

UNITED WISDOM

Anātman and the Continuity of Experience

World and Consciousness

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What this article is about

Imagine someone reading a letter they wrote ten years ago. The handwriting is familiar and the circumstances recognisable, but the writer's confidence feels almost foreign. How could I have thought that? A minute later, another question follows: if I am different now, why does that old promise still concern me? A difficult boundary runs between these questions. We change, yet our lives do not fall apart into unrelated episodes. We recognise ourselves without necessarily finding an unchanging owner behind everything that happens.

The Buddhist concept of anātman invites us to examine this boundary without rushing to the claim that we do not exist. This article considers several early Pāli texts and distinguishes an unchanging self, the experience of being oneself, the conventional designation of a person, and the connection between actions and their consequences. We then ask what these distinctions might offer in ordinary life: when changing our beliefs, accepting responsibility, or describing our character. The contemporary situations are examples devised for this article, rather than accounts of Buddhist liberation. Continuity within one lifetime also provides no proof of rebirth; the religious question retains its own status.

1. Saying that we change does not settle the question

Anātman is the Sanskrit term; the Pāli form is anattā. In the Buddhist context considered here, it concerns the absence of a secure basis for treating the changing constituents of experience as an unchanging self. A person and such a self are different concepts: questioning the latter does not require us to stop recognising the former. SN 22.59 examines bodily form, feeling, perception, fabrications and consciousness through change and the absence of complete command. SN 22.59.

The old letter in our opening example presents several distinct tasks. We need to establish whether this person actually wrote it. We may ask why they thought as they did. We may decide whether a promise remains binding. Finally, we may look for a permanent core supposedly present in exactly the same way at every age. Confusion begins when an answer to one task is offered as a solution to all the others.

A change of belief, for example, does not make the letter a forgery. Similar handwriting does not establish an unchanging character. A legal obligation does not establish the existence of an

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immortal soul. Doubting such a soul does not, by itself, cancel an agreement. Each claim needs its own grounds; the familiar word “I” often conceals that work.

It helps to begin with a more precise question than a demand to choose between an eternal core and the complete disappearance of the person: what kind of stability do we mean here? Stability of a name, a memory, a habit, an obligation and a metaphysical entity are different matters. They may overlap, but using the same sentence to describe them does not make them identical.

This distinction does not promise a final solution to the philosophical problem. It removes some confusion before we discuss it. Sometimes that is enough to keep another person's “you have changed” from becoming proof of betrayal, and our own “I am different now” from becoming permission to forget what we have done.

2. Experience need not be treated as one indivisible lump

The five constituents named above are traditionally called skandhas, or khandhas in Pāli: groups or aggregates. This is a religious and philosophical framework for examining experience, rather than an anatomical map of the brain. Our interest is in distinguishing things that everyday speech can compress into a premature verdict about a person.

Imagine a woman in a work discussion. She hears a comment, feels an unpleasant tension, recognises a familiar tone, suspects contempt and prepares a sharp reply. A conclusion then arrives: they do not respect me, and I have always been too sensitive. That sentence combines an event, a bodily state, recognition, an assumption about someone else, an intention and a story about herself. The combination may feel persuasive, but that feeling does not verify each component.

Unpacking the situation produces questions we can actually investigate. What was said, word for word? What indicates contempt? What remains an assumption? What response is being prepared? Can she clarify the comment while keeping her own boundary? We are not proposing a Buddhist label for every item: this modern example does not reproduce the ancient classification in all its detail.

The point is not to defeat a feeling by giving it the correct name. An unpleasant experience still matters when our account of its causes needs checking. Nor must checking end in a conclusion convenient for the other person. Perhaps the comment really was contemptuous and requires a firm response.

Distinguishing the elements makes another outcome possible: someone may stop deciding their whole future on the basis of one conversation. Space opens between an event, how it is experienced, and a declaration of who they will be forever. That space is not empty. It can hold

further information, a choice of words and an observation of change. Experience remains our ordinary human experience, without requiring an immediate, definitive portrait of its owner.

3. Limited control does not mean helplessness

Questions about selfhood can quickly become arguments about power. If I cannot completely command my state, does anything depend on me at all? That conclusion confuses two different scales. The absence of absolute control does not establish the absence of limited influence.

