

The concept of anatman in traditional buddhism



The concept of anatman, or 'no-self' or 'no-soul', in traditional Buddhism has been said to be the most difficult to understand. Anatman literally means "without Atman, the eternal self or soul" that is concrete throughout the Hindu religion (Oxtoby, pg. 402). Instead of believing that each person has a soul that is reborn in the cycle of birth-life-death-rebirth, Buddhists believe that there is no unchanging or eternal soul that keeps coming back until Nirvana is realized. Therefore, the Buddhist notion of rebirth must be distinguished from the concept of reincarnation, which will be discussed later.

Instead of believing that each person possesses an eternal soul, Buddhists believe that each person is made up of five factors (skandha). The first one is 'Form' which consists of the body and its sense organs. The second is 'sensation' which is the act of just feeling if something is hot or cold, hard or soft. This must not be confused with emotion. The third is 'perception'. This factor is the one that consists of the perception of reality, no-self, suffering, or even the "false" reality or sense of self that Buddhists try to steer away from.

The fourth factor is 'mental formations' which include thoughts and habits. It is said that this is the source of all karma. The fifth and final factor is 'consciousness' which is the foundation that supports all human experience. It is also believed that the "mind is made up of a complex of fleeting mental states" and that thoughts are not eternal, but an everchanging flow of conceptual ideas that each have a beginning and an end (Thera).

From a psychological standpoint the concept of anatman gives no meaning to the notion of 'I', 'me', or 'mine' because everything in nature is connected.

The belief is that a wise person is detached from this sort of egotism. This is not to say that Buddhism disregards the notion of personality or a sense of self, but the "dharma" emphasizes that personality is the product of shifting, fluid circumstance" (Oxtoby, pg. 390). By hanging onto this notion of self and the 'ego', one can never reach enlightenment because their minds are too clouded with selfish wants and needs.

As stated before, the Buddhist notion of rebirth must be distinguished from the concept of reincarnation. Reincarnation is defined as "the rebirth of a soul in a new body". Because there is no 'soul' to come back and be reborn into another body and another life, reincarnation is unfathomable. Instead, traditional Buddhists believe that karma energy transfers from one life to another. When a person dies, the karma energy the previous person produced is manifested and transferred to the reborn person.

An example of this is lighting a series of candles with a match. The match is struck and lights the first candle. The flame from the match is not the same flame that is on the candle even though the one on the match started it. Likewise, the flame on the candle could not have existed if it weren't for the flame on the match. The original flame is then blown out and the flame on the candle remains. The same flame lights the subsequent candles but even though others are blown out the flame still remains.