

## 6.6 Anattā(Non-Self)

The Buddhist concept that the experience of a distinct self is an illusion.

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According to Buddhism, the source of suffering is the illusion of self—that is, the ubiquitous belief that there exists a unique, separate, and unchanging part inside us that constitutes a consistent “Me” and to which things happen. This makes everything, including suffering, personal—we find ourselves thinking, “I am suffering,” which in turn increases our suffering. Buddhists believe this is a trick our mind plays on us and that when we observe reality experimentally, we will discover that this “Me” is illusory. If you want to reduce or eliminate your suffering or just to know yourself in the deepest sense, this belief is worth exploring.

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- Experiencing the self as merely an illusion can allow us to weather pain more easily without compounding it by heaping needless suffering on top.
- The idea that others also lack a definitive self can reduce the need to blame and judge them, defusing situations that might otherwise lead to conflict.
- There is an intrinsic value in seeing things as they truly are.

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- The concept that there is no self seems to go against our usual experience, making it hard to understand, trust, and apply.
- The road to encountering the non-self is not always clear, and instructions on attaining this state can seem nonsensical before one experiences it.
- Can be misapplied, leading to nihilism and a loss of meaning.

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Proponents of anattā suggest many different routes to the realization of selflessness, ranging from meditation (see Tool 6.1), listening to spiritual teachers, psychedelic drugs, experiments such as the Headless Way, and many more. The key thing to understand here is that you don’t currently have a self that you are seeking to lose. Rather, there already is no self—indeed, there never has been—and the key to recognizing this is a change of perspective revealing that you are not the illusory self you may appear to be. However, this is not something you are asked to believe in as an act of faith but rather something you should test out on your own.

Therefore, the realization of anattā always takes place in the present moment. But, for most of us, it slips away repeatedly. We forget that we are not ourselves, and the illusion raises its head all over again. The only way to address this is to be mindful in every moment in order to repeatedly wake up to this reality. Indeed, the very goal of reaching a state of permanent freedom from this illusion, otherwise known as enlightenment, is a story that distracts us from being free in the here and now (see Tool 6.7: Enlightenment Is Always Now).

Also, be aware that the realization of anattā is not binary. It's entirely possible to loosen our identification with our sense of self gradually or partially, which can lessen the experience of suffering. Any move in this direction can help, even if we cannot wholly accept that we are without a self.

#### 4

1. A related concept, dependent origination: "Pratītyasamutpāda":  
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prat%C4%ABtyasamutp%C4%81da>
  2. "Emptiness, or Śūnyatā": <https://lionsroar.com/b:uddhism/emptiness-sunyata/>
  3. "Anattā to Śūnyatā": <https://multisubjectjournal.com/article/112/4-1-11-448.pdf>
  4. "Interdependence and Non-Self (Anattā)":  
<https://library.fiveable.me/introduction-buddhism/unit-6/interdependence-non-self-anatta/study-guide/WQcD3xI9EH5v6r2p>
  5. The Headless Way: <https://headless.org/>
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