

The Doctrine of 'Non-Self' in Buddhism And the Benefit of its Practice

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A. Introduction:

The conception of 'non-self' (Pali: *anatta*) is the fundamental and central idea in Buddhism, it is the key element that distinguishes Buddhism from other religions, particularly from other Indian religious traditions during the time of the Buddha. *Anatta* is a composite word in Pali, with '*an*' meaning 'not or without', and '*atta*' meaning soul (de Silva 1979, 11), thereby *Anatta* clearly and directly displays the belief in Buddhism that there does not exist an underlying and permanent substance in human known by us as 'the soul.' Buddha Shakyamuni spoke of *the Doctrine of Anatta* in his second sermon after he attained enlightenment, after hearing it, his first five disciples attained arahathood (the state of perfection). The *doctrine of Anatta* has always been regarded as a significant corner-stone on which Buddha's teachings are built.

During Buddha's time, India had two types of schools, the annihilationist school and the externalist schools, each holding a different view towards the concept of soul but both are different to Buddha's theory of 'self'. The first believed that soul does not exist, nor do rebirth and karma, they understood death as the end and the living being is annihilated. Buddha criticised the danger in this theory as it could encourage material hedonism and cause moral corruption. The notion of '*anatta*' is not the same as the annihilationist belief as it acknowledges afterlife and rebirth, as well as karmic effects. Buddhism also distinguishes itself from the externalist school which posits an external soul in every living being.

In Buddha's forty-nine years of teaching, the doctrine of 'non-self' is certainly one of the most significant and enlightening theories expounded. It has been more common to believe that an eternal soul exists in man until Buddha brought forward the idea of '*anatta*'. In fact, the false notion of 'self' can evoke much harm and defilement, such as ignorance, covetousness, self-grasping, anger, pride, envy and many more, which all lead to the suffering of life. The Buddha was concerned about the lives of the people at the time and aspired to find a way to end human sufferings. After the attainment of enlightenment, Buddha realised the truth of all phenomena and that is the conception of '*anatta*', revealing the

underlying essence behind all manifestation. The conception of '*anatta*' involves two areas, the selflessness of persons and the selflessness of phenomena. Every existence is impermanent and illusory, yet man still strongly grasp onto them and do everything in their power to obtain them, this way of living undoubtedly causes much affliction and misery. Buddha conveyed the idea of non-self so as to help sentient beings to see through the truth of existence and to let go of their craving, with practice, all can break free from the sufferings of samsara.

The teaching of 'non-self' orients at attaining liberation from renouncing the habitual mind of 'self-grasping' and 'craving'. It was also a way to improve the moral standards in society at the time of the Buddha, as it encouraged people to look within themselves rather than pursuing and attaching to external gain. This fact reflects the humanistic aspect of Buddhism.

This paper will begin by examining the theoretical foundation of '*anatta*', that is the theory of 'dependent origination'. This theory is comparable to the creation of all things except there is not an external force or a Creator behind the whole process, it is a process controlled by the interactions of various conditions. Then the formation of existence and the law of Karma will be discussed. The last part of this paper will focus on the possible harm of strong 'self-grasp', the benefits of practising the concept of 'non-self' in our lives and its contemporary significance on a wider scale.

B. The Doctrine of Non-Self

I. The Basis of the 'non-soul' Theory - Theory of Dependent Origination (arising)

Buddhism has its own unique theory of cosmic generation and that is the 'theory of dependent origination', sometimes translated as 'dependent arising'. The Buddha's main goal of teaching is to help all sentient beings emancipate from the sufferings of conditioned existence in samsaric life; such emancipation is known as liberation. Buddhism does not recognise the existence of a Creator or any divine being that created the world and is sustaining the universe; rather it believes that all things originate from the twelve links (nidana) of the chain of 'dependent arising' (Gethin 1998,141). So what is dependent and what is arising? The formation (arising) of all existence depends on the encounters of conditions, everything in the universe is a result of cause and effect. The state of existence is caused by the unceasing interaction and constant connection between all phenomena, so it cannot be considered a true substance of being, but is merely given the so-called name of 'dependent origination.' All phenomena are of illusory nature as their emergence is only a

