

## **Anatta and Meditation**

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This article aims to describe how the central Buddhist doctrine of anatta or ‘egolessness’ relates to meditative practice and experience through a survey of meditative teachings by meditation masters in Buddhism.

In the Dhammapada; chapter on the Path (magga vagga) the Blessed One said thus-

“All things are not-self”—when one sees this with wisdom,  
one turns away from suffering. This is the path to purification.

Dhpd. 279

Anatta, often translated in English as ‘non-self’ or ‘egolessness’, is regarded by both Buddhist practitioners and scholars alike as being one of the essential kernels of the vast edifice of Buddhist thought and practice taught by the supremely Enlightened Buddha. The title of Anatta-vàdi conferred upon the Buddha by Theravada Buddhists and the testimonies of meditation teachers all bear witness to the centrality of the doctrine of anatta. In particular, Buddhist meditators have often described anatta as the single most profound discovery of the Buddha and that an insight into anatta is crucial for attaining that utter liberation of the mind (ceto vimutti) which is the summum bonum of Buddhist practise.

In the Theravada tradition, a very important doctrine is that of the Three Characteristics of Existence, namely anicca (impermanence), dukkha (unsatisfactoriness), and anatta (non-self). Both in theory and practice, insight into these Three Characteristics is considered of paramount importance in the realisation of Nibbàna, the ultimate state of freedom from all suffering. Venerable Bhikkhu Ñānaponika describes the heart of Buddhist meditation as the simple but effective method of bare attention which he defines as ‘the clear and single-minded awareness of what actually happens to us and in us, at the successive moments of perception’. Bare attention consists in the bare and exact registering of the object of perception through the six senses (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind) before associative and abstract thinking takes place. Sustained and diligent application of bare attention to the four domains of mindfulness, namely the body, feelings, mind, and mental objects, is thought to lead the meditator to the realisation that nowhere behind or within the psychophysical continuum can any individual agent or abiding entity called the ‘self’ be

detected. Ven. Bhikkhu Ñāṇaponika also emphasises the usefulness of ànàpànasati or mindfulness of breathing in enabling the meditator to see the conditioned nature of the body by virtue of the very fact that the breathing process is dynamic, essentially linked to existence and dependent on the efficient functioning of certain organs. The nature of the body as activated by impersonal processes, and thus without any substance, thus becomes evident.

Dhiravamsa, another contemporary Thai meditation teacher in the Theravada tradition, advocates the practice of non-attached awareness, which consists in the dynamic and alert observation of all sensations, emotions and thoughts. He emphasises the need to spontaneously observe and investigate one's experience free from the grip of authority – be they some teacher's words or one's preconceived ideas. According to him, meditation can be found by looking, listening, touching, tasting, talking, walking, standing, in all movements and in all activities. For example, when one is able to look or listen with great attentiveness, clarity and without a single thought, one can then experience the flow of awareness that is without any reactivity, reasoning and sense of self. In talking about hearing with awareness, he says:

If there were myself acting as the hearer apart from the hearing, then "I am" would be separated from "myself" which has no corresponding reality. For "I am" and "myself" is one and the same thing. Hence I am hearing.

In this experience of the non-duality of subject and object, there is a realisation of the absence of any permanent and independently existing 'experiencer' apart from the experience. This state is characterised by tremendous joy and bliss, a great clarity of understanding and complete freedom.

Ajahn Sumedho, a foremost Western disciple of the famous Thai forest meditation master Ajahn Chah, speaks about the silent observation of all that arises and passes away in one's body and mind in an open spirit of 'letting go'. The gentle calming and silencing of the mind is encouraged so as to create a space in which to observe the conditions of the body and mind. In particular, meditation on the body is done with a sweeping awareness of all the various sensations that arise throughout the body, for example the pressure of one's clothes on the body or the subtle vibrations on the hands and feet. This awareness can also be concentrated in a gentle and peaceful way on any particular area of the body (rāpa) for further investigation. The mind, consisting of feelings (vedanà), perceptions (saññà), mental formations (sankhàra) and consciousness (viññàna), is also observed with a silent awareness. As Ajahn Sumedho says:

Investigate these until you fully understand that all that rises passes away and is not self. Then there is no grasping of anything as being oneself and you are free from that desire to know yourself as a quality or a substance. This is liberation from birth and death.

Another technique advocated by Ajahn Sumedho is that of listening to one's thoughts. The meditator is asked to allow mental verbalisations and thoughts to arise in the mind without suppressing or grasping them. In this way, what is normally held below the threshold of consciousness is made fully conscious. Verbalisations associated with pride, jealousy, meanness or whatever emotions are seen for what they are – impermanent, selfless

conditions arising and passing away. The thought "Who am I?" is purposefully generated to observe its arising from and dissolving into the empty space of the mind. By doing this, one realises the lack of a substantial and existing self within the processes of one's thought.

Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk who represents a confluence of both the Theravada and Mahayana (literally 'Great Vehicle') Zen tradition, is a well-known peace activist as well as a respected meditation teacher who leads retreats worldwide on the 'art of mindful living'. In his teachings, Thich Nhat Hanh emphasises the twin practices of 'stopping' or concentration and 'observing' or insight. In 'stopping', one practices conscious breathing in order to come back to oneself and to regain composure of body and mind. In 'observing', one illumines one's body and mind with the light of mindful awareness in order to see deeply their true nature. Through the simple practice of consciously following one's breath and attending to one's body in the process of breathing, there comes a time when the breath, body and mind very naturally become unified. One is then ready to clearly observe and look deeply into feelings (vedanà), mental formations (sankhàra) and mental objects (dhamma) that arise in the field of awareness. In this process of looking, Thich Nhat Hanh says that to observe is to be one with the object of observation. The subject of observation is not one's self but the faculty of mindfulness which has the function of illuminating and transforming. As Thich Nhat Hanh says:

Mindfulness is the observing mind but it does not stand outside of the object of observation. It goes right into the object and becomes one with it. Because the nature of the observing mind is mindfulness, the observing mind does not lose itself in the object but transforms it by illuminating it just as the penetrating light of the sun transforms trees and plants.

This method of penetrative observation leads one to realise deeply that behind the illumination, there is neither one who illumines nor one who is illumined. In short, the observer is the observed:

If we continue our mindful observation, there will be no longer a duality between observer and observed.

In this respect, Thich Nhat Hanh is articulating an insight essentially similar to that of Dhiravamsa. But Thich Nhat Hanh goes further than that. He says that there comes a point in time at which, when one's observation of the body and mind becomes sufficiently deep, one realises directly the essential interdependence of oneself with all beings and, indeed, with all things. In this experience of insight, which he calls 'interbeing', there is no longer any separation between an independently-existing self and all that is external to it – in fact, one is the world. To experientially understand this profound truth is to have penetrated into the core of anatta in every phenomenal and conditioned existence.

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