Imagine a musician preparing to perform. They can rehearse, choose a programme, check the instrument and arrive on time. They cannot simply order themselves never to feel nervous for even a second. If their self-image requires complete inner obedience, the arrival of nervousness will feel like a defeat. The demands of performing acquire an additional struggle: proving that a real professional has total command of themselves.

A more accurate account does not make the musician passive. It helps them distribute effort. Preparation can improve. Unexpected circumstances can be considered. Some conditions can be negotiated with the organisers. Meanwhile, the demand never to have an unpleasant experience can cease to be the measure of their right to walk on stage.

The difference becomes especially clear after a mistake. Finding an insufficiently rehearsed passage and working on it is one thing. Treating the existence of a changing body as proof of personal inadequacy is another. The first conclusion points towards an action. The second delivers a verdict without making clear what could be done next.

We do not derive the whole Buddhist teaching from this example. It is a limited comparison of our own, separating influence from omnipotence. Conditions can be internal or external, and their distribution must be investigated in each case. Sometimes someone has already done what was available to them and the outcome is still unfavourable. Sometimes an appeal to circumstances conceals an action they could have taken. The word “conditions” does not decide which situation we face.

Careful attention to change is therefore compatible with activity. It may even make activity more precise: working where there is an actual means of influence, instead of endlessly checking whether we resemble an imagined master of every event.

4. The chariot: a name can work without a separate entity

In SN 5.10, the nun Vajirā uses the image of a chariot: its name depends on assembled parts, while the designation of a being depends on aggregates. The comparison occurs in a religious narrative involving Māra. It is not an experiment about consciousness. SN 5.10.

Extending the image in our own way, consider an ordinary bicycle. We can point to it, repair it, lend it to a friend and take responsibility for its safekeeping. None of this requires us to discover an additional object called the bicycle itself, hidden beyond the frame, wheels and their arrangement. Yet it would be strange to infer that our friend borrowed nothing and has nothing to return.

The comparison distinguishes a meaningful designation from a demand for a separate, unchanging entity. But a bicycle cannot provide a complete account of a person. People have experiences, histories of relationships, language, the ability to respond, and many other characteristics that the mechanical analogy does not capture. A useful metaphor illuminates one question while retaining its limits.

Similar care is needed with the word “conventional”. It need not mean arbitrary, fraudulent or worthless. A person's name is conventional in the straightforward sense that people use a system of designations. A request addressed to that person can nevertheless be very specific, and failing to fulfil it can hurt someone else.

Consider a promise to collect a child after school. We can discuss philosophically whether an unchanging bearer of the promise exists. While that discussion continues, the child is still waiting, and the question of who should arrive does not disappear. The problem of selfhood offers no free exit from relationships.

At the same time, the usefulness of a name does not prove an eternal core. We reach a more modest, workable conclusion: for many purposes, an identifiable connection among a body, a biography, actions and relationships is sufficient. A demand to find a further owner beyond these connections requires a separate argument.

5. Continuity concerns connections, rather than complete sameness

The title uses the word “continuity”, but we should not take it to mean an established, smoothly uninterrupted line of consciousness. Sleep, forgetting and gaps in our knowledge of our own past already make that description too strong. Here the concern is primarily with connections between stages of life that allow us to recognise a history and discuss its consequences.

Return to the reader of the old letter. An earlier choice may have led to a move; the move to a meeting; the meeting to an obligation that exists today. Present beliefs differ from earlier ones, but the difference does not destroy the sequence. The person need not approve of their old decision to acknowledge its part in their biography.

Another example devised for this article is a renewed friendship. Two people remember their shared past differently, correct their impressions of each other and make new agreements.

Continuity here does not mean identical memories. It is also sustained by meetings, correspondence, shared evidence and a willingness to investigate disagreements. Our story about ourselves may contribute to that work, without being its sole judge.

A third example is someone training for a different profession. They really are changing their skills, schedule and surroundings. Yet the training does not begin on a perfectly blank page: earlier working habits, financial circumstances and existing promises enter the new situation. The connection with the past may help or hinder. Either way, it calls for examination rather than a declaration that the past no longer exists.

