

The Power of Non-Identification Mark L. Blum

The Buddhist doctrine of *anatta* or *anātman* in Sanskrit is one of the core teachings that all forms of Buddhism recognize as central to what the Buddhist path is all about. Usually translated as *nonsel* or *no-soul*, the term shows up extremely often both in the scriptural canon and in commentarial literature as well. This is testimony not only to its importance, but also to its power, and to its difficulty as well. For some people, *nonsel* stands in direct opposition to what is considered “common sense”. Every time we say, “I am _____” we are asserting an identity of some sort. Because denying identity seems absurd to so many, this term is translated in different ways, some sourcebooks and dictionaries render it as *not a soul* or *without a soul*, thereby limiting its scope to the theological question of does each person have an unconscious soul inside of them in the way that most religions affirm, with the Buddhist defining themselves by denying that assumption.

But other definitions are *not-self* or more recently the single word, *nonsel*, whereby the more complex notion of “self”, both conscious and unconscious, is problematized. In this way, the issue becomes the more immediately relevant question of *identity*, that is, *who am I?* In this rendering, *anatta* or *anātman* pertains to how we see ourselves in a very conscious sense, as well as in the habitual identifications we have with various aspects of our lives. Considering how we actually live our lives, Buddhism’s assertion of the truth of *non-identity* may seem unrealistic and impractical. When students look at me with puzzlement when I teach this, I ask them to compare who were five years ago with who they are now. The appeal of a teaching that reflects the reality that everyone goes through life with changing notions of how they view themselves is obvious.

But there is yet another aspect to *anatta/anātman* that also has social and even political implications. I am referring to “nonsel” as a *process* rather than a belief. As the scriptures point out, we may dismiss one notion of self today but tomorrow we naturally develop another one. Therefore, the proper and most effective way to gain a sense of liberation from this teaching is to see it as a process that itself undergoes change and development, whose power waxes and wanes over time.

One very important aspect of the *nonsel* doctrine involves the relationship between my identity and what I identify with. As social beings, our interaction with others is often described in terms of groups that we feel membership toward or not. Thus, I am a member of this family, this clan, this religion, this region, this nation, this language-group, and so forth. Often those identifications are verbalized by others in a way I have no control over—when I travel, for example, I am identified by which passport I carry, which gender is written in that passport, etc.

This social reality of various group identifications is unavoidable; this is how the world operates. For some, their group identities define their personal identities to a major degree; they take great pride in choosing a team or a political party to support.

But what about the relationship between *identity* and *identification*? It is one thing to recognize that I have to have a passport from a specific country and that I need to have a driving license from a specific state in the United States. Those are external. Internally, am I OK with these identifications? To put it another way, the Buddhist teaching of *anatta* pertains just as much to a notion of *identity* I hold about myself as it does to the processes of *identification* whereby, I embrace ideas, concepts, and presumptions about world that I have learned from the world. And

when I accept ideas, concepts, and presumptions about the world, those same notions have a direct impact on how I perceive my own identity.

There are examples of this all around us. Individuals are typically *identified* as belonging to particular ethnicities, to the benefit or detriment of their social status and opportunities in society. A legacy of the discovery of the theory of Evolution in the latter half of the 19th century was the pervasive belief in most Western societies that the physical makeup of ethnicities defined humans as qualitatively different. That is an example of a *social reality* that everyone had to live in, the legacy of which is still with us. Whether we are born to this or that ethnic group, practice this or that form of religion, or speak this or that language, that *social reality* in an impersonal way defines my identity in terms of its own categories. And as that social reality changes, my position within it can look very different.

In some religious traditions, being born into this or that class, into a family considered part of this or that religious tradition is a sign of divine judgment, an expression of grace, or in some cases as a sign or divine punishment. Even being born a woman in traditional Indian notions of karma was regarded, in the *social reality* of Brahmanism or Hinduism, even in some Buddhist texts, as a form of punishment.

But whereas the *social reality* affects my identity in a *social sense* in a way beyond my control, how the *social* affects my identity in a *personal sense* is a challenge to me personally. To what degree does the world around me determine how I think about both that world and my internal world? When my family's ethnicity or religion is regarded by the world as a determinant of where I belong and what opportunities are available to me, there is no question that this limits my choices, regardless of how I think about identity. How do I deal with the reality that the world around me changes in ways that I cannot control and often do not fathom, and that those changes external to me may deeply affect how my internal sense of balance, who I am and what I do?

But then we remember the life of the Buddha Śākyamuni, who was born as a *kṣatriya*, as the first son of a king. He did not have to worry about his skin color, his gender, his income, his family's place in the world. And yet, he threw all those privileges away, walking into the forest where he had to beg for his meals in order to pursue the pursuit of an *internal identity* that all but ignored that *social reality*.

