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**The Three Basic Facts  
of Existence:  
III – Egolessness (Anattā)**  
Collected Essays

*Nyanaponika Thera (Ed.)*



# The Three Basic Facts of Existence: III — Egolessness (Anattā)

## Collected Essays

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# Editor's Preface

The present volume on *anattā* concludes the treatment of *The Three Basic Facts of Existence* (or The Three Characteristics) within The Wheel series. Though the Buddha's teaching on not-self has been treated quite often in these publications, it was felt that some more material from sources not easily accessible to the general reader should be offered here. From different angles, these essays and translations will throw light on that central teaching of Buddhism, *anattā*. As in the earlier books on *anicca* and *dukkha*, this volume also concludes with a concise and systematic treatment of the subject by the late venerable Ñāṇamoli Thera, which is a valuable guide to the source material as well as to a deeper study of this profound doctrine.

The diverse renderings chosen by the individual authors for the key term *anattā* or *nairātmya* (Skt.) have been retained. Hence it should be understood by the reader that the terms "egolessness," "soullessness," "impersonality," and "not-self" all stand for the Pali term *anattā* (Sanskrit: *anātma* or *nairātmya*).

Nyanaponika Thera

# Egolessness (Anattā)

Nyanatiloka Mahāthera



More and more the noble teaching of the Buddha seems to be on the way to conquer the world. More than ever before, Buddhists are working for its propagation in nearly all the countries of the earth. Especially in India, the birth place of Buddhism (from where it disappeared for nearly a thousand years), Buddhism has again made its entrance and gained a firm footing, and with rapid strides it is gaining more and more ground. One therefore should rather think it a good omen that India, having regained its independence, has adopted as its emblem the Buddhist Four-Lion symbol of Emperor Asoka, and that, at the proclamation of the Indian Republic there appeared the Buddha's statue (behind the presidential throne, crowned with this Buddhist emblem).

Also all over Europe and America a mighty Buddhist wave is set in motion, which no longer can be kept back and suppressed, and which, sooner or later, will flood the world with its beneficial influence. The world is no longer satisfied with dogmas based on blind belief. Everywhere in the

world there is found today a striving for freedom and independence, externally and internally. And ever more the thinking man feels that the destinies of beings are not dependent on the omnipotence and infinite goodness of an imaginary creator, but that they rest entirely on the beings themselves. It is in Buddhism that one may find the true answers to many of the problems that are troubling men, and which they wish to have solved. Everybody knows that Buddhism is not a revealed religion and not based on blind belief, but is a doctrine to be realised by man's own understanding (a doctrine that makes man free and independent in his thinking, and assures him of happiness and peace).

But of one thing I wish to warn all those who are working for the propagation of Buddhism: not to allow themselves to be influenced or carried away by seemingly identical theosophical, Christian, or (what is still worse) materialistic teachings. For all these are, in essence and substance, very often diametrically opposed to the Buddha's doctrines, and prevent a real understanding and realisation of the profound law discovered and proclaimed by the Buddha.

The most crucial point for most men seems to be the Buddha's fundamental teaching of phenomenality, egolessness and impersonality of existence (in Pali *anattā*). It is the middle way between two extremes: on the one hand, the spiritualistic belief in an eternal ego-entity, or soul, outlasting death; on the other hand, the materialistic belief in a temporary ego-entity becoming annihilated at death.

Therefore it is said: There are three teachers in the world. The first teacher teaches the existence of an eternal ego-entity outlasting death: that is the Eternalist (as for example the Christian). The second teacher teaches a temporary ego-entity which becomes annihilated at death: that is the annihilationist, or materialist. The third teacher teaches neither an eternal, nor a temporary ego-entity: this is the Buddha. The Buddha teaches that what we call ego, self, soul, personality, etc. is merely a conventional term not referring to any real independent entity. And he teaches that there is only to be found this psycho-physical process of existence changing from moment to moment. Without understanding the egolessness of existence, it is not possible to gain a real understanding of the Buddha-word. And it is not possible without it to realise that goal of emancipation and deliverance of mind proclaimed by the Buddha. This doctrine of egolessness of existence forms the essence of the Buddha's doctrine of emancipation. Thus with this doctrine of egolessness or not-self, *anattā*, stands and falls the entire Buddhist structure. Indeed, for anyone who wishes to engage in the study of the Buddhist scriptures, the best thing would be, from the very start, to get himself acquainted with the two methods in which the Buddha taught the Dhamma to the world. The first method is the teaching in conventional language; the second method is the teaching in philosophically correct language. The first one relates to conventional truth, *voḥāra-sacca*, the second, to truth in the ultimate sense, *paramattha-sacca*.

Thus, whenever the Buddha uses such terms as I person, living being, etc., this is to be understood as conventional speech, and thus not correct in the highest sense (*paramattha-vacana*). It is similar to speaking of the rising and setting of the sun, though we know thoroughly well that this does not correspond to reality. Thus the Buddha teaches that, in the ultimate sense, amongst all these psychophysical phenomena of existence there cannot be found any eternal or even temporary ego-entity, and hence that all existence of whatever kind is something impersonal (or *anattā*).

In this connection I would like to emphasise the fact that this fundamental doctrine of not-self and emptiness is not (as some misinformed Western Buddhists assert) only taught in the southern school of Buddhism, but that even in the so-called Mahayana schools it forms a most essential part. Without this teaching of *anattā* (or egolessness), there is no Buddhism; and without having realised the truth of egolessness no real progress is possible on the path to deliverance.

The Buddha is, in every respect, a teacher of the golden mean, ethically as well as philosophically. From the ethical standpoint, for example, the Buddha rejects two extremes: the way of sensual pleasures and the way of self-torture. From the philosophical standpoint he rejects eternity, as well as the temporary nature of an ego-entity. Just so he rejects belief in an absolute identity and an absolute otherness of the various stages of the process of existence. He rejects determinism, as well as the belief in chance. He



rejects the belief in absolute existence and absolute non-existence, in freedom of will, as well as in non-freedom of will.

All these things will become clear to one who understands the egolessness and conditioned nature of all phenomena of existence. On the understanding of these two truths depends the understanding of the entire doctrine of the Buddha. Hence the understanding and final penetration of egolessness and conditionedness of all phenomena of existence are the necessary foundation to the realisation of the noble eightfold path leading to deliverance from all vanity and misery: right understanding, right thought, right speech, right bodily action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration of mind. Only this golden middle path, based on these two kinds of right understanding, namely of “not-self and conditionedness,” can alleviate and destroy these vain illusions of “self” and craving, which are the root-causes of all war and bloodshed in the world. But without these two kinds of understanding there is no realisation of the holy and peaceful goal pointed out by the Buddha. There are, however, various would-be Buddhists in the West who are attached to an imaginary Great Self; who uphold that the Buddha did in no way reject the view of an “eternal Atman,” or soul, behind and independent of the phenomena of existence; and who believe that the Mahayana texts teach such a doctrine. Such assertions, however, do not in the least prove correct, for neither the Pali texts, nor the early Mahayana texts,

proclaim an eternal self. From a study of the Buddhist scriptures, any reader, unbiased in mind and free from prejudices, will never from a study of the Buddhist scriptures come to the conclusion that the Buddha ever taught any such ego-entity within or outside the corporeal, mental and spiritual phenomena of existence. Nowhere in the world can there be found such an entity, as was clearly pointed out by the Buddha.

Regarding the questions whether the Holy One will continue after death, or not continue etc., the Buddha says that all such questions are wrongly put. And why? Because what is called the "Holy One" is here only a conventional term and refers to no real entity, while in reality there is only to be found a process of corporeal, mental and spiritual phenomena. In another text, the Buddha asks a monk whether he considered corporeality as the Holy One (Tathāgata), or feelings, or perceptions, or mental formations, or consciousness. Or whether he believed the Holy One to exist within these five groups of phenomena or outside of them. Or whether all these phenomena heaped together were the Holy One. And denying all these questions, the Buddha further said that, even during a lifetime, the Holy One could not be discovered in reality. Therefore it would be wrong to ask whether the Holy One will continue or not continue after death, etc. Thus, no entities are existing in the world, but only ever-changing processes. The Buddha further says: Because man does not understand that corporeality, feeling and the other mental

and spiritual phenomena are impermanent, unsatisfactory, and impersonal (*aniccā, dukkha, and anattā*), does not understand their conditioned origin, their extinction, and the path leading to their extinction, he therefore will think that the Holy One does continue, or does not continue after death, etc. This, therefore, is the reason why the Buddha did not answer such questions.

According to Buddhism, the whole of existence is comprised of the five groups of phenomena mentioned above, or more briefly still, expressed in three groups: corporeality, consciousness and the mental factors. And within these three groups are comprised the only and ultimate things given, though also these again are mere fleeting and evanescent phenomena, flashing up for a moment, in order to disappear immediately thereafter forever. Thus whenever in the Buddhist scriptures mention is made of I self, living being, etc. (even of the Buddha), these expressions accordingly are used merely as conventional terms, without referring to any real entities. Therefore the Buddha has said, "It is impossible, it cannot be that a man with real understanding should ever consider anything as a real entity."

He who does not understand the egolessness of existence, and who is still attached to self-illusion, one cannot comprehend and understand the four Noble Truths of the Buddha in the true light.

These four truths are:

1. the truth of the impermanency, unsatisfactoriness and impersonality of existence;
2. the truth that repeated rebirth and misery are rooted in self-illusion and craving for existence;
3. the truth that through the extinction of all self-illusion, vanity and craving, deliverance from all rebirth will be attained; and
4. the truth that the eightfold path, based on right understanding, is the path leading to this goal.

He who has not penetrated the ego-illusion and is still attached to self-vanity will believe that it is he himself that suffers, that it is he himself that performs the good and evil deeds leading to his rebirth, that it is he himself that will enter Nibbāna, that it is he himself that will bring the eightfold path to perfection.

One who, however, has fully penetrated the egolessness of existence, knows that, in the highest sense, there is no individual that suffers, that commits the kammic deeds, that enters Nibbāna, and that brings the Eightfold Path to perfection. In the *Visuddhimagga* it is therefore said:

Mere suffering exists, no sufferer is found.

The deeds are, but no doer of the deeds is there.

Nibbāna is, but not the man that enters it.

The path is, but no traveller on it is seen.

Further:

No doer of the deeds is found,  
No being that may reap their fruits.  
Empty phenomena roll on!  
This is the only right view.

Therefore, wherever the doctrine of the egolessness of all existence is rejected, the Buddha's word is rejected. But wherever, through penetration of the selflessness of all existence, the self-vanity has reached ultimate extinction, there the goal of the Buddha's teaching has been realised: freedom from all vanity of I and Mine, and the highest peace of Nibbāna.

# Self

G. N. Lewis

If something is yours, you have power over it: you can make it into whatever you wish. It will change according to your plans.

But have you power over your self? Can you make your body larger or smaller, or let it be this or that as you desire?

If it is not governed by your power but by its own laws and processes then it is not yours. If it were, the body would not be involved in sickness, for you would be able to make it be whatever you wished. Admittedly, one has control over the body to an extent but not as much as one has over this house or any other possession. Why not?

Your body was once very much more delicate and smaller than it is now. Now it is bigger and stronger. It will get weaker and degenerate later on. This body which you call yours — has it developed and deteriorated according to your will? Or perhaps the question of ownership does not arise, the body being subject to the same laws of nature as everything else, i.e., birth, decay and death.

If this is so, should one be concerned or unconcerned regarding the body? If neglected, the natural processes of destruction act quickly, disease and death soon resulting. Therefore food, exercise and clothing must be used to maintain it and to stop the natural processes being accelerated.

Do people feed and dress the body for maintenance only, and, if not, why not? Take a person who dresses only to keep his body protected from the elements. What's wrong with this? Should he be criticised and, if he is, for what? Because others don't dress similarly doesn't mean he's doing something wrong. Someone may say he looks ugly and unsightly, but how did we learn what ugliness was in the first place? Is the person criticising him or his clothes? Well, "him" is not the body; the person criticising him is not taking offence at the body but just at the clothes.

This is where opinion together with vanity creep in and facts become concealed.

Leaving the body let us turn to another aspect of self: feeling.

Say a man tries to grasp something which continually slips through his fingers. Can he say that thing is his? He tries to keep it but he can never clutch it solidly and he would never dream of calling that thing his own.

But say he has a fountain pen. That really seems to be his own. It is always with him and it keeps its shape and doesn't change very much.

How about feelings: happiness, indifference and pain? Are not these like the first example? How can we ever say feelings are our own? If they were, happiness would be ours for the rest of our life and not an illusive thing which comes and goes against our wishes.

Body is born, decays and dies. Likewise we find on investigation that exactly the same is true for feelings. The body does not come from nothing. It starts off by the fusing of two cells from mother and father. By way of nourishment it grows and develops. Then it dies.

Feeling is born of sense-impingement: e.g., eye and material shape lead to sense impingement, which leads to visual consciousness, which leads to feeling (pleasant, indifferent or painful according to whether or not what has been seen is liked or disliked as a result of past experience).

Thus we see how feeling is born. But this feeling changes. If a painful feeling arises, we are not content but crave to get away from it. Alternatively, if we have perceived something that gives a pleasing feeling we long to keep this feeling and try to possess whatever has caused it to arise.

Why don't feelings last? Because the very things from which they arise do not last. Therefore if we do not grasp after feelings we never suffer. Feelings are continually born and continually die, but the body takes a long time to do so.

If we cannot call body our own, how much less so is this true of feelings?



Let us now examine a third aspect of ourselves: perception.

What do we perceive and is it we who actually perceive? Perception is the recognition of sense-impingements. How is it born?

I hear a loud noise and recognise that a door has been slammed. What is the basis of this recognition? Firstly, without the ear no sound would be heard; therefore the ear is a necessary basis. The sound impinges on the ear, this being sensory impingement. From this, perception arises, but like feelings it does not last and soon dies away, another rising in its place. Do I enter into this perception? Do I perceive the door slamming? No. We have definitely seen that perception arose of its own accord, with oneself not being involved at all. Well, if body, feeling and perception are not me," what is?

Before this can be answered there is yet another aspect of ourselves, and this is volitional action. Here surely we shall find our true self. I say to a friend "I am going to do that" and I keep to what I've said. Here it appears a deliberate choice has been made between doing two specific things: either I will or I won't. How does the will (or act of choosing) arise, or is it there all the time? Does it only come into force when we have to make a choice? On investigation we find that this is so. For example: I'm going to ride my bicycle tonight. This is a deliberate choice. I could have gone to the cinema or for a walk. Why did I choose riding? Does volition come into this at all? What other volitional

tendencies are there?