These examples do not establish a single scientific criterion of personal identity. We are not resolving cases of severe memory loss or difficult legal questions. An attractive metaphor cannot settle them. A narrower conclusion is enough: change and connection do not logically exclude one another.

Someone can therefore acknowledge that they no longer think as they once did, then add that the consequences of their decision belong to their present life. That second statement leaves room for both responsibility and revision. The past ceases to be a person's eternal essence while remaining among the conditions they encounter today.

6. Consciousness cannot quietly become a travelling soul

Once a familiar conception of self is questioned, we may be tempted to move it somewhere less visible. The body and character change, but perhaps one consciousness remains unchanged behind them? In MN 38, the monk Sāti attributes precisely such a consciousness, travelling from birth to birth, to the teaching; his understanding is rejected. Consciousness is then examined in relation to the conditions of its arising. MN 38.

This sets an important boundary for interpretation. We cannot first say that there is no unchanging self, then quietly make consciousness the same unchanging owner under a different name. Changing the word does not change the argument. If a new concept performs all the old functions, we need to show why the old objections no longer apply.

Rejecting Sāti's particular understanding does not, however, entitle us to declare every later Buddhist debate about consciousness settled. We are working with the specified episode and its immediate context. A full history of those debates would require another article, other texts and more detailed distinctions.

It is equally important not to substitute a modern example of memory for rebirth. Today's action being connected with yesterday's does not confirm life after death. A religious teaching about such continuation cannot be presented as an empirical inference from recognising a school photograph. The opposite reduction also fails: an early text about repeated birth does

not become exclusively an account of changing moods because that adaptation suits a contemporary reader.

We can honestly retain several levels. One is the content of a religious source. Another is the philosophical problem of conditions and identity. A third is the everyday connection between decisions and consequences. They offer material for comparison, without constituting evidence for one another.

Keeping these levels distinct leaves the reader free to form their own worldview. Understanding the argument does not require them to accept rebirth in advance. Reading the source accurately does require them to acknowledge that its religious framework is present.

7. A changing person still encounters consequences

SN 12.17 discusses suffering through two extremes: complete identity between the agent and the experiencer, or their radical separation. It turns to dependent arising instead. This is religious reasoning, rather than a substitute for contemporary law. SN 12.17.

In ordinary life, a similar fork appears in conversations after harm has been done. Someone says they were a different person then. The statement may be honest. They may have revised their beliefs and stopped repeating the action. But the other person hears something else: do not bring what happened to me any more. Change becomes a way to end discussion of consequences.

The opposite error declares that having done something, a person must be that kind of person forever. A biographical event becomes an irreversible essence. Any later effort to put things right is discounted in advance, and discussion of a particular harm is replaced by a final description of its author. These errors can reinforce each other: condemnation encourages escape, and escape strengthens the desire to condemn.

Our proposed way out consists of several separate questions. What was done? What harm resulted? What does the person acknowledge now? What can be put right? What conditions would let us see whether change is expressed in action? And who may decline further involvement, even if the change is real?

The last question is essential. Taking responsibility gives someone no entitlement to trust, forgiveness or renewed relationships. The other person is also part of the situation; their decision cannot be deduced from someone else's account of inner renewal. Acknowledging change and restoring trust are different events.

This approach preserves connection without assigning an eternal character. The past is considered through consequences, evidence and action, while the future remains open to

investigation. That is harder work than choosing a slogan about an unchanging or disappearing person. It is also what makes a concrete discussion of repair possible.

8. Understanding an idea and feeling like a self are different events

In SN 22.89, Khemaka distinguishes not identifying the aggregates as self from a remaining sense of “I am”. The narrative shows that this distinction does not mark the completion of the path. We use it as religious testimony, rather than as a clinical model of personality. SN 22.89.

This caution is useful for a reader who understands a philosophical argument and immediately tests themselves against it. Why am I still offended? Why does recognition matter to me? Should I not have stopped defending myself already? Another image of the correct person emerges: someone now required never to feel personally touched by anything.

