

EGO FREE SOCIO-POLITICAL DIMENSION OF THERAVADA BUDDHISM

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ABSTRACT

This research has an attempt to demonstrate, and investigate the not-self (*anattā*) of Theravada Buddhism according to *Pāli* cannon and its commentaries and sub-commentaries, to study the doctrine of not-self (*anattā*) of Theravada Buddhism in the socio-political dimension, and to suggest an alternative—the Buddhist way for solving problems and conflicts of human beings. Methodology adopted in this thesis is of descriptive approach of research including interpretation, criticism and analysis of the texts. The data collection has been collected from *Pāli Tipitaka* and its Commentaries (*Atthakathā*) and Sub-Commentaries (*Dikā*), including books on Buddhist studies, scholarly articles from journals of research in Buddhist philosophy and related literature by several scholars on Buddhism including unpublished theses.

The results of research are as follows:

According to Pali sources, '*Anattā*' refers to not-self or no-ego which denies *attā* or self, soul or ego, neither within the body and mental phenomena of beings, nor outside of them. The Buddha used the term *anattā* to explain His teachings which rejected the view of a permanent self. *Anattalakkhaṇa sutta*, the second sermon the Buddha preached to His first five followers (*pañcavaggiyas*) at *Vārāṇasī*, is the first account from Buddhist texts that assert that the Buddha rejected the self-theory (*attā*). The essentiality of this *sutta* emphasizes the impermanent-existence or not-self, and the stream of continuity in every moment, seen as the function of mind and body-relationship called 'five aggregates (*pañca-khandhas*). In Theravada Buddhism, it is accepted that Five aggregates (*pañca-khandhas*, three characteristics (*Tilakkhaṇa*), and dependent arising (*Paticcasamuppāda*) are the doctrines that assert that the Buddha denies self or ego; in addition, and also the doctrine of kamma and nibbana of the Buddha are accorded with the doctrine of not-self (*anattā*) as well.

The Buddha believes that there is no self, ego or permanent soul in the nature of all existence, he sees all existence as the stream of dynamism in every moment. The nature of all being, according to him is the unification of mind and matter (*pañca khandhas*), namely, corporeality, feeling, perception, mental formation, and consciousness. All of five natures function systematically and inter-connectedly. All of five natures of beings subject to common characteristics (*tilakkhaṇa*), that is to say, impermanence, suffering, and no self, or ego. *Anattā* is the core idea the Buddha discovered, and He established his organization based on this idea. *Anattā* has a significant role in the establishment of Buddhism and Buddhist *Saṅgha* organization and shows the paradigm shift of the way to solve our problems and conflicts from empirical approach to an inner realization of human being.

Keywords: Anattā, Not- Self, No Soul, No Permanent Identity, Ego Free, Socio Political Dimension, Theravada Buddhism

1. The Significant Problem of the Study

At present, human beings are facing problems and conflicts such as fighting between religious groups, fanaticism, terrorism, ideological persecutions, chemical warfare and the proliferation of nuclear weapons, domestic crimes, drug addiction, drug trafficking, environmental pollution, energy crisis, unemployment, serious violence etc. Peace and happiness seem to be farther and farther away, various forms of problems affecting peace are on the increase, eroding the hope of happy and peaceful living.¹ Previously, scientists and technologists anticipated peace and happiness from the tremendous progress made by science and technology, but it seems to have failed.

The real root of these problems and conflicts could be understood as the result of adhering to the egocentrism of human beings themselves. Problems and conflicts of individuals in each society have occurred from clinging on the enjoyment and pleasure alone, paying too little attention to the development of one's own self.²

Buddhist philosophy, especially not-self, or non-egoism (*anatā*), as the major core of Buddhist metaphysics as far as Buddhist philosophy is concerned, would be considered an alternative way (for current researchers) to be restudied, interpreted, and investigated to be a source of knowledge to human beings in the modern age to really understand themselves, and treat others as equal, and be aware of love, pity, and fraternity among themselves and the others, which are the ultimate aims of being man in this world according to Buddhist Philosophy, thereby diluting the severity of problems and conflicts.

