

Making Room

At some point in recovery, most of us run into a certain way of talking about ourselves. I am an addict. I am an alcoholic. At first these can even feel helpful, like finally there is an explanation for why we are the way we are, a kind of diagnosis that comes with an opening. That power is real. Recognizing the shape of the thing can break through the denial we get stuck in while we are in the throes of it.

But there is a second edge to these statements. "I am an addict" also draws a line, it is a comparison by its very nature, us and them. And it makes a larger claim underneath: that this is a permanent, essential, defining fact about who we are. That may be true. But it is worth picking apart what kind of claim we are actually making when we say it.

Take the words apart. "An addict" we can define well enough: someone who acts against their own better judgment, reaching for the quick relief in front of them at the cost of everything else, and who will keep doing so without some intervention. That part we know intimately. But what about the first two words? What do we actually mean when we say "I am"?

We usually assume "I am" points at something solid. A fixed thing at the center of us, the one who is guilty, the one who is broken, the one we defend and attack and are so sure we know. We rarely question it. It is the most obvious thing in the world, that there is a me here that all of this is happening to.

Buddhism offers a different answer, one worth testing against our own experience. The teaching of anattā, or not-self, suggests that when we go looking for that fixed, unchanging self at the core, we do not find it. This is not the claim that we do not exist, which would be both absurd and useless. It is subtler than that. The "I" that is the subject of the sentence turns out to be not a fixed thing but a process: a stream of thoughts arising and passing, sensations, intentions, habits, memories. None of it permanent. None of it, by itself, the essential person we take ourselves to be.

In a way we have been circling this idea already. When we watch a hindrance arise and learn to say "this is not me, just the mind doing what it does," we are practicing it. When we trace how a sense of "I" gets born in a single moment of

reaction and passes when the moment passes, we are seeing it directly. Anattā is just the name for what we were already noticing.

Taken into the context of addiction, this turns out to be a deeply hopeful stance. It allows that even though we carry deep grooves, worn by years of the behaviors we are recovering from, those grooves are not essentially who we are. There is a way forward in which the past informs but does not condemn.

This does not mean the grooves and the consequences are not real. We did those things. We may yet do them again. Seeing that the self is a process rather than an object is not a free pass. But it lets us hold what happened, and what may still happen, as movements of an ever-changing process rather than as proof of some fixed and ruined thing at our core. It lets us see that the self we are defending, or the self we are attacking, was never as solid as we assumed. It does not swap a bad self-image for a good one. It loosens our grip on a fixed-self-image altogether.

Present-moment awareness helps here more than anything. When we are caught in loops of thought, replaying the past or bracing for the future, worrying about when some bad feeling will finally end, we are held captive by the sense of a solid, continuous self who owns all of it. But the past is not happening now. The future is not here yet. The self that is so worried about both is only ever here, at the thin bleeding edge of the present. That is the only place it actually exists.

And that opens a door. Forgiveness for the past becomes a much smaller ask when we understand that the one to be forgiven has already changed, that they are not a fixed offender frozen at the moment of harm but a process that has already moved on. This is the same ground the heart practices work: the harshness we turn on ourselves needs a solid, permanent self to aim at. Loosen that self even a little, and the ground under the harshness softens too.

We do not have to resolve any deep philosophical question to feel the relief at the edge of this. It is enough to catch a glimpse that the self we take ourselves to be is more fluid than fixed. That glimpse alone can change the whole story. We are not the worst things we have done. We are not any fixed thing at all. And that, it turns out, is not a loss. It is room to move.

Sources
Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta (SN 22.59), the discourse on the
characteristic of not-self