result of the gathering of required conditions for origination and will perish very rapidly, so they cannot be perceived as real. The Buddha taught in the *Diamond Sutra* that a Buddhist practitioner should perceived the body and mind as a dream, an illusion, a bubble, a shadow, and their existence as brief as the existence of dew drops and lightning flash, for all phenomena only arise from the gathering of causes and conditions (CBETA: T08n0235, trans. M. Sun). So just how fast might this occurrence be? It is said in *the Sutra of Benevolent Kings* that ‘there are ninety split-seconds in a moment, and within a moment, each split second experiences nine hundred rounds of its arising and passing away. The manifestation of all phenomena abides by this law (CBETA: T08n0245, trans. M. Sun).’ The unawakened beings in the cycle of samsara do not have the capacity to see things moving at such an unimaginable speed, so they mistake all things being real, including ‘one-self’, but according to the Buddhist theory, they are really only successive illusory forms very rapidly arising and passing away in a flash as a result of the karmic force triggered by relevant conditions; all phenomena are conditioned and become a form of emptiness once it completes its cycle of arising-and-passing away, one example would be an illness that causes the death of the human body.

The theory of ‘dependent origination’ without a doubt constitutes the Buddhist cosmic view on the creation of all things in this world and beyond; it offers profound significance in the doctrine of Buddhism. As mentioned earlier, causality operates in line with twelve conditions that link (nidana) the chain of ‘dependent origination’, an understanding of the relationship and connection between these conditions will provide an expedient application for Buddhist practice in which one will possess better informed awareness of the conditions when dealing with everyday life situations and hence will be less inclined to grasp strongly onto what is considered illusory. So what are exactly the twelve conditions that play the significant role in the occurrence of ‘dependent origination’? They are namely ignorance, formation, consciousness, mind-and-body, the six senses, sense-contact, feeling, craving, grasping, becoming, birth, old age and death. The twelve conditions are the causes that interact with one another, forming a link that creates the illusory existence. The Buddha deduces the link from ‘old age and death’; death occurs because there was birth, birth is conditioned by becoming, becoming is the result of grasping, grasping originates from craving, craving is conditioned by feeling, feeling is conditioned by sense-contact, sense-contact is evoked by the six sense, the six senses arise from mind-and-body, mind-and-body is conditioned by consciousness, consciousness is caused by formation, and formation is conditioned by

ignorance (Gethin 1998, 141-142). This sequence of causality clearly shows that ignorance is the source of all 'dependent origination', the extinction of ignorance can subsequently cease all arising (CBETA: T01n0001_001). The chain of the twelve links shows the nature of impermanence (*anicca*) in all things, everything we possess, including our lives, follow this law; the fragments of the chain provide each other with the conditions required for temporary existence and in this way, all existence are within a causal cycle and are ever arising and passing away. This also brings out the Buddhist theory of impermanence, this will be discussed in more detail later. The notion of 'self' for all sentient beings is in fact only a product of causal connectedness, it cannot sustain itself independently, the continuity of its existence relies on the twelve conditions and is merely temporary. Thus would it not be unreasonable to perceive such temporary, ever-changing and impermanent 'self' as a true substance of being? The theory of 'dependent origination' does indeed provide a good foundation to the understanding of the doctrine of 'non-self.'

II. The Five Pancakkhandhas (The Five Aggregates)

What elements constitute a man if his temporary existence is condition-dependent, and does man have ownership of these elements to call them true partial existence of the 'self'? The classic Theravada Pancakkhandha theory has the answer to those questions. It is said that each individual consists of rupa (matter), vedana (sensation or feeling), sanna (perception), samkhara (mental states or activities) and vinnana (consciousness), they are commonly known as 'the five aggregates'. A brief description of each aggregate will be given in order to enhance our understanding on why the aggregates should not be identified as part of the so-called 'self'. First of the five aggregates is Rupa (matter), consisting of four primary elements, earth (solidity, compactness of matter), water (liquidity), fire (heat and cold, all range of temperature), air (distension and motion); overall, Rupa embodies the dynamic aspect of matter. Secondly, the vedana (sensation or feeling), comprising the six sense, they are sight, hearing, smell, touch, taste and mind. Thirdly, the sanna (perceptions), it is the faculty responsible for receiving impressions of physical and mental objects. The impressions here are of colour and shape, sound, odour, taste, touchable things, and non-mental objects. Fourthly, the samkhara (mental states or activities), apparently, the Buddha mentioned fifty mental activities but the English language is not able to give the exact connotation carried by its original Pali term. The fifth aggregate is vinnana (consciousness). It is a reaction that has a basis from one of the six faculties and an object from one of the six external phenomena. Consciousness is believed to be pure sensation and should not be misinterpreted as the

