

## Buddhism and No-Self

[Begin with a sandwich] — What is this? Obviously: a sandwich. We'll return to the sandwich later. Remember the sandwich.

So, when people talk about meditation and Buddhism, one of the main reasons they give for practicing Buddhism/meditation is to “find themselves,” or to find their “true self.” People say they want to find their “true, inner being.”

Although meditation can be a way of seeing your psyche and thoughts, in the Buddhist context the point of meditation is not to find a true and total self. In fact, we don't even believe in one. We don't believe in a self. This is what we'll be talking about today: “No-self.”

This is one of the more complex topics of Buddhism, and it is one that is often misunderstood and seemingly scary—if you're feeling a little disturbed about the idea of not having a ‘self,’ don't worry. That's the exact reason why I'm giving this talk today: not because I'm particularly skilled or knowledgeable in it, but because like a lot of new Buddhist practitioners, it was something that was confusing and a little bewildering to me at first.

So, we'll be talking about why we do not believe in the self, why this is relevant to our lives, and dispel any misunderstandings about no-self.

But first, some history for context:

### Atman vs. Anatman

- 1) As we've discussed before, Buddhism in many ways acts as the antithesis of Hinduism/Brahminism; this is the case when it comes to our identities or “self” as well
- 2) Brahminism taught that, in each of us, there was an eternal and true self (*atman*), which transcends both our bodies and minds. This self is part of an everlasting and eternal God, and when we die or attain enlightenment, that self is merged with God.
- 3) This isn't the case in Buddhism—in fact, we think that the “self” is inseparable from our minds and bodies, but simultaneously is not entirely comprised of our minds and bodies.
- 4) Essentially, we believe that we do not have a fixed, eternal, unchanging identity. We believe in *anataman*, or No Self.

### What No-Self Is

- 1) The argument for No-Self goes like this:
  - i) We're composed of Five aggregates (or *skandhas*):
    - i) Form (our physical forms and forms around us),
    - ii) Consciousness (awareness; allows us to experience form)
    - iii) Sensation (our reception of the world around us—*pleasurable, unpleasurable, indifferent*),

- iv) Perception/Conception (defining the world around us; creating ideas about the *forms* our *consciousness* has experienced),
- v) Mental formations/volition (how we react to our perceptions)

The First two aggregates are simply physical/mental occurrences; the three after are how we personalize these experiences.

- ii) All these things combine to form what we perceive to be our “self”
- iii) Remember the impermanency of all things—including these aggregates
- iv) Thus, if the aggregates that make your identity change, you can have no permanent identity; thus no single component of all of these things is your self. If you point to any one, you couldn't honestly call that yourself.
- v) So, you have “no self.”

I'll explain this a little more:

If our aggregates are separated or changed, is it the same identity? Typically, the metaphor for this is a chariot—that a chariot is made of many parts, including wheels and spokes and such—but that no part of a chariot inherently makes it a chariot. But chariot's cost a lot of money. So I brought a sandwich:

So, we called this a sandwich before, right? But if we split apart this sandwich into its components, is it still a sandwich? When I lay it all out, can you really call it a sandwich—I mean, if you ordered a sub at Subway and got this, this would NOT be a sandwich. But all together, it does form a sandwich. Where is the nature of the sandwich—which part of it undeniably makes it a sandwich? Is there a single part of this that is inherently a sandwich? No.

### **Why is this important?**

1) Remember how we talked about how it is our attachment to changing things that causes us suffering? Well, imagine how acute that suffering is when it's our identity.

2) Buddha described this process of suffering in the *Upaadaaparitassanaa Sutta*:

“Change occurs in a man's body, and it becomes different. Because of this change and alteration in his body, his consciousness is preoccupied with bodily change. Due to this preoccupation with bodily change, worried thoughts arise and persist, laying a firm hold on his mind. Through this mental obsession he becomes fearful and distressed, and being full of desire and attachment [to this changing body] he is worried. He regards feeling as the self...change occurs in feeling...he is worried...etc.”

3) In the *Nadi Sutta*, this is elaborated through the metaphor of a man being washed down river. The man, caught up in the current of life and change, grabs out for a handful of grass—his

body—only to find it ripped away in the current; he does the same for reeds (feeling), which breaks away; etc.

i) The Buddha urges us then to look beyond our aggregates, repeating for each aggregate: “*This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not who I am.*”

4) I’d argue that most of the suffering we encounter in our life—most of our attachment—stems from this need to validate an identity and find something pure and unchanging about it. We suffer when our seemingly unchanging identity is compromised by a changing reality.

5) I think the easiest places to see our attachment to our identity is in our volition and perception:

1) Sometimes we find our identity in our careers (I’m a dentist, I’m a writer); sometimes we find it in our relationships (I’m a husband/wife); sometimes we find it in our style and looks, or even in our bodies. We try to find it in all of these places, but these things change, and even if they don’t seem to, the way we perceive them will change. When we invest so much in them, and they change, we suffer.

6) Sometimes, we can even turn this *suffering* into a part of our identity—we cling to it and identify with it. We perpetuate our own neurosis in this way. “I can’t stop over thinking—*it’s who I am!* I can’t stop being mean, sarcastic—*it’s who I am!* I can’t stop worrying about all these problems—*it’s who I am!* I’m hurt, I’m injured, I’m broken—*but it’s who I am!*”

i) No, it isn’t who you are. It’s a part of who you are, and just for now.

### **So, how do we overcome this?**

1) By removing our unhealthy attachment to our aggregates, we will stop the suffering that develops when they change.

2) This is not to say that we stop caring about what we do or think, or stop taking care of our bodies, but rather that we accept that all components of our life *will* change.

3) We realize that we are comprised of our parts, and that none of our parts are wholly us.

3) In this way, we can accept changes in our lives—we can be someone one day, and someone else the next, and there’s no problem with it. Instead of grasping out and clinging for impermanent things as we’re swept down the river, we can rest in the current.

### **What No-Self is NOT**

1) Now, people get scared when they hear this—you might be feeling that way too. I honestly felt the same at first.

2) However, our anxiety about all of this stems from misinterpreting it: we come to the conclusion that if we have no self, we must not be real—we start thinking that everything is an illusion.

3) In a sense, everything is an illusion when we think it permanent and eternally lasting, because this is not how things are; What we see when we see things for how they truly are—transient, changing—is quite real.

Everything is real—the way we may be seeing is not, however.

4) Buddhism is *NOT* Nihilistic—things are very real in this world. They just don't last as we know them.

5) Like all things, we walk between the extremes: *Atman* theory says we have an eternal, lasting self; Nihilism says we are nothing. Buddhism says we are something, but that it's a changing something.

6) Thus, you are real—your aggregates are very real, but they're very unstable. Acknowledge them, but try not to identify with them excessively.

So, when we're meditating and thoughts arise, stop and look at them; how do you identify to that thought, that feeling? Chances are, you are internalizing it and making it a part of your self—you are looking at an aggregate and saying "This is me, this is who I am." It's a habit we all naturally fall into—don't be angry, don't suffer. Recognize that you are identifying with the thought, then ask yourself "Well, is this who I am? Is this my true, real self, unchanging and perfect?" Chances are, you'll think, "No." Then think: "This is real, but *this is not mine. This is not my self. This is not who I am.*"

You may find this all disturbing—that's a little natural, to be honest. If you do, don't worry about it and don't dwell over it right now. Focus on your meditation and the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold path.