

Non-Self

By Katty Choi



We cannot isolate the concept of non-self, the second of the dharma seals, and discuss it purely by itself. It involves other concepts like karma, rebirth, and also the other two dharma deals, dukkha and impermanence. As Venerable Yin Shun says, we cannot separate the three dharma seals since they are too closely linked to each other.

Let's begin by tracing the concept of non-self back to ancient Indian philosophy in order to find out where the concept originated and the purpose for teaching this concept by the Buddha. And, let's realize that by attempting to understand the concept of non-self at the apparent level we may one day we will be able to share with each other our realization of non-self on the experiential level.

In his article, *The Selfness Rebirth, the View Point of Birth and Death in Buddhism*, Professor Guo explained that:

In India, the philosophy of samsara or rebirth began as early as the Brahmana period, before the Buddha's time. During this period, the concept was not very clear. It just vaguely linked the rebirth with virtuous and non-virtuous actions. The process or the realms of rebirth was not yet developed.

It was not until the later Upanisad Period that the philosophy was fully developed and widely accepted by the society. There were two stages in this period: first, people believed that after death, the "Soul" would be reborn at another world, and in the second, they believed that at the time of dying, the Atta (Pali), or the "Self" would gather all its consciousnesses and functions and that this past knowledge and experience would accompany the atta for rebirth. So the decaying of the body was only to make way for a newer body.

In both stages, people believed that there was an independent entity that went through rebirth.

And this entity had its intrinsic nature that lasted eternally. The destiny for rebirth depended on a person's actions. Thus, the theory of linking rebirth with moral conduct was established before the Buddha's time.

Only the Carvakas, the materialists who believed that nothing existed other than what is material, did not believe in the concepts of rebirth and a soul. Most people in the early to mid-first-millennium BCE accepted the concept of an atta. They believed that the atta (or atman in Sanskrit) came from Brahma, the creator of the universe. The atta would stay in the samsara until liberated, then it would be reunited with the Brahma and that was its final goal. This concept continued even after the Buddha's time.

Although the philosophy of linking the destiny of rebirth with moral conduct is accepted in his teaching, the Buddha disagreed with the belief of a permanent soul or self. Through his personal experience, he realized that all phenomena are conditionally arisen and that things that are conditional arisen cannot have an intrinsic nature of permanence. He expounded the teaching of the three characteristics of existence stating that all formations are impermanent; all sensations are dissatisfactory (dukkha); and all phenomena, including the body and mind of a person, are non-self.

If the "Self" or "I" has an intrinsic nature of permanence, it should have the characteristics of unconditional arising, be permanent and unchanging, and it should have the power to control. All these criteria would have to be :

If the "Self" is unconditional arising, it should arise without depending on any condition. If the "Self" is permanent and unchanging, it should be able to continue through the time from the past to the

future. If the “Self” has the power to control, it should be able to function independently.

The reality of non-self applies to all phenomena. However, let’s take human being for example, we know that the so called “self” or “I” is a composition of the physical body and the processes of the mind. As the Agama says, if we consider there is an “I” or “Self”, we have to base on the five skandhas or the five aggregates as a reference point to search for the “Self”. And, there are only two possible assumptions: the “Self” is within the five aggregates; or the “Self” is outside the five aggregates

First, if we are considering the Self is within the five aggregates, let’s look at which part of the five is the I or Self.

The five aggregates are: form, sensation, perception, mental formations, and consciousness.

Form is the physical part, but which part of the form is the “Self”? The eye, ear, nose, tongue or the body? Based on the characteristics of the self we just mentioned, which part of the form is not conditional arising, is permanent, is unchanging, and can last through time and has the power to control itself freely, to function independently?

Let’s consider the eye. If the eye is self, then it should be arising without depending on conditions. But people were born with different shape eyes; some people are near sighted, some people have brown eyes, some people blue, depending on their genes. So it is conditional arising.

If it is permanent and unchanging, I wouldn’t have to wear reading glasses which I didn’t need to 10 years ago!

If it has the power to control and function independently, let’s turn out all the lights and be in the dark and see if our eye can function by itself or not.

We can test each physical part by applying the three criteria and see which part can be considered as the “I” or “Self”. It is not difficult to find that the answer would be negative to all.

Now, how about the other four aggregates: Is the

Feeling or Sensation “I”? Is the Perception “I”? Is the Mental Formation “I”? Is the Consciousness “I”? We would find that these four aggregates are sometimes changing even faster than the physical Form. In fact, it might take years for us to notice the physical change, but it is very difficult to notice our mental change because the changes happen in split seconds.


