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THE CONCEPT OF ANATTA

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ABSTRACT:

The Buddha's denial of the existence of Atta through the exposition of the AnattalakkhanaSutta (Discourse on Soullessness) revolutionized the whole history of man's thoughts and ideologies. According to the teachings of the Buddha, so long as one cannot remove Sakayaditthi (heresy of individuality), one will remain blind to the Truth. It is impossible to remove Sakayaditthi without the knowledge of Anatta. Therefore, it stands to reason that understanding the nature of Anatta is a must for our deliverance. The character of Anatta can be evident to people only in the presence of and within the fold of the Buddha's Sāsana (Dispensation). All other religions base themselves on the idea of Atta. So Donal Weston says, "Of the world's major religions, only Buddhism denies or is agnostic about the existence of soul". It is also the concept of Anatta that popularized Buddhism and made it different from all other religions. However, this concept still remains a hard-nut to crack among philosophers, theologians, and scholars.



KEYWORDS: *Buddha's denial, history of man's, Buddhism denies.*

INTRODUCTION :

Firstly, we should know what meaning the word "Anatta" conveys. Etymologically, the Pali compound "Anatta" is composed of two members; a negative prefix "An" meaning "not" plus "atta" corresponding to "atan" in Sanskrit which means "soul, self, ego, personality, etc." So this Pāli compound is literally translated as "No soul" or "Not-self".

Some religions believe that there is a separate soul in every being. It is created by Supreme Being, Universal Soul, called Brahma. As Brahma, the separate soul is immortal. When the body dies, the separate soul shifts to another body and makes it is a new home, discarding the worn-out body. The liberation of this soul occurs only when it becomes completely purified and finally united with Supreme Being or Universal Soul emanated. Dr. Walpola Rahula says that this idea is conceived by man for self-protection and self-preservation. The Buddha spurned this untenable idea flatly by preaching the *AnattalakkhanaSutta* five days after He had expounded his first discourse "*Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*". His new teaching was in complete antithesis to those of the then prevalent religions which were founded on the idea of *Atta*. Hence, Buddhism is known as being against man's selfish desires. For this teaching, the Buddha was denounced as an iconoclast by the leaders of other contemporary religions.

According to the teachings of the Buddha, there is no doer apart from doing. There is no sufferer apart from suffering. There is no being called, "I", "he", "she" etc. Beings are just a combination of mind (*Nāma*) and matter (*Rupa*) or five aggregate-corporeality (*Saññakkhandhā*), mental formation

(*Sankhārakkhandhā*) and consciousness (*Viññānakkhandhā*) which are in a state of constant flux, not remaining for two consecutive moments. No creator can bring this incessant arising and dissolution of corporeal and mental phenomena under control. Nothing permanent or substantial is there is a being, apart from this incessant arising and dissolution of corporeal and mental phenomena.

In the ultimate sense, our so-called body (*Rupa*) is composed of particles of matter. Matter, in fact, is the visible complex of invisible qualities and forces known in *PāliMahābhuta*, essential or great elements such as earth-element (*Pathavī*), heat-element (*Vāyo*). Depending on these four great elements, 24 derivatives also arise like a tree growing depending on the earth. In addition, along with these four great elements, there also arise four secondary characteristics of matter, i.e. color (*Vaṇṇa*) smell (*Gandha*), taste (*Rasa*), and nutritional quality (*Ojā*). Our whole physical body can be experienced only in terms of these eight elemental properties of matter. According to the Abhidhamma, our physical body is conditioned by action (*Kaṇṇa*), mind (*Citta*), season (*Utu*), and nutrient (*Āhāra*), not by any creator. When our physical body is minutely analyzed into ultimate realities, no soul except the qualities and forces of these four great elements and its 24 derivatives can be found.

The so-called mind (*Nāma*) is nothing but a series of successive momentary thoughts or processes of consciousnesses which are the products of the impact between sense organs and sense objects. For example, due to the contact between eyes and the visible object, there arise eye-consciousnesses, and simultaneously along with it, there also arise mental concomitants called cetasikas such as feeling (*Vedanā*), perception (*Saññā*) mental formations (*Sankhāra*), contact (*phassa*) etc. In this case, the eyes and the visible object are matters (*Rupakkhandhā*). To remember the visible is feeling (*Vedanakkhandhā*), to feel the visible object is perception (*Saññākkhandhā*), to motivate actions is mental formations (*Sankhārakkhandhā*) and to incline to the visible object is consciousness (*Viññānakkhandhā*). Thus, in our every action, the five *Khandhas* (mind plus matter) work collectively and mutually, depending on one another. Therefore, Arahāt Vajira said thus,

“When all constituent parts are there,
The designation ‘cart’ is used.
Just so, where the five groups exist,
Of ‘living being’ do we speak”.