I have killed a man. Surely volition was there. But if I ask myself why I wanted to kill him, several interesting things come to light. For argument's sake, let us say he murdered my wife. I was very attached to her. He took something away from me which I wanted. Missing the pleasurable feelings which were continually aroused by my wife's company, a painful feeling took its place when I lost her and I craved to get the former feeling back. The only satisfaction for me was to get rid of the object (the man) which caused the painful feeling to arise, and therefore I killed him.

So we see from this example that the volitional drive (the desire to kill) had a basis for arising, and we see also that after arising it passed away on completion of its primary object (the death of a man).

Volition therefore is a conditioned force directed specifically toward something, e.g., I can arouse myself to apply my mind to something. But, as just proved, volition is a conditioned phenomenon. Can I therefore be equated with volition? If so, I only exist when volition is present; when it passes away I die also. But we say we are present all the time; therefore I cannot be equated with volition.

In conclusion, we can state that if I say "I'm going to do this or that," what this really means is that this or that is going to be done, not by me but through cause and necessity.

Well, we still have not found ourselves. Yet there is only one more aspect of ourselves to consider: consciousness.

Are you conscious? Am I conscious? "Yes," is the usual immediate answer. If this were not so you would say, "I'd be unconscious." Can you be conscious without being conscious of anything? Most people would say not. Let us find out what factors are involved in being conscious.

Can one be conscious without a body? Not that we know of, so we can assume from this that consciousness arises dependent on the body. Will there be consciousness if no sense-organs are in the body? We can categorically state that there will not be. So our second step is that consciousness is dependent on the sense-organs. Will there be consciousness with body and sense-organs and no internal or external sense-impingement? Again we can say definitely "No." Given sense-impingement, shall we be conscious? Yes, but it will not be a very meaningful consciousness. We shall see a conglomeration of colours, hear noises, smell things, have bodily sensations, and taste things, but not be able to recognise them. If perception is missing one cannot say "I am conscious."

We have already discussed perception and shown that it is not one's real self. Sense-consciousness, together with perception, gives us our awareness of things, but is there an "I" who is aware? If you say, "I am conscious of a vase of flowers on the table," are *you* really conscious of it? By our investigation we have tried to show that you do not enter into it at all, and that consciousness, like all the other aspects of self, has birth, decay and death.

To fall into the delusion that the body, feelings, perception, volitional action, and consciousness are “you” is to suffer because, unfortunately, they are not of you and you are not of them, and you cannot expect them ever to give satisfaction for very long.

In conclusion I would say that the more disgusted one becomes with compounded things, the closer one gets to things that give lasting happiness.

From *The Maha Bodhi*, May 1964.

# Physical and Biological Aspects of Anattā

Edward Greenly

The labours of a succession of devoted scholars, from Turnour to Rhys Davids, has now made impossible (at any rate for all serious students of religion) the cruder misconceptions of Buddhism that were current in Europe at the end of last century. Its deeply intellectual character, its unique and unsullied record of tolerance, its priority (relative to the Mediterranean systems) of five centuries in promulgation of the higher ethic, are now all widely known.

And yet in spite of all this, even among such as are devoid of prejudice, it is seldom that one meets with a real, penetrating understanding of the Teaching. To some its philosophy, to others its influence, appear unintelligible.

Now the source of this perplexity (it may safely be affirmed) is, invariably, a failure to apprehend that characteristic and central doctrine or principle of Buddhism that is summed up in the Pali term *anattā*. Without this, there must appear to be an unbridgeable gap in the Buddhist doctrine of

causation; its power over the hearts and lives of men must seem incapable of explanation; its final goal still presents the insoluble enigma that it has for long presented to the European mind. However, once *anattā* has been comprehended, all thought and practise is clear and open. That is the key that unlocks the secret, the way to the heart of the Buddhist mystery.

The term is generally explained as meaning “denial of the soul”; and yet such a translation is apt to be somewhat misleading to a European. For it involves, in a certain sense, both less and more than that. It does not by any means imply, for example, that “death ends all” in the sense of some of the Western schools. And on the other hand, the idea of a “soul” is but a part (though indeed the most important part) of the great body of conceptions which it denies.

Taken in connection with *aniccā* (the principle of impermanence), that which it denies is the idea of separate and abiding substance in anything whatever in the whole unbounded universe, whether psychical or physical. Psyche, of course, was the particular kind of substance which the Buddhist teachers had in view, and its proper treatment is, naturally, psychological. But every kind of substance comes under the same condemnation. And, as the Western mind of today is far more at home in, and thinks far more clearly and powerfully upon, physical affairs, a consideration of some of the physical and biological aspects of *anattā* is likely to be the best possible preparation for an

understanding of those psychical aspects of it which the Buddhist teachers so earnestly laboured to convey, the more so as such cases are (it should most clearly be understood) not “illustrations” or analogies only, but actual examples of the principle itself.

Consider such a phenomenon as a rainbow. To the unsophisticated mind, a rainbow is just as real as any other object (much more vivid and real than the faint and distant hills that lie beyond it). A child, indeed, filled with longing, will beg that it may be given to him, that he may have and hold and possess for himself this beautiful and brilliant thing. Later on, he learns something of its real nature, learns that there is in it no “thing” whatever capable of being so held; that it is but a conditioning of certain rays of light and drops of water, and has no existence in itself at all. [1] That is precisely the anattā doctrine. The rainbow is anattā. This step in sound philosophy every sane adult is taught to take. How many take any further steps? For most, “the cares of life and the deceitfulness of riches” (riches often of another world as much as of this) occupy the mind entirely, and there is no desire for further knowledge. Yet to some (and one day to all) the question cannot but arise: “If this be so, if the rainbow be but a conditioning, how about the things of which it is a conditioning? How about the light and water? Surely those are real enough?”

Very well, then. The light, first: what is that? Little as we know, we know enough to answer that it is an undulation or vibration, a particular kind of very rapid movement of

something. But what is this but just the very answer that was given to the child about the rainbow, given to the adult about the light? Just as that rainbow was a conditioning of the light and had no existence in itself, so now the light proves to be a conditioning in its turn, to have no more existence in itself than the rainbow had. The light, too is anattā. Yet, if it be an undulation, of what is it an undulation? Of the ether. [2] And what is this ether? Here we are getting near the limits of our knowledge. Yet this much can be said: that it is not matter. It is not this; it is not that; it is not the other. To any question concerning it, such are the replies. And yet it is not non-existence. Seek it, and it vanishes from the grasp of the mind, just as the rainbow and the light did in their turn. It is the very type of insubstantiality, of anattā.

The water, however, is tangible and substantive enough. Here is existence in a way that cannot be denied. Go far enough to north or south, and water will react to even the Johnsonian fist. Nevertheless, let it but feel the touch of a lump of sodium, or even of a few inches of hot copper, and where is it? Vanished utterly, and in its place two things that are no more water than it or light were rainbow. Water in itself, then, is not and never was; nothing “was” but a particular conditioning of these other things, this hydrogen and oxygen, as we call them; “water” is but a name for such conditioning. Nor need we even think that this water-conditioning is the rule, and the water-abolishing experiments mere curious exceptions. Throughout the



whole vast universe that is visible to us, only in a score of tiny specks is that the case. Not for one fleeting moment in the great star that daily lights us, or in a single one of the millions of its peers in the depths of space, could the water-conditioning hold good.

Both the constituents of the rainbow, therefore, are as truly anattā as the rainbow itself. As in the case of the first constituent, however, the question leads us further. What of these elements, this hydrogen and this oxygen, into which the water has resolved itself? Well, it is true that, misled by the unsound views of the nature of things in which they were brought up, many (probably most) chemists did, for a long time, think that in the ultimate combining particle (the “atom” of such elements) a real, separate and abiding substance had at last been hunted down.

Not all, indeed, were so deceived. Hardly had the atomic theory been formulated, when discerning minds began to seek, first by one means, then by another, for that of which the atom must be but a compounding. The time had not come, and they were baffled. How in the last few years they have been completely justified, how abiding substance eludes us no less in the atom than it does elsewhere, has been already told elsewhere.

The hydrogen and oxygen, therefore, are in their turn nothing but conditionings of something else, and when we inquire concerning that of which they are conditionings, then (as we have done to the ether) we can give to it a name,

we can show that it must behave in such and such a way. But the moment that we attempt to lay the profane finger of thought upon it, and say that it is this or that, it is gone.

As of the rainbow, so of all things: process there is, conditioning there is, but nowhere the least trace of substance, nowhere the least trace of "self."

That is the anattā doctrine as exemplified by matter.

According to the theory of the soul, familiar to all of us from our childhood, each living body (at any rate each living human body) is inhabited and informed by a single psychic entity, the thinker of all its thoughts, doer of its deeds, and director of the organism generally. In Christianity, until lately, such a soul was ascribed to human beings only; animals had no souls. For them death ended all, without even the hope of a future life in which might be redeemed some of their unmerited sufferings. The present writer well remembers his passionate yearnings as a child after a larger hope for some of the dear animals he loved so well, and remembers the quenching of this hope by his orthodox instructors. [3]

The Roman Catholic Church still holds valorously to this ancient orthodoxy, [4] but the rapidly-growing feeling of compassion for animal suffering that has sprung up in the Western world during the past hundred years, and is one of its kindest and noblest features, [5] has, outside the Roman pale, begun to modify opinion, and souls are now postulated for the higher animals.

Concurrently with this, an influence of a different kind has accelerated the movement of men's minds in the same direction. This comes from the acceptance, now general, of the theory of evolution. Fear for the existence of the human soul was the motive of much of the early opposition to that theory. But now that resistance is no longer possible, it is coming to be felt that a worthier way out of the difficulty is to be found in the concession of a soul to these our fellow-beings. The inter-relationship and unity of all life left, indeed, no other way, if the soul theory was to be held at all.

The unity of life, however, has other bearings very searching, some of them, upon the whole question; and a consideration of these may throw some light upon animistic views in general.

For there is no stopping at the higher animals, still less at those who are our especial friends and lovers. If we concede a soul to a dog, so must we also to a wolf; if to a cat, then also to a tiger. Nor can we call a halt at any place, as, passing from these sensitive and splendid beings, we descend lower and lower through the mammalians till we reach the very humblest of the primitive marsupials. But the mammalian form but one of the branches of the Tree of Life: bird, reptile, fish put in the same claim, and it cannot be denied to them. Not even the lowly *Amphioxus* brooks the refusal of a soul, and he, standing at the confines of his kingdom, opens the gates to the still vaster and dimmer armies of the life we call Invertebrate. To cut an almost endless story short, we find even here no place at which to

stop, and are fain to concede at last that the microscopic protoplasmic cell-units called the protozoa are as able to make good their title as the lordliest of the mammalians. Besides, if we were inclined to pass them by with a *De minimis non curat lex*, they could reinforce their claim by pointing out that man himself enters upon his existence as a protozoan unit indistinguishable from themselves, and that if this unit contains a soul, why should not each of them contain one likewise?

There is another curious consideration. If my soul enters upon existence along with me, and is mine and no one else's, so also does any other being's even such as a protozoa's, and it is its soul and no other protozoa's. Now, man propagates his kind at an exceptionally slow rate, but the rate of increase in the lower ranks of life is prodigious. Statisticians amuse themselves sometimes by computations of the progeny of a single cod-fish in quite a moderate space of time, and the results are astonishing. But the multiplication of the protozoa proceeds by geometrical progression, so that, without books at hand, I am afraid to quote the shortness of the period in which one such will have given rise to millions. The influx of new souls into this world alone, therefore, is proceeding at a rate beyond all power of numbers to convey, and when we reflect that this has been going on throughout the whole of geological time, the conception is truly staggering.

Well-found indeed must be the ship of speculation that can carry such a freight as that across the stormy seas of modern

thought!

So far we have considered the single soul in a single body, such as we ourselves have been taught we are endowed with. But some cases are not so simple. Among the coelenterata and the polyzoa there are, as well as single hydroid animals, many species of compound ones, in which whole colonies of such beings are united by a "coenosarc" or flesh-body common to them all. What are we to say of the soul in a case of this sort? Shall we ascribe it to the individuals, to the coenosarc, or to the colony as a whole? The individual is just such another as a simple hydroid, yet if we assign to him a soul like that of the simple one, what becomes of the coenosarc, which is just as much alive? Or, if we assign it to the community, then why, to the hydra that is rooted in a coenosarc, should be denied that which is conceded to his cousin who is rooted on a stone? And, as if this were not perplexing enough, sometimes a member of such a community will detach himself from it altogether, and conduct his life on his own account.

To return, however, to the higher beings, ourselves included, with a single body and its single soul. Closely bound up with the theory of evolution are the facts of histology, the structures and relationships of the microscopic units that compose the living being.

Let us consider, first, the corpuscles of the blood. They are of the two kinds: the large white corpuscles, and the smaller red ones. Both are cells, but we will consider just now the

white ones. They are minute specks of living protoplasm, constantly changing their shape, moving slowly about, and living upon what they meet with.

Now, amongst the protozoa (animals consisting of a single cell whose claims to a single soul we were obliged to admit capable of being made good with such irresistible effect) is a creature known as the amoeba. It is a speck of protoplasm that moves slowly about from point to point, changing its shape as it goes along, and living upon any suitable object it meets with. The white blood-corpuscles and the amoeba are indistinguishable in composition, aspect and behaviour. They differ in nothing but their habitat. The amoeboid corpuscle (as it is called) can make every whit as effective a claim to a single soul as the amoeba.

The one, however, is an independent being; the other an integral part of a most essential portion of our own economy, essential, indeed, for without them the blood cannot perform its functions. And is not the blood, as we have long ago been told, "the life" (Deut. 12:23)? Even if we take refuge in the brain, and seek to locate the soul where thought goes on, to that retreat also they pursue us; for stop the blood, and in a few short minutes thinking ceases.

Clearly there is something wrong. It is evident that the simple-seeming hypothesis of a single soul in a single body hides a world of perplexities and complications. The difficulty of the hydrozoan coenosarc has reappeared in a more subtle form than ever, and that within our own

breasts, the very citadel of the soul-hypothesis.

Nor is this even the end of the matter. The relations of the amoeboid corpuscle to the amoeba strike the mind at once, and the lessons that they teach are past mistaking. But the red corpuscle is no whit less a cell, which, were it found elsewhere than in the blood, would pass without challenge as one among many protozoan creatures.

