No-self of inanimate objects

The Buddhist notion of impermanence is developed philosophically as *anatta* (Sanskrit *anatman*) or 'no-self', sometimes translated as 'non-self'. This is known as the third Mark of Existence. It is a difficult principle to understand and it is one which is unique to Buddhism. Whatever common ground we can find between all world religions, this is one point on which Buddhism differs from the rest.

Radical impermanence implies that nothing has an unchanging essence or 'self'. Buddhist thought makes no distinction between the core or essence of a thing, which is unchanging and has ontological existence, and its secondary qualities which may change and have only contingent existence. Instead, everything is process, and things are simply made up of lots of constantly changing parts and particles. Rupert Gethin puts it this way:

> *Buddhist thought understands change not in terms of a primary substantial essence remaining constant while its secondary qualities change, but solely in terms of the causal connectedness of different qualities. There is no primary substance to remain constant.* [i]

This is radically different from Plato's theory of Forms, for example, where the perfect Form of each thing exists unchanged in a separate dimension from that of empirical experience.

If we believe that things have an unchanging essence, and that change only affects their secondary qualities, then even if we chop a large branch off a healthy tree we would still consider that it remains a tree. It does not lose its 'treeness'. Its existence as a tree does not depend on the continued existence of all its parts. Likewise, in the case of a human being, if, through learning biology, I realise that hundreds of cells in my body have died compared with a moment ago, and hundreds of new cells have replaced them, I could consider that such a level of cellular change has no effect on who I really am. I continue to be me, with or without my cells; my identity has not changed; the true me is not dependent on the existence or non-existence of cells.

There are problems with this view for both Buddhist and non-Buddhist philosophers. If we take the example of the tree again, how much of a tree can you chop down before it ceases to be a tree? Two branches, three, all the branches, the trunk? And how much change and destruction can my body undergo before you might say that my identity has changed? It is very hard to know where to draw the line.

The 'no-self' of inanimate objects

Anatta means 'no essence' or 'no inherent existence'. This idea is linked to the Buddhist understanding of causality, the principle that everything in the universe – and the universe itself – comes into existence through the power of certain causes and conditions. A causes B, X causes Y, and so on; also, A causes B and B causes C, and so on. This is what is meant by *conditioned existence*: everything arises from causes and conditions. The implication of conditioned existence is that everything must therefore be impermanent. If

there is a chain of causes and effects this logically means that causes must exist before their effects; and, if this is so, it means that effects begin to exist from a particular point in time, and before that point they do not exist.

We can illustrate this in a simple chart, where T is a moment in time, and A, B and C are objects.

A ⇒	B	B ⇒	C
T_1	T_2	T_3	T_4
cause	effect	cause	effect

B does not exist at T1, nor does it exist at T4, so the existence of B has a clear beginning and end. It exists from the moment it is caused by something else until such moment as it produces its own effect. This model can be applied to a particular situation. 'A' could be a cherry seed; once planted, watered and fertilised, A produces B, a young sapling. Later, when all the growing conditions have been good, B produces C, a cherry tree. When the tree is fully grown the seed and sapling no longer exist. And at T1 when only the seed exists, the sapling and the tree do not yet exist. This example shows how, if things are caused by other things, they have to have a beginning and an end and are therefore impermanent. In other words, conditioned things are necessarily subject to time.

The Buddhist analysis goes one step further. Impermanence, in itself, is not enough to prove non-inherent existence because it could be argued that change only applies to a thing's secondary qualities and not to its essence. Buddhists must show why they do not think there are essences. They do this through reductionist analysis, that is, by logically breaking things down and reducing them to their parts, and by reaching the conclusion that things are merely the sum of their parts. Buddhists argue that the existence of a thing can be fully accounted for by its parts without the need for positing an unchanging essence. They point out that an essence is something one cannot perceive and of which we have no experience, so its existence cannot be validated either logically or empirically.