Four conditions- the eye, the visible object, light, and attention- must be present to make eye-consciousness arise. Eye-consciousness cognizes the visible object, thereby making eyesight comes into being. If one of these four conditions is absent, eye-consciousness can, by no means, arise. Consequently, we cannot see anything like a blind-man. This proves it evident that eye-sight is not created at all by any doer. Likewise, smelling, tasting, touching, and thoughts are not created by anyone. They arise only due to the functioning of their respective conditions. In short, when the so-called being is analyzed in every detail, no soul or nothing substantial will be found, with the sole exception of the ever-changing particles of matter and processes of concomitants that are working side by side being dependent on one another. So it should be noted that beings do not dance to the tune of the creator. With regard to this, the following stanza is mentioned in the *DighaNikaya*.

“...Just as a wooden puppet, though unsubstantial, lifeless, and inactive, may, by means of pulling strings, be made to move about, stand up, and appear full of life and activity, just so are mind or body, as such, something empty, lifeless and inactive, but by means of their mutual working together, this mental and bodily combination may move about, stand up and appear full of life and activity..”.

The Buddha professionally explained the idea of *Anatta* in the *AnattalakkanaSutta* that the five aggregates are not the soul or one or one’s own property, for one cannot exercise authority over them because they always lead to affliction. They are impermanent (*Anicca*). What is impermanent is unsatisfactory (*Dukkha*) and what is both impermanent and unsatisfactory should not be regarded by any means as soul or one or one’s own property (*Anatta*). Thus did the Buddha introduce his revolutionary idea.

It is very difficult to see the nature of *Anatta*. Only those who have developed at least *Namaruparicchedanana*, *Paccayapariggahanana*, and *Udayabhayanana* can clearly discern the separate working of the five aggregates, the causes which condition *Nāma* and *Rupa* and the nature of three characteristics *Anicca*, *Dukkha*, and *Anatta*. In actual fact, *Anicca* is concealed by changing postures (while meditating) and *Anatta* by compactness and solidity of things.

The heated debate on the concept of *Anatta* between the Buddha and the great ascetic Saccaka makes it clearer that there is no *atta*. During the debate, Saccaka asked the Buddha if he had taught *anatta*. When the Buddha answered in the affirmative, Saccaka countered saying “No, there is *atta*. The five aggregates are *atta*”. Then the Buddha cross-questioned him. “Do you really think that *rupa* is *atta*? If so, can you make your physical appearance (*rupa*) beautiful?” Thus Saccaka was finally forced to admit that *rupa* is not *atta*.

The following verse from the *Patisambhidamagga* Pall says that even *Nibbana* is *anatta*.

“...Sabbesankhārā anicca;
Sabbesankhāradukkha;
Sabbedhammā anatta...”

The first line means “All conditioned things are impermanent, “the second means” All conditioned things are suffering. The third, however, is different. Here, the Buddha does not use “Sankhārā” but uses *Dhamma*. *Dhamma* here means all things- both conditioned and unconditioned. So the third line means that all things, conditioned and unconditioned, are *Anatta* and void of self or soul. This means that even *Nibbana* which is *Asankhata*, unconditioned, is not *atta* or is void of *Atta*. Thus does this verse deny the existence of *Atta*.

The Buddha did not agree to the idea that when the body dies, the soul moves to another new body and continues from life to life. According to him, people are reborn with *Patisandhi* (relinking consciousness), a rebirth consciousness that does not transmigrate from the previous existence, but which comes into existence, conditions such as *Kamma*, etc. thus a reborn person is not the same as the one who has died nor is the reborn person entirely different from the one who has died. Most importantly, no metaphysical entity, no soul, and kind of spiritual self continues from one existence to another in the Buddha’s teaching.

In conclusion, so profound is the concept of *Anatta* that we cannot understand it easily. Only when we see the three characteristics-*Anicca*, *Dukkha*, and *Anatta*-clearly, we can comprehend the nature of *Anatta*. Therefore, we should develop insight meditation (*VipassanāBhāvanā*), the only practice which can guarantee us insight into the nature of the three characteristics.

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