

Anattā and Meditation

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Introduction

This article aims to describe how the central Buddhist doctrine of *anattā* or 'egolessness' relates to meditative practice and experience, through a survey of meditative teachings by medieval and contemporary meditation masters across various Buddhist traditions – Theravada, Zen, and Tibetan Buddhism. A personal account of how *anattā* and meditation are related in the experience of the author follows. The twin approach of contemporary textual study and personal phenomenological investigation may prove to be a helpful methodology in the elucidation of this most enigmatic, and perhaps, most controversial teaching of the historical Buddha.

Meditation Teachers on *Anattā*

Anattā often translated in English as 'non-self' or 'egolessness', is regarded by both Buddhist practitioners and scholars alike as being the essential kernel of the vast edifice of Buddhist thought and practice. The title of *Anattā -vadi* conferred upon the Buddha by Theravada Buddhists, the elevated status accorded to the huge collection of *prajñāpāramitā* or 'perfection of wisdom' texts, which focusses emphatically on the idea of *sūnyatā* or 'emptiness', and the testimonies of meditation teachers across the various Buddhist traditions, all bear witness to the centrality of the doctrine of *anattā*. 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 which is the *summum bonum* of Buddhist praxis.

In the Theravada or 'Way of the Elders' tradition, a very important doctrine is that of the Three Characteristics of Existence, namely *anicca* (impermanence), *dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness), and *anattā* (non-self). Both in theory and practice, insight into the Three Characteristics is considered of paramount importance in the realization of *nibbana*, the ultimate state of freedom from all suffering. Nyanaponika 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 realization that nowhere behind or within the psychophysical continuum can any individual agent or abiding entity called the 'self' be detected. Nyanaponika also emphasizes the usefulness of *ānāpānasati* 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 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 emphasizes 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 realization of the absence of any permanent and independently existing 'experiencer' apart from the experience. This state is characterized by tremendous joy and bliss, a great clarity of understanding and complete freedom.

Ajahn Sumedho, a foremost Western disciple of the famous Thai 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 for further investigation. The mind, consisting of perceptions (*sanna*), sensations (*vedana*), mental formations (*sankhara*), and consciousness (*vinnana*), 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's 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 Sumedho is that of listening to one's thoughts. The meditator is asked to allow mental verbalizations and thoughts to arise in the mind without suppressing or grasping after them. In this way, what is normally held below the threshold of consciousness is made fully conscious. Verbalizations 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 realizes 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 respected meditation teacher who leads retreats worldwide on the 'art of mindful living'. In his teachings, Thich Nhat Hanh emphasizes the twin practices of 'stopping' or concentration, and 'observing' or insight. In 'stopping', one practises 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 becomes unified. One is then ready to clearly observe and look deeply into the feelings (*vedana*), internal formations (*sankhara*), and mental objects (*dharmas*) 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 realize deeply that the awakened mind is not separate from the deluded mind, and 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 in our mindful observation there will no longer be 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 this body and mind becomes sufficiently deep, one realizes 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*.

Shunryu Suzuki (1905-1971), a direct spiritual descendant of the great thirteenth-century Zen master Dogen, came to America from Japan in 1958. His teachings, simple and direct, are focussed around the practice of the 'beginner's mind' – that innocence of first inquiry characterized by the attitude which includes both doubt and possibility, and the ability to perceive things always as fresh and new. Commenting on the practice of breathing in *zazen* or sitting meditation, he says:

The air comes in and goes out like someone passing through a swinging door. If you think, "I breathe", the "I" is extra. There is no you to say "I". What we call "I" is just a swinging door, which moves when we inhale and when we exhale. It just moves; that is all. When your mind is pure and calm enough to follow this movement, there is nothing: no "I", no world, no mind nor body.

Like Thich Nhat Hanh, Suzuki emphasizes the correct practice of mindful breathing in which there is no independent observer apart from the observed – in other words, the experience of *anatta*. He goes on to say that when one is fully concentrated on the breathing, there arises the realization of the 'completely dependent' yet 'independent' nature of existence, of which he says:

When we become truly ourselves, we just become a swinging door, and we are purely independent of, and at the same time, dependent upon everything... So when you practise *zazen*, your mind should be concentrated on your breathing... Without this experience, this practice, it is impossible to attain absolute freedom.

Suzuki also advocates an attentive and focussed mind in everything that one does, without being 'shadowed by some preconceived idea' or giving rise to 'other notions about other activities and things'. In the total engagement of an activity with one's whole body and mind, there is no room for a sense of "I" or "other" – an experience of *anatta*. He describes this kind of action rather poetically:

When you do something, you should burn yourself completely, like a good bonfire, leaving no trace of yourself.

Yet another way of practice which he teaches is what he calls a 'smooth, free-thinking way of observation' wherein the mind remains soft, open and observant of everything that arises in one's experience. Whether an object arises in the field of consciousness or not, the mind should remain stable and undivided in its attention. In this way, there is no fragmentation of experience and no clinging to one thing while rejecting the other – an experience of 'no mind' or emptiness, in which the 'self' no longer exists as separate from the *whole* of experience, emerges.