Example of the chariot

The classic example of this principle is found in *The Questions of King Milinda*. The monk Nagasena asks King Milinda what mode of transport he used to come and meet him, and his answer is 'a chariot'. He asks the king what a chariot is. Is it the axle, the wheels, the wooden frame, the yoke or the reins? Naturally, the answer is that none of these things on their own constitute a chariot. But if none of the parts are the chariot, where is the real chariot? The king replies:

> *"It is in dependence on the pole, the axle, the wheels, the framework, the flagstaff, etc., that there takes place this denomination 'chariot', this designation, this conceptual term, a current appellation and a mere name."*

Nagasena agrees with the king. He is saying that what we conventionally call a chariot only exists in dependence upon all the parts that make it up; if some or all of those parts were missing, there would be no chariot there. A chariot is not something that exists over and above the sum of its parts: it is simply a concept, a word that we apply when all the parts are assembled and function together in a particular way. One can go even further and conclude that there is nothing called 'chariot' that exists in actuality; 'chariot'

is simply a term used to designate a particular association of pieces of wood and metal. The corollary of this is also true: if we take all the pieces apart, or destroy them, then the 'chariot' no longer exists. Therefore, chariots only have conditioned existence: they exist in dependence on certain causes and conditions coming together in a particular way, and once those causes and conditions change chariots cease to exist.

A modern example of this would be a car. What is a car? Clearly it is not simply the tyres or the engine or the steering wheel, and so on, on their own. A car exists when all its parts are assembled in a particular way so that it functions like a car. So once the car gets old and we take it to the car breakers, can we still call it a car when it has no wheels, or no windows, or no engine, or no steering wheel? At what point, when we start taking it to pieces, does a car cease being a car? And once we have disassembled the entire car and there is nothing left but spare parts, is there still an 'essence of car' that exists? And if so where, how, and how do you know?

The principle put forward by Buddhist philosophy here is called dependent origination, dependent arising, conditioned arising or interdependence *(paticcasamuppada* in Pali, *pratityasamutpada* in Sanskrit*)*. All these terms mean that things arise or originate in dependence on causes. Nothing exists without a cause. One of the classic formulations of this idea in the scriptures is the following:

> *When this exists, that exists;*
>
> *From the arising of this, that arises;*
>
> *When this does not exist, that does not exist;*
>
> *From the cessation of this, that ceases. ii*

Nothing is unitary – nothing is just one single thing – everything is made up of numerous parts, so the existence of an object depends on the coming together of all its parts. This analysis demonstrates that the objects of our everyday world do not exist in the way we think they do, as substantially distinct entities. This is just how they appear to us, how we perceive them. This philosophical analysis enables us to make a distinction between the way things appear and the way they truly are. By reflecting and meditating on this, we mentally break down the phenomena that make up our world until we realise that they are as insubstantial as a dream, a mirage or a rainbow.

The philosophical analysis used in Nikaya Buddhism reduces the objects of our world to their parts, and so on down to the tiniest particles that things are made of. The conclusion of this reasoning is that there are only two types of reals: the infinitely small particles that join together to produce material things, and the infinitely small moments of consciousness that produce our stream of consciousness. Particles and moments of consciousness are therefore the building blocks of reality; they are the starting point of the causal chain. Logically they are considered necessary because otherwise, if things were reduced to their parts, and those parts further reduced to their parts, and so on, endlessly, the argument would fall into infinite regress. There never would be a starting point to causation. These two types of reals therefore make this theory of causation tenable.

Another modern example of interdependence is provided by chemistry. As we know, water is H_20; it is made of hydrogen and oxygen. There is no such thing as 'water' that exists apart from hydrogen and oxygen.

When its chemical parts come together in this particular way it has its own characteristic function – it flows, for example, and has a certain temperature – but likewise, if through a chemical experiment one separates the hydrogen from the oxygen, there will be no water there. If one extends this analysis further, one can see that water is not a distinct, substantial entity that is entirely different from, say, the air or the earth. Chemical analysis demonstrates that the elements that make up water (atoms and molecules of hydrogen and oxygen) are also present in the air and the earth, but in combination with other elements. It follows that everything in the world is interconnected; nothing is completely separate from anything else even though that is not how we usually perceive things.

From Discovering Buddhism *by Dominique Side*

Research and Discussion

To what extent does the Buddhist idea of no-self correlate with scientific theories of the nature of matter?

[i] Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism,* p.142-3.
[ii] Majjhima Nikaya, 1.262-264.