If we say that the whole five aggregates is the “Self”; then, it should be unconditionally arisen. But, are we the same that when we were a baby as now? Which is the “Self”, then or now? Can we control it not to get old, not to get sick, or not to die if we don’t want to?

If we consider that this “Self” or “I” is an entity outside of the five aggregates, then, how can this individual entity come in contact with the external objects without the form? How can this entity feel? How can this entity perceive? How can mental formation arise in this entity? How can this entity experience and store information? And, how can this entity perform actions? Without any actions performed, there cannot be any energy generated, that means no karma is created. If not karma is created, then where is the energy to push toward rebirth? Therefore, we cannot say that there is a separate entity called the “Self” or “I” outside of the five aggregates.

So, what is the Buddhist teaching on the concept of “Non-self;” and if it is “Non-self” who is going through the process of rebirth? These are interesting questions that for 2500 years people inside and outside of the Buddhist community have been trying to answer. Different schools have developed various theories to answer these questions. Such as the theory of the “Two Truths” established by the school of Madhyamaka, the theory of the “Mere Consciousness or the Eight Consciousness” by the school of Yogacara, and the theory of the “Tathagabha”; are all trying to provide answer to the question of the “Self.”

Let’s look at how did the Buddha respond to the question of Self and what was his teaching on Non-self:

On one occasion, the wonderer Vacchagotta went to the Blessed one and exchanged greetings with him. Then he asked: “How is it, Master Gotama, does self exist?” When this was said, the Blessed One was silent. “How is it, then, Master Gotama, does self not exist?”



and for a second time, the Blessed One was silent. Then, the wonderer Vacchagotta got up from his seat and went away. Not long after he had gone the venerable Ananda asked the Blessed One: “Lord, how is it that when the Blessed One was questioned he did not answer?”

“If, when I was asked “Does self exist?” I had answered, “Self exists”, that would have been the belief of those who hold the theory of eternalism. And if, when I was asked “Does self not exist?” I had answered, “Self does not exist”, that would have been the belief of those who hold the theory of annihilationism. Again, if, when asked “Does self exist?” I had answered, “Self exists,” would that have been in conformity with my knowledge that all things are not-self? And if, when asked “Does self not exist?” I had answered, “Self does not exist,” then confused as he already is, Ananada, the wonderer Vacchagotta would have become still more confused, assuming: “Surely then I had a self before and now have none”. –SN 44:10

There are many times that Buddha would not answer questions that are not related to practice. As he mentioned that he only teaches doctrines and techniques to eradicate the three poisons and only shows the path to liberation.

Previously, we have learned that the Buddha from time to time would give discourse to his son Venerable Rahula. In SN 18:21 and 22, Venerable Rahula went to the Blessed One and asked about how to eradicate the sense of “I” and “mine and the tendency to conceit.”

The Buddha’s answer was: “First one has to know and realize with correct wisdom the fact that the five aggregates are not “I” or “Mine.” Then again with correct wisdom, one will be liberated from the sense of “I” or “Mine.”

Buddhist scholar and ethicist, Peter Harvey, in his book *The Selfness Mind* mentioned that while the Buddha disapproves the assumptions of the existence of an eternal Self, he accepts that there is the existence of an empirical self or a conventional self. This empirical self consists of a changing flow of mental and physical states that neither unchangingly exist nor do not exist. Also,

this empirical self is subject to conditional phenomena and is responsible to causality and karmic results.

The Buddha teaches us that we should make use of this conventional or empirical self to work diligently and persistently with right effort in order to develop right view; and not to cling to anything that is not permanent, anything that causes dukkha and that is not-self.

Also, Harvey mentions that we should use the concept of “Non-Self” as a reason to let go of things, and not try to prove that there is No Self.

Hopefully, understanding the concept of “Non Self” will help us reduce our clinging to this constantly changing body and mind which we refer to as “Self”.

Katty Choi took refuge in 1995 under Master Ji Ru. She practiced at various Vipassana Centers in the next decade, and in 2004 earned a masters degree in Buddhist Studies from Hong Kong University. She has written various research papers in Chinese and English, and helped in the translation of articles presented at the First World Buddhist Forum hosted by China in 2006. She leads a Chinese Buddhist Study Group and is a co-facilitator of a Mahayana Buddhist Study Group in St. Louis. She teaches at the Mid-America Buddhist Association (MABA) under the guidance of the Sangha.