

Concepts of Gender Affirming Surgery, Anattā, and Kamma

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Abstract

This paper examines gender-affirming surgery regarding the Buddhist concepts of anattā and kamma, arguing that while it involves attachment to identity, its ethical implications depend on the intention (cetanā) behind the action. The analysis is grounded in the belief that pursuing a particular gender identity and the desire to alter one's physical form to align with that identity are manifestations of attachment and identification with the physical body. Both are inconsistent with the central Buddhist teachings of non-self (anattā). However, since Buddhist ethics emphasizes cetanā (intention) as central to moral evaluation, it suggests that the karmic implications of gender-affirming surgery depend not merely on the act itself, but on the motivation behind it. While such practice may be motivated by compassion and the aspiration to live authentically, it also raises important philosophical concerns regarding attachment, identity, and karmic continuity. With wise attention, not as a judgment, this analysis offers insights that may encourage awareness of the broader spiritual consequences, as understood within Buddhism, while respecting the importance of individual choices and rights.

Keywords: Gender-affirming surgery, non-self (anattā), kamma, cetanā (intention)

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Introduction

In contemporary society, discussion surrounding gender identities and gender-affirming surgeries is always a subject of debate. Recently, owing to the exponential medical technological advancement, many people have turned to sex reassignment surgery (SRS) to align their physical bodies with their internal sense of gender identity. Although widely supported, they have also drawn significant criticism from religious and philosophical traditions, including Buddhism, which offers a unique and profound perspective on the self and the nature of personal identity.

At the core of Buddhist Philosophy is the concept of *anattā*: *Sabbe dhammā anattā' ti*, meaning “*all phenomena are non-self*.” (Dhp. 279) This doctrine asserts that there is non-substantiality and non-existence of a permanent, blissful, center of consciousness “self”. (Hoffman, 2020, p. 136) All aspects of identity, including perspective, Buddhism suggests that

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‘*upādāna*’, clinging to the body’s form or any fixed identity, including gender, may lead to suffering. (Rahula, 1974, p. 34)

While the concept of *anattā* emphasizes the impermanence of identity, the principle of *kamma* reminds us that actions motivated by wholesome intentions can create new conditions. This teaching mentions that our present circumstances are shaped by past volitional actions, and that new actions, motivated by wholesome or unwholesome intentions (*cetanā*), create future outcomes. Thus, gender confirming surgery may be seen not as a violation of karmic law, but as the emergence of new *kamma*, the ethical implications of which depend upon the motivation behind it.

In addition, the Buddhist teachings of *karuṇā* (compassion) and *upāya* (skillful means) could support gender-affirming surgeries as a compassionate response to alleviate suffering. In this view, surgery could serve as a way to help individuals live in greater alignment with their true selves, reducing suffering in the present moment.

This paper examines how gender-affirming surgery intersects with the Buddhist concepts of *anattā* and *kamma*. It argues that while gender confirming surgery may involve attachment to identity, its ethical implications depend on the intention (*cetanā*) behind the action. By examining both supportive and critical perspectives within Buddhist thought, the paper attempts to contribute to better insights into gender transformation surgery via the lens of Buddhist philosophy.

Main Argument

(1) Gender-affirming surgery is a way of aligning one's physical body with their deeper felt gender identity.

In recent years, many individuals experiencing gender dysphoria have turned to medical procedures such as sex reassignment surgery (SRS) to align their external appearance with their internal sense of gender. This surgery is often seen as a transformative act, alleviating the psychological distress caused by gender dysphoria, the mismatch between their gender identity and their physical body. (Budge, Adelson, & Howard, 2013)

In Transgender History, Susan Stryker mentioned that “Transgender individuals often undergo gender-affirming surgeries not merely for cosmetic reason, but to feel at home in their own bodies. These surgeries provide a means to express one’s gender identity authentically”. (Stryker, 2008)

In this sense, gender-affirming surgery is an effort to resolve this incongruence and help the individual live in greater harmony with their perceived true self. Such surgeries are generally viewed as “*upāya*” – a skillful means to alleviate suffering in the short term, which resonates with the Buddhist concept of *karuṇā* (compassion). The Dalai Lama has stated: “*If there is a way to alleviate suffering, it should be pursued with compassion as the guiding principle*”. (Lama, 1998, p. 92) By reducing gender dysphoria and the distress it causes, gender-affirming surgery can be viewed as aligning with the compassionate goals of Buddhism, which encourages actions that contribute to personal and collective well-being. (Kornfield, 1993, p. 143)

However, from a Buddhist perspective, this desire to alter the body to match one's perceived identity could be viewed differently. Buddhism invites deeper reflection on the

nature of self, attachment, and impermanence, which will be further explained in the succeeding premises.

