Mindfulness
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GUIDELINE

Letting Go of the "Unwell Self" in Chronic and Life-Challenging Conditions

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Pause for a moment and consider who you really are beneath all the conditioning and labels given to us by others or ourselves. For many experiencing the long road of chronic or life-challenging health conditions, the answer is entangled in suffering, limitations, and identity. Yet within the teachings of Buddhism lies an invitation, a gentle but radical call to see ourselves, and our suffering, in a new light.

The concept of *anattā* (non-self) is a core teaching of Buddhist philosophy. It asks us to look beyond the familiar boundaries of "I" and "mine", and to recognise that what we call the "self" is not fixed, but a flowing, ever-changing process. This perspective is not only philosophical, but also deeply practical, suggesting that our habitual ways of relating to illness, pain, and change are shaped by the stories and identities we unintentionally cling to. By questioning these patterns, the Buddhist teachings assert that we can open the door to new ways of being, even amidst suffering and adversity. Such insight can offer a profound gift for anyone living with chronic or life-challenging conditions, inviting us to challenge and loosen the grip of rigid identities and our attachments to them to discover a freedom within.

Non-self (*anattā*) constitutes one of the Buddhist "Three Marks of Existence" (Bodhi, 2005), of which the other two — impermanence (*anicca*) and suffering (*dukkha*) — also hold significance for those living with chronic or life-challenging conditions. For example, in Buddhist philosophy, suffering (*dukkha*) is not simply physical pain or hardship, but also the inherent vulnerability, unease, and unsatisfactoriness that accompany all living existence (Bodhi, 2010). The Buddha's teaching of the "two arrows" (Sallatha Sutta; SN 36.6) is especially relevant here: the "first arrow" represents the inevitable pain or adversity that life brings, such as symptoms of pain, receiving difficult diagnoses, and changes to our normal lives due to disability or illness. These experiences are often beyond our control and form the initial source of suffering.

However, the "second arrow" reflects the additional layer of suffering created by our mental reactions, such as rumination or self-judgement (e.g. "I should be feeling better" or "I'll never get back to my old self"). Described as "resistance obsession", this second arrow reflects our tendency to resist or push away unpleasant experiences. Rather than alleviating distress, such resistance frequently invariably intensifies it, compounding the original pain with further emotional turmoil. While the first arrow is unavoidable, the second is, to some extent, optional. Recognising this distinction can potentially empower individuals to notice when they are adding a "second arrow" to their experience, becoming aware of our habitual mental reactions and how these may add to our suffering (Nicolardi et al., 2022).

Rather than viewing oneself as a static entity, defined by illness or suffering in this manner, the principle of *anattā* (non-self) invites a radical re-examination of personal identity, encouraging recognition of identity as a dynamic interplay of sensations, thoughts, emotions, experiences, and awareness, each in constant flux (Gallagher et al., 2024). Indeed, non-self suggests that what we call the "self" is fluid, shaped by countless conditions and influences (Barrows et al., 2024). For example, a newborn baby could be viewed as a "blank slate" in many respects. At birth, a baby does not possess a fixed identity or hold beliefs; instead, their sense of self emerges gradually through a continuous process of lived experiences. Each interaction contributes to

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the formations of the "self" concept. Recognising this, we can reflect on how our own identities have been shaped over time, often influenced by experiences and relationships in ways we may not consciously realise. This perspective can loosen the hold of ridged self-concepts, allowing individuals to see themselves as more than what they believe themselves to be, including more than their diagnosis or symptoms.

Closely connected to this is the practice of non-attachment (*anupādāna*), which supports psychological well-being by encouraging a gentle release of clinging to these fixed identities, expectations, and outcomes (Tremblay et al., 2024). This attitude fosters equanimity and emotional balance, allowing individuals to meet change and uncertainty with greater ease. In practical terms, non-attachment supports the development of self-compassion and adaptability, qualities that are especially valuable when navigating the unpredictable terrain of chronic illness (Sys et al., 2024).

