*sammā-vāyāma*), if not-self who does the effort?

The Perception issue

Vasubandhu in *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* mentioned that no self exists separate from the 5 *khandhās*. The Person is the 5 *khandhās* and the *khandhās* are real. He argues that, if we could perceive a person (*pudgala*) directly,

the *skandhas* would be based on the person. Thus, the relation of “being based on” would be turned around. However, according to the *Vātsīputriyas*, the relation of “being based on” simply means that the *pudgala* can only be perceived if there are *khandhās* in the first place.

Vasubandhu objects to this view because according to him, it would lead to the absurd claim that color ‘is based on’ the existence of eyes because the eyes are necessary for the perception of color.

The problem with *Vasubandhu’s* argument is that: First, the knowledge of the *pudgala* is based on the perception of the *khandhās* and second that the knowledge of the *pudgala* is gained through direct perception. But, it is not clear why people cannot simultaneously have a perception of the *khandhās* and a perception of the *pudgala*? Given an example of the perception of a moving train, people can perceive the train at the same time with the movement, so is it not logical to say one cannot gain knowledge of the existence of a *pudgala* through the perception of *khandhās*?

Discussion

The subject of actions and the real self must be distinguished. Early Buddhism does not accept the self as real. However, the critical points of this doctrine almost focus on the subject aspect. The memory issue, the unification of consciousness, the value of morality, and the karmic law would be nonsense without the subject.

Early Buddhism distinguished the two levels of truth when it brings out the Not-self (*anattā*) concept: conventional and ultimate truths. On daily activities, it is convenient to talk about the ‘self’ as human needs in order to make sense of what is being experienced. But, on an ultimate level, there is no such thing as ‘self’ as everything is interconnected with each other.

When Buddhism denies each of the five aggregates (*khandhās*) is not *attā*, it does not mean that there really is no *attā*, it merely means that each *khandha* is not ‘human *attā*’. And the combination of them does not create the real self with the meaning eternal existence.

The self to be denied is the one in ultimate level. The self linking with five aggregates still exists; it can be called a conventional self. Therefore, it is not correct to have the inference that there is no self when the Buddha teaches not-self.

Oetke, a Buddhist scholar also agreed the two levels of truth when he made some comments in *Milindapañha*; however, according to him, it is not clear what exactly is meant by the term *pudgala*. The interpretation is not

helpful by the fact that we have a *Pāli* version as well as a Chinese version of the story, and that these differ in certain details. Oetke argues that the most plausible interpretation of both of the versions is that pudgala consists of parts, namely the *khandhās*, and is therefore comparable to terms such as ‘house’, ‘tree’, or ‘army’...which also consist of parts. According to the *Milindapañha*, these terms do not exist in “true reality” but are merely used conventionally. Therefore it is not logical to say that the *Milindapañha* rejects the concept of a subject, only that it rejects its existence in “true reality”. Even in the most famous Buddhist text, with regard to the not-self theory, we do not have an explicit rejection of the self, merely the claim that the existence of the self is different from the existence of its parts. (Emmanuel, 2013, quoted from Joerg Tuske p.422)

Buddhism views everything as *anattā* due to no real essence in all things. They arise because they are conditioned. They change and cease because their conditions change or cease. Buddhism asserts that the concept of real self is simply an idea stemming from misunderstanding by human beings, who do not perceive the true nature of the world.

In *abbhidhamma* analysis by early Buddhism, self is simply a continuous stream of energy in action like the continuous flowing of a river or the continuous burning of a flame. (Aurobindo, 1969, p.22). The concept of life-continuum is called *bhavaṅga*. This explains the faculty of memory, paranormal psychic phenomena, mental and physical growth, *kamma* and rebirth. It is considered as “subconscious life stream” (*bhavaṅga-sota*). (Nyanatiloka, 1972, p.33)

Bhavaṅga literally means “factor of life”; it is translated into English as “life-continuum”. The *bhavaṅga-citta* keeps the continuity in a lifespan, so that ‘being’ can go on to live from moment to moment. It is very important for any individual in being alive.

“*Bhavaṅga* is explained as cause, reason, indispensable condition of the being, it is the sine qua non of being’s existence, that without which one cannot subsist or exist.” (Govinda, 1975, p.180)

The memory issue and karmic law could be solved by this *bhavaṅga citta*. Modern scholarship suggests that *bhavaṅga citta* and *ālaya vijñāna* are similar to unconscious state of the mind. To some extent, *bhavaṅga* is the base to develop the concept of *ālaya-vijñāna* of *Yogācāra* which means “storehouse consciousness,” where karmic seeds are held. It extinguishes with death, but is the first to be reborn.

The profound and subtle appropriating (*ādāna*) consciousness
Flows with all its seeds like a turbulent stream
I did not teach to the fools
Lest they should imagine it to be a (real) self. (Conze, 1983, p.134)

So, Buddhism does not reject the existence of *anattā* operating together with the *bhavaṅga*, *cuti* and *paṭisandhi citta*. The combination of five aggregates is destroyed by the end of one’s life but the new combination will form as the result of one’s *skamma*. However, there’s nothing considered as a “real self” that is reborn, just the ‘a self’ established by the stream of *kamma*. It is on the way to evolve for the *nibbāna* ending.

There should be a ‘self’ in conventional meaning to exist, *bhavaṅga* and *paṭisandhi citta* as the connection between lives; they support for this self to be continued. This self drifts continuously in ‘Three Realm’ until reaching *nibbāna* state.

The morality aspect, the free-will, the perception, the subject of actions and other logic issues could be explained easier with the concept of impermanent self. And the “Not-self” doctrine must not be understood as “No-self”.

Conclusion

Not-self is a unique doctrine in the Indian Buddhist thought. And there have been different ways to explain this doctrine. Early Buddhism thought that self is merely the combination of five aggregates (*skandhas*), each of them is not self. By this explanation, almost Buddhists think wrongly that ‘Not-self’ is ‘No-self’. However, based on the etymology of the term ‘*anattā*’ as mentioned above, the exact meaning of *anattā* is not a real self or permanent soul.

The self is not an issue but to consider it as an imperishable entity is a serious problem. This wrong concept leads humans to suffering realms. The Buddha’s last words: Hence, Oh, *Ananda!* Take refuge in your island, in yourself, not in others, in the island of truth, in truth itself, not in others. (Sasaki, 1986). The self in this case was implied for the unreal self.

However, the concept of self and not-self need to be transcended, as it is mentioned in *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* by *Nāgārjuna*:

“The Buddha taught self, the Buddha taught not-self and the Buddha also taught neither self nor not-self” (Siderits, 2013, p.298). Self, No-self, Not-self become nonsense in the state of *nibbanā*.

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