2. AIM AND SCOPE OF STUDY

As far as the aim and scope of this study are concerned, an attempt has been made to find a solution to reserve a morally mutilated society by changing the direction of the focus of social justice inwards -- realization of the spiritual essence of all living beings. The study is an attempt to shift the emphasis from ego-centric dimension to ego-free-centric dimension. Precisely, the aim and scope of this thesis can be shown as follows:

- 2.1. To demonstrate, and investigate the doctrine of not self (*anattā*) of Theravada Buddhism according to Pālī cannon and its commentaries and sub-commentaries
- 2.2. To study the doctrine of not-self (*anattā*) of Theravada Buddhism in the socio-political Dimension
- 2.3. To suggest an alternative solution by the Buddhist way for solving problems and Conflicts of human beings.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DATA ANALYSIS

The methodology adopted in this thesis is aimed at giving descriptive approach of research including interpretation, criticism and analysis of the texts. It is mainly based on a documentary investigation as well as its analysis. The data collection has been classified into two sources viz. primary and secondary. The former is mainly derived from the early Buddhist texts called the *Pāli Tipitaka* including their translations both in Thai and English, its Commentaries (*Atthakathā*) and Sub-Commentaries (*Dikā*) whereas the latter is based on books on Buddhist studies, scholarly articles from journals of research in Buddhist philosophy and related literature by several scholars on Buddhism including unpublished theses.

¹ Phra Dhammapitaka, *Freedom Individual and social*, (Bangkok: Buddhaddhamma Foundation, 2003), p.2

² *Ibid.* p.4

4. THE RESULT OF THE STUDY

The results of this research are as follows:

4.1 Anattā (Not Self) in Theravada Buddhist Scriptures

Etymologically, the *Pali* word *anattā* consists of the negative prefix ‘an’ plus ‘attā’ meaning not self, non-ego, non-soul, impersonality or non – substantiality. *Anatt*, therefore, refers to not -self or non -ego which denies *attā* or self, soul or ego, neither within the body and mental phenomena of beings, nor outside of them. The Buddha used the term *anattā* to explain His teaching which rejected the view of a permanent self.

The account from Buddhist texts show that the Buddha denies two main self-theories, viz., *Annihilationism* and *Eternalism*.³ *Annihilationism* is the view that there exists in man an ego entity as the principle of all physical and mental activities. But such a principle is relatively permanent (lasting for a single lifetime) and it does not survive after death. *Eternalism* is the view that the self is considered as something permanent (*nicca*), blissful (*sukha*) and not liable to change (*aviparināma-dhamma*).

Anattalakhaṇasutta is the first account from Buddhist texts that assert that the Buddha rejected self-theory (*attavāda*).⁴ The essentiality of this *sutta* emphasizes the impermanent-existence or not-self, and the stream of continuity in every moment, seen as the function of mind and body-relationship, called five aggregates (*panca-khandhas*). They are corporeality (*rūpa khandha*) feeling (*vedhanā khandha*) perception (*saññā khandha*) mental formation (*saṅkhāra khandha*) and consciousness (*viññā khandha*).

Apart from the five aggregates, the doctrine that asserts that the Buddha denies self or ego is the natural law (*Tilakhana*): i) *all conditioned states are impermanent* (*sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā*, ii) *all conditioned states are subject to oppression* (*sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā*) and iii) *all phenomena are not self* (*sabbe dhammā anattā*), or well-known as the *three characteristics*.⁵ These are said to be in the relatively dependent state, the three aspects of the same thing, and the cause and effect of each other.

According to the Buddha, all phenomena are subject to the laws of causation. Every element, though appearing only for a single - moment, is a dependently originating element because it depends for its arising on what has gone before it. That is the meaning of Dependent Origination.⁶

The teachings of *kamma* and not-self (*anattā*) are based on the standpoint that everything, including the individual, is in a flux, undergoing constant change. In such a situation, there cannot be identity, but only continuity. The Buddhists give the necessity to the conditionality of events than to the factor called ‘doer’ (*kattā*). It means that there was no active agent but only a series of reactions to conditions.⁷ *The Buddhist regarded Nibbāna as Not-self (anattā)*. *Nibbāna* is attained by one without clinging to the notion ‘I am.’ It is remarkable that the Buddhist teaching of *Nibbāna* cannot be accounted without admitting the *anattā* doctrine. And the doctrine of *anattā* (not-self) or selflessness forms the essence of the Buddha’s doctrine of *Nibbāna* (Freedom).

³ Rhys Davids, *The Birth of Indian psychology and Its Development in Buddhism*, (London: Luzac&Co, 1936), pp. 218, 222.

⁴ *Vin.iv.* 20-21.

⁵ *D.i* 339, S.iii.50.

⁶ *Vin.iv.* 1-2; *M.iii.* 107.

⁷ Mitchell, W. Donald, “*Buddhist Theories of Causation – Commentary*” PEW., V. 25 (1975), p.