This understanding is further clarified through the Buddhist teaching of the five skandhas, or aggregates (*pañcakkhandhā*). These refer to the five psycho-physical components that together constitute the entirety of human experience: form (*rūpa*; the physical body), feeling (*vedanā*; sensations of pleasure, pain or neutrality), perception (*Saññā*; the recognition and interpretation of sensory input, e.g. sound), mental formations (*Saṅkhāra*; thoughts, intentions, and emotional responses), and consciousness (*Viññāṇa*; awareness itself) (Bodhi, 2005). According to this teaching, none of these aggregates, nor any combination of them, constitutes a fixed or permanent "self". Instead, they are in constant flux, arising and passing away moment-by-moment. Recognising the composite and fleeting nature of these aggregates encourages us to see the "self" not as a static entity, but as a dynamic process, shaped by ongoing change.

Attachment to Identity: The "Unwell Self"

When the body aches, symptoms persist or diagnoses arrive, it is easy for our sense of self to intertwine and attach with illness. We may find ourselves repeating thoughts such as "I am broken", "There is something wrong with me", and/or "I can't do certain things". This attachment can manifest as self-limiting beliefs which can exacerbate psychological distress and perpetuate cycles of despair (Morin & Racy, 2021). The Buddhist perspective suggests that this fixation on identity, whether as "healthy" or "unwell", is a form of clinging (*upādāna*) that contributes to suffering (*dukkha*) (Bodhi, 2010).

Clinical examples illustrate how this attachment manifests. In oncology contexts, cancer patients often report feeling that their diagnosis defines them entirely, overshadowing other aspects of their identity, such as their relationships, achievements, or aspirations (Little et al., 2022). Similarly, individuals with fibromyalgia often describe their lives as consumed by chronic pain and symptoms.

Research has shed light on this experience by highlighting the concept of *schema-enmeshment*, which refers to the extent to which a person's sense of self becomes intertwined with their illness. For example, higher levels of intertwinement are associated with greater levels of disruption to daily life due to pain catastrophising and the impact of symptoms, both physical and emotional (Paschali et al., 2021).

The Buddhist teachings seek to undermine the intensity of attachment by highlighting the impermanent and conditioned nature of phenomena, including illness and identity (Van Gordon et al., 2021). According to Bodhi (2010), recognising that the "unwell self" is not a fixed or inherent reality is an important first step toward liberation.

Cultivating Non-Self Awareness

Mindfulness offers a pathway to disentangle identity from illness and cultivate awareness and freedom of non-self. At its root, this practice is not about erasing thoughts or controlling emotions, but about learning to observe them as they arise and pass, without automatically claiming them as "me" or "mine" (Van Gordon et al., 2023).

In practical terms, this means noticing a thought (e.g. "I am unwell") or an ache in the body and recognising it for what it is, a mental event or a physical sensation, rather than a definitive statement of identity. The experience is acknowledged and validated, perhaps even felt deeply, but it is not clung to or resisted. Over time, this allows for a subtle but significant shift: illness or health conditions are no longer seen as the sum total of who we are, but only as one thread in the tapestry of a diverse and changing human experience.

For example, someone living with chronic pain may notice moments when discomfort is intense, as well as moments when it recedes into the background. They may become aware that their mood, attention, or environment can alter the quality or intensity of their pain. Observing these fluctuations with curiosity rather than judgement can facilitate an understanding that neither pain nor thoughts about pain are fixed or defining. Furthermore, "deconstructing" pain by recognising that it has a contextual and biological basis (e.g. the body informing the brain of potential harm) can empower individuals to see pain as a potentially subjective experience, which in turn may ease how it is experienced.

This way of relating to pain is not a cold detachment, but a warm, mindful awareness involving engaged presence. It helps individuals to respond to their circumstances with greater psychological flexibility and self-compassion,

rather than being trapped by habitual reactions or self-limiting beliefs. Ultimately, cultivating awareness of non-self is about developing the capacity to be with life as it unfolds—whether that be painful, pleasant, or mundane— without being bound by it. In this space, greater freedom can emerge, even amid ongoing challenge.

Contemplative Techniques

Specific techniques that encourage awareness of non-self include:

Observing Impermanence

When we begin to pay close attention to our present experience, we may notice that very little stays the same for long. Sensations in the body shift, pain may flare, then ease, tiredness might lift, even if only briefly, before returning. Emotions, too, are in constant motion; a wave of frustration might give way to a moment of calm, or sadness may soften in the presence of a kind word or change of scenery.