(2) Their deeper felt gender identity is to have a specific gender identity, and to physically alter one's body through gender-affirming surgery to conform to that identity, could be seen as a form of craving or attachment.

In the *Alagaddūpamasutta* (Horner, 1967, p. 187) (Discourse on the Parable of the Water Snake), the Buddha warns against the danger of attachment '*upādāna*' to the idea of self, whether about physical form, perception, or identity. In this *sutta*, the Buddha also gave the "Parable of the Raft", about "*dhamma* that is not for clinging on to but useful for crossing over". (Hoffman, 2013, p. 98) If the goal of gender-affirming surgery is to establish a particular self-identity, it may risk misunderstanding the teaching on non-attachment. Just as the *dhamma* is a tool rather than a permanent attachment, one's body should be seen as a transient aspect of existence rather than something to be rigidly defined.

Consequently, the desire to embody a particular gender via pursuing gender-alteration procedures could indicate attachment to the constructed sense of self, which Buddhism views as impermanent and illusory. This craving for a specific form (male, female, or transgender) runs counter to the Buddhist ideal of letting go of attachments, which perpetuates the cycle of *samsāra* (that is the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth). (Rahula, 1974, pp. 35-37)

(3) Craving or attachment, whether for a specific gender (male, female, and transgender) or anything else to transcend attachment to any form of self is contrary to the concept of *anattā* or non-substantiality.

Anattā is a core Buddhist teaching that asserts there is no permanent self, and that all things, including identity, are impermanent. The doctrine of non-self teaches that all aspects of existence, including body and mind, are constantly changing and lack any enduring substance. (Harvey, 1995, p. 54) In *Anattalakkhanasutta* (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2024) (The Discourse on the Characteristic of Non-self), The Buddha explains that what we consider to be "the self" is a collection of constantly changing phenomena, and attachment to a fixed, permanent self leads to suffering.

In the context of gender-affirming surgery, clinging to a specific form or identity, such as a fixed gender, one reinforces attachment to self, which is contrary to the concept of *anattā*. When recognizing that the nature of identity is impermanent and non-self, one can work toward reducing attachment and alleviating suffering. (Dhp. 277.) Thus, while surgery may offer temporary relief, from the Buddhist perspective, it might also reinforce attachment to an illusory self, creating further obstacles to spiritual liberation.

(4) As the corollary, the Buddhist teachings on the concept of *anattā* can only be comprehended via practicing meditation, emphasizing that the body and circumstances one is born into are the results of past actions. [by (1), (2) and (3)]

The path to realize the impermanence and non-substantiality nature of the self is only through direct experience, typically cultivated in meditation. In *Satipatṭhānasutta* (The Discourse on the Applications of Mindfulness) (Horner, 1967, p. 70), the practices of *satipatṭhāna* (mindfulness of body, feelings, mind, and mental objects) enable practitioners to directly observe the body as merely a physical form subject to conditions. Gaining insight into how identity and attachment contribute to suffering which encourage practitioners to

cultivate detachment from identity and helping them to understand their body and circumstances as karmically conditioned rather than as a true self. (Shulman, 2014, p. 104)

For someone who experiences gender dysphoria, meditation can offer a way to relate to their body without the need for physical alteration. Buddhist practices emphasize mindfulness and acceptance, promoting an understanding of the body and identity as impermanent, non-self and the karmic nature of one's circumstances, thus leading to true insight and lessening attachment (Analayo, 2003). For those following the Buddhist path, meditation provides a means to work through attachment and suffering, potentially offering an alternative way of finding alignment with self that transcends physical transformation.