Imagine a writer whose article has been criticised. They can distinguish a comment about the text from a final judgement of their own worth. Yet tension still arises. Its presence alone does not show that the distinction is useless. It may have changed their response: instead of attacking, the writer asks for a specific example, recognises a useful observation and keeps the right to disagree with the rest.

In this contemporary example, the idea's significance appears in a change of available action, rather than in proof of spiritual attainment. The unpleasant feeling may remain. Another habit may become visible. It may take time before an old self-description stops governing every conversation. This article sets no compulsory deadline and assigns no level of realisation to the person.

It is more useful to examine particular events: could the writer separate the text from their worth, clarify the criticism, correct an error or acknowledge a limit? These questions require no certificate of selflessness. They provide grounds for noticing whether something meaningful has happened.

Intellectual clarity has value without being required to remake all experience immediately. Acknowledging that boundary allows learning without a performance of completion. A person may understand more than they can yet put into action, and still honestly continue the work.

9. We can say “I” without turning a description into a verdict

In SN 44.10, the Buddha answers Vacchagotta neither by affirming a self nor by denying one, and later explains to Ānanda why those replies would deepen misunderstanding. Silence in this episode neither proves a secret eternal self nor cancels the other texts. SN 44.10.

The contemporary inference is more modest than a universal theory: the form of a question can impose an unhelpful choice before we begin. Are you strong or weak? Are you selfish or a good person? Are you a real professional or an impostor? An answer may fix a label before we have examined the event. Sometimes it is better to clarify which situation is being discussed and the grounds on which it could be assessed.

This does not require a ban on the pronoun “I”. Statements of tiredness, agreement or refusal do intelligible work. They communicate a state, undertake an obligation or mark a boundary. Replacing all of them with impersonal constructions does not by itself deepen understanding. It may simply make conversation harder.

It is more useful to notice the movement from a report to an essence. Acknowledging that we did not manage a task on this occasion allows us to examine its difficulty and conditions. Calling ourselves incapable extends the result to the whole person. Being unwilling to agree describes a present position. Saying that we always ruin everything turns a few events into a universal law that still needs justification.

Sometimes a stable description is warranted: someone may know a preference or regularly notice a habit. The problem is not generalisation itself, but whether it closes off investigation and change. A person can say they find public speaking difficult and look for a suitable way to prepare. They can use the same sentence as a lifelong prohibition on trying. The words are identical; their consequences differ.

The question therefore concerns the function of the story, rather than its grammar. Does it help us distinguish what is happening, make agreements and act, or does it require us to defend a definitive portrait? Language about ourselves becomes more accurate when it remains connected with what is actually known.

10. Disidentification does not require devaluing a person

An examination of selfhood is sometimes made to support an excessively broad everyday conclusion: if no permanent owner of experience has been found, personal interests do not matter. Someone reporting pain is then told that there is nobody to suffer. A philosophical formula becomes a way of refusing to hear a person.

This article draws no such conclusion. We can doubt an unchanging entity while attending to experience, need, consent and the consequences of action. Discussing harm does not require us to settle the entire metaphysics of personhood first. Indeed, introducing metaphysics when someone is asking for help may make the conversation less precise: the specific question remains unanswered.

Imagine two people in a close relationship. One says they need some time alone. The other replies that their ego is creating separation. Calling a boundary selfish does not establish that it is unwarranted. Time, circumstances and agreements need discussion; consent cannot be derived from a philosophical proposition. Someone may keep their decision without defending a theory of an eternal soul.

An inward version of the same error is also possible. A reader begins to treat every preference as a spiritual shortcoming. They stop distinguishing a wish for recognition, a need for rest, an obligation and a fear of losing approval: all of them become one thing called ego. Such a universal label is poorer than the experience it replaces and gives little help in choosing an action.

Disidentification, when used in a limited contemporary sense, means the possibility of not reducing ourselves entirely to one state or story. It does not require us to seek a feeling of being unreal. If reflection becomes frightening, we may stop and return to ordinary activities; this article prescribes no practice of forcibly dismantling the sense of self.

Depth here is measured by the quality of distinctions. A person may become less bound to a definitive portrait without their life becoming less worthy of attention. Relationships, decisions and events still call for a response. This is precisely why discussing anātman can sharpen responsibility rather than weaken it.