Nay, further still. If we watch through the microscope a drop of pond-water full of paramecium, or any other simple animals, it will not be long before we see one of them constrict into a sort of "waist," develop there a medial cell-wall, and part along that into two, each of which proceeds without more ado to go about its own business. [6]

In paramecium and its congeners the new cells leave each other, but in slightly higher animals they remain united along the medial wall, dividing, perhaps, and redividing until we have a tissue or colony of several cells. The members of such a tissue are to the free separating cells as the hydroids of a coenosarcal community to the solitary hydroids. The inner nature of the cell remains the same.

Now, all the tissues of the living body are neither more nor less than just such colonies. Modified in various ways according to the nature of the tissue (here for muscle, here for skin, there for bone, differently again for nerve, and finally in a special way for the brain itself), the units of these tissues are, throughout the body, cells, alike in their essential nature, different only in their modifications. The

blood corpuscles are just some of these cells which, in order to perform a particular function, remained detached and free to move, like the protozoa. And every activity of the being, physical or psychical, depends entirely on the coordinated activities, physical or psychical, of this vast multitude (which indeed no man can number). But each one of these is, as we now perceive, a being to whom, if we set out the hypothesis of souls, it is logically impossible to refuse a separate soul-unit of its own.

Seeking in the first part of this article for the essential, inner self or being of the rainbow (light, water, and their elements), we found that there was not in any one of them any essential self or being whatsoever. Every one of them turned out to be, by its very nature, a conditioning of elements that were not itself, and this held good to the last stages of analysis that knowledge could apply. Every one of them had to be pronounced anattā.

What have we now found (using a biological analysis) to be the case of the living being? We have found it to be (more conspicuously if possible than even those other phenomena) a conditioning of a vast number of elements that are not one of them itself, dependent absolutely upon these elements, having apart from them and their activities no existence “in itself” whatever.

Beginning with a phenomenon, the rainbow, with regard to which the anattā doctrine is already held by every sane adult, we have followed that doctrine and found it to apply



to the highest form of existence that we know upon this earth. From the biological point of view, the living being is (and that in a superlative degree) anattā.

Further treatment of the anattā subject is, of course, psychological. With that, this article is not concerned. But any sound psychology must be in harmony, not at variance, with biology and physics. Suffice it then to say, we may be sure that what is biologically compound will not prove to be psychologically simple.

Were we ever inclined to regard the doctrines of anattā and the khandhas as either fantastic or perverse, we may wonder rather at the discernment which perceived the one, long before biology and physics were, and at the moderation which gave us but five khandhas where modern science would give for one of them alone (viz. *rūpa*) something much more like five hundred million! Far more marvellous, however, was that surpassing spiritual penetration that could see, in this compositeness of our nature, nothing less than the balm of sorrow, the justification of the Golden Rule, and life's liberation from the house of bondage.

Parts of this article may have, perhaps, a somewhat polemical expression. Well, argument (if undertaken at all) should be made conclusive and convincing, if that be possible, and should result in intellectual conviction. But intellectual conviction is not religion; it may not even have religion as its consequence in life. Something more is

needed. He who discerns not life's pathos and its sorrow, will not find out the annattā path of love to sorrow's utter ceasing.

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# The Spell of Narcissism and the Anattā Doctrine

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“Narcissism is a passion the intensity of which in many individuals can only be compared with sexual desire and the desire to stay alive. In fact, many times it proves to be stronger than either. Even in the average individual in whom it does not reach such intensity, there remains a narcissistic core which appears to be almost indestructible.”

Erich Fromm, *The Heart of Man*

The word “narcissism” is derived from a Greek legend. Narcissus in mythology is a beautiful youth who loved no one till he saw his own body reflected in water. Narcissus fell in love with his own reflection. Finally, he pined away, died, and was turned into the flower of the same name. [7]

Thus the word “narcissism” derived from this legend has been generally used to refer to a kind of morbid self-love. [8]

The concept of narcissism was woven into psychological theory by Sigmund Freud. Freud himself borrowed this name from Paul Nacke, who used the term to describe a perversion, where “an adult individual lavishes upon his own body all the caresses expended only upon a sexual object other than himself.” [9] It was Freud, however, who grasped for the first time the tremendous significance of the concept of narcissism. Freud’s essay on narcissism is one of the richest spots in his psychology, unfortunately neglected by his fellow psychiatrists and submerged by the popular image of Freud’s work. Freud’s essay on narcissism is a little gem which would have been pushed into an insignificant corner in the field of psychological theory but for the efforts of Eric Fromm, who remarks that, “One of the most fruitful and far-reaching of Freud’s discoveries is his concept of narcissism. Freud himself considered it to be one of his most important findings.” [10]

In this paper I shall very briefly refer to the Freudian concept of narcissism and then present Fromm’s development on this against the background of the anattā doctrine.

Before his paper on narcissism appeared, Freud made a clear distinction between the sexual instinct (libido) and the ego instinct, or in more popular terms, between “love” and “hunger.” But he came across an interesting category of

patients whose condition presented a great challenge to this distinction between sexual and ego instincts. "We became slowly accustomed to the conception that the libido, which we find attached to certain objects and which is the desire to gain some satisfaction in these objects, can also abandon these objects and set the ego itself in their place," says Freud. [11] More reflection on this point made him realise that a fixation of this kind to the subject's own body and person was not something accidental; it is probable that this is the original condition of man (primary narcissism) out of which object love develops later without thereby necessarily affecting a disappearance of narcissism.

This conception of narcissism was backed by evidence from a number of sources. In megalomania, we get the subjective over-estimation of self-importance. In dementia praecox we get the magical belief in the "omnipotence of thought." Freud also studied the mind of the infant and the primitive man and here too discovered an expression of narcissism. There are also other situations in life like disease, after an accident, in old age, etc., "when the tendency to this withdrawal into self-preoccupation is apt to become pronounced." Normal love is also affected by a great deal of narcissism. The notion of narcissism was used to explain a wide range of distinct phenomena ranging from love, jealousy, and fear, to mass phenomena. Continuing on these lines, Fromm has worked out the spell of narcissism in group-behaviour, nationalism, and war. It was due to Fromm's insight that the concept of narcissism was

salvaged from its limited base in the libido theory and given a more comprehensive interpretation.

## Narcissism in Buddhism and the Writings of Fromm

Fromm himself makes a reference to Buddhism which is extremely significant for an understanding of narcissism. Fromm says that the essential teachings of all the humanistic religions in the world can be summarised in one sentence: “It is the goal of man to overcome one’s narcissism. Perhaps this principle is nowhere expressed more radically than in Buddhism.” [12] Fromm concludes on these lines that if man sheds the “illusion of his indestructible ego” and the other objects of greed, then he can be totally open, awake and fully related to the world.

The illusion of the indestructible ego that Fromm mentions is quite clearly a reference to the Buddhist doctrine of anattā (egolessness). There is no ego entity existing apart from, and independently of, those physical and mental processes that constitute life.

The illusion of the ego has two basic forms: eternity belief and annihilation belief. The craving for selfish pursuits arises with a false conception of personality, based on the dogma of personal immortality (*sassata-diṭṭhi*), and the craving for annihilation arises with a false conception of personality, based on the annihilationist view (*uccheda-*

*ditṭhi*). [13]

An understanding of the doctrine of *sakkāya-ditṭhi* (wrong personality belief) helps us to grasp the Buddhist doctrine of egolessness. Where there is a mere complex of corporeality, feeling, perception, dispositions, and consciousness, the individual being subject to the ego-illusion assumes the existence of an ego in twenty ways:

1–5: Ego is identified with corporeality, feeling, perception, dispositions, and consciousness.

6–10: Ego is contained in them.

11–15: Ego is independent of them.

16–20: Ego is their owner.

This does not mean that the ego is merely an intellectual construction. The roots of the ego-illusion are strong and it is fed by deep effective processes. [14] These processes are dormant proclivities described in the Discourses of the Buddha as the latent desire for continued existence (*bhavarāga anusaya*).

## Corporeal Overtones of the Ego Concept

The origin of the Freudian concept of narcissism is the point at which Narcissus falls in love with his own body. In relating auto-eroticism to narcissism, Freud says that the ego is first and foremost a “body-ego.” Fromm also says

that one of the most elementary examples of narcissism can be found in the attitude to the body exhibited by the average person. [15]

The narcissistic relation to one's body has its parallel in the doctrine of the Buddha, where he discusses the operation of personality beliefs (*attadiṭṭhi*) in relation to corporeality. The majority of the people who are not skilled in the doctrine of the Buddha are subject to the ego-illusion associated with their body. This ego-illusion is described in the suttas:

“Those who are untrained in the doctrine of the Buddha regard body as the self (*attā*, Skt: *ātman*); they regard the self as having a body, body as being in the self, the self as being in the body. ‘I am the body,’ they say; ‘body is mine’; and they are possessed by this idea.” The Buddha also says that due to the excessive attachment to the body, when it alters and changes sorrow and grief set in; thus the doctrine of *anattā* is linked to the doctrine of *dukkha* (suffering).

However, while the body-image concept of the ego dominates the thought of Freud, the Buddha offers a more comprehensive analysis, relating the ego-illusion to feeling, perception, dispositions, and consciousness. To use a phrase of Wolheim, “the corporeal overtones of the ego concept” prevented Freud from presenting a broad base for his theory of narcissism. In fact, Wolheim has pointed out a significant ambiguity in the Freudian analysis of narcissism. Sometimes Freud conceives narcissism as an attraction towards one's own person, and sometimes as an attraction towards one's own body.



Fromm has not merely re-vitalized the Freudian concept of narcissism, but takes it very much beyond this, and brings it close to the doctrine of the Buddha. Not merely does Fromm offer a theory of narcissism which is of interest to the Buddhist, but he quite clearly refers to the doctrine of the Buddha: “The ‘awakened’ person of whom Buddhist teaching speaks is the person who has overcome his narcissism, and who is therefore capable of being fully awake.” [16]

## The Narcissistic “Self-Image”

The narcissistic person is not only proud of his body but he has an exaggerated and inflated image of all aspects of his personality: his intelligence, his honour and his wealth, his social standing, etc. “Just as the narcissistic person has made his ‘self-image’ the object of his narcissistic attachment, he does the same with everything connected with him. *His* ideas, *his* knowledge, *his* house, but also people in *his* ‘sphere of interest’ become objects of his narcissistic attachment.” [17] As both Freud and Fromm point out, one’s narcissistic image about oneself is projected on to the children. This is extended to identification with wider groups, culminating in nationalism.

Karen Horney was quick to point out that at the root of this kind of narcissistic self-image is found a kind of “self-inflation” rather than “self-love,” with a need not for love but the admiration of others.

At this point we see the relevance of the Buddhist concept of *māna* (self-conceit). Self-conceit, according to the Buddha, takes three forms: I am superior to others (*seyyo' ham asmi-māna*); I am equal to others (*sadiso 'ham asmi-māna*); I am inferior to others (*hino 'ham asmi māna*). *Māna* is one of the fetters that bind man to the ills of existence, and it varies from a crude feeling of pride to a subtle feeling of distinctiveness that prevails till the attainment of arahatship (sainthood).

If a person is proud of his attainments, exaggerates them, and feels infuriated when someone gives a lower estimation of his doings, he suffers from an inflated sense of vanity (*māna-mada*). If he feels frustrated, disappointed, and underestimates his attainments, he is subject to a kind of inferiority complex. This is similar to what Fromm describes as “depression”: “The element of mourning in melancholia refers, in my opinion to the narcissistic image of the wonderful ‘I’ which has died, and for which the depressed person is mourning.”

Pride, vanity, and conceit manifest clearly in interpersonal relations, as a reactive expression, as “wounded narcissism.” Its mechanism is similar to what Freud refers to as “secondary narcissism.” One’s wounded narcissism gives way either to an ego collapse, depression, and melancholy, or to anger and fury.

## The Antinomy Between Self-love and Love for

## Others

Apart from discussing the pathology of narcissism and its crippling impact on healthy personality growth, Fromm raises the question whether there could be a kind of healthy self-love, a benign form of narcissism as different from malignant narcissism. Is a certain degree of narcissism necessary for survival? Is there a necessary antinomy between love of self and others?

Part of the problem could of course arise due to the linguistic issues besetting the use of the word “self” in diverse contexts. A grasp of the subtle mechanisms that bear upon the psychology of human motivation can clear up another facet of this issue. Ultimately this might involve a whole philosophical perspective, or a way of looking at the universe and man.

Fromm’s analysis of this question too can be presented against the background of the Buddhist analysis of the issues involved. The problem arises when we consider love for others and love for oneself as alternatives which are mutually exclusive. **[18]** Selfishness is not identical with mature self-love. In fact selfishness is caused by a real lack of genuine self-love. “Love, in principle, is indivisible as far as the connection between the ‘objects’ and one’s own self is concerned. Genuine love is an expression of productiveness and implies care, respect, responsibility, and knowledge. It is not an ‘affect’ in the sense of being affected by somebody, but an active striving for the growth and happiness of the

loved person, rooted in one's own capacity to love." [19]

Fromm says that it is only a "symbiotic attachment" which is rooted in one's narcissism. Symbiotic attachment takes two basic forms: that of passive submission (to use a clinical term, masochism), and active dominance (sadism). The masochistic person escapes from the unbearable feeling of separation and isolation by making himself a part and parcel of another person. The sadistic person wants to escape from his aloneness by making another person part and parcel of himself.

From the Buddhist standpoint, a clear distinction could be made between self-devoting motives and self-centred motives. The practise of *metta-bhāvanā* is the finest expression of the fusing of self-love and love for others in Buddhism. The meditation of loving kindness is first developed towards oneself and then radiates towards others. One first starts with the thought, "May I be happy," and then extends it to the welfare and happiness of others.

Even where a person makes a sacrifice and forgoes certain material benefits for the sake of others, it merely strengthens his self-development. The very nature of the good is such that no one can seek the salvation of others without seeking his own. It is extremely important to mention that Buddhism considers the life of renunciation as the highest expression of the other-regarding instincts. This is very well expressed in the *Kindred Sayings*: "He who of both is a physician, since Himself he heals and the others too."

In the suttas, there is a classification of beings into four types: he who is neither bent on his own profit nor on the profit of another; he who is bent on the profit of another but not his own; he who is bent on his own profits not another's; and he who is bent on the profit both of himself and another. [20] The Buddha considers the last category as the best.