4.2 The Interpretation of *Anattā* in Modern Context

This study is an attempt to restudy the doctrine of not-self (*anattā*) of the Buddha in the context of social and political phenomena. An attempt has been made to account for the exposition of the theory of *anattā* or non-soul as the basis for subsequent development of Buddhist philosophy. The function of five aggregates (*pañca khandhas*) has been introduced to replace the no-soul concept for the functioning of consciousness in the body through the mind.

According to Theravada Buddhism, '*Anattā*' refers to not-self or no-ego which denies *attā* or self, soul or ego, neither within the body and mental phenomena of beings, nor outside of them. The Buddha used the term *anattā* to explain His teaching which rejected the view of a permanent self.

Theravada Buddhist scholars hold that to solve the dilemma of not-self doctrine of the Buddha, we must deal with two levels of reality: the ultimate level, and the conventional level.⁸

In the conventional level, Buddhist scholars hold that Buddhism has no objection to the use of the words '*atta*', or '*satta*' or '*puggala*' to indicate the individual as a whole, or to distinguish one person from another.

On the level of the absolute truth, *anattā* doctrine denies any and all psychological entities or agents inside the person; there is no man in man or a self that is permanent and unchanging, possessed of bliss and autonomous. In this sense, all phenomena are only a bundle of elements or forces (*sankhāra*), and a stream or a series of successive states (*santana*) originating and existing in dependence on other and previous states. As everything is a succession, there is nothing substantial or permanent.

All conceptual entities, such as self or being or person, are resolved into their ultimate, into bare mental and material phenomena, which are impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen, and empty of any abiding self or substance. As the Buddha says: Whether *Tathagatas* arise in the world or not, it still remains a fact, a firm and necessary condition of existence, that all formations are impermanent...that all formations are subject to suffering...that all things are non-self.⁹

4.2.1 Man as a Being-Process

According to Buddhism, man is the process of continuity as Richard Gombrich¹⁰ points out that human activity according to the Buddha is the process of continuing, fluxing and flowing, nothing in the world has an unchanging essence or there is nothing in our normal experience that never changes. According to this process, the human individual does not remain the same for two consecutive moments. The 'spiritual' part (*nāma*) of the human being and its physical frame (*rūpa*) are linked together by causal laws. The individual is entirely phenomenal, governed by the laws of life, without any extra-phenomenal self or soul within him.¹¹

'Man' is called *Nāma-Rūpa*. He is made up of five constituents (*panch-khandha*), feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), mental formation (*saṅkāra*), consciousness (*viññā*), and the physical form (*rūpa*). The term '*nāma*' stands for the psychical factors constituting

⁸ *AA.i.95, KvuA.34.*

⁹ *A.i. 236*

¹⁰ Richard Gombrich, *What the Buddha thought*, (London: Equinox Publication, 2009), Pp.9-10.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p.8

the aggregate, and *rūpa* connotes the physical body, so that the compound signifies the psycho-physical organization and may be taken as roughly equivalent to mind and body.¹²

From the point of view of Buddhism as we discussed above, man is the process of mind and matter (*nāma – rupa*) organization or the unity of the two distinct identity. The function of these two natural beings cannot be separated from each other. Consciousness (*Viññāṇa*) is the most important of the process as the experienter or knower of the process.

Consciousness (*Vinñāṇa*) is regarded as the faculty of distinguishing or discarding or judging as understanding. It is the nature of understanding thing as arising and passing away at every moment.¹³ Consciousness, seems like one continual flow, is described as a succession of discrete evanescent mental events. There is no self, soul, or any kind of agent inside a person involved in this process.¹⁴

It could be said that in the present phenomena, Consciousness (*viññāṇa*) is intended to explain the continuity in the person who is individuated by dispositions (*sankāra*). When consciousness is so explained, it is natural to conclude that it is a substantial entity, which was how the substantialists responded to the Buddha, who replied that consciousness is nothing more than the act of being conscious.¹⁵

4.2.2 Anattā as the Ultimate Value

The point of view of Buddhism is that the final stage of man is to realize the nature of all things as the product of mind and matter-unity (*pañca- khandha*), common characteristics (*tilakkhaṇa*) that all phenomena are impermanent, subject to dissatisfaction, and have no inner core inside. All phenomena are under the causal law of nature (*paṭiccaasmuppāda*). Everything falls into three rules of nature: arising, existing; continuing, and passing away.

Anattā is the goal of life in the mind of the Buddhist who understands the whole teaching of the Buddha. It is evident that the one who realizes *nibbāna* is the one who realizes *anattā*. *Anattā* and *nibbāna* are essentially the same state though different in name and form, that is, the state of bliss and peacefulness.