definition for ‘mind’ from the Western thought, for ‘mind’ has content and is active. Therefore, consciousness always depends on one of the senses and an object of sense, it cannot arise alone. For instance, the hearing consciousness is formed by pure consciousness, along with the sense of hearing, an object of hearing and sound. Consciousness has been described as a mirror that reflects whatever is placed in front of it (de Silva 1979, 19-20). The combination of the five aggregates manifests certain forms and such formation is given a name, thus every existence has nama-rupa (name and form); however, none of the elements in the five aggregates are permanent, so when they disintegrate, the so-called nam-rupa, person, or ego cease to exist. Hence, the theory of Pancakkhandha theory reinforces the conception of ‘non-self’.

Agama Sutra puts an emphasis on the elucidation of the Five Aggregates; through analysing and explicating the impermanent nature of each of the aggregates, it demonstrates that the aggregates do not represent ‘my existence’ (CBETA:T02n0099). *The Discourse on the Not-self Characteristic (Anatta-lakkhana Sutta)* states Buddha’s view on the emptiness of the five aggregates. Buddha said that ‘if form, feeling, perception, determination and consciousness were self and permanent, then they would not lead to affliction or change, one could determine how they are. So, any kind of form, feeling, perception, determination and consciousness arisen, whether past, present or future, whether in oneself or external, whether lofty or low, whether far or near, one must understand that the reality is that “This is not I, this is not myself.”’ (*Anatta-lakkhana Sutta* 1993, trans. Ñānamoli Thera).’ The significance of the Pancakkhandha theory is also clearly explicated in the famous chariot illustration in the conversation between Arahāt Nagasena and King Milinda (Pesala eds. 2001, 32 - 34).¹ In this conversation, Venerable Nagasena guides King Milinda to realise that the notion of self is perceived as real because we mistakenly identify one of the aggregates as the so-called self. When we say ‘I’, what we are really referring to is the combination of the aggregates or anyone of them, but we are often deluded that the referred aggregate or aggregates was ‘I’. De Silva used a rather interesting analogy that if one cannot say the fragrance of the lotus belonged to its petals, colour or pollen, then one cannot say the rupa was ‘I’ or any other of the five aggregates was ‘I’ (de Silva 1979, 23). Indeed, ‘I’ is nowhere to be found in the five aggregates.

¹ Due to the length of this paper, the full text of the passage will not be quoted here. Please refer to reference for details.

III. The Purpose of Practising *Anatta*: Cessation of *Dukkha* is based on the Realisation of *Anatta* and *Anicca*

'*Anicca*' means impermanence, '*dukkha*' means suffering, pain or unsatisfactoriness. The false notion of a permanent 'self' is believed to be the root cause of *dukkha*. As demonstrated earlier, the fact of *anicca* corroborates the conception of *anatta* as the transient nature of the five aggregates does not provide the conditions for a permanent substance of being. The delusion of a permanent nature of all phenomena entices one's craving (*tanha*) for existence ensuing *dukkha* in birth and decay; as stated in the Samyutta Nikaya, 'the arising of suffering and the manifestation of decay and death is the effect of the arising and presence of materiality, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness. Hence the Buddha points out whoever finds delight in materiality, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness, he finds delight in suffering, thus cannot be liberated from suffering (CBETA: N14n0006, trans. M. Sun).' So if one wishes to cease the experiences in all forms of *dukkha*, then one must forgo the belief of 'the self'; contemplating in the Noble Eightfold Path is the practice taught by the Buddha to stop one clinging to the notion of self, hence ending suffering, but this is another part of the Buddhist doctrine and will not be discussed in further detail in this paper.