The context in which the Buddha made the analysis cited above may be a little different from the context in which Fromm has made a case for genuine self-love. But I do not see any fundamental difference between the approaches of Buddhism and that of Erich Fromm. It is true that the Buddha was basically concerned with the life of renunciation, and the other-regarding virtues in Buddhism are based on a deeper doctrine of compassion. But if we present the basic human relations presented in a homily to Sigāla, it will be quite clear that even in limited social situations the Buddha advocates mature human relations which deny any *symbiotic attachment* [21] of abnormal domination or dependence.

There is however a wider dimension in which the Buddhist analysis of self-love has to be presented. A layman who has made a necessary compromise with life will find it difficult to handle the obtruding ego, while the recluse committed to the path of renunciation will have at his command a more effective therapeutic control over the spell of narcissism. The only way to bridge the gap is to discover significant similarities between the techniques used by the psychiatrist

in special “clinical situations” and those of the recluse who has made a life-long commitment to a therapeutic procedure of his own.

This short paper is essentially a response to a psychiatrist with vision who has opened a significant dialogue with humanistic religions.

# Extracts from the Saṃyutta-nikāya Dealing with Not-self [22]

Compiled and translated by  
Nyanatiloka Mahāthera

## SN 5:10

When certain things we find are combined,  
We speak of 'chariot,' speak of 'car.'  
Just so when all Five Groups appear,  
We use the designation 'man.'  
'Tis naught but suffering that does arise,  
And that exists and passes off.  
Nothing but suffering appears,  
Nothing but suffering that vanishes.

The “five groups” are a classification, in which the Buddha has summed up all the physical and mental phenomena of existence, and in particular, those which appear to the ignorant man as his self or personality. They are: corporeality, feeling, perception, mental formations, and

consciousness.

It is said in the *Visuddhimagga*:

“Whenever different parts, as axle, wheels, frame, pole, etc., are combined in a certain manner, we use the conventional designation ‘chariot.’ But if we examine one part after the other, we cannot, in the ultimate sense, discover anything that can be called a chariot. It is likewise with the five groups of existence (*khandha*). If they are present, one uses the conventional designation ‘being’ or ‘personality,’ etc. But if we examine each phenomenon in its ultimate sense, there is nothing that can form a basis for such conceptions as ‘I am’ and ‘I.’ Hence, in the ultimate sense, only mental and physical phenomena exist.”

## SN 12:12

Through sense-impression is conditioned feeling—thus it is said in the formula of dependent origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*).

... “But who, Venerable One, is it that feels?”

“This question is not proper,” said the Exalted One. “I do not teach that there is one who feels. If however the question is put thus: ‘Conditioned through what, does feeling arise?’ then the right answer will be: ‘Through sense-impression is feeling conditioned ...; through feeling, craving; through craving, clinging;



....”

## SN 12:35

But what are old age and death, and to whom do they belong? I do not teach that there is one thing called old age and death, and that there is someone to whom they belong. Verily if one holds the view that life (*jīva*: life principle, soul, etc.) is identical with the body, in that case there can be no holy life. And if one holds the view that life is one thing but body another thing, also in that case a holy life is impossible.

Avoiding both these extremes (i.e. complete identity and complete otherness), the Perfect One has taught the doctrine that lies in the middle, namely: 'through rebirth conditioned are old age and death; ... through the (kammical) process of becoming, rebirth; ... through clinging the process of becoming ... through craving, clinging, ... through feeling, craving; ... etc.

...

The Visuddhimagga quotes:

“From suffering and sorrow springs delusive thinking,  
No first beginning of existence can be seen.  
No doer can be found, nor one that reaps the fruits.  
And twelve fold empty is the cycle of rebirth,  
And steadily the wheel of life rolls on and on.”

## SN 12:61

Better it would be to consider the body as the 'self,' rather than the mind. And why? Because this body may last for 10, 20, 30, 40 or 50 years, even for 100 years and more. But that which is called 'mind, consciousness, thinking,' arises continuously, during day and night, as one thing, and as something different again it vanishes.

Now, here the learned and noble disciple considers thoroughly the dependent origination: 'If this is, then that becomes. Through the arising of this, that comes to arise; through the extinction of this, that becomes extinguished, namely: Through ignorance conditioned arise the kamma-formations; through the kamma-formations, consciousness (in next life); through consciousness, corporeality, and mind; ... through the extinction of ignorance the kamma-formations become extinguished; through the extinction of the kamma-formations, consciousness, ..., etc.'

## SN 22:9–11

Corporeality ... feeling ... perception ... mental formations ... and consciousness are impermanent ... suffering ... not-self, be they of the past or the future, not to mention the present. Understanding thus, the learned and noble disciple does no longer cling to

things past, and he enters the path leading to the turning away therefrom, to detachment and extinction.

## SN 22:18–20

The five Groups of Existence are impermanent, suffering, and not-self. And also the causes and conditions for the arising of these groups of existence are impermanent, suffering, and not-self. How could that which has arisen through something impermanent, suffering and not-self as its root, be itself permanent, joyful, and a self?

## SN 22:47

All those ascetics and priests, who again and again in manifold ways believe in a 'self' (*attā*), they all do so with regard to the five groups of existence, or to one of them. What five? Here the ignorant worldling ... considers form as the self; or the self as the owner of form, or form as included in the self, or the self as included in form. (So for feeling, perception, mental-formations, consciousness.)

## SN 22:81

Now, someone holds the view: This is my 'self,' this is the world. After death I shall remain permanent, steady, eternal, and not be subject to any change.

This eternity-view is one kamma-formation (*saṅkhāra*). [23] But through what is this kamma-formation conditioned?

It is the craving which has arisen in the ignorant worldling while being impressed by a feeling conditioned through an infatuated sense-impression. It is through this craving (*taṇhā*) arisen hereby, that the kamma-formation has arisen. Hence that kamma-formation is impermanent, created, and has conditionally arisen. In one who thus understands, thus sees the immediate extinction of taints (*āsavā*) takes place.

Again, someone holds the view: 'May I not be! May there nothing belong to me! I shall not be! Nothing will belong to me!' Also this annihilation-view is a kamma-formation ... is impermanent, created, and conditionally arisen. In one who thus understands, thus sees, the immediate extinction of taints takes place.

## SN 22:85

To the monk Yamaka once the following wrong view had arisen: 'Thus do I understand the doctrine shown by the Blessed One that he in whom all taints have vanished, at the dissolution of the body, after death, will become annihilated and will no longer exist after death.'

(Sāriputta:) “What do you think, Brother Yamaka, are corporeality ... feeling ... perception ... mental formations ... or Consciousness permanent or impermanent?”

“Impermanent, Venerable Sir.” ...

“Now, do you consider corporeality etc. as the Perfect One?”

“No, Venerable Sir.”

“Or do you consider the Perfect One as contained therein?”

“No, Venerable Sir.”

“Or do you consider all these groups combined as the Perfect One?”

“No, Venerable Sir.”

“Or do you think that the Perfect One is without corporeality, or without feeling, without perception, without mental formations, without consciousness?”

“No, Venerable Sir.”

“Now, since you cannot, even during life-time, make out the Perfect One according to truth and reality, how can you rightly maintain that the Perfect One will, at the dissolution of the body become annihilated and no longer continue after death?”

“Should someone ask me, what will become of the

Holy One, I should answer thus: 'Corporeality, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness are impermanent and what is impermanent, that is suffering; and what is suffering, that will become extinguished and annihilated.'"

Hence, it is only these five groups of phenomena, embracing all existence whatever, which are here to be considered, while the designations 'Perfect One,' I, Ego, self, person, man, animal, etc., are merely conventional terms, not referring to any real entities. And the so-called pure 'self' is merely a metaphysical fiction or hypothesis.

## SN 22:89

Five Groups of Existence forming the objects of attachment' (*upādānakkhandha*) have been taught by the Blessed One: corporeality, feeling, perception, mental formations, consciousness.

With regard to these five groups I do not find any self (*attā*), or something 'belonging to a self' (*attaniya*), but still I am not yet a Holy One, not yet freed from taints. Also concerning these groups of existence liable to attachment, I am no longer subject to the thoughts of 'I am' or 'This I am.'

## SN 22:90

The world, as a rule, is fettered by attachment and clinging to things, and is firmly adhering to them. But the learned and noble disciple does no longer attach himself, cling and firmly adhere and incline to the thoughts: 'I have a self (*attā*)' and he knows: 'Merely woe is it that arises; merely woe that vanishes.'

## SN 22:95

Suppose a man who is not blind, beheld the many bubbles on the Ganges as they drive along; and he watched them, and carefully examined them. After carefully examining them, they will appear to him empty, unreal, and unsubstantial. In exactly the same way does the monk behold all corporeal phenomena, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and states of consciousness, whether past, present or future, one's own or external, gross or subtle, lofty or low, far or near. And he watches them, and examines them carefully; and after carefully examining them, they appear to him empty, unreal, and unsubstantial.

The body's like a lump of foam,  
Feeling like a water-bubble,  
Perception like a void mirage,  
Formations like a plantain tree,  
And consciousness like jugglery.

## SN 22:96

There is no corporeality, no feeling, no perception, no mental formation, no consciousness that is permanent, enduring and lasting, and that, not subject to any change, will eternally remain the same. If there existed such a self that is permanent, enduring and lasting and not subject to any change, then the holy life leading to complete extinction of suffering will not be possible.

## SN 22:102

Once the contemplation of impermanence has been developed and has attained full growth, then it will overcome all craving for sensuous existence, all craving for fine-material existence, all craving for immaterial existence; it will overcome and uproot all conceit of 'I am.'

Only on reaching perfect Holiness, all conceit of 'I am' (*asmimāna*) will forever disappear.

## SN 22:117

The learned and noble disciple does not consider corporeality, feeling, perception, mental formations, or consciousness as the self; nor the self as the owner of one of these groups, nor this group as included



within the self, nor the self as included within this group.

Of such a learned and noble disciple it is said that he is no longer fettered by any group of existence, own or external: thus I say.

## SN 22:122

... It is possible that a virtuous man, while contemplating the five groups of existence as impermanent, suffering, ... empty, not-self, may realise the fruit of stream-entrance...

## SN 22:147f

The noble disciple, who out of faith has gone forth from home to the homeless life, has to fulfil the task of contemplating the five groups of existence as impermanent, suffering, and not-self. And while penetrating these things, he becomes freed therefrom, freed from rebirth, old age and death, from sorrow, lamentation, grief, and despair, becomes freed from suffering: thus I say.

## SN 22:151

“What must exist, and what must be the condition, that such views may arise as ‘This is my self, this the world. After death I shall continue, be everlasting,

eternal, not subject to any change’?”

“The five groups of existence must exist ... that such views may arise.”

“What do you think: Are these five groups permanent or impermanent?”

“Impermanent, Venerable Sir.”

“But what is impermanent, is that happiness or suffering!”

“Suffering, Venerable Sir.”

“But based on that which is impermanent, suffering and subject to change, may (rightly) arise such views as: ‘This is my self, this the world. After death I shall continue, be everlasting, eternal, not subject to any change’?”

“No, Venerable Sir.”

In SN 22:47 it was stated, in a more general way, that any kind of self-illusion is necessarily based upon the five groups of existence. Here, however, the same is said with special reference to the eternity-views.

## SN 35:6

The visible objects are not-self (*anattā*). Sounds ...  
Odours ... Tastes ... Bodily impressions ... Mind-

objects are not-self. But of that which is not-self, one has, according to reality and true wisdom, to know thus: 'That am I not; that does not belong to me; that is not my self'...

## SN 35:23

What is the totality of things?

Eye and visible objects, ear and sounds, nose and odours, tongue and tastes, body and bodily impressions, mind and mind-objects: these are called the totality of things.

## SN 35:45–49

All things are not-self. ... All things one has to comprehend fully (1st truth). ... All things one has to overcome (2nd truth). ... All things one has to know directly....

## SN 35:85

It is said that the world is empty. But why does one call the world empty?

Because the world is empty of a self (*attā*) and of something belonging to a self (*attaniya*), therefore the world is called empty. But which are the things that are empty of a self?

Empty of a self are eye and visible objects, ear and sounds, nose and odours, tongue and tastes, body and bodily impressions, mind and mind-objects.

## SN 35:90

One should not conceive oneself being identical with the eye, should not conceive oneself being included within the eye, should not conceive oneself being outside the eye, should not conceive oneself: 'The eye belongs to me.'

One should not conceive oneself being identical with the visible objects, should not conceive oneself being included within the visible objects, should not conceive oneself being outside the visible objects, should not conceive: 'Visible objects belong to me.

One should not conceive oneself being identical with eye-consciousness, should not conceive oneself being included within eye-consciousness, should not conceive oneself being outside of eye-consciousness, should not conceive: 'The eye-consciousness belongs to me.' ...

One should not conceive oneself being identical with the totality of things....

Thus not conceiving any more, the wise disciple clings no longer to anything in the world. Clinging no longer to anything, he trembles not. Trembling no longer, he reaches in his own person the extinction of

all vanity: 'Exhausted is rebirth; lived the holy life; and no further existence have I to expect.'" Thus he knows.

The four types of 'imagining' mentioned in the first paragraph of this text, correspond to those contained in the 1st Discourse of the Majjhima-Nikāya (Mūlapariyāya Sutta).

### SN 35:141

... Consciousness (mind) is not-self. Also the causes and conditions of the arising of consciousness, they likewise are not-self. For, how could it be possible that consciousness, having arisen through something which is not-self, could ever be a self? ...

### SN 35:163

... Whosoever understands and contemplates the mind as not-self, in him the self-view disappears. Whoso understands and contemplates as not-self (*anattā*) the mind-objects ..., mind-consciousness ... mind-impression ... and the agreeable and disagreeable and indifferent feeling conditioned through mind-impression, in him the self-view disappears ...

### SN 35:193

... Just as this body has in various ways been revealed, disclosed and explained as not-self, in exactly the same way one should explain also mind as not-self ...

## SN 35:197

... 'Empty village' is a name for the six sense-organs; Thus, whenever an experienced, learned and wise man examines the six sense-organs, eye, ear, nose, tongue, body or mind-organ, then all these things appear to him as delusive, empty, and deceitful...

## SN 35:207

... 'I am' is a delusion. 'This I am' is a delusion. 'I shall be' is a delusion. 'I shall not be' is a delusion. 'Corporeal shall I be' is a delusion. 'Incorporeal shall I be' is a delusion. 'Endowed with perception shall I be' is a delusion, 'Without perception shall I be' is a delusion. 'Neither with nor without perception shall I be,' is a delusion. Delusion is a sickness, an ulcer, a thorn.