According the Buddhist tradition, the unwholesome roots are the causes that mislead human beings into the state of mental diffusion (*papaṇca*), that is, craving (*taṇhā*), wrong view (*ditṭhi*), and conceit (*māna*). These wrong views with ignorance and craving of an unenlightened mind prevent one from knowing things as they really are. This is called Fetter (*saṅyojana*).¹⁶

According to Buddhist epistemology, the characteristic of not self can be seen by intuitive insight. It can be seen by perfect wisdom as it really is. In order to develop insight which sees the true nature of things, one has to practice the Buddhist method called meditation. This practice aims at 'knowing and seeing things as they are.

Methods of mental development in Buddhism are essentially the Noble Eight-fold Path. They are: 1) Right View, 2) Right Thought, 3) Right Speech, 4) Right Action, 5)

¹² J. Varghese Manimala, *Being, Person, and Community: A Study of Inter-subjectivity in Existentialism with Special Reference to Marcel, Sartre, and the Concept of Sangha in Buddhism*, (New Delhi: Intercultural Publication, 1991). p.177.

¹³ Mathieu Boisvert, *The Five Aggregates: Understanding Theravāda Psychology and Soteriology*, (Delhi: Sri Satguru, Publication 1997), p.114.

¹⁴ Bhikkhu Bodhi (Ed.), *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1993), pp. 3-9

¹⁵ David J. Kalupahana, *A Buddhist Philosophy: Continuities and Discontinuities*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 1994), p.7

¹⁶ S.v.61; A.v.13; Vbh.377

Right Livelihood, 6) Right Effort, 7) Right Mindfulness, and 8) Right Concentration.¹⁷ In Practice, this Eight-fold Path can be grouped under three headings of the Threefold Training (*tisikkhā*), namely, (i) morality (*sīla*), (ii) concentration (*samādhi*), and (iii) wisdom (*paññā*).

The Buddha himself maintains that without cultivation of morality, concentration cannot be cultivated, and without cultivation of concentration, wisdom cannot be developed. On the contrary, the reverse shall surely be the case.¹⁸

4.2.3 The Notion of Ego Free Society

It would be said that all phenomena are not-self, or ego, or permanent soul. All beings are nothing but the constituents of the unity of mind and matter (*panca-khandhas*), all nature of existence subject to common characteristics (*tilakhaṇa*): impermanent, suffering, and no egocentric entity inside, and all substances move under the casual law of nature (*paticcasmuppāda*). Everything in the world is under the law of three momentariness, namely, arising (*upāda*) existing, continuing (*thiti*) and disintegrating (*bhanga*). Nothing can be called as self or permanent soul, substance, or identity, nothing but the sentient being or state of fluxing and flowing of substance in every moment.

According to Buddhist point of view, the true reality is that man is the sentient substance, that is to say, the combination of mind and matter organization. Consciousness—the states of knowing, realizing, or enlightening, is regarded as the most important of the process. However, man does not realize this because he is bound by ten fetters or bondage (*saṅyojana*). The way to realize all phenomena as not self, or *nibbāna* is to follow the threefold training (*ti-sikkhā*), namely: (i) morality (*sīla*), (ii) concentration (*samādhi*), and (iii) wisdom (*paññā*).

From this perspective, it is said that man is the “psycho-physical unit.”¹⁹ There is No Ego or permanent soul inside this unit of substance, this sentient being floats in the Universe with others under the same space and time. The essence of this unit of being is mind and matter relationship, functioning systematically without any break. Consciousness, the state of knowing, is the main *essence of this unity*. Its supreme intention is to develop itself to the *absolute reality*—see thing *as no-ego or soul*, nothing but the organization of mind and matter.

During the time that this unity yet to reach the final goal, it needs interaction with others for the accumulation of merit (*puññā*) or the ten perfections (*pāramis*).²⁰ Once the psycho-physical unity completes the accumulation of all ten perfections at some point of time, then it can reach the final perfection, that is to say, seeing thing as they really are, known as *nibbāna*, or *anattā*.

The time that this psycho-physical being yet to emancipate itself from ten fetters is the most important stage of all living beings. This stage of life requires an association with all sentient beings for the good and perfection of itself and the others as a whole. It would be said that on the one hand, this stage of life needs doing good for other, on the other hand, accumulates perfections for itself in order to reach the final goal of life.

The psycho-physical unit depends on others for the perfection of itself. This dependence is one of the important factors in forming a community of people with similar ideas coming together to help one another in the growth of their personalities. Here, there arise *a give -and -take* of idea and good at a practical level. Thus, the religious

¹⁷ S.v.23

¹⁸ A.iii.14

¹⁹ Manimala, p. 192

²⁰ Jat.V.6, P.A., Payut Payutto ,2003

communities were born. The followers of the Buddha spurred on by the zeal to reach perfection and to escape suffering and its after-effects sought to live together as a community without self or ego.