It is not difficult to observe the constant occurrences of *anicca* in one's everyday living. Whether material or mental, things and situations never remain the same, this finds a nice parallel in the famous saying by the ancient Greeks that 'the only constant in life is change'. The characteristics of *anicca* also applies to periodical destruction of world-systems (de Silva 1979, 27), let alone the smaller things around us. The theory of 'dependent origination' highlights that the arising of all phenomena is condition dependent and a result of cause and effect, this idea reveals the impermanent and illusory nature of all things. The Buddha saw the uncertainty of life as the effect of this law; hence he expounded the 'Noble Truth of Suffering' first in his teaching of 'the Four Noble Truth' (CBETA: T12n0375). *Dukkha* is considered as a part of the conditioned worldly life, the beauty of the world as well as the joy of life are bound to pass away someday, they are merely illusory forms of transient nature, one does not have permanent control over the things in one's life. Eternal happiness cannot be found in what is ever-changing and unpredictable, hence worldly life reflects *dukkha*. Ageing is the suffering of becoming old and frail; most significantly, man is moving towards the end of life the minute he is born. Life has a limit and it also corresponds to the law of 'origin and decay' so it is not unreasonable to say it exists to perish. Throughout the process of ageing, one may experience the suffering of unexpected illness. What follows is the

passing of life, nothing in this world one seemingly had once owned can be taken away with him. Man has the knowledge of death but cannot prevent it from happening. It is every man's instinct to live on but when the time of death comes, no one can defy, our body is, without exception, a formation of the five aggregates that arise and pass away in due time. So life is impermanent and we can never truly have full control of it. In fact, the encounters of an old man, a sick man and death were three of the four sights that inspired the then Prince Siddhartha to realise the impermanence of life and to begin his journey on finding ways to end the causes of human suffering. Some of the other forms of suffering mentioned in the teaching of *dukkha* entail sorrow, lament, association with disagreeable people, separation from loved ones, and not being able to get what one wants. Man's desire is endless because they perceive themselves and everything around them as permanent and real entities, therein self-grasping towards all things is invoked by the false notion of 'self'.

It is evident that *anatta*, *anicca* and *dukkha* are intimately interconnected, one cannot be fully understood without relating it to the other two, with *anatta* and *anicca* having a direct effect on *dukkha*. The sensation of *dukkha* is experienced when man is trapped in samsaric life as a conditioned existence, their misconception of a permanent world and the strong will to continue to exist induces much craving (*tanha*), leading to all kinds of suffering (Abe 1995, 74). The possibility of non-existence can be threatening so that one may become further clung to the false understanding of an eternal soul, but 'decay' is bound to take place wherever there is an origination. This state of existential anxiety is also a cause of *dukkha*. So to eradicate *dukkha*, one ought to work from the underlying cause and realise that *anicca* is inherent in what is mostly intimate to one and that is the so-called 'self'. When one comes to believe that even the so-called 'self' is impermanent, then it is much easier to realise that the external things are also impermanent and thereby let go. Hence, the realization of *anatta* is the ultimate key to freedom from *dukkha*.

During the time of the Buddha, his disciples were constantly reminded of the impermanent nature of all conditioned phenomena, mental and material, that are subject to continuous arising and passing away. Buddha's last words before entering nirvana were also a reminder of this truth. He stressed that if one wishes to be liberated from conditioned existence then one must be mindful that all compounded things are subject to decay (de Silva 1979, 27). This gives prominent weight to this theory as it was Buddha's final teaching and advice.