## SN 41:7

... What is the mind-deliverance of emptiness (*suññata*)? There the monk repairs to the forest, to the foot of a tree, or to an empty hut. And he contemplates thus: 'Empty is all this of a self and of

anything belonging to a self' ...

## SN 46:72f

... If one develops the contemplation of impermanence, the contemplation of suffering due to impermanence, the contemplation of not-self due to suffering, then all these contemplations are leading to great fruit and benefit. ...

## SN 56:8

Do not think such evil, unwholesome thoughts, as 'Life and body are identical'; or 'Life is one thing, but another is the body'; or 'Does the Perfect One live after death?' 'Or not?' ... And why should one not think such thoughts? Because such thoughts are not profitable, do not belong to the genuine holy life, do not lead to the turning away and detachment, not to extinction, appeasement, enlightenment, and Nibbāna.

# The Advantages of Realising the Doctrine of Anattā (Anattānisaṃsa)

The Venerable Ledi Sayādaw,  
Agga Maha Paṇḍita, D. Litt.

[Extracts from *Anattā-Dīpanī*. Adapted from  
the translation by U Sein Nyo Tun. From *The  
Light of Dhamma* (Rangoon), VIII 2.]

I shall show here the advantages arising from the realisation  
of the characteristic of not-self (*anattā*).

If one can clearly perceive the characteristic of *anattā*, one  
achieves the knowledge pertaining to the path of stream-  
entry (*sotāpatti-magga-ñāṇa*), wherein ego-delusion (*atta-  
diṭṭhi*) and personality belief (*sakkāya-diṭṭhi*) are totally  
eradicated.

## Anattā Realisation and Past Kamma



All beings who drift and circle in the long and beginningless round of rebirths called *saṃsāra* rarely encounter the teachings of a Buddha. They may not encounter them for the time of even a hundred thousand world-cycles. They may not get the opportunity of hearing of a Buddha's teachings even once while an infinite number of world-cycles elapse. The number of existences and world-cycles in which beings have been afflicted by evil and error predominate. Hence, in the mental make-up of a being, there is always an infinite number of unwholesome actions (*akusala-kamma*) that can result in its falling into a world of utmost torment (*avīci-niraya*), or in being reborn in other worlds of woe.

Ego-delusion is the foremost of the unwholesome kamma of old and accompanies beings incessantly. As long as personality-belief exists, these old unwholesome actions are fiery and full of strength. Though beings may be enjoying happiness and splendour as deities, as divine rulers (Sakka) or in the fine-material or immaterial Brahma worlds, yet they necessarily exist, as it were, with their heads forever turned towards the four worlds of woe (*apāya*).

Palm fruits in a palm grove have an ever-existing tendency to fall to the ground, even though they may be attached to the very top of a palm tree. So long as the stalks are firm the fruits will remain on the tree; but as soon as the stalks weaken they will inevitably fall to the ground. In the same way, deities and Brahma gods afflicted with ego-delusion will be able to exist in their respective worlds only as long

as the “stalks” of vital life force as deities and Brahmas remain intact. But when these “stalks” of vital life force are severed, they inevitably fall into worlds below, just like the palm fruits. This happens because personality-belief, which is ever present in the mental make-up of a being, is a great burden (heavier than even the Mount Meru) in as much as personality-belief gathers in its fold an infinite number of unwholesome kamma accumulated in the past.

Thus beings who harbour within themselves this personality-belief are continually under pressure to gradually descend or directly to fall towards the worlds of woe although they may be living in the highest of the Brahma worlds. The cases of beings living in the lower Brahma worlds, or in the celestial or human world, are much worse and need no further comment. Although such beings may exist as the rulers of Brahma worlds or of celestial worlds, yet their mental makeup contains (ready-made) the eight great hells, the lesser hells, the worlds of ghosts and demons, and the animal realm. It is because these beings do not know that the tendency towards those misery-filled lower realms is always present in their mental make-up that the Brahma kings and divine kings can afford to derive pleasure and enjoyment from their form of existence.

But all the old unwholesome actions that have accompanied beings throughout the long and beginningless round of rebirths will be extinguished completely when their head and chief, personality-belief (*sakkāya-dit̥ṭhi*), has been made

to disappear entirely.

Apart from that old unwholesome kamma that had accompanied beings since time immemorial, even in the case of the numerous unwholesome actions committed in the present existence (such as killing or stealing), their (rebirth-producing) tendencies entirely disappear as soon as their head and chief, the personality-belief, becomes completely extinguished. For such beings there may remain occasion to fear affliction by vermin, but there no longer remains any occasion for them to fear the resultants of the infinite number of past unwholesome actions. [24]

Beings whose mental make-up is entirely freed from personality-belief have, as it were, their heads turned towards the higher planes of the celestial and Brahma worlds even though they may be living in the human world. And if living in the lower celestial and Brahma realms, their heads are always turned towards the higher planes of those worlds. They resemble the vapours that invariably rise upwards from forests and mountains during the latter part of the rainy season.

This shows the greatness of the advantages arising from the extinction of personality-belief as far as relating to past kamma.

## Anattā Realisation and Future Kamma

Human beings, deities, and Brahmas, who have personality-

belief in their mental make-up may be good and virtuous beings today, but any time later they may commit an unlimited number of evil deeds, even grave offences like matricide, parricide, killing of arahats, etc. This may happen to them tomorrow or the day after, next month or next year, or in following existences. Today they may be devotees within the fold of the Buddha's Dispensation, while tomorrow or the day after, etc. they may be outside its pale or even become enemies and destroyers of the Buddha Sāsana.

Those beings however, human or divine, who well perceive the characteristic of not-self (anattā), and thus have entirely extirpated personality-belief from their mental make-up, will cease to commit evil deeds and other unwholesome kamma even in their dreams, although they may continue to circle in saṃsāra for many more lives to come. From the day of freeing themselves from personality-belief until their final existence before their attainment of Nibbāna, they will always remain within the fold of the Buddha's Dispensation, wherever they are reborn. They will never appear in a form of existence or in a world where the Buddha's Dispensation is absent.

This shows the greatness of the advantages arising from the extinction of personality-belief as far as relating to future kamma.

## How Past Kamma Becomes Inoperative

How the innumerable unwholesome karmic actions of the past become inoperative [25] at the moment when personality-belief is extinguished may be illustrated as follows:

In a string of beads where a great number of beads are strung together by a strong silk thread, if one bead is pulled all the others will follow the one that is pulled. But if the silk thread is cut or removed, pulling one of the beads will not disturb the other beads because there is no longer any attachment between them.

Similarly, a being that possesses personality-belief harbours a strong attachment to the series of the aggregates (*khandha*) which have arisen during past existences and past world cycles, and transforms them into an ego. Thinking, "In the past I have often been a human being, a deity, or a Brahmā," he acquires the thread that is personality-belief. It is thus that the innumerable unwholesome karmic actions of the past which have not yet produced results, will accompany that being wherever he may be reborn. These unwholesome actions of the past resemble beads that are strung and bound together by a strong thread.

Beings, however, who clearly perceive the characteristic of not-self and have rid themselves of personality-belief, will perceive that the bodily and mental aggregates that arise and disappear even within the short period of one sitting do so as separate phenomena and not as a closely interlinked continuum. The concept of "my self" which is like the

thread is no longer present. Those bodily and mental processes appear to them like the beads from which the thread has been removed. They clearly perceive that the unwholesome actions of the past committed by them are not “persons” nor “beings,” not an “I” nor my actions,” but that they arise and disappear in an instant. That is why that past unwholesome kamma disappears as soon as personality-belief disappears.

It should be known, however, that only unwholesome (*akusala*) kamma disappears. Wholesome (*kusala*) kamma of the past does not disappear through the mere disappearance of personality-belief. It is only when the stage of the path of sainthood (*arahatta-magga*) is reached, and when craving (*taṇhā*) is completely eradicated, that wholesome kamma of the past becomes inoperative.

## The Evil of Personality Belief

Personality-belief is an evil that is extremely deep-rooted and far-reaching.

A person who commits an evil deed, and thus becomes extremely agitated and worried over the prospect of being reborn in states of woe, transforms that evil deed of his into a “self” (*attā*) and becomes greatly distressed by such firmly held thoughts as, “I have done wrong. I have gravely erred.” But if that being fully comprehends and realises the characteristic of not-self and thereby can abolish attachment to such thoughts as, “I have gravely erred,” that kamma

(unless it is a weighty one) will no longer have the power of producing results (in a future rebirth) so far as that being is concerned. But, generally, beings do not discard their attachment to such thoughts.

Although that kamma does not, as it were, desire to accompany that being nor to produce results, yet it is forced to do so by the fact that being takes possession of it by harbouring such thoughts as, "I myself have committed that deed. It is *my* kamma." It is because of this forcible possessive act that kamma is obliged to produce its results. To this extent are beings possessing personality-belief deluded and erring in their ways.

It is the same in the case of unwholesome kamma of the past that remains operative. It is because of the forcible possessive act of personality-belief that this kamma accompanies beings throughout their saṃsāric wanderings and will produce its results in due course.

Beings find that they cannot discard their unwholesome actions even though they are oppressed by their results, and suffer great privations in the process. They think, "I have committed those evil deeds," and thus (identifying themselves with them) they take, as it were, possession of them. Thus these unwholesome actions cannot help to produce results and continue to do so, preventing those beings achieving from release. To this extent, personality-belief is profoundly evil and erroneous.

Beings are very much afraid of the dangers of disease, old

age, and death. But through harbouring such fear, they become attached to the past incidents of disease, old age and death by identifying themselves with those experiences in the thought, "For a long time in the past I have suffered these ills." Thus they find it impossible to relinquish even such fearsome phenomena. Hence these phenomena of disease, old age and death continue to accompany them, as it were, against their own will, and continue to cause oppression. To this extent, too, is personality-belief profoundly evil and erroneous.

In this present existence, too, when external and internal dangers are encountered or disease and ailments occur, beings attach themselves to them through such thoughts as, "I feel pain; I feel hurt," and thus take a possessive attitude towards them. This becomes an act of bondage that later may obstruct beings from ridding themselves of those diseases, ailments and dangers. Because this bondage through personality-belief is so strong, beings have often found those diseases, ailments, or dangers to be their inseparable companions through many existences up to the present day. Thus, personality creates a possessive attachment even to diseases, ailments, and dangers even though these are greatly oppressive.

Also fears of encountering disease, ailments and dangers in future will produce such bondage. And as long as there is personality-belief, beings will certainly meet such eventualities in future.



This is a brief description of how personality-belief is profoundly evil and erroneous.

## Superficial and Deep Attachment

The attachments of craving (*taṇhā*) and conceit (*māna*) are not necessarily attachments of wrong views (*diṭṭhi*). Craving develops an attachment for all the (physical and mental) phenomena in the three spheres of existence, in the form, “It is my property.” Conceit develops a proud attachment for them in the form, “It is I who owns it” or “It is I who has those great qualities.” In the case of beings that have personality-belief, craving and conceit follow the lead given by personality-belief. In the case of stream-winners, once-returners, and non-returners, who have eliminated personality-belief, craving and conceit follow the distortion of perception (*saññā-vipallāsa*) and the distortion of consciousness (*citta-vipallāsa*). The attachments produced by these distortions are superficial; but those produced by personality-belief are deep.

This ends the description of how unwholesome actions of the past totally cease with the disappearance of personality-belief.

# Is There a Self or Not?

## SN 44:10

Vacchagotta the Wanderer went to visit the Exalted One, and said:

“Now, master Gotama, is there a self?” At these words the Exalted One was silent.

“How, then, master Gotama, is there not a self?” For a second time the Exalted One was silent.

Then Vacchagotta the Wanderer rose from his seat and went away.

Now not long after the departure of the Wanderer, the Venerable Ānanda said to the Exalted One:

“How is it, lord, that the Exalted One gave no answer to the question of the Wanderer Vacchagotta?”

“If, Ānanda, when asked by the Wanderer, ‘Is there a self?’ I had replied to him, ‘There is a self,’ then, Ānanda, that would be siding with the recluses and brahmins who are eternalists.

“But if, Ānanda, when asked, ‘Is there not a self?’ I had replied that it does not exist, that, Ānanda,

would be siding with those recluses and brahmins who are annihilationists.

“Again, Ānanda, when asked by the Wanderer, ‘Is there a self?’ had I replied that there is, would my reply be in accordance with the knowledge that all things are impermanent?”

“Surely not, lord.”

“Again, Ānanda, when asked by Vacchagotta the Wanderer, ‘Is there a self?’ had I replied that there were not, it would have been more bewilderment for the already bewildered Vacchagotta.

“He would have said, ‘Formerly indeed I had a self, but now I have not one any more.’”

# The Search for a Self or Soul

Chas. F. Knight

In the Saṃyutta-Nikāya is the story of Vacchagotta the Wanderer, the man who was concerned with the existence or non-existence of his “self.”

In the Dīgha-Nikāya is the story of Poṭṭhapāda, an inveterate asker of questions, in search of a “soul.”

It is of interest to note the different response these two inquirers received from the Buddha. Vacchagotta’s questions remained unanswered, while Poṭṭhapāda’s doctrinal questions were discussed and answered in full.

Both of these inquirers have their counterparts in the West today: those who are concerned with a “self,” and those who are concerned with a “soul.” While the two terms “self” and “soul” are often used as synonyms and interchangeable, I think that those who use them in reference to themselves have a different conception of each of the two words. The seeker for a “self” is more concerned with the preservation of his ego in the here and now, whereas the would-be possessor of a “soul” is perturbed as to survival after death. It is apparent that the protagonists of

the self theory, or concept, are by nature extrovert and egotistic. On the other hand, those who most ardently cling to the soul concept, are less concerned with asserting themselves before others, but *are* concerned mainly with their inmost nature; they are natural introverts. Yet these too in their quiet way are also egotistical, in that they desire to preserve their “identity.”

While the Asian Buddhist world unanimously accepts and adheres to the doctrine of anatta (the absence of an abiding and stable entity), it is by no means uncommon to find nominal “Buddhists” in the West who are unable to shake off 2000 years of indoctrination of the “soul” concept, and, as a consequence, bring to their “Buddhism” preconceived views, often bolstered up by a syncretic admixture of other Indian beliefs.