(5) The results of past actions, being the karmic conditions, one has inherited, create the circumstances in which one experiences gender dysphoria. Choosing to undergo gender-affirming surgery in such a situation does not necessarily violate the law of kamma, but rather constitutes the arising of new kamma which must be examined through the lens of intention (*cetanā*) and ethical clarity.

The results of past actions (*kamma*), manifesting as present circumstances, constitute the karmic conditions into which one is born. The experience of gender dysphoria may be understood within Buddhism as part of the fruit (*vipāka*) of previous intentional actions. However, choosing to undergo gender-affirming surgery in response to such conditions does not necessarily violate the law of *kamma*. Rather, it represents a new volitional act which generates its own karmic consequences depending on the intention (*cetanā*) behind it. As the Buddha taught in the *Nibbedhika Sutta* (*Ānguttara Nikāya* 6.63): "*Intention, I tell you, is kamma. Intending, one does kamma by way of body, speech, and intellect.*" (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 2025)

From this teaching, *kamma* is not strictly about external action, but about the motivational force behind the action. Hence, if the choice to gender-transition arises from compassion, a sincere wish to reduce suffering, and does not stem from aversion or delusion, it may be considered wholesome (*kusala*) rather than unwholesome (*akusala*). In this regard, Peter Harvey explains in *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*: "*The degree of unwholesomeness of an action is seen to vary according to the degree and nature of the volition/intention behind the action, and the degree of knowledge (of various kinds) relating to it.*" (Harvey, 2000, p. 52)

Moreover, in the *Cūla-Kammavibhaṅga Sutta* (*Majjhima Nikāya* 135), the Buddha clarifies that beings are not determined by their past *kamma* alone, but are "owners of their actions," to shape future karmic pathways: "*Student, beings are owners of their actions, heirs of their actions; they originate from their actions, are bound to their actions, have their actions as their refuge. It is action that distinguishes beings as inferior and superior.*" (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2025)

From this view, gender-affirming surgery becomes part of one's karmic continuum, not as a disruption, but as an exercise of present-moment intention. It reflects an ethically significant choice that must be evaluated through the lens of mindfulness, wisdom, and compassion. As Peter Harvey explains in "*Karma is not a deterministic doctrine but a flexible one, in which new actions can change one's path and adjust one's course through life.*" (Harvey, 2000, p. 56) In this perspective, the choice to undergo gender-affirming surgery could be viewed not as a rejection of karmic conditions but as an intentional, compassionate decision that potentially creates new karmic opportunities.

(6) While gender-affirming surgery may resolve bodily dysphoria on a physical level, it cannot solve deeper existential suffering rooted in clinging to identity. Within Buddhist thought, spiritual practice offers a way to understand and overcome attachment to the body and self without depending solely on surgical alteration. However, when undertaken with wholesome intention and self-awareness, such a decision may reflect a compassionate response to one's karmic conditions rather than defilement.

While gender-affirming surgery may alleviate suffering associated with gender dysphoria on a physical and psychological level, it does not necessarily address the deeper existential roots of suffering as understood in Buddhist teachings. Buddhism regards attachment to identity and form as obstacles to liberation, and emphasizes the development of insight into impermanence and non-self (*anattā*) through ethical conduct and meditation practice. The *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* teaches mindfulness of the body precisely to loosen the identification with it: “*A monk dwells fare along contemplating the body in the body, ardent, clearly conscious (of it), mindful (of it) so as to control the covetousness and dejection in the world.*” (Horner, 1987, p. 71) This spiritual practice enables individuals to see the body not as self or as something to be perfected, but as impermanent and conditioned. As Walpola Rahula mentioned that freedom from suffering does not come by changing the world, but by changing one's reaction to it, through the realization of *anattā*. (Rahula, 1974, pp. 42-44) This is not to say that medical interventions are wrong or discouraged, but Buddhist teachings caution that without confronting internal attachment to self, even well-meaning actions may reinforce patterns of *upādāna* (clinging) and delay insight into reality. In *Dhammapada* (Dhp. 204) reflects the Buddhist perspective that true peace and happiness are attained through inner contentment and spiritual practice rather than through attempts to change the external self or physical conditions. As Peter Harvey also mentioned, “*Physical changes may temporary relief, but only the transformation of mind can bring true freedom from suffering.*” (Harvey, 1990, p. 47)

Compassionately motivated actions like gender alignment surgery may relieve immediate suffering, but cannot substitute for the transformative insight gained through ethical and meditation practice. As such, the path to true liberation lies not merely in physical alignment but in overcoming identification with both body and identity.