Various methods for the realization of *anattā* or *śūnyatā* (literally 'emptiness' or 'voidness'), as articulated in Mahayana Buddhism, can be found in the different schools of Tibetan Buddhism. An intellectually-oriented, analytical method is advocated by the Gelug school whereas a direct, spontaneous awareness approach is taught and emphasized by the Mahamudra and Dzog-chen traditions of the Karma-Kagyū and Nying-ma schools respectively. It is the opinion of the author that while a discursive, intellectual analysis of the mind-body complex and of the world, even when accompanied by strong concentration, might result in a deep and refined understanding of the **concept** of *śūnyatā*, it nevertheless is a realization quite separate from a direct **insight** into *anattā*, which involves a non-conceptual **seeing** of **what is**. As such, the Mahamudra and Dzog-chen approaches, rather than that of the Gelug, will be discussed here.

Wang-ch'ug Dorje (1556-1603), the ninth Karmapa or spiritual head of the Karma-Kagyü school, describes Mahamudra meditation as consisting of mental quiescence (*śamatha*) and penetrative insight (*vipaśyana*) practices. The two techniques advocated for settling the mind in mental quiescence are the focussing of attention on an external object and on one's breath. A mastery of the above practices results in a state of bliss, clarity, and bare non-conceptuality, which is then utilized to investigate the mind. In penetrative insight practice, the settled mind itself is scrupulously and silently examined to realize its true nature. Following this, the meditator is asked to examine thoroughly the moving mind or train of thought, and to recognize it for what it is. If a fleeting thought does not arise, one is then asked to deliberately emanate a thought for mindful investigation. Wang-ch'ug Dorje further instructs:

When you see that the nature of thought is a bright, clear awareness, then look to see whether there is any difference between the bright, clear awareness you saw previously with respect to the settled mind and the bright, clear awareness you see now with respect to a thought.

Such an investigation leads the meditator to realize the essential non-differentiation of the settled mind, moving mind, and clear awareness, in which no inherently existing self can be found. This allows full realization to be attained, when thought-moments are consistently seen as 'suchness' and 'emptiness' in the course of one's experience, thereby transcending their delusion-making quality. The sense of an inherently existing 'self' dissolves with this clear penetrating insight into the nature of both thoughts and the quiet mind – the experience of *anattā*.

Another Tibetan master, Sogyal Rinpoche, comes from the Nying-ma school which had its origins in the great Tibetan saint Padmasambhava. In the Nying-ma tradition, the highest and quintessential practice is known as Dzog-chen, a term which denotes both the simple yet profound practice for realizing the intrinsic nature of the mind, as well as the state of primordial awakening itself – the summit of one's spiritual evolution. Sogyal Rinpoche explains that the essential nature of the mind is a space-like, radiant, pristine awareness, traditionally described as the state of *rigpa*. The whole point of Dzog-chen is 'to strengthen and stabilize *rigpa*, and allow it to grow to full maturity'. The essence of meditation practice in Dzog-chen is described as follows: one mindfully and repeatedly attends to the space between the arising of two thoughts, which eventually results in a luminous, naked awareness that is free of conceptualizations and firmly rooted in the present – that is the state of *rigpa*. Following this, another thought might arise out of that space, which is then immediately recognized for what it really is without lapsing into further chains of thought. In this way, 'whatever thoughts that arise all automatically dissolve back into the vast expanse of *rigpa* and are liberated'. The same space-like awareness is cultivated with respect to emotions, events in everyday life, and whatever activities one is engaged in. Through a sustained and gradually deepening practice of *Dzog-chen* meditation, the state of *rigpa* eventually becomes a continual flow, 'like a river constantly moving day and night without any interruption'. In the state of *rigpa*, be it continuous or momentary, all that arises in the mind is seen to be the manifestation of its very energy. In other words, the awareness and the object of awareness are no longer separate and no subject called the 'self' can be found anywhere – this is essentially an insight into *anattā*, perhaps in its most subtle and mature form.

Personal Glimpses into Reality

In my personal practice, the meditative technique that I have found to be most direct and profound is what might be described as *choiceless awareness*. In essence, it is no different from many of the aforementioned meditative practices, especially those of Mahamudra and Dzog-chen. (A key difference holds between choiceless awareness in the Krishnamurtian sense and open awareness in *rigpa* as per Dzog-chen, but I will desist from further discussion here for brevity's sake).¹ In any case, authentic open awareness involves a whole way of living in which meditation, life, and activity are meant to blend into one harmonious integrality. I do not claim to have fully actualized this state but see myself as an earnest and committed practitioner of this integral path.

¹ This sentence is added to the text by the author in this lightly edited version (2013).