The story of Vacchagotta precedes this article. His questions are akin to asking a man if he has stopped beating his wife. The man may have not have lifted his hand against her at any time, but if he answers “Yes,” the inference is that he had previously beaten her. If he answers “No,” the inference is that he still beats her. Had the Buddha agreed that Vacchagotta had a self (for the Buddha did not deny the existence of phenomenon), Vacchagotta could have taken it as a confirmation of the brahmin belief in an eternal atman (or spark of the Divine) surviving after death. Had the Buddha agreed that there was not a “self” in the ultimate sense, Vacchagotta could have taken the reply as an endorsement of the view held by the annihilationists that

nothing survives after death. Vacchagotta was not asking questions idly, but this was an occasion on which confusion could have arisen, and so the Buddha maintained the noble silence and left Vacchagotta to ponder further on the point that was bothering him. He still had not grasped the higher truths of karma and aniccā under which the conventional “self” is but a momentary manifestation of ever-changing components to be cast aside at death, and without a stable entity to be carried forward to a new birth. Later, Vacchagotta did grasp these truths, and he finally became one of the arahats.

Those who are fond of quoting this dialogue between the Buddha and Vacchagotta to support their theory of a soul seldom, if ever, go on to the Buddha’s final explanation to Ānanda which closes the passage (and which, incidentally displays one of those flashes of the Buddha’s humour that peeps out here and there in his dealings with inquirers). It would be stretching the argument beyond reason to presume that the Buddha was not capable or not inclined to make an assertion on the “soul” if it really existed, in the light of his many expositions of its non-existence. The commentator, Kumāralabdha, quoted by Dr. Malalasekera in the *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism*, puts it in a nutshell: “If there was an ‘attā’ (soul), what on earth was there to prevent the Buddha from saying so?”

For our purpose we can dismiss the “self” seekers, for while they insist on having a “self” to satisfy their ego, many of them give at least lip-service to the anattā doctrine. They

have their “self” that thinks, writes, or teaches, to present to the world. They have their “self” that strives to lift the “self” still higher in man’s estimation, till it equals or becomes part of the “SELF,” and some go on to the “Overself,” or Godhead by another name. These people see themselves as gods in the making, and their word is final (so far as they are concerned). Their concepts are usually derived via Theosophy from pre-Buddhistic Brahmanism, even though they may call themselves “Buddhists.” Brahman, the First Cause, or Great SELF, was personified as Brahma the Creator, the Self, and all beings were (or had in them) a spark of the Divine, a lesser self, which was still essentially of the same substance as the Great SELF, to which it eventually returned when purified by rites and ceremonies.

On the question of a “soul,” Poṭṭhapāda and his friends were discussing the importance of consciousness, its arising and its ceasing. One had put forward the theory that:

“States of consciousness come to a man without reason and without a cause, and so also do they pass away. At the time when they spring up in him, then he becomes conscious.”

This was rejected by a second speaker who protested:

“That, sirs, will never be as you say. Consciousness, sirs, is a man’s soul [*attā*]. It is the soul that comes and goes. When the soul comes into a man, then he becomes conscious; when the soul goes away out of a man, he becomes unconscious.”

Seeing the Buddha approaching they decided to ask his

opinion on the matter, and Poṭṭhapāda outlines the pith of their discussion and the various arguments that have been put forward.

The Buddha refuted the former view by stating that it was precisely through a reason, by means of a cause, that states of consciousness come and go. “By training some states of consciousness arise. By training others pass away.” Through training one sort of consciousness arises, and through training another passes away.

The Buddha illustrates his meaning by a lengthy discourse on training, showing the causal origination of consciousness as a consequence. He then goes on to the cessation of consciousness dependent on the cessation of ideas as the adept in meditative practises achieves the various trance states of the jhānas.

“To him neither thinking anymore, nor fancying the ideas, the states of consciousness he had pass away, and no others, coarser than they, arise. So he enters into jhāna. Thus it is, Poṭṭhapāda, that the attainment of the cessation of conscious ideas takes place step by step.”

The first proposition of the independent arising of ideas leading to consciousness having thus been disposed of by the Buddha, Poṭṭhapāda admits to not having heard this explained before, “but I now understand what you say.” He then proceeds to the second opinion that had been expressed by his fellow mendicants:

“Is then, Sir, consciousness identical with a man’s soul, or is



consciousness one thing and the soul another?"

"But what then, Poṭṭhapāda? Do you really fall back on the soul?" queries the Buddha.

Poṭṭhapāda replies that he takes for granted the existence of a soul of some kind. Maybe a material soul, he suggests tentatively, but without much conviction. Failing that, what about a soul that is an exact copy of the body, but so subtle in texture that it could only be described as being made of mind." No? Well then a soul without form, and made of consciousness.

To all of these suggestions the Buddha had but one reply. Suppose you did have a soul conforming to any of these descriptions. Still some ideas, some states of consciousness, would arise to the man, and others would pass away. So "you can see how consciousness must be one thing, and the soul would be another."

However Poṭṭhapāda was still not convinced that he was totally lacking in a soul. On that point he had a closed mind as is shown by his next question. He does not ask: "Is there, or is there not, a soul?" But is it possible for him to ever understand what the soul is?

"Is it possible for me to understand whether consciousness is the man's soul, or is the one different from the other?"

The Buddha's reply to Poṭṭhapāda is equally applicable to the "soul-seekers" of today, those who accept the Buddha's teachings with reservations (the right to reject what does not

fit in with their preconceived notions, beliefs and views).

“Hard is it for you, Poṭṭhapāda, holding as you do different views, other things approving themselves to you, setting different aims before yourself, striving after a different perfection, trained in a different system of doctrine, to grasp this matter.”

Poṭṭhapāda abandons his search for a definition of his soul, to which he still clings, and changes the subject by propounding ten questions on the imponderables. The Buddha bears patiently with him, and in answer to each question replies it is not a matter on which he had expressed an opinion, for such questions were not calculated to profit, were not concerned with his Dhamma, nor to the attainment of Nirvana.

But Poṭṭhapāda has not exhausted his propensity for asking questions.

“Then what is it that the Exalted One *has* determined?”

“I have expounded what Dukkha is; I have expounded what is its origin; I have expounded what is the cessation of Dukkha; I have expounded what is the method by which one may reach the cessation of Dukkha.”

The Buddha departed with dignity, while Poṭṭhapāda was subjected to the jeers and sarcasm of his fellow mendicants for having failed to obtain the answers to his later questions.

It is worthy of note that to the doctrinal questions the Buddha gave serious and ample replies, sufficient to remove

any reasonable grounds for differing from the Dhamma he taught, but he refused to be drawn into any discussion that could not lead to finality, such matters being outside of the Dhamma taught by him.

The Buddha taught his doctrine of “soullessness” (*anattā*) in two ways, and by two methods demonstrated its truth and necessity if the major purpose of his teachings was to be accomplished (the cessation of Dukkha). One was by the analysis of constituents of “personality,” the other was that any belief in a permanent “self” would conflict with the causal law, and so deny the possibility of escape from the wheel of becoming.

In regard to the analysis of personality, there are so many passages that deal with this method that lack of space prevents more than a passing mention of them. Those who wish to clarify their thinking on this point will have no difficulty in finding them. The most common formula is to proceed with those who regard body as the self, or the self as being in the body; also with feelings, with perception, with activities, with consciousness. Such ones become obsessed with the idea, “I am the body. The body is mine,” or “I feel, I perceive, there are activities, I am conscious.” “Feeling is mine, perception is mine, activities are mine, consciousness is mine.” But when these change and alter, owing to their unstable nature, then arises sorrow, woe, and grief due to their impermanence and instability.

In SN 3.147, prior to an analysis as above, a certain one

asked of the Buddha:

“Pray, Lord, is there any body, feeling, perception, activity, or consciousness that is permanent, stable by nature, lasting, unchanging, like unto the eternal, so that it will stand fast?”

Then the Exalted One took up a pinch of dust on the tip of his nail, and said to that brother:

“Even this much material form, brother, is not permanent, stable, eternal, by nature unchanging, like unto the eternal, so that it will stand fast. If even this much material form, brother, were permanent, unchanging, then the living of the holy life for the utter destruction of suffering would not be set forth. But in as much as even this much material form, brother, is not permanent, stable, eternal, by nature unchanging, therefore the living of the holy life for the utter destruction of suffering is set forth.” (SN 3:147)

We have on previous occasions written that no one doctrine taught by the Buddha stands in isolation from any other or all of them. The Buddha’s reply to Poṭṭhapāda quoted above as to what he expounded is the key to them all, and the connecting link between them. Dukkha (its origin, its cessation, and the way to its cessation) was the Buddha’s only concern. All his doctrinal dissertations climaxed in

moral perfection as the way to Dukkha's ceasing. The purpose of the analysis in expounding the anatta doctrine is to understand the functioning and the impermanence of the five aggregates that constitute the phenomenal "person." If this be accomplished, the major delusion of a "self" that obsesses mankind generally will be eliminated. With the elimination of this illusory "self," the root-cause of our unhappiness is eliminated. The eternal thirst to satisfy its demands, the grasping after sense-pleasures to please it, the clinging to phenomena that must fade and die, is the source of Dukkha. So the doctrine of Anattā becomes a coordinating link with all other doctrines leading to the ethical life and sorrow's ending.

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# Personality

## Andre Maurois

It is in vain that we return to the places that once we loved. We shall never see them again, not only because they were situated not in Space but in Time, but also because the man who tries to rediscover them is no longer the child or the youth who decked them with the fervour of his emotions.

The classic philosopher assumes that "our personality is built about a hard and changeless core, is a sort of spiritual statue," which stands like a rock against the assaults of the external world. Such is man as viewed by Plutarch, Molière and even Balzac. But Proust shows us that the individual, plunged in Time, disintegrates. The day comes when nothing at all remains of the man who once loved, who once made a revolution. "My life, as I saw it," wrote Marcel Proust, "presented me with the spectacle of a succession of periods so occurring that, but for a brief space of time, nothing of that which had been one's sustaining force continued to exist at all in that which followed it. I saw human life as a complex from which the support of an individual, identical, and permanent 'self' was so

conspicuously absent, was something so useless for the future, so far extended into the past, that death might just as well intervene at this point or that; because it could never mark a conclusion that was other than arbitrary...”

The successive “selves” are so different from one another that each ought, really, to have a different name.

From *The Quest For Proust*, Ch. 6.

# Soul and Substance

William Gilbert

An electric light bulb has burned out. This small incandescent bulb that shone so brightly is now dark; it will never shed light again; it will no longer turn darkness into daylight in the night-time. In its useless state it will nevermore be able to shine forth its miraculous rays to enable us to read and to see the other people and objects that surround us. There it hangs in its socket. It cannot respond to our command to render service; it is lifeless, it is dead.

What do we do? Replace the bulb with another one of course! The used bulb that is no longer a part of life is consigned to the trash can, but the living force, the electricity that gave it life, now courses through the new bulb that hangs in the socket. Light and life go on. The discarded light bulb has not been able to take along the life that flowed through it to its final resting place.

So it is with our life. It is one and indivisible although its ever changing forms are innumerable and perishable. There



is in truth no death although every form must die. We cannot permanently possess the life that flows through us any more than the electric light bulb can own the current that gave it light. Life alone is continuous, ever seeking self-expression in new forms.

So it is with what we call the soul. There is no substantial categorical entity as a soul which belongs to us, and only to us, in death as it did in life. A human individual is composed of psychological elements and a physical body. It is consciousness which unifies the individual. This relationship between consciousness and the psycho-physical existence often gives rise to the egocentric belief that we possess an immortal unchanging soul, the destiny of which may be eternal happiness or eternal misery according to the deeds of the personality it inhabits. Unfortunately this idea is so deep-rooted in Western man, so near and dear to him, that he naturally experiences great difficulty in understanding any teaching contrary to this established notion.

Buddhism stands unique in the history of human thought in denying the existence of such a separate soul, self or ātman. According to the teachings of the Buddha, the idea of self is an imaginary and false belief which has no corresponding reality and produces harmful thoughts of “me” and “mine.” Buddhism insists that the soul is not a rigid unchanging entity but a living evolving organism. The soul, as Buddhists understand it, is an ever growing, changing bundle of attributes or characteristics forming our character

and personality. All of these manifested things, when analysed, are found to lack continuous form or unchanging substance. In reality there is nothing infinite apart from finite things. Whatever exists is in a constant state of flux through and through, like the flame of the lamp, and all existence is in a process which continues to constantly renew itself.

Our mind and its thoughts is essentially a stream of consciousness. Thought, however, is not simply a physiological function but a kind of energy, something like electricity. We should therefore strive to translate and activate this thought energy in the world in which we live, the life we live, this existence where the illusion of the separate self and the unchanging permanent soul can be forever eliminated, no longer causing us to cling to forms that lack reality and substance. The bonds of selfhood are then broken. New vistas appear before us. A clearer unclouded understanding of the living forces of life is now ours.

From *Suchness*, April 1966.

# The Unique Gateway

Extracts from *Tattva-Saṃgraha*, “The Compendium of Truth”  
by Śāntarakṣita, and the Commentary by  
Kamalaśīla

## Introductory Note

Śāntarakṣita (also called Śāntirakṣita) was born in a royal family in India in the 8th century C.E. He was one of the greatest Buddhist philosophers of his time and a chancellor of the famous Nālanda University. His main opus, the *Tattva-Saṃgraha*, is a monumental work of philosophical criticism, comprising no less than 3,646 stanzas. A very voluminous commentary on it, written by his pupil Kamalaśīla, is likewise a work of great philosophical and critical acumen. Both stanzas and commentary are extant in their Sanskrit original (discovered by G. Buehler in 1873) and in a Tibetan translation. The Sanskrit text of both, in Devanāgarī script, was published in 1929 in the *Gaekward's Oriental Series* in two volumes. In the same series, a complete English translation of stanzas and commentary by Dr. Ganganath Jha appeared in 1937 and 1939, likewise in

two volumes totalling 1,613 pages. The following extracts have been taken from that translation, with some necessary changes (chiefly in Buddhist terminology), which were made after consulting the Sanskrit original. A few more extracts had been published earlier in *Buddhism and God Idea* (The **Wheel No. 47**).

It is difficult to identify Śāntarakṣita's philosophical position with any of the contemporary schools since his work shows features of Mādhyamika, Vijñānavāda as well as Sautrantika thought (the latter being a so-called Hīnayāna school). Probably Śāntarakṣita took an independent and eclectic position of his own. His work and thought is still in need of careful research before it can be evaluated to the extent it deserves.