IV. Who is reborn in the cycle of samsara if *anatta* was true?

One may ask: who is reborn in the cycle of samsara if Buddhism does not acknowledge the existence of an immortal soul? In fact, the operation of the process of reincarnation does not require the permanent existence of a ‘soul’ per se, as rebirth is also a form of ‘dependent origination’. More precisely, sentient beings move between rebirths according to the actions of their intentional deeds in one life time, good or bad, those deeds become the conditions for origination and are stored in their psyche (more commonly known as consciousness in Buddhism) leading to future effects (rebirth). This is known as the law of Karma governing the process of samsara (Harvey 2013, 39). So Buddhism does not believe that there need be an author external to one’s act, or a thinker external to one’s thoughts, or a creator behind one’s consciousness; the act, thoughts and consciousness are the author in themselves as they are the recipients of karma. Karma is the general term given to all the activities or deeds that are good or evil, the generators of karma are our body, speech and mind. As the Buddha stated in the *Dhammapada Sutra*, “I speak of *cetana* (intention) as Karma; the force of *cetana* inherent in all sentient beings drive them to generate karma through their body, speech and mind (CBETA: N26n0009, trans. M. Sun).” Each sentient being dwells in the causal cycle of death and rebirth under the karmic force of their past actions, during this process, karma is unceasingly transmitted through the on-going movement of the consciousness of a being from one life to another. Previous karma is stored and inscribed in the repository of one’s consciousness while it receives new karma; when their corresponding dependent conditions mature, the effects of the karma will manifest themselves. The end of life does not mean the end of the movement of one’s consciousness. When the moment of death arrives, the physical body loses its liveliness as the five aggregates disintegrate and the active consciousness leaves; but the energy of the consciousness continues to move until it finds the conditions that respond to the karma generated. Consciousness enters a compounded entity and continues to operate. So the driving force of rebirth does not come from materialistic compound, but is condition dependent. Like when a rolling ball collides with a stationary ball, the stationary ball takes the force exerted by the rolling ball and begins to move forward. In this scenario, energy transfer moved the stationary ball, the movement was not caused by the actual object of the moving ball. Similarly, the nature of cause and effect drives the movement of rebirth; an ideal permanent existence of a ‘soul’ is not a requirement for the occurrence of this event. Therefore, reincarnation, as understood in Buddhist theory, is not the reincarnation of the

‘soul’ but that of the consciousness influenced by karmic force. In this sense, the doctrine of ‘non-self’ does not contradict the concept of *samsara*.

The originator of Karma and the recipients of its effects should not be differentiated as two entities, they are merely two different stages of existence in one life continuum. The energy of consciousness is unchanged but the new form of existence is not exactly the same as the previous one. For instance, after a child has become an adult, the adult cannot be considered entirely the same as when s(he) was still a child, there must have been changes in cells, physique and thoughts, however, it is also incorrect to say they are not the same because they do belong to the same life entity. This entity progresses and is ever-changing, and the adult has to bear the consequences carried down from his younger days. If the child signifies one’s current life, then the adult signifies rebirth. When the so-called death happens, the material body perishes but it is merely a manifestation of karmic effect; upon rebirth, a new material body arises. Although there seem to be very obvious changes in material matter, but the unseen stream of consciousness is not slightest damaged by the factors of death; rather, it carries the karma generated and streams onto one’s subsequent existence in the same life continuum. Karma is also ever-changing, from one origination to another, so there is not an eternal entity, namely the ‘soul’, to bear the changing karma in the cycle of death and rebirth. Every conditioned existence is responsible for their action and the consequences it brings.

All in all, Buddhism affirms the concept of *samsara* based on causality, but denies the permanent existence of the ‘soul being reborn in the cycle of reincarnation. The Buddhist conception of ‘*anatta*’ reflects the belief that conditioned phenomena do not possess an eternal and unchanging entity, but this does not mean Buddhism refutes the manifestation of all existence. The doctrine of ‘the two truths’ identifies truth on two levels, conventional truth and ultimate truth. The conception of ‘*anatta*’ belongs to the ultimate truth while the manifestation of *samsara* is interpreted from the perspective of conventional truth, the two are not conflicting. The physical existence of sentient beings is recognised by the Buddha; under conventional truth, man who are constituted by the compound of the five aggregates do manifest existence in this world, Buddhism does not deny this fact. The notion of the ‘self’ provokes strong ‘self-grasping’ in man, leading to all kinds of evil deeds. Buddha realised this problem, so he explicated the conception of ‘*anatta*’ to help man overcome self-ego and craving.

