**Emptiness or Fullness?**

“**Wisdom tells me I am nothing—Love tells me I am everything…My life moves between the two**”. Nisargadatta

A core concept of Buddhism is *Anatta* (ah-nah-tah) *the absence of an enduring/autonomous self*, traditionally translated as *non-self* or *not-self*. A supporting concept within Buddhism is *Sunnata* (soon-yah-tah), typically translated as *voidness* or *emptiness*. These terms are often misunderstood, considered a justification for cynicism or reason for despair. The purpose of these notes and the talk associated with them is to describe a view of these core concepts that is positively motivational regarding the process of Awakening.

The primary function of human personality is to create and maintain self-identity. Subjectively, we all experience this throughout the course of a lifetime, and it emerges from our capacity for language. We create a “selfing story” that enables us to understand what is going on in the environment and respond in ways that promote survival. There is nothing substantially real about this selfing experience—the process of sensing, feeling and the ability to think and create language is real, but the resulting internal narrative is made up, based on one’s personal history.

Our ancient ancestors relied on this process to find food and avoid becoming food for a predator—true threats to survival of themselves. In contemporary life, for the most part, humans are not physically threatened, but we regard our interpersonal status with the same instinctual responses that were necessary for survival back in the day. This social identity is the primary cause of dukkha, the distress and confusion that Buddhist concepts and practices seek to find relief from.

The driver of attention and identity reinforcement is feeling, *vedana* (vey-dah-nah) in Pali, and the identity that emerges from the three forms of feeling: *pleasant, unpleasant*, or *neutral*. The untrained mind very quickly transitions from feeling to the impulsive reactive of craving—either wanting pleasant feeling or avoiding unpleasant feeling. Paying attention to the tone of feeling, assessing the impulsive reactivity of the resulting craving, and cultivating non-reactivity to the driving characteristics of the experience is a fundamental skillset for Awakening from distress and confusion.

The human mind is strongly conditioned to build a dualistic self-identity separated from the “other”, accustomed to creating a self that is defined by either wanting or not wanting the identity derived from the urgent demands of craving, and the mind falls back into that fabrication as if it is inherently real, rather than conditional. An experience of neutral feeling has no urgency, requires no explanation or commentary, and instead is characterized by tranquility. However, feeding into the sense of self, the “selfing story”, has been repeated so often over the course of a lifetime that the quietude of neutral feeling is discounted as unimportant, perhaps boring, or even threatening, and the mind automatically reverts to a selfing story that is organized around either wanting and not wanting a customary narrative identity—the ego seeks reinforcement and identity. This reversion can be noticed when the mind quickly flips from the tranquility of breath/body awareness into a nonsensical story—a daydream. The mind needs something to “chew on” in order to be real!

However, when the mind can stay with the neutral feeling tone of breath/body awareness for significant periods of time, the resulting internal quietness diminishes the need for an identifiable self. In this way, a doorway to sunnata is nurtured. Subjectively, during extended periods of this consciousness, the need to have a story or define a boundary between the body and the rest of the universe becomes uninteresting, and the cognitive simplicity of the experience becomes increasingly interesting, with less of a felt need for the selfing story. This is emptiness, but the experience is not just blank—the mind is “empty” of craving, and this is the experience that manifests direct awareness of anatta, the absence of an enduring/autonomous self.

The cultivation of persistent present-moment breath/body awareness creates a stream of consciousness that is not driven by craving/clinging and brings relief from attachment to a particular moment of self-identity. We experience the uniqueness of our personality, but, realizing the fabricated nature of the selfing story, we can be more clearly aware of whether that identity is organized around ethical considerations—kindness, compassion, generosity, and emotional balance/patience, and make appropriate changes in the flow of experience away from unwholesomeness and towards wholesomeness and Awakening.

As the process that creates the experience of inner/outer duality fades away, there’s a integration of inner awareness/outer stimulation, producing the “fullness” alluded to in the title of these notes. The mind is open to the flow of experience with non-reactive detached interest and a significantly diminished need for ego defense or gratification.

The Buddha regarded attachment to any view as an obstacle to understanding sunnata and anatta. Here is a quote that describes his comments in this regard:

“Then Vacchagotta the wanderer went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, exchanged courteous greetings with him. After an exchange of friendly greetings and courtesies, he sat down to one side. As he was sitting there he asked the Blessed One, ‘Now then, master Gotama, is there a self?’ When this was said, the Blessed One was silent. ‘Then is there no self?’ The second time the Blessed One was silent. Then Vacchagotta the wanderer got up from his seat and left.

“Then not long after Vacchagotta the wanderer had left, Venerable Ananda said to the Blessed One, ‘Why, Lord, did the Blessed One not answer when asked a question by Vacchagotta the wanderer?’”

