

Buddhist Texts on Anatman

(The doctrine of “no-soul” or “no-self”)

Opportunity Saint Paul

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Nadi Sutta (ca 6th-5th centuries BCE), translated by Thanissaro Bhikku

“What do you think, monks — Is form (body) constant or inconstant (permanent or impermanent)?”

“Inconstant, lord.”

“And is that which is inconstant easeful or stressful?”

“Stressful, lord.”

“And is it fitting to regard what is inconstant, stressful, subject to change as: ‘This is mine. This is my self. This is what I am’?”

“No, lord.”

“...Is feeling...perception...mental formations...consciousness constant or inconstant?”

“Inconstant, lord.”...

“And is that which is inconstant easeful or stressful?”

“Stressful, lord.”

“And is it fitting to regard what is inconstant, stressful, subject to change as: ‘This is mine. This is my self. This is what I am’?”

“No, lord.”

“Thus, monks...every form (feeling...perception...mental formation...consciousness) is to be seen as it actually is with right discernment as: ‘This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am.’

“Seeing thus, the well-instructed disciple of the noble ones grows disenchanted (non-attached, non-clinging, dispassionate) with form...feeling...perception...formations...consciousness...Through dispassion, he is fully released. He discerns that...the holy life is fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.”

Dialogue of Nagasena and King Menander (ca. 2nd century BCE)

King Menander: How is your reverence known, and what is your name?

Nagasena: I'm known as Nagasena, your Majesty, that's what my fellow monks call me. But though my parents may have given me such a name, it's only a generally understood term, a practical designation. There is no question of a permanent individual implied in the use of the word...It's on account of the various components of my being that I'm known by the practical designation Nagasena...

King Menander: When a man is reborn does he remain the same being or become another?

Nagasena: He neither remains the same nor becomes another.

King Menander: Give me an example.

Nagasena: You were once a baby lying on your back, tender and small and weak. Was that baby the same as you, who is now grown up?

King Menander: No, your Reverence, the baby was one being and I am another...

Nagasena: Through the continuity of the body all stages of life are included in a pragmatic unity...Suppose a man were to light a lamp...Is the flame which burns in the middle watch the same as that which burned in the first?"

King Menander: No, your Reverence.

Nagasena: So is there one lamp in the first watch, another in the middle?

King Menander: No. The same lamp gives light all through the night.

Nagasena: Similarly, your Majesty, the continuity of phenomena is kept up. One person comes into existence, another passes away, and the sequence runs continuously without self-conscious existence, neither the same nor yet another...There is rebirth without anything being reborn.

Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (1959)

“According to the teaching of the Buddha, the idea of self is an imaginary, false belief which has no corresponding reality, and it produces harmful thoughts of ‘me’ and ‘mine,’ selfish desire, craving, attachment, hatred, ill-will, conceit, pride, egoism, and other defilements. It is the source of all the troubles in the world from personal conflicts to wars between nations. In short, to this false view can be traced all the evil in the world.”

Joanna Macy, “The Greening of the Self” (1991)

“The crisis that threatens our planet, whether seen from its military, ecological, or social aspect, derives from a dysfunctional and pathological notion of the self. It derives from a mistake about our place in the order of things. It is a delusion that the self is so separate and fragile that we must delineate and defend its boundaries, that it is so small and needy that we must endlessly acquire and consume, and that it is so aloof that as individuals, corporations, nation-states, or species, we can be immune to what we do to other beings.”

“Oh, the sweetness of being able to realize: I am my experience. I am this breathing. I am this moment, and it is changing, continually arising in the foundation of life.”

Stephen Batchelor, *Buddhism without Beliefs* (1997)

“If I search for myself in meditation, I find it is like trying to catch my own shadow. I reach for it, but there’s nothing there...Each time I think I’ve pinned it down, it turns out to be something else: a bodily sensation, a mood, a perception, an impulse...”

“The self may not be something, but neither is it nothing. It is simply ungraspable, unfindable. I am who I am not because of an essential self hidden away in the core of my being but because of the unprecedented and unrepeatable matrix of conditions that have formed me...There is nothing thinglike about me at all. I am more like an unfolding narrative.”

Robert Wright, *Why Buddhism is True* (2017)

“According to Buddhism, truly, deeply realizing that you are selfless – in the sense of not having a self – can make you selfless in the more familiar sense of the term.”