C. The Benefit of Practising the notion of ‘Anatta’ and its Contemporary Significance

I. Harm in Attaching to the Erroneous View of ‘self’

Venerable Walpola Rahula once expressed his view that all the evils in the world is due to the erroneous view of the self. The imaginary idea of ‘self’ enhances selfishness, craving, egoism and many other problems and defilements; it can be understood as the source of troubles in this world, from disharmony between people to conflict on a global scale (de Silva 1979, 25). Indeed, the notion of the true existence of ‘self’ has been too strongly ingrained in the mind of mankind; they can hardly imagine this idea being the possible source of human affliction. The notion of an unchanging ‘self’ can engender defilements such as attachment, envy, aversion, pride and so on, incurring all kinds of emotional and physical pain. Ever since man became attentive to self-conscious existence, a sense of ego separates one from all that is external to oneself; the ‘self’ locates itself at the centre of the world and regards others as its objects (Abe 1995, 64). Self-centeredness urges the fast expansion of greed, anger and ignorance within man, known as the three unwholesome roots in Buddhism; there seems to be no end in human desire and much misery is endured for its fulfillment.

Man’s sense of self-grasping derives from the realisation of self-consciousness which is a product of social development throughout human history; nonetheless, it has made great contribution to the building of civilization. The recognition of ‘self’ has encouraged goal-oriented way of thinking, consequently bringing immense material wealth to humanity. The satisfaction and pleasure acquired from the abundance of materialistic enjoyment and the convenience of living are currently at an unprecedented level. The arising of a goal-oriented mindset reflects the advancement in human perception and cognition, enabling rapid growth in human creativity and innovation in their obtainable scope of time and space, ensuing in the establishment of modern industrial civilization and modern technology. However, all of these achievements have become the cause for inflated desire in man. We always want more and are never satisfied with what we have accomplished; we always seek to go beyond, with the development of new projects and unstoppable over-exploitation of natural resources for our selfish purposes. Self-centeredness has not only caused tension between people, but also between man and nature. When dealing with the nature, the character of self-centeredness makes man believe that all earthly resources should be at their disposal, for the value of its existence is to provide for human consumption. Nature has value in its own right whether its existence benefits humans or not, but man often disregard nature’s intrinsic value and use it

as an instrument to fulfill their covetousness. Global demand for natural resources has increased significantly since the beginning of the 20th century, endless plundering and exploitation have been imposed on nature. As a result, various environmental issues and ecological crises have emerged with unforeseeable consequences; global warming, desertification, species extinctions and air pollution are among the very many damages that the people of this world and their future generations need to face. Environment degradation directly puts the living environment of man at risk; being the culprit of the entire situation, men only have themselves to blame as they strive to pamper the imaginary entity of 'self'.

The advancement in our science and technology has maximised the power of human, allowing man to do so many things that the ancestors could have never possibly imagined. However, unexpectedly, our level of happiness has not shown a positive correlation to the improvement in material lives. The overemphasis and attention given to materialistic pleasure has resulted in man's negligence of the need for a spiritual life. Misery caused by loss of self-identity is becoming more and more prevalent in today's society. Identity loss is attributable to objective and subjective reasons. Objectively speaking, heavy workload and a fast paced lifestyle can impose enormous stress and tension to one's life; but at the same time, one can be too engrossed in the pursuit of wealth and power, and become enslaved and obsessed in materialism and self-indulgence. These factors are enough to make a person lose oneself in his/her identity. Another problem is associated with the rising of egoism in man. In the new age, fast developing economy, as well technology and science, are providing so many new opportunities for individuals to enhance their potential efficacy and to develop their talent. This can be very beneficial for the society if people used their ability to make positive contributions to the world and humanity, and find self-worth in doing so. However, a large mass of people have been ensnared in 'self-grasping', so to them, individual success is the utmost important and should always come before the benefit and success of others. When man continues to live this way, the condition of egoism will keep growing to the extent that winning and competing with others become their purpose of life and self-actualisation. This is a typical example of the loss of self-identity. The erroneous view of 'self' has certainly done much harm to man, making them sparing no effort in filling in the gaps of desire only to find it's a bottomless pit. This is the root-source of human suffering (*dukkha*).