I have found, over the course of my practice, the immense value of formal sitting- meditation in initiating the momentum of stillness and observation, which can then be made to continue throughout the day. Both during formal sitting and in my daily rounds, I have found the practice of awareness of thoughts to be greatly significant in yielding deep insights into the nature of the self and experience. I compare this state of awareness to an elusive guest that comes of its own accord and leaves just as mysteriously, and that again emerges just as quietly as it has left. Be that as it may, the presence of awareness is felt as an 'inner light' which allows a diverse range of mental processes to be 'seen' with clarity and openness. Thoughts are witnessed in a subtle and undistracted manner to reveal their associative nature and at times, their isolated randomness. At times, thoughts have been observed to arise one after another in a continuous 'stream', each image associated with the next, centred around a specific theme or moving along in a specific direction. At other times, thoughts seem to branch off in multiple directions through lateral connections between seemingly unrelated images. And again, thoughts may arise in a slow and discontinuous manner, with each image ceasing almost immediately after it has arisen, to be followed after a pause by another related or non-related image. Along with mental images is an almost ubiquitous accompaniment of a running 'commentary' or 'inner voice'. This somewhat vague yet familiar voice appears to be 'me', the centre of 'my' being, the place from where 'I' relate to the world. Perhaps the most important discovery that I made in relation to this experience of meditative awareness is this: while a strong sense of solidified 'self' separate from the flow of experience is present in ordinary, unaware consciousness, this very 'self' is starkly and refreshingly absent in the light of awareness. It is as if there is only a luminosity in the midst of experience, of thoughts and inner commentary, that defies reification or solidification. Greater familiarity with this spacious state of awareness allows me to contrast it to times when I have been unaware or only partially aware. This act of contrasting and comparison resulted in the realization that while in the state of unawareness, there is strong volitional and emotional involvement in these images, in the experience of awareness, this very involvement seem to be strikingly absent. In their place is a quality of soft, relaxed equanimity. It is as if the vortical interplay of thoughts, emotions, and volition is the very source of this sense of 'self'. In other words, the 'thinker' *is* the thought(s), the 'experiencer' *is* the experience!

The other practice which I have found to be very beneficial is that of conscious breathing as described by Thich Nhat Hanh. Conscious breathing has been of great value in collecting the scattered energies of the mind prior to mindful observation. Two distinct yet somewhat similar states of consciousness that bear a relation to *anattā* have been experienced in the course of this practice. The first resulted from intense concentration on the sensations of moving air touching the tip of my nostrils as I was breathing. With sustained attention, coarse contactual sensations gradually gave way to subtle vibrations of rapid frequency. Persistent concentration on these vibrations seemed to increase the intensity and field of this experience; awareness of breathing seemed to have totally dissolved into the 'sea' of vibration. In a sudden and unexpected moment, however, the field of vibrations disappeared, leaving a pervasive sense of 'nothingness' wherein no boundary between the 'self' and the environment existed. I had lost all consciousness of bodily sensations and thoughts, and awareness, which was initially clear and present at the start of the practice, now became indistinct and blurred. It was a state in which 'I' was not there at all, characterized by the lack rather than presence of clear awareness. While this may be a glimpse of *anattā*, albeit an imperfect and distorted one, it never had the significance and clarity that the second experience had.

This experience occurred, again, during the practice of conscious breathing. Following a period of focussed attention on the breath, I started suffusing the whole body with awareness, all the while keeping the breath at the background of my mind. Awareness was light, open, and pervasive, giving rise to a deepening sense of joy and ease. Gradually and gently, it seemed as if the awareness, the breath, and the blissful sensations of the body merged into one, leaving no solid 'self' or 'experiencer' behind or within this flowing experience of clarity and non-thought. It was a profoundly invigorating 'non-experience' which left a deep and lasting impression on me. It made me think of its resemblance to what Thich Nhat Hanh has described as the *anattā* experience.

Another interesting experience that bear a relation to *anattā* occurred on a particular occasion when I was at the beach. On this occasion, the sea breeze was blowing with great strength and its extreme chill sent shivers down my spine and through my entire frame. I felt myself tensing up every single muscle I could find in my body. In that moment of need, awareness arose in my mind and an immediate relaxation of the muscles ensued. I decided to experiment with how far I could possibly relate to this somewhat unpleasant experience with clear awareness. Gradually I was able to let go of

my resistance to the wind and to allow my body to experience the strong sensations as they are, without interference. It was as if the wind was allowed to sweep across and into my body even as I stood there open, aware, and vulnerable. As I stayed with it for some time, the separation between the wind and myself seemed to vanish, and in a brief but unforgettable moment, I **was** the wind. The 'self' had merged into the wind, as it were, and my sense of a separate ego had been forgotten.

In conclusion, the discovery of the lack of any permanent, inherent self that stands apart from one's experience is perhaps the most fascinating and freeing insight that Buddhist meditators over the centuries have realized. This insight contains many dimensions and varying degrees of profundity and subtlety, which in a sense, can never be adequately described with language. It is an understanding that has to come from personal, existential realization. It is only when thought and all that is born of thought, which is the self, has completely ceased to dominate and to delude, that there comes the possibility of lasting, unconditioned freedom – that is the aim, that is the goal, that is the culmination.

ENDNOTES

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