(7) As a corollary, from this standpoint, gender-affirming surgery is not inherently a *kilesā* (defilement), but a morally neutral action whose karmic outcome depends on the underlying motivation and awareness. Thus, its implications for the cycle of *samsāra* are not fixed, but contingent upon the mental states and ethical discernment that accompany the act. [by (5) and (6)]

From a Buddhist standpoint, gender-affirming surgery should not be categorically viewed as a *kilesā* (defilement), but rather as a morally neutral act (*avyākata dhamma*) whose ethical and karmic weight depends on the underlying mental states. Traditional Buddhism teaches defilements such as greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*), are the root causes of *samsāra* or the cycle of rebirth and suffering. (Dhp. 251.) However, not all actions involving desire or identity are necessarily driven by unwholesome roots. If surgery is undertaken with mindful intention, compassion, and a desire to alleviate suffering rather than from delusion or self-clinging, it may not reinforce *kilesā*, but instead reflect a wholesome volition (*kusala cetanā*).

Thus, gender-affirming surgery does not necessarily take one further in *samsāra*, as traditionally defined. Instead, the spiritual impact of such an act must be considered in light of

whether it reinforces ego-identification (*attavāda*) or supports the alleviation of suffering with wisdom and mindfulness. Rather than mentioning the surgery as a defilement, it is more accurate within Buddhist ethics to understand it as an ethically contingent action shaped by volition and clarity.

As we have seen, the main argument consists of the seven premises and the conclusion that logically follows from the premises.

(1) Gender-affirming surgery is a way of aligning one's physical body with their deeper felt gender identity.

(2) Their deeper felt gender identity is to have a specific gender identity, and to physically alter one's body through gender-affirming surgery to conform to that identity, could be seen as a form of craving or attachment.

(3) Craving or attachment, whether for a specific gender (male, female, and transgender) with the goal of transcending attachment to any form of self is contrary to the concept *anattā* or non-substantiality.

(4) As the corollary, the Buddhist teachings on the concept of *anattā* can only be comprehended via practicing meditation, emphasizing that the body and circumstances one is born into are the results of past actions.

(5) The results of past actions, being the karmic conditions, one has inherited, create the circumstances in which one experiences gender dysphoria. Choosing to undergo gender-affirming surgery in such a situation does not necessarily violate the law of *kamma*, but rather constitutes the arising of new *kamma* which must be examined through the lens of intention (*cetanā*) and ethical clarity.

(6) While gender-affirming surgery may resolve bodily dysphoria on a physical level, it cannot solve deeper existential suffering rooted in clinging to identity. Within Buddhist thought, spiritual practice offers a way to understand and overcome attachment to the body and self without depending solely on surgical alteration. However, when undertaken with wholesome intention and self-awareness, such a decision may reflect a compassionate response to one's karmic conditions rather than defilement.

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Postscript

The question of whether gender-affirming surgery aligns with Buddhist teachings is a complex and multifaceted issue. On one hand, Buddhism's emphasis on relinquishing attachment to fixed identities and the impermanence of all phenomena may suggest that such surgeries conflict with core Buddhist principles. On the other hand, the teachings on *karuṇā* (compassion) and *upāya* (skillful means) offer an alternative perspective, suggesting that gender-affirming surgery could be seen as a compassionate means to alleviate suffering. Ultimately, the Buddhist perspective invites a deep reflection on the nature of identity, attachment, the conditions that perpetuate suffering and liberation.

To be clear, this writing is not intended to oppose transgender community or to question the validity of their experiences and rights. Instead, it aims to engage Buddhist philosophy with careful and compassionate attention, offering insight into the potential spiritual implications of identity and transformation. With wise attention (*yoniso manasikāra*), and not as a judgment, this analysis invites awareness of the broader karmic and existential consequences as understood within the Buddhist tradition, while fully respecting the importance of individual choices and human dignity.

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