And here’s the Buddha’s response: “Ananda, if I, being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer if there is a self were to answer that there is a self, that would be conforming with those brahmans and contemplatives who are exponents of eternalism [the view that there is an eternal, unchanging soul]. If I, being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer if there is no self were to answer that there is no self, that would be conforming with those brahmans and contemplatives who are exponents of

annihilationism [the view that death is the annihilation of the self].

If I, being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer if there is a self were to answer that there is a self, would that be in keeping with the arising of knowledge that all phenomena are not-self?” And Venerable Ananda said, “No, Lord.”

Then the Buddha said, “And if I, being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer if there is no self, were to answer that there is no self, the bewildered Vacchagotta would become even more bewildered: ‘Does the self that I used to have now not exist?’” *— SN 44:10, translated by Thanissaro*

The gist of the argument is that any views about the future or the past are not relevant to the project of overcoming the false belief that there is an enduring/autonomous self. There are also significant contemporary biological and psychological research results that support the fundamental Buddhist concepts of Anatta and Sunnata:

**Biological supportive evidence**: The skin seems to be a solid boundary between the body and the environment, but the skin is actually selectively porous, constantly allowing liquids in and exuding liquids. When examined through a powerful enough microscope, the molecular boundary between the skin and whatever is in proximity—solid, liquid, or gas, diminishes to insignificance. There is an enormous variety and quantity of microorganisms that live on the skin and in the body, and their effective functioning is required for good health, both physically and mentally. We absolutely require the ingestion of solid food, liquids, and air—when do these substances stop being the “other” and become my self?

**Psychological supportive evidence**: A very important psychological principle is interpersonal attachment, which has been extensively researched since the end of WW II. We are hard-wired to be social. Human personality development requires active and ongoing interpersonal exchanges throughout the course of a lifetime. We co-create each other through verbal and nonverbal communications. This insight cuts through the belief that one’s personality is autonomous, self-directed and in control. The quote by Nisargadatta at the beginning of these notes says, in part, “…love tells me I am everything.” suggests that the function of love is to intentionally dissolve any emotional boundaries that are the result of craving and clinging. That dissolution produces increasing realization of Anatta and Sunnata.

**Neural evidence**: Contemporary neuroscientific research has provided much insight into how the Buddhist traditions cultivated very sophisticated ways to apply the concepts of Anatta and Sunnata. There is a process called *long term potentiation* that has been well-researched. Within the brain, neural circuits are deeply interconnected, and it has been demonstrated that “*the neurons that fire together wire together”*. Practically stated, as we learned to tie our shoes, the neural networks around the brain and body that control intentions and actions fired through the memory stores associated with the various behaviors associated with tying shoelaces. These patterns have “wired together” since then—we call them habits. These habits are also associated with all the patterns we call our personalities, and this is part of the concept of Anatta. The neural networks have no identifiable, enduring common “in-charge” self, so what we experience as ourselves is nothing more than a lifelong trail of procedural routines. We know that the different “sense doors” ”—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touch/heat/pain, and memory references to current events, are processed through different areas of the brain that are densely interconnected—no central core “decision-maker” is discernible. This system doesn’t just operate in the brain—it is dispersed throughout the body both through extended neural networks and hormonal flows through the veins and arteries.

**Environmental evidence**: One of the characteristics of the Anatta concept is the increasing realization of how interdependent humans are with the ecological dynamics of the environment, along with the other living systems of the planet. When our cumulative consumerist choices are harmful, the entire system is disrupted in ways that we are barely able to understand—a “social karma” is operating creating distress and confusion within all of earth’s living systems.

Our Western culture is strongly embedded in individual identity, much more so than traditional indigenous cultures. The word ego is often used to describe one’s self-centeredness; for example, “That comment hurt me!” or “Boy, he has a big ego!” I prefer to think of the ego as a “sorting process”. We are constantly flooded with stimulation emerging within the “six sense doors. The function of the ego operates through the mind sense door to preconsciously channel attention, to determine which stream of stimulation is the most important, based on personal history (karmic influences). For example, a woman’s cultural conditioning would be prone to use a gender-identifying protocol that would be different from a man’s cultural conditioning profile. There is no identifiable enduring self in these ego processes—they are impersonal.

The concepts of Anatta and Sunnata actually provide a way to change fundamental beliefs in beneficial ways, towards Awakening. The ancient teachings and contemporary concepts that were described in mutually supportive ways provide liberation. Neuroplasticity and the dispersed functioning elements of the brain prove there is no enduring identity—the self-creating patterns within these networks are changeable! The Buddhist ethical precepts provide guidelines or mental/emotional filters that orient the energy of attention and action in prosocial and proenvironmental ways: kindness, compassion, generosity, and patience. There is no self in these categories—they are benevolent rules to abide by over the course of a lifetime, and Buddhist concepts of Anatta and sunnata fit nicely within that scheme.