

# Myself, Yourself, No-Self



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Essays on Buddhist Doctrines

# Myself, Yourself, No-Self



Recently there has been some discussion in the newspaper about the Buddhist doctrine of anatta. In one letter written in response to an article by Prof. Carlo Fonseka, Mr. Leo Fernando mentioned that he failed “to comprehend the logic of the theory” despite reading many books on the subject (The Island, 24, Feb. 2019). I sympathise with him completely. As a monk who strives to explain Buddhism to others I find that many inquirers and new-comers to the religion often express this same bewilderment. As anatta is not just central to the Dhamma but unique to it also, this is seeming a pity. People who otherwise are attracted to the Dhamma sometimes lose interest in it specifically over this doctrine. However, I feel that the problem is not so much the doctrine itself but how it is often presented. I would like to look at three aspects of the anatta that I find is all too often badly presented and causes confusion and doubt.

The first is usually encountered at the very beginning of any explanation of the Dhamma and goes like this. The expounder says; “The Buddha taught that there is no self!” and immediately the listener thinks; “That must mean I don’t exist?” Some years ago a famous US psychiatrist pointed out that one of the characteristic that many psychotics and schizophrenics suffer from is that they feel they lack a ‘core’ or self and that they don’t exist. He went on to say that the whole

purpose of Buddhist meditation is to attain exactly this state and therefore that Buddhist “mysticism” like most other types has its origins in delusion and psychosis. This is completely wrong but given how anatta is sometimes explained it is also understandable.

What those who teach anatta often fail to explain is that the word ‘self’ can have different meanings and that the Buddha did not teach that there is no self – he taught that there is no metaphysical, eternal self behind reality. This is the self, soul, or true person of Vedantic Hinduism, Christian and Islamic theology, New Age notions, and in one form or another traditional folk religion. There is however, another self, what might be called the empirical self, the self that all of us experience which is created by my memories of the past and imagination about the future that gives me a sense of continuity, my orientation in space, the sensitivity to the outline of my body that makes me feel separate from my others, my name which distinguishes me from others, etc. etc. This empirical self or sense of self is further reinforced by language; there are nearly 200 English words or compounds in the Oxford English Dictionary with self in them – myself, yourself, ourselves, selfishness, self-mortification, self-indulgent, etc. The empirical self clearly exists as a psychological construct built up during childhood and forever changing and being modified by each new experience. But many who try to explain anatta fail to mention or make a distinction between the metaphysical self which the Buddha denied and the empirical self that everyone (except psychotics and schizophrenics) feel and respond to

every moment of every day. Thus when someone hears or reads; “The Buddha denied the existence of the self” and the distinction is not explained to them, it is hardly surprising that they are confused. If Dhamma teachers learned psychology, particularly developmental psychology, they would be better positioned to explain the admittedly profound and apparently counter-intuitive doctrine of anatta.

The next other big problem related to anatta is this one. People hear that the Buddha denied the existence of a self and he also taught rebirth. The first thing that comes into the mind of someone hearing or reading this is; “If there is no self how can rebirth take place?”, or “If there is no self what is reborn?” Dr. Asoka Weerakkody brought up this issue in his letter to *The Island*, (26, 2, 2019). Again, all too often the answers to these questions are not always adequate. Many aspects of the Dhamma are open to experience, a sensitive and aware person has little problem accepting the reality of dukkha, they can see anicca with their own eyes but the very nature of rebirth is that it is not accessible to the ordinary person, as Dr. Weerakkody rightly states. According to the Buddha, one only ‘realizes’ the fact and the mechanism of rebirth before the final breakthrough to awakening (bodhi) when the mind is “focused and purified, cleansed and unblemished, without impurities and malleable, workable and imperturbable.” In this state one attains what the Buddha called “the knowledge of former lives” (pubbe nivasanussati nyana) during

which vividly and dramatically one apparently recalls all one's former lives. Of course occasionally some individuals, usually in childhood, spontaneously recall one or several earlier existences lives, but like the recall just prior to awakening, this is an experience only very few people have. So as the reality of rebirth is not directly discernible to the vast majority of people the best way to explain it is by similar experiences from ordinary life and/or analogy.

So to the question; "How can there be rebirth when there is no self or soul to pass from one life to another" I sometimes use this analogy. Imagine three billiard balls in a line, each touching the other, and a fourth billiard ball some distance from the three and aligned to them. If a player hits the fourth ball with his cue it will speed across the table and hit the first ball in the line. The moving ball will come to an immediate halt, the first and second balls will remain stationary while the third ball, the last in the row, will speed across the table and into the pocket. What has happened? The energy in the fourth ball has passed through the first and second balls in the row, into the third ball, activating it so that it moves across the table. In a similar way, the mental energy that makes up what we can call the empirical self, moves from one body to another. Indeed, the very thing that allows this energy to pass through a medium and animate another object is its changeability (anicca).

And one final issue. If someone grasps the idea of anatta they can still be uncertain about personal continuity and therefore individual moral responsibility if everything is anicca. They can ask; “If the empirical self is a constantly changing mass of memories, notions, ideations, etc. in what sense is the person who died the same as the person who is reborn?” Again a roughly similar phenomenon from ordinary life can help give at least some idea how this is possible. Imagine that a mother takes out a photo album and shows her children photos of herself when she was young. The children look at the photos and ask in amazement “Is that you mummy?” They are would be right to be curious because the child in the photo is so different from the mother they know. But if the mother replies: “Yes, that’s me when I was eight” no one would accuse her of lying.” In fact, mummy has changed far more than her children or even she herself probably know. According to science, not a single cell in her body, now a hair on her head and not a notion or idea in it is the same as when she was eight, or eighteen or ever twenty right. She has completely changed – and yet she and everyone who knows her recognized her as the same person, and so do all social, governmental and legal entities. And why? Because we accept that in some way identity persists despite continual change. And it’s the same with the self as it is reborn. I could say more but I will leave it for another time. I hope these few words might help those who are confused about anatta understand it a little better.