II. Personal Happiness Can be Achieved by Weakening the Thought of ‘self’

The Buddhist doctrine of ‘non-self’ has certain enlightening significance in the alleviation of human suffering in contemporary society. Its theory builds on the basis of the ‘dependent origination’ nature of all phenomena, negating the existence of any form of permanent entity in this world. The notion of ‘no self’ fundamentally opposes the perception of a real ‘self’; the awareness of this fact can help man leave their goal-oriented mindset and thereby change their utilitarian attitude towards life and guide them to regard all things around them in a non-possessive manner. When one is able to let go of ‘self-grasping’ and see through the truth of impermanence, then one will be less likely to rely on and crave for materialistic pleasure, in other words, s(he) has escaped from being controlled by external factors. Such state of mind can give true freedom and peace to one’s life.

The transient existence of worldly ‘self’ is formed by the five aggregates of ‘matter’, ‘feeling’, ‘perception’, ‘mental activities’ and ‘consciousness’, the notion of ‘non-self’ indicates non-existence of the five aggregates as they are impermanent; deliberation on this concept will help one to not strongly cling on ‘self-consciousness’ and reduce the traits of ‘self-centeredness’. The condition of ‘greed’ for self-indulgence and personal gain will diminish, which will in turn develop kindness towards others. This change of mentality can generate positive outcomes on the building of one’s moral character, as well as on society. Living a life without strong attachment to the idea of ‘self’ can lead to true happiness, enabling man to find true value to life, for one will be content with what one has and not have to suffer from endless unfulfilled desire. As for personal moral cultivation, the practice of ‘non-self’ will initiate the renunciation of much defilement, such as greed, self-grasping and pride. After the renunciation of greed, one will not purposefully harm others to attain one’s goals; after the renunciation of ‘self-grasping’, one will take things as they come with a composed state of mind, and will no longer be stuck in one’s own ways; after the renunciation of ‘pride’, one will become more compassionate and humble so that egoism may be gradually forsaken. These are some of the possible changes and benefits that the practice of contemplation on ‘non-self’ can deliver on a personal level, guiding man to enjoy a life of serenity and harmony without the disturbance of stress and incessant craving for external pleasure. In the long run, this change will not only increase a sense of personal happiness, but the positive energy from an individual can also influence others and the community in a constructive way. Certainly, not every practitioner of the notion of ‘non-self’ can receive recognition and admiration from others and this notion may not even be accepted as a virtue

or a positive gesture by some non-Buddhists. People may think it's foolish and misunderstand those who practise. Regardless of what others think, the enjoyment of life from the realisation of inner tranquility and peace may be sufficiently rewarding to overcome any obstacles.

III. The Role of 'Anatta' in the Alleviation of Social Instability and Conflict

Despite the strong advocacy of equality in contemporary society, social stratification still exists, unobtrusively in some places and more openly and evident in other. Throughout history and even to this day, it is not uncommon to witness discrimination, oppression and exploitation imposed by the rich to the poor, the powerful to the weak. The resentment, dissatisfaction and repressed anger from the disadvantaged have been accumulated over centuries, provoking the happening of countless riots and protests. This way of handling mistreatment could intensify conflicts and prejudices. As a result, conflicts in the areas of religion, politics, race and ethnicities, and finance are ever on the rise around the world, causing man immense pain and sorrow, misfortune and anxiety. Regardless of who holds the right reasons to fight, wherever there is conflict, there is rigid belief in the real existence of 'me' and 'mine', whether they are the culprits or the defenders. So it is reasonable to contend that social unrest throughout human history lies in the strong attachment to the notion of 'self'.