Śāntarakṣita's life had also an active side: together with Padmasambhava, he founded the first monastery in Tibet (Samye), and had visited Tibet once before.

Nyanaponika Thera

## Stanza

The doctrine of No-soul has been clearly taught by Him for the benefit of His disciples. It is the Unique Gateway to the Highest Good, causing fright in upholders of wrong doctrines.

Stanza 3322

**Commentary:** The doctrine of no-soul [*nairātmya*] is called the “Gateway to the Highest Good” because it is the means of entering Nirvana. It is Nirvana that is meant by the term “Highest Good” [*śivam*]. This doctrine causes fright [*bhayankaram*] in those who uphold wrong beliefs, as for instance the soul-belief [*ātma-dṛṣṭi*], and are attached to unrealistic views. As it was said, “The foolish man is always beset with such fears as ‘I am not, I may cease to exist, naught is mine, nothing shall be mine’; but in the wise [such] fear has ceased.”

It is not known to the worldly man; when known it sets aside all evil. For those who are devoted to its practise, it is a veritable mine of valuable qualities.

Stanza 3323

When one has made Soullessness one’s own experience, no defect can find a footing in him, because it is its opposite; just as if there is a bright lamp, no darkness can be there.

Stanza 3338

**Commentary:** It is, indeed, omniscience that follows from the removal of the hindrance [caused] by the defilements and by cognizable things [*kleśa-jñeyāvaraṇa*]. It is because these very defilements (i.e., greed, hate, etc.) obstruct an understanding of the real nature of things that one speaks of the hindrance consisting in the defilements. Though things

are perceived, the lack of capacity to discern them in all their aspects as to whether they are to be rejected or accepted (and also the incapacity to conduct oneself [in accordance with that discernment]) is the hindrance in regard to cognizables. Of these two, the hindrance caused by defilements is removed by the direct experience [or confrontation, *pratyaksākarāṇa*] of Soullessness [*nairātmya*]. The hindrance in regard to cognizables is removed by the dedicated, constant and long-continued absorption of that very doctrine of Soullessness. [26]

All defilements such as greed, hatred and the rest have their root in the wrong notion of a soul [or self]. They do not arise from external things because, even when the external thing is there, the said defilements will not appear without unwise attention to them [*ayonisau-manascchāskāram*; Pali: *ayoniso manasikāra*]. Conversely, even when there is no external thing, the defilements will appear when there is a [mental] confrontation with unwise imaginings. Thus, when presence and absence of one thing do not follow the presence and absence of another, the latter cannot be the cause of the former. If it were so, there would be incongruities.

Defilements really proceed from the unrealistic notion of a self [soul]. For instance, unless one seizes upon the notion of “I,” one cannot have self-love. Nor can love arise for objects taken as self or self’s property, unless one seizes upon the notion of “mine” and on what is conducive to the arising of pleasure to oneself. Likewise, hatred towards anything does

not appear unless one seizes upon objects as being repulsive [and hostile] to [what one takes to be] one's self and self's property, because there cannot be hatred against what is not harmful to one's self and its property, nor against what removes that harm.

From all this it is clear that it is the notion of a soul or self, produced from beginningless time by a repeated habituation to one's [varying] nature, which generates the grip on [what is regarded as] self's property. These two produce self-love, which again generates hate and other defilements. From this concatenation it is abundantly clear that the defilements have their root in the clinging to self and its property, originating from an excessive habituation to the notion of a self or soul.

Contrary to this idea of soul or self is the idea of no-soul or not-self, because the latter rests upon a mode [of thinking] quite the reverse of the former. It is incompatible too that both these ideas (of soul and no-soul) should be identical or co-exist in the same [thought-] continuity; because they are as contrary to each other as the notions of "serpent" and "rope" applied to the same object. Thus the doctrine of no-soul being contrary to the doctrine of soul, it becomes contrary to (incompatible with) the defilements too, i.e. greed, hatred and the rest. Consequently, when the doctrine of no-soul, being incompatible with all defects and aberrations, has been directly experienced, then its contrary (i.e., the whole host of defilements such as greed, etc.) cannot obtain any footing, just as darkness ceases in a place

flooded with light. It is in that way that the hindrance caused by defilements is eliminated by the realisation of the doctrine of no-soul.

But if it were impossible for the idea of no-soul to appear in the [thought-] continuity of a man whose defilements have not been destroyed, then there would be no room at all for the arising of an understanding of no-soul. It is however, a matter of common experience that the idea of no-soul presents itself before all men. And if it is meditated upon it is capable of reaching great intensity, just as a [lustful] thought about a young woman. Subsequently it becomes as obvious as if one were to observe a directly perceived thing. How then can it be impossible for the idea of no-soul to arise in the minds of men?

The host of defilements, even in their most blatant forms, are unable to shake the strength of the doctrine of no-soul, because being due to adventitious causes, the defilements are never very firm. On the other hand, as to the idea of no-soul, it forms the very nature of things and is also helped by the means of cognition [*pramāṇa*]. Hence it is strong and firm.

It has been argued that even for those who have cognised the doctrine of no-soul through inference [*anumāna*], the defilements, such as greed etc. do appear. But this [objection] is not conclusive, because it is the knowledge acquired by meditation [*bhāvanā-maya*] which, through its clarity and distinctness, directly envisages soul-less



[impersonal] things in a non-conceptual way. And having as its object well-ascertained things, it is not erroneous. It is such an understanding of no-soul that can entirely uproot the notion of a soul (or self) and has, on that account, been described [in the stanza commented upon] as being opposed to it. This knowledge is not of the kind derived from study and reflective thought [*śruta-cintā-maya*].

From the realisation of the Soullessness of all things as proclaimed by him,

follows the cessation of the entire flood of defilements which originated from personality-belief.

It is from the view-point of a self and self's property that the notion of a "being" proceeds.

From the conceit of "I" and mine" all defilements come forth.

This realisation of no-soul is inimical to the view of an [abiding] "being."

When the habitual notions of a self and self's property have been eliminated by the former, the latter too disappears.

The accumulation of defilements rooted in it will vanish when their cause is absent.

And if the defilements are absent, there will be no further rebirth being caused by them.

There being absolute liberation from birth, this state is spoken of as the Final Goal.

Thus the perception of no-soul is the door to the

Unrivalled Good.

All other philosophers have held that Liberation follows from the cessation of egotism [*ahaṃkāra*].

But if there is a soul, this egotism can never cease.

Because its efficient cause would always be there; so the objective of that cause would not be abrogated.

If it were abrogated, there would be a negation of it, which would mean a complete volte-face on their part.

Stanzas 3488–3494

**Commentary:** It is accepted that liberation consists in the absolute cessation of the series of rebirths. But the only means of attaining this consists in the teachings of the Blessed Lord, as it is only here, and nowhere else, that we have the doctrine of no-soul, which is the sole destroyer of defilements that are the source of rebirth. All other philosophers are wedded to the false doctrine of a soul. Thus it is the word of the Blessed Lord alone which, as being the means of obtaining the highest good, can be the indicator of Dharma. Hence it is this teaching alone that should be depended upon by all who seek their own welfare. Such is the purport of the whole text.

It might be argued that, “The Yogin does abrogate it.” But if the soul were to be abrogated, it could be repudiated only in the words “It does not exist,” as otherwise there would be no point in repudiating it. Because if, after having accepted the concept of a soul, one were to repudiate it as the “source

of pain," then such repudiation would be useless, because the repudiation of a thing is done for the purpose of abandoning it. And no abandoning would be possible of what one regards as being one's ever-lasting self. Hence that repudiation would be useless. Nor can those other philosophers repudiate the Soul as being non-existent, because, having regarded it as existent, if they now regard it as non-existent, this would mean a complete *volte-face* on their part.

# Anattā According to the Theravāda

Ñāṇamoli Thera

*Anattā* is the last of the three characteristics (*ti-lakkhaṇa*) or general characteristics (*sāmañña-lakkhaṇa*). Like the teaching of the four Noble Truths, it is the “teaching peculiar to Buddhas” (*buddhānaṃ sāmukkaṃsikaṃ desanā*: MN 56/M I 380).

The most usual English rendering, which will be employed here, is “not-self” (or “not self”), though the words “soulless,” “egoless,” and “impersonal” are often used for it. (The rendering “Self” with a capital is not justified owing to the absence of capitals in Indian alphabets.)

## Derivation and Usage

Etymologically *anattā* (adj. or n.) consists of the negative prefix *an-* plus *attā* (cf. Vedic Sanskrit *ātman*). There are two main Pali forms of the word: *attā* (instr. *attanā*) and *atta* (instr. *attena*). Neither form seems to be used in the plural in

the Tipiṭaka, the singular form being used with a plural verb subject. There is also a rare subsidiary form: *atumo* (e.g., Sn 782; Nidd I 60; AN 3:99/A I 249 (*appātumo*)) and *tumo* (e.g., Sn 890).

As principal Tipiṭaka (and Commentary) uses of the very commonly employed *attā* and *atta*, the following five types of examples may be cited:

1. as “one-self” in the more or less colloquial sense: *attā hi attano nātho* (Dhp 124/V 160), *attanā va kataṃ pāpaṃ* (Dhp 12 5/V 161), *attānaṃ na dade poso* (SN 1:78/S I 44), *ahaṃ... parisuddhakāyakkammantaṃ attani samanupassamāno* (MN 4/M I 17), *attahitāya paṭipanno no parahitāya* (AN 4:95/A II 95), *n’ev’ajjhagā piyataraṃ attanā kvaci, evaṃ piyo puthu attā paresaṃ* (S N 3:8/S I 75), *yam hi appiyo appiyassa kareyya taṃ te attanā va attano karonti* (SN 3:4/S I 72–2), *pahitatta* (MN 4/M I 22), *attānuvāda* (AN 4:121/A II 121), *attakilamathānuyoga* (SN 56:11/S V 421), *attadīpa* (DN 16/D II 100), *attānaṃ gaveseyyātha* (Vin Mv I), etc.;
2. as “one’s own person” (including the physical and mental body): *attapaṭilābha* (DN 9/D I 195), *attabhāva* (AN 3:125/A I 279; DN 33/D III 231; Dhs 597), *appātumo* and *mahattā* (AN 3:99/A I 249), *brahmabhūtena attanā viharati* (MN 51/M I 349), *paccattaṃ ajjhattaṃ* (MN 28/M I 185; for four kinds of *ajjhatta* see Dhs-a 46),
3. self as a “subtle metaphysical entity” (always

repudiated as unidentifiable and undiscoverable): *atthi me attā* (MN 2/M I 8), *rūpaṃ attato samanupassati* (MN 44/M I 300), *attānudiṭṭhi* (DN 15/vol. II 22), *attavādupādāna* (MN 11/M I 66), *suññaṃ idaṃ attena vā attaniyena vā* (MN 106/M II 263), *rūpaṃ bhikkhave anattā* (SN 22:59/S III 66), etc.;

4. enclitic -atta in the sense of “-ness”: *socitattam* (DN 22/D II 306); and
5. confusion with *atta* as pp. of *odādati* and *niratta* as pp. of *nirassati*: *attamano* (MN 2/M I 12) explained as *sakamano* (D-a I 155), *attaṃ nirattaṃ* (Sn vv. 787, 858, 919, and 1098 commented on as a pun at Mahāniddeśa pp. 82 = 248 = 352 and by *Paramatthajotikā* (Hewavitarne ed.) pp. 422, 476).

## Attā

The first two senses of *attā* distinguished above may be assumed to have been ordinary usage and no subject of disagreement between the Buddha and his opponents (see DN 9, cited below). The last two are of minor import and need not concern us beyond noting them. The characteristic of not-self (*anatta-lakkhaṇa*) deals with the third, the unidentifiable entity that is conceived, sought and made the subject of a certain class of views: self-views (*attānudiṭṭhi*).

Many suttas classify the conflicting notions of the nature of self held by opponents of the Buddha. It could, for instance, be claimed that it had materiality, or was immaterial, or

both; or neither; was percipient of oneness, or of plurality, or of the limited, or of the measureless; was eternal, or non-eternal, or both, or neither; had only pleasure, or only pain, or both, or neither; each of these theories being maintained by its propounder as “the only truth and all else wrong” (MN 102, etc.). Or else it could be described as having materiality either limited or infinite, or as immaterial and either limited or infinite. And then whichever of these four is adopted, it may be seen as such now, or due to be such (upon rebirth), or in this way: “Though it is not yet real, still I shall contrive for its reality” (DN 15/D II 64). All these rationalised views (*diṭṭhi*) stem from uncritical acceptance or overlooking of an underlying tendency (*anusaya*) or fetter (*saṃyojana*), a natural predisposition to regard or to identify some aspect or other (in the situation of perceiving a percept) as “This is mine” or “This is what I am” or “This is my self” (e.g. MN 22). These two levels (the self-view and the I-sense) are respectively what are called the “(lower or immediate) fetter of views” (*diṭṭhi-saṃyojana*) and the “(higher or remoter) fetter of conceit” (*māna-saṃyojana*). The first is abandoned with the attainment of the first stage of realisation (the path of stream-entry) while the second is abandoned only with the fourth and final stage (the path of arahatship; see DN 33). (It may be noted here in parenthesis that the rendering of *māna* by “pride,” though not wrong, severs the semantic relationship with *maññati* and *maññanā*, which it is most important to preserve intact for the understanding of this situation.)

The overlooked fundamental conceit “I am” (*asmi-māna*) (a mirage that, in the act of perceiving, is believed will fulfil its counterpart, the intuitive sense of lack, which is craving) in the basic ontological structure of ordinary perception provokes the average man with no knowledge of the Buddha’s teaching to indulge in uncritical speculation about what this may be that “I am,” and consequently to build up self-theories. He perceives (*sañjānāti*); but the very act of his perceiving is tendentious so that he simultaneously conceives (*maññati*) his percepts with an I-tendency. But a stream-enterer, who has attained the first stage of realisation, has direct acquaintance (*abhiñānāti*) where the ordinary man has perception, owing to which fact the former has the possibility of hastening his attainment of arahatship; and an arahat has no more conceivings (*maññanā*) at all. So long as a man leaves intact this fundamental tendency to conceive in the very act of perceiving, accompanied by the tendency to formulate views, he will look for answers to the questions that these two tendencies together prompt him to ask, and he will invent them and try to prove them.