The life of the Buddha has been an inspiration to millions of Buddhists, showing the value of renunciation, discipline, and critical thinking. But today I want to emphasize something else we learn from this story—the power of the act of *non-identifying* as a spiritual discipline. When the Buddha leaves the palace to become a *śramaṇa*, a seeker of liberation, in essence he is no longer identifying with the person he used to be. When he returns to the palace years later, he does not ask to be restored as the heir apparent. The prince does not return, a buddha returns. He creates his own *social reality*, and in this context his internal and external identities are one and the same, and when asked what this is, he explains that it is a *non-identity* that is his *identity*. And, moreover, this is available to anyone.

I am not a buddha and far from becoming one. So how can this *non-identity* help me, and how can it help the world that is filled with millions of non-buddhas? One of the answers we can gain from the Buddha's teachings, and this is the specific point that contributes directly to World Peace lies in how much we understand, value, and practice *non-identification* as we stumble through life seeking to liberate ourselves and the world as a whole. What the Buddha's story tells us is that as an individual, not only do I not have to be bound by the identity given to me by my social circumstances, but that I do not have to be bound by the identity given to me by my own

thinking. That is, in order to attain liberation, the buddha needed to not only deconstruct his social identity as prince, he also had to deconstruct his personal, psychological identity based on his previous ways of thinking, many of them unconsciously habitual.

Mahāyāna Buddhist literature expands this warning about the danger of habitual thinking in ways that also deconstructs the very identity of Buddhism itself. In the *Diamond Sutra*, the buddha urges people to practice compassion and charity without identifying with any particular form in which they practice those virtues. My acts of compassion and charity do not belong to me, if I claim them as an achievement such a thing will impede my progress toward liberation because it reinforces a notion of self that is defined by what I do, what I have, what I feel, what I think. The more I *identify* with my thoughts and feelings and accomplishments, the more I strengthen the current delusion of self. *Nonattachment, nonidentification, nonself.*

The *Diamond Sutra* also makes it very hard to *identify as a Buddhist*. The conceptualization embraced by people who identify as Buddhists at any of the four stages along the path is directly criticized as illusion. For example, the beginner who identifies as “Streamwinner”, one who has just entered the stream to start his practice, is not a Streamwinner because there is no identifiable stream, there are no experiences to be viewed as “Buddhist” as such. We *think* those things are meaningful because they feel that way, but while our mental experiences are real, the *identification* of them as *representing* something significant is a mental construct, i.e., fiction. This is because, regardless of what I am perceiving, I only have a conception of what I think something is; to be attached to it is foolish. In essence, I am not attached to the actual thing or idea or person, I am attached to the concept because that is how my mind processes perception. The *Sutra* is saying, “only when you do not identify with what is valuable to you, only when you are not attached to it, only then can you truly enjoy it.

When we pan out to think about the implication of this teaching as it relates to war and peace, the potential danger of *identification* in a political sense it obvious. If I identify as a Buddhist, such a notion is predicated on the presumption that there are others who do not so identify. If the leader of my religion determines who is considered an insider and who is an outsider, then we have the added problem of a *social entity* passing judgment on my religious *identity*. Religious divisions are notorious for negative judgments wherein one sectarian identity delegitimizes another sectarian identity.

In the secular context, it is assumed that *identification* with one nation versus another nation, or with one ethnicity within a nation, is expected by nearly all political leadership. Many politicians benefit from the strongest possible *identification* felt by the members of the group they are leading and take steps to strengthen those feelings. When people personally *identify* with the social group they are affiliated with, usually because it is expected, it makes it easier for the leaders of that group to demand things. The problem is that, like religious identity, political identity depends on there being an *other*, defined simply as anyone not being in *my* group. These others may or may not be opposed to our agenda, but at the very least they are not one of us. In this way we see that *identifying* inevitably produces *othering*, and although this may not result in conflict now, the potential is always there. Buddhism is no exception—in medieval times, sectarian violence occurred among Buddhist groups in Tibet and Japan, and recently some Buddhist leaders in Myanmar have publicly supported violent government action to exile the entire Rohingya population.

The point I want to make is that the process of *identification* wherein I recognize events external to me *as well as* feelings internal to me as part of my sense of *identity* will always

constitute support, unconscious though it may be, for a notion of how the world is constructed wherein the potential for conflict exists. As long as there is an *us*, there will be a *them*.

The way in which Buddhist can contribute to a weakening of what we might call this “potential-conflict-structure” is by directly challenging the attachments that people develop to these group identities through its teaching of *nonsel*. If I cannot even *identify* as a Buddhist, then how could I take up arms to defend my religion?

And yet, as stated earlier, we are all born within communities, and we grow and thrive through our interactions within those communities which can be supportive, responsible, and progressive. The challenge that we face, therefore, is learning how to be active within our communities without being attached to them, without *identifying* with what we think and do, and what the community thinks and does.