What this means in practice

Return to the person with the old letter. They need not choose between having always been that way and claiming that it no longer concerns them. They can read the letter as evidence of a particular period, establish its consequences and separately decide which obligations remain. Change then becomes neither an accusation nor an excuse in advance.

For this reflection, we can choose one specific episode, rather than our whole life or the question of whether a person exists at all. It might be a promise that has become difficult to keep, a conversation followed by a definitive label, or a change of belief we want either to conceal or conspicuously announce.

First, it helps to describe the event narrowly enough: what happened, when, and what is known directly. Then we can distinguish an experience from its explanation: what was felt and what meaning was assigned to it. Next, we can name a connection with the past, such as an earlier decision, a recurring agreement or a familiar way of responding. These notes will not constitute an exhaustive map of causes. Their purpose is to remove at least one excessively broad statement that obstructs our view of the situation.

The next question concerns action. If someone promised help, a change in how they feel about themselves does not explain how to notify the other person, renegotiate or fulfil the promise. If they made a mistake, acknowledging change does not determine the extent of the harm. Specific consequences, possible remedies and the limits of their competence still need investigation.

Finally, we can check whether we have replaced one definitive essence with another. A claim to be a permanent failure may give way to a claim to have become a person without ego, while preserving the old demand to prove a correct portrait. Both versions use an event to deliver a total verdict on the self. A more accurate conclusion may be simpler: we noticed one way of responding and chose differently on this occasion.

These questions are an invitation to reflect, devised for this article. They are neither therapy, traditional meditation instructions nor evidence of liberation. Their usefulness is tested by whether events and available actions become clearer, rather than by agreement with the article's title.

At the beginning, the person recognised their letter while feeling a distance from its author. They can now hold both observations together. Their present life is connected with the earlier one; their present beliefs need not repeat the earlier ones. That connection requires no motionless inner monument. It requires attention to what continues to have effects and to what has actually changed.

Comparisons and limits

Distinction	What it helps us see	What does not follow
A person and an unchanging self	An everyday designation does not settle a metaphysical question	That promises cannot be made to someone
Change and connection	The past can have effects without complete sameness of states	That memory proves rebirth
Influence and complete control	Available action can be separated from a demand for omnipotence	That every circumstance depends on desire
Change and responsibility	Repair can be examined through consequences and actions	That someone else must forgive
Understanding and experience	A clear idea does not mean experience has been entirely transformed	That an unpleasant feeling establishes failure
Disidentification and boundaries	A self-description can be reconsidered while consent or refusal remains	That personal dignity must be discarded

This is a map of distinctions within the article, rather than a claim that Buddhism, psychology and every philosophical school teach the same thing. Everyday comparisons are our own; religious propositions are attributed to specific sources.

Sources and passages used

All links lead to translations by Thanissaro Bhikkhu at Access to Insight. The article uses brief, independently worded accounts of teachings, without reproducing passages from the translations. The contemporary scenes and conclusions about ordinary relationships are comparisons devised for this article.

1. SN 22.59, Pañcavaggi / Anatta-lakkhana Sutta, 1993. Aggregates and the examination of self; the main text.

2. SN 5.10, Vajira Sutta, 1998. Vajirā's reply and the chariot image; the main text, without treating the translator's note as the teaching.

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3. MN 38, Mahatanhasankhaya Sutta, 2011. Sāti's episode and consciousness classified by conditions; no claim to have read the entire discourse.

4. SN 12.17, Acela Sutta, 2005. Extremes of identity and separation, and dependent arising; the main text.

5. SN 22.89, Khemaka Sutta, 2001. Identification distinguished from a remaining sense of “I am”; Khemaka's explanation.

6. SN 44.10, Ananda Sutta, 2004. Vacchagotta's questions and the explanation to Ānanda; the main text.

Tags

Anātman, anattā, Buddhism, selfhood, personhood, experience, consciousness, five aggregates, skandhas, continuity, change, causality, memory, responsibility, promises, boundaries, language, Vajirā, Khemaka, Sāti, dependent arising.

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