The accomplishment of the contemplation of 'non-self' is often compared to the act of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva, who signifies the embodiment of ultimate compassion shown to all the suffering sentient beings. Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva is an enlightened being who has renounced the notion of 'self' and is devoted to delivering all sentient beings from suffering whenever and whatever is needed. One who practices the notion of 'non-self' is advised to follow the example of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva. When facing and treating others, one should harbour mindfulness of compassion and the pure intention of helping sentient beings to overcome their troubles and worries. One should regard others as the same entity as "oneself"; it is reasonable to think this away according to the nature of 'dependent origination. If all beings are a composition of the five aggregates, then they are not at all any different from one another despite the illusory external differences such as skin colour, social status or gender. Practitioners of 'non-self' would not segregate themselves from the other but rather show enthusiasm and undertake tasks that could benefit others and the community. Consequently, conflict situations will find no dependent factors to take place, instead, a friendlier and more harmonious and caring living environment, free of selfish motives and

intolerance, can be shared and enjoyed by all. Fundamentally, humanity aspires for a society of peace and order and a life of happiness and love. On a wider scale, the practising of the notion of '*anatta*' could assist in the restoration of social stability by awakening the morals and ethics in man. Because if one does not cling to what is only beneficial for oneself, s(he) will also do what is beneficial for others. The positive effects of this practice will allow man to experience the joy of selfless acts; if all embrace the same attitude of 'non-self' and treat others as how one wants to be treated, humanity can build a harmonious world together.

In *the Diamond Sutra*, Venerable *Subhuti* asks the Buddha how one subdues one's false mind (trans. Bhiksuni Heng Ch'ih, 1974). Buddha's answer to this problem is that one needs to cultivate a mind of compassion in order to subdue the false thoughts of defilement. A false mind arises from grasping onto the notion of a true existence of 'self' and of other; the misinterpretation that 'I' am an entirely separate entity from others would ensue in the erroneous strong attachment to 'me' and to what belongs to me. In this mindset, one will be inclined to protect one's benefit and defend one's standpoint, thereby experiencing afflictions caused by quarrels and conflict with others. The false mind bears selfishness and narrow-mindedness that are capable of generating negative emotions such as covetousness, anger, doubt, ignorance and many more. This negative state of mind is not only harmful to our mental health but also our physical health; moreover, behaviour and character derived from this mentality can hardly attract others' trust, support and affection. So it will be very difficult to achieve happiness in life if one uses the false mind to deal with day to day encounters. The Buddha teaches Bodhisattvas to renounce the attachment of 'self' and aspire to treat all sentient beings with compassion, as this approach can subdue the defilements of a false mind.

The phenomenon of the so-called 'self' is not sustained independently, but formed by a combination of dependent conditions. Thus 'I' am part of all phenomena and all phenomena exist in me, each individual plays an important role in the manifestation of all things. Everything in this world, including the so-called 'me', live interdependently in a shared existence, hence we are of equal significance and should treat one another with equality and kindness. Selfishness and narrow-mindedness derived from the strong grasping of individual significance and happiness will diminish when the cultivation of compassion and the broadening of horizon progress. The Buddha taught the doctrine of 'non-self' for the purpose of reminding sentient beings the impermanence of 'self', so that evil deeds are not done to satisfy the cravings generated by the imaginary 'me', as complete departure from craving is required if one wishes to break the cycle of *samsara* and attain *Nirvana*.

D. Conclusion

The reconciliation between the doctrine of '*anatta*' and the concept of *samsara* is probably the most debatable issue among Buddhist scholars. It has been argued in this paper that the recognition of 'non-self' is not to deny the event of reincarnation, one thing to be clarified is that the transient existence in the cycle of *samsara* is not a permanent substance of being but a combination of the five aggregates that change incessantly. Reincarnation is governed by the karmic force carried by such transient existence. So it is not an unchanging soul that moves from one life to another in the cycle of *samsara*.

Buddha's teaching is neither of annihilationist nor of externalist, as they are still under the false opinion of 'I have' or 'I have not'. The concept of '*anatta*' views all things objectively from the perspective of their mental and physical aggregates in a continuous process of change bound by the law of cause and effect. The Buddhist doctrine of 'non-self' displays the truth of the impermanent and 'dependent origination' nature of existence, of persons and phenomena. It is only by the realization of this truth can one overcome the habitual behaviour of 'self-grasping', and it is only by forsaking this defilement can one transcend the cycle of death and birth and thereby attain *nirvana*. Not only is this doctrine useful for Buddhists, any non-Buddhists could also follow this mindset and practise in their everyday life for serenity and inner peace.

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