> Observing impermanence is about tuning into these subtle changes with curiosity. Rather than assuming that discomfort or distress is fixed, we can ask ourselves: "Is this sensation exactly the same as it was a moment ago?" or "Does this feeling move and change?"
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> This principle is reflected not only in our inner world, but all around us. Consider the changing seasons such as winter giving way spring — no moment in nature remains static. In the same way, our lives are shaped by countless small transitions. For example, morning turns to afternoon, minutes turn to hours, and we age second by second. Change, both subtle and profound, is a constant and unavoidable presence in our lives.
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> In this context, it is also useful to distinguish between gross and subtle impermanence. Gross impermanence refers to the more obvious and tangible changes we encounter, such as day moving into night or the shifting seasons. These changes are visible and familiar, reminding us that nothing in life remains static for long. Subtle impermanence, by contrast, relates to the moment-by-moment fluctuations within our immediate experience: sensations, thoughts, and emotions that arise, shift, and dissolve, often so rapidly they escape our notice. By tuning into these micro-changes, we begin to see for ourselves that nothing in our existence is as fixed or solid as it may first appear.
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> Thus, by recognising the ever-changing nature of our experience, we can loosen the grip of certainty and become more open to the possibility of something different. This does not mean denying pain or difficulty but rather seeing it as part of a larger unfolding process, one that is always in motion. In this way, observing impermanence can bring a sense of lightness and hope, reminding us that each moment, no matter how challenging, does not reflect the whole story.

Mindful Awareness

At times, it is normal to experience many thoughts in a short space of time, including those that are helpful, unhelpful, or simply automatic. Through practising mindfulness, individuals can notice these thoughts as they come and go, gently labelling them for example as "thinking" or "remembering," rather than getting caught up in their content per se. Doing so can help us realise that thoughts are not commands, facts, or truths, but passing mental events influenced by countless factors.

> By creating this space between awareness and thought, we can cultivate the freedom to choose which thoughts deserve our attention and which can be allowed to pass us by. For example, when the thought "I can't do that" appears, it might be better regarded as habitual rather than a fixed reality. In this manner, mindful awareness opens up new possibilities for responding with self-compassion and curiosity, rather than automatically accepting self-limiting beliefs. Over time, this approach can foster greater confidence and flexibility, even in the face of illness or challenge.

Reflecting on Emptiness

People living with long-term and challenging illness can reflect on emptiness by noticing that their experiences, such as pain, tiredness, or worry, do not have a single, permanent essence. For example, by seeing that the feeling of "I'm not well" is not a fixed truth but a label for a shifting set of experiences, individuals can begin to loosen their identification with illness and any rigid notions of "self".

> This is where the link with observing impermanence and non-self is especially relevant. Emptiness does not mean that things are meaningless or do not exist, but rather that nothing we experience is as fixed or solid as it may appear (Van Gordon et al., 2021). For example, a flower would not exist without sunlight, water, minerals in the soil, its petals, or its stem —all these components come together and without them, there would be no flower. The same goes for our thoughts and sense of self.
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> Thus, when we look closely, we should begin to see that what feels like a permanent "unwell self" is actually a mental construction — a story of the mind's construction shaped by language, memory, and habit. For example, the grief someone feels after receiving a diagnosis may be intensified by messages from others or the media implying that life with illness is dimin-

ished, leading to rumination and a deepening sense of loss for past freedoms or health.

However, from a Buddhist perspective, this thought, the sense of being "less" or "broken" is empty, because it does not exist independently or permanently. It arises due to various causes and conditions, such as social influences, memories, and emotional responses, and it can change or fade when those conditions shift. For instance, if someone receives encouragement from others or finds new meaning in their current life, the sense of loss may lessen or transform. This illustrates that such thoughts are not fixed truths, but transient mental events without a fixed entity.