The world, from the point of view of Buddhism, is the place where psycho-physical beings live together for avoidance evil and doing well for themselves and others as the accumulation of perfections to reach the final goal of life, that is to say, see things as they really are.

The ideology of man and the world according to Buddhism is to understand thing as the interconnected being, co-existing in all moments of living, each being incapable of isolation. Society in this perspective means the unity of all individuals living together under the same space and time. The supreme commitment of all individuals in society is to liberate themselves from all attachments. Peace and happiness of the society indicate that the individuals of that society are at peace.

From the statement above, it is said that society is the unity of individuals, having main commitment on the seeking of righteousness (*Dhammāadhipateya*) for peace, happiness and harmony to all. Man and society in this perspective, is the dynamism of awareness and comprehension (*sati-sampajañña*) throughout spectrum. Man, regarded as one unit of the whole unit of society who should realizes himself as one of many beings living in the universe as a unification of mind and body, functions through perceptual process, being consciousness (*viññāna*: the knowing, or realizing thing as it is), as the leading role of the process. In this sense, man lives on the middle way or the balanced lifestyle, does not intrude into the rights of other in the society, and follows the norms of society in accordance with social status to which he belongs, as being the social practice.

Sangha organization is regarded as the model of the ego free socio-political ideal of administration. Buddhist scholars hold that the *Sangha* organization is the socio-political ideal that the Buddha materializes from his notion of not-self. Thus, it would be said that the *Sangha* is a **model community** with love, compassion friendliness, and togetherness among members of the community, in other words, the *Sangha* is regarded as the concise and enlightened community that is based on the understanding the real nature of co-existence among members of community, which we also can find as the phenomenological basis for the *Sangha*. It was intended to be an inter-subjective living together of people who have realized the nullity of the world and their own ego, and having found the way to the summum boum of life, which directs others towards it.

4.3 Anattā: An alternative way to resolve Problems of Human Being

The problems that challenge the global community today such as fighting between religious groups, fanaticism, terrorism, ideological persecutions, chemical warfare and the proliferation of nuclear weapons, etc. This common root might be briefly characterized on placing short-term, narrowly considered self-interests (including the interests of the limited social or ethnic groups to which human being happen to belong) above the long-range, vital good of the broader human community. And what is distinctive about these drives is that they derive from a pernicious distortion in the functioning of the human mind which sends human being blindly in pursuit of factional, divisive, circumscribed ends even when such pursuits threaten to be ultimately self-destructive.

To mitigate such a huge problem and conflict at the current situation, the global community should open its mind to learn from being oneness and the other from the ***Sangha organization***. We have to learn to know all beings as equal entity and treat them with knowledge.

In short, one should treat neighbors with loving-kindness and compassion, but relate to nature and truth through learning and knowledge. This is the middle way for people to live peacefully with one another, while at the same time being free to proceed to search for knowledge and truth. The truths about the Buddha, the *Dhamma* and the *Sangha* will enlighten an aspiration in the realm of unity, equality and equanimity through the practice of *vipassanā* meditation, the unique feather of Buddhist meditation in the absence of a soul.

5. Conclusion

Buddhism believes that all the problems confronting human beings such as economic, social and political can be solved through the inner-realization of human beings. All aspects of human life are interconnected. The internal life is the most fundamental for human beings. If the mind is deluded and heedless, and it is ruled by ignorance, desire and conceit, it is impossible to clearly understand things as they are. Cleansing the mind and purifying the intelligence are necessary prerequisites for dealing with life and living.

Buddhism strikes a balance between spiritualism and materialism. As a practical idealist, the Buddha was deeply concerned about the welfare of all. The Buddhist solution to the present-day national and international turmoils lie in the spiritual quest starting from an ego-free approach to social and political problems, ending with a total identification of oneself with humanity as a whole. To resist and eliminate evil, the starting point is the self and the ending point also is the self. Universal social values begin from individual social values. The Buddha has been a perfect example of this Universal truth.

Justice and compassion, the basic principles of Buddhism, should be the workforce for the emancipation of every living being. From the Buddha, we learn that spirituality implies unity and unity implies the oneness of all creation. The concept of 'egolessness' helps to bring social changes that can sustain individual freedom and insight.

This is vast sphere for further research on the same theme and related topic, since this study has focused only on one theme, viz., non-soul. Soullessness may attempt to promulgate the social reliance of Buddhism in the modern context from the other moral, religious and even metaphysical points of view.

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