The mind naturally imposes narratives and labels on experience, which can not only provide a sense of stability but also lead to suffering, especially when those labels become rigid or self-limiting. The insight to be gleaned here is that these narratives, such as the "unwell self", are not intrinsic of experience itself, they are created by the mind (Ducasse et al., 2019). The concept of emptiness also invites individuals to explore the non-fixed, ever-changing nature of phenomena, including their own identity (Shonin & Van Gordon, 2014). Such exploration and insight can help us recognise how upbringing, culture, and personal life experiences have all contributed to the multifaceted nature of our identity.

When we look closely at experience in this way, we should hopefully begin to notice its openness and interconnectedness, or "interbeing" (Hanh, 2022). This perspective reveals that our lives are deeply interlinked with the lives of others, and that who we perceive we are is shaped by countless relationships, experiences, and influences. For example, someone's sense of self may be shaped by the care and support received from caregivers, the opinions of healthcare professionals, and engagement with others via social media and in person. This awareness can be empowering, encouraging us to nurture aspects of ourselves that may have been overshadowed by an "illness" identity, such as by reconnecting with roles as a friend or parent, or by rediscovering interests such as music or art.

Practice Guided Meditation

Practising guided meditation, such as the following, can also be a useful means of cultivating awareness of non-self:

Begin by bringing your attention to your breath. Notice each inhalation and exhalation just as it is, without trying to change or control your breathing. Simply observe the natural rhythm of your breath, allowing it to be however it is right now. Feel the air moving in and out of the body and the subtle changes it brings with each breath.

Now, gently expand your awareness to include sensations in your body. Notice any and all areas of comfort or discomfort, warmth or coolness, tension or ease. Notice too how the body feels supported by the furniture beneath you. Allow these sensations to be present, recognising that they may shift and change over small moments in time.

Bring this same awareness to any thoughts or emotions that arise. You might notice thoughts such as "I am unwell" or "I don't have energy". See if it is possible to observe these as mental events – just experiences that come and go - rather than as fixed truths. Acknowledge that different thoughts and feelings may arise, and that it is natural for them to change from moment to moment.

As you continue, notice that all sensations, thoughts, and emotions are constantly shifting. None of these experiences alone define who you are. If it helps, you might silently note to yourself, "This is just a thought," or "This is a just sensation," and watch it pass in its own time.

Observe that all of these sensations, thoughts, and feelings come and go within your awareness. There is not a single, fixed "self" at the centre of these experiences. Instead, there is an ongoing flow - different experiences appearing and disappearing, each shaped and influenced by many different things, such as what is happening in your body, your environment, and what has happened in your past. See if you can rest in this sense of openness, simply observing whatever arises, moment-by-moment.

You might also notice that because you are able to observe all these shifting experiences, there is a part of you that stands apart from them. This observing presence is like a calm, steady background – a spacious loving awareness within which all sensations, thoughts and feelings arise and fade away.

If it feels comfortable, allow yourself to settle into this space of steady awareness. Imagine it as a gentle, compassionate space that allows whatever comes to be held without judgement or resistance.

This witnessing awareness is not defined by illness or distress. It continues to offer a stable compassionate space in which all experiences can unfold, offering kindness and acceptance to whatever arises.

Rest in this open awareness, with a sense of kindness and curiosity. When you feel ready, gently bring your attention back to the present moment, carrying this sense of perspective with you.

Liberation from the "*Unwell Self*"

Awareness of non-self has the potential to gradually help individuals let go of shaping their identity around the notion of being unwell. By recognising that the "unwell self" is not fixed or static, individuals can change their relationship with the physical and psychological suffering associated with their condition. This does not mean denying or invalidating the reality of illness but rather approaching it with acceptance and equanimity.

This subtle but significant reframing can help people to engage with their condition without being consumed by it. Moreover, cultivating non-attachment to the "unwell self" may foster resilience such that by no longer clinging to the identity of being unwell, individuals can respond to their circumstances with greater flexibility and openness. This can also foster a deeper appreciation of impermanence, helping individuals to cherish the present moment without fear of change or loss.

Ultimately, practising non-self can help each of us to transcend the confines of conditioned identity and embrace a broader perspective of existence. This transformation is ultimately not only psychologically healing but also spiritually enriching, offering a pathway to greater peace and enjoyment amidst life's challenges.

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