“This is how he gives unreasoned attention [*ayoniso-manasikāra*]: ‘Was I in the past? Was I not in the past? What was I in the past? How was I in the past? Having been what, what was I in the past? Shall I be in the future? Shall I not be in the future? What shall I be in the future? How shall I be in the future? Having been what, what shall I be in the future?’ Or else he is



doubtful in himself about the presently arisen extent thus: 'Am I? Am I not? What am I? How am I? Whence will this creature have come? Whither will it be bound?'

"When he gives unreasoned attention in this way one of the six kinds of view arises in him: the view 'A self exists for me' arises as true and established, or the view 'No self exists for me' ... or the view 'I perceive self with self' ... or the view 'I perceive not-self with self' ... or the view 'I perceive self with not-self'" arises in him as true and established. Or else he has some such view as 'It is this my self that speaks and feels and that experiences here and there the ripening of good and bad actions; but this my self is permanent, ever lasting, eternal, not subject to change, and it will endure as long as eternity.' This field of views is called the thicket of views, the wilderness of views, the vacillation of views, the fetter of views. No untaught ordinary man bound by the fetter of views is freed from birth, ageing, and death; from sorrow and lamentation, pain, grief, and despair; he is not freed from suffering, I say." (MN 2/M I 8)

In assuming that "I was" etc. cannot be analysed, all these philosophical systems attempt to settle with unilateral certainty the dialectic questions of "What was I?" etc. and to dispose of them on an inadequate ontological basis of self-

identity without querying how the questions come to be put in the first place or what is the structural nature of being. But any one answer “I am this” cannot be decisively established over its contrary opposite, though it can be fortified by arguments, more or less logical or emotional, introducing my self” and defining relations between it and what it is considered not to be, endowing it then with certain qualities and values and with either eternal or temporary permanence according to bent. The impossibility of establishing absolutely any one of these views as the only truth may lead to abuse and even to violence in the end, since it is often thought important to be right.

The pre-rational conceit “I am” (*asmi-māna*) is a “fetter but not a view” (M-a *Diṭṭhikathā*/M-a I 143). To perceive is to recognise and identify (see *Vism* Ch. 14/p. 462). In perceiving a percept the “untaught ordinary man “automatically conceives in the positional terms of “I,” which then must seem involved in an I-relationship to the percept: either as identical with it, or as contained in it or as separate from it, or owning it as “mine.” That relationship so conceived is relished (favoured and approved) through want of full knowledge of the situation (MN 1; cf. MN 49).

The rational self-view (*attānudiṭṭhi*) is both a “fetter and a view.” Though the conceit “I am” is normally associated with the tendency to formulate views, these views need not by any means be definitely formulated; but whenever they are, none can be specifically described without reference to the five categories affected by clinging (*upādānakkhandha*: see

SN 22:47 cited below). For that reason they can all be reduced to one of the types of what is called the “embodiment view” (*sakkāyadiṭṭhi*, from *sat* (or *saṃ*) plus *kāya* = “true (or existent) body”) which is set up schematically as follows: “The untaught ordinary man who disregards the *ariyas*... sees materiality [*rūpa*] as self, or self as possessed of materiality, or materiality in self, or self in materiality. [And likewise with feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), formations (*saṅkhāra*), and consciousness (*viññāṇa*)” (MN 44/M I 300). These four self-identifications embracing the five categories make twenty types. For each of the four basic modes of identifying, the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* gives a simile as follows:

“How does he see [say, materiality] as self? ... Just as if a man saw a lighted lamp’s flame and colour as identical; thus, ‘What the flame is, that the colour is; what the colour is that the flame is’... How does he see self as possessed of [say, materiality]? ... Just as if there were a tree possessed of shade such that a man might say, ‘This is the tree, this is the shade; the tree is one, the shade another; but this tree is possessed of this shade in virtue of this shade’... How does he see [say, materiality] in self? ... Just as if there were a scented flower such that a man might say, ‘This is the flower, this is the scent; the flower is one, the scent another; but the scent is in this flower’ ... How does he see self in [say, materiality]? ... Just as if a gem were placed in a casket such that a man might say,

‘This is the gem, this is the casket; the gem is one, the casket another; but this gem is in this casket.’”

(M-a *Diṭṭhikathā* / vol. I 144–5)

Self so viewed is then taken either as eternal (e.g., “This is self, this the world; after death I shall be permanent, everlasting...” (MN 22 cited below)) or as temporarily permanent but eventually annihilated (e.g., “As soon as this self is annihilated... that is peace...” (It 49/p. 43)). All possible views of whatever shade are again classified under sixty-two types in the first Sutta of the *Dīgha-Nikāya* called *Brahmajāla Sutta* or the “Divine Net.” In this “net” all possible views are “caught” and so it can be seen how they come to be.

Now all these views (and all these standpoints for views (*diṭṭhiṭṭhānā*)) are formed (or conditioned; *saṅkhata*) because “it is impossible that anyone shall experience [them] apart from contact [*phassa*]... and with contact as condition, feeling; with feeling as condition, craving [*taṇhā*]; with craving as condition, clinging [*upādāna*]; with clinging as condition, being [*bhava*]; with being as condition, birth; with birth as condition, ageing and death come to be, and also sorrow and lamentation, pain, grief and despair; that is how there is an origin to this whole aggregate-mass of suffering” (DN 1/D I 43–5). The structure of the conceit “I am” and the views to which it gives rise, is, in fact nothing else than the structure of being, the structure of what is “impermanent, formed, and dependently originated.” “A Tathāgata

understands that thus '[These views] are formed and [consequently] gross; but there is cessation of formations: there is that.' By knowing and seeing the escape from them a *Tathāgata* transcends them [*tad upātivatto*]" (MN 102/M II 229–30).

The Buddha explains how he uses the word *attā* (self) in the second sense, namely, the "person" or "individual" noted above:

"There are these three kinds of acquisition of self [*atta-patilābha*]: gross, constituted of mind, and immaterial... The first has materiality and consists of the four great entities [elements of earth, water, fire, and air], and consumes physical food; the second is constituted by mind with all the limbs and lacking no faculty; the third consists of perception... I teach the Doctrine [*dhamma*] for the abandoning of acquisitions of self in order that in you, who put the teaching into practise, defiling ideas may be abandoned and cleansing ideas increase; and that you, by realisation yourselves here and now with direct knowledge, enter upon and abide in the fullness of understanding's perfection... If it is thought that to do that is an unpleasant abiding, that is not so; on the contrary, by doing that there is gladness, happiness, tranquillity, mindfulness, full awareness and a pleasant [blissful] abiding... These are worldly usages, worldly language, worldly terms of communication, worldly descriptions, by which a

Tathāgata communicates without misapprehending them.” (DN 9/D I 195–202 abbr.)

It is only after this sketch of views that we can treat of the doctrine of not-self (for views in general see especially DN 1 and 2; MN 102; *Diṭṭhi-Saṃyutta*; M-a *Diṭṭhikathā*; and Vibh).

## Definitions of Anattā

The first discourse given by the Buddha after his Enlightenment set out the Four Noble Truths. The second stated the characteristic of not-self as follows: “Bhikkhus, materiality is not self. Were materiality self, then this materiality would not lead to affliction, and one could say of materiality ‘Let my materiality be thus, let my materiality be not thus.’ And it is because materiality is not self that materiality leads to affliction and one cannot say of materiality ‘Let my materiality be thus, let my materiality be not thus’” [And similarly with feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness.] The Buddha then continued:

“How do you conceive this, bhikkhus? Is materiality permanent or impermanent?” — “Impermanent, Lord.” — “Is what is impermanent pleasure or pain?” — “Pain, Lord.” — “Is what is impermanent, painful and subject to change fit to be seen thus: ‘This is mine, this is what I am, this is my self?’” — “No, Lord.” [And similarly with the other four categories.]

“Consequently, bhikkhus, any kind of materiality [feeling, perception, formations, consciousness] whatever, whether past, future or presently arisen, in oneself or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, is all [to be seen thus], ‘This is not mine, this is not what I am, this is not my self.’ That is how it should be seen with right understanding as it actually is.” (SN 22:58/S III 66)

The characteristic is stated more succinctly in this way: “The eye [ear, nose, tongue, body, mind, and the six external bases] is impermanent; what is impermanent is suffering; what is suffering is not self” (SN 35:1/S IV 1); or, “All is not-self. And what is the all that is not self? The eye is not self...” (SN 35:45/S IV 28); or again, “All things [*dhamma*] are not-self” (e.g. Dh 20, 7/V 279). The canonical commentary, the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* adds “Materiality [etc.] is not-self in the sense that it has no core [*sāra*]” (M-a *Ñāṇakathā* / M-a I 37).

Ācariya Buddhaghosa’s definitions are as follows: “The characteristics of impermanence and suffering are known whether Buddhas arise or not. But that of not-self is not known unless there is a Buddha; ... for the knowledge of it is the province of none but a Buddha” (*Āyatana Vibhaṅga Aṭṭhakathā* / Vibh-a 49–50). “The Blessed One in some instances shows not-self-ness through impermanence (as in MN 148 cited below), in some through suffering (as in SN 22:59 cited above), and in some through both (as in SN 22:76

or 35:1 cited above). Why is that? While impermanence and suffering are both evident, not-self is not evident” (MA *ad* MN 22/M II 113); for “the characteristic of not-self seems non-evident, obscure, arcane, impenetrable, hard to illustrate and hard to describe” (Vibh-a, 49). He distinguishes “the not-self and the characteristic of not-self... Those same five categories [which are impermanent and suffering] are not-self because of the words ‘What is suffering is not self.’ Why? Because there is no exercising mastery over them. The mode of insusceptibility to the exercise of mastery [*avasavattana*] is the characteristic of not-self” (Vism Ch. 21/p. 640). Again “[The eye] is not-self in the sense of insusceptibility to the exercise of mastery over it. Or alternatively, because there is no exercising of mastery over it in the following three instances, namely, ‘Let it when arisen not reach presence’ or ‘Let it when already reached presence not age’ or ‘Let it when already reached ageing not dissolve’; it is void of that mode of exercise of mastery.

Therefore it is not-self for four reasons: it is void, it has no owner, it cannot be done with as one wants, and it denies self” (Vibh-a 48; cf. M-a II 113). The *Vibhāvini-Tīkā* (commentary to the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*) says “Not-self is the absence [*abhāva*] of self as conjectured by other teachers; that not-self as a characteristic is the characteristic of not-self.”

## Treatment of Anattā in Suttas and



## Commentaries

What is conditioned by not-self cannot be called self:

“Materiality [etc.] is not self. The cause and condition for the arising of materiality [etc.] are not self; so how could materiality [etc.] which is brought to being by what is not self be self?” (SN 22:20/S III 24; cf. SN 35:142/S IV 130)

Nor can what is possessed of rise and fall:

“If anyone says that the eye [for instance] is self, that is not tenable. The eye’s rise and fall [dependent on its conditions] is evident, from which it follows that self would rise and fall. That is why, should anyone say that the eye is self, that is not tenable.” (MN 148/M III 282-3)

Craving, however, provides an emotional attachment to the survival of the personality:

“Here someone’s view is this: ‘This is self, this the world; after death I shall be permanent, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change; I shall endure as long as eternity.’ He hears a Tathāgata or a Tathāgata’s disciple teaching the True Idea for the elimination of all standpoints for views; all decisions [about ‘my self’], insidencies and underlying tendencies; for the stilling of all formations; for the relinquishment of all essentials [of existence; *upadhi*]; for the exhaustion of

craving; for fading out, cessation, extinction [*nibbāna*]. He thinks thus: 'So I shall be annihilated! So I shall be lost! So I shall be no more!' Then he sorrows and laments, beating his breast; he weeps and becomes distraught. That is how there is anguish [*paritassanā*] about what is non-existent in oneself [*ajjhataṃ asati*] ...” (MN 22/M I 136–7)

Some shrink back in that way from the truth; but some go too far the other way:

“Some who are humiliated, ashamed and disgusted with being [*bhava*], relish [the idea of] non-being [*vibhava*] thus: 'As soon as this self is annihilated on the dissolution of the body, after death, that is peace, that is the supreme goal, that is reality [*yathāva*].’” (It 49/p. 44)

But “One who has eyes sees how what is [*bhūta*] has come to be, and by so doing he practises the way to dispassion [disgust] for it” (ibid.).

“Bhikkhus, the possession that one might possess that is permanent, everlasting... do you see any such possession?” — “No, Lord.” — “The self-theory clinging whereby one might cling that would never arouse sorrow and... despair in him who might cling thereby; do you see any such self-theory clinging?” — “No, Lord.” — “The view as support that one might take as support that would never arouse

sorrow and... despair in him who might take it as support; do you see any such view as support?" — "No, Lord." — "...Bhikkhus, there being self, there would be self's property?" — "Yes, Lord." — "...Or there being self's property, there would be self?" — "Yes, Lord." — "Bhikkhus, self and self's property being non-apprehendable as true and established [*saccato thetato*: cf. use at MN 2], then would not this view 'This is self, this the world; after death I shall be permanent... endure as long as eternity' be the pure perfection of a fool's idea?" — "How not, Lord? It would be the pure perfection of a fool's idea." (MN 22/M I 137–8)

The Wanderer Vacchagotta, during one of his numerous visits to the Buddha, asked:

"How is it, Master Gotama: does self exist [*atth'attā*]?" When this was said, the Blessed One was silent.

"How then, does self not exist [*natth'attā*]?" A second time the Blessed One was silent.

Then the wanderer Vacchagotta got up from his seat and went away. Soon after he had gone the venerable Ānanda asked, "Lord, why did the Blessed One not answer the wanderer Vacchagotta's question?"

"Ānanda, if, when asked 'Does self exist?' I had answered 'Self exists' that would have been the belief

[*laddhi*] of those who hold the theory of eternalness; and if, when asked 'Does self not exist?' I had answered 'Self does not exist,' that would have been the belief of those who hold the theory of annihilation. Again if, when asked 'Does self exist?' I had answered 'Self exists,' would that have been in conformity with my knowledge that 'All things are not-self?'"

"No, Lord."

"And if, on being asked 'Does self not exist?' I had answered 'Self does not exist,' then Vacchagotta, who is already confused, would have become still more confused, [wondering] 'My self certainly existed, but it does not exist now.'" (S 45:10/S IV 400–1)

Self is conceivable only on the basis of clinging to [assuming] the five categories. But so conceived, it must always founder owing to the radical impermanence of their existence. And no other basis for it is possible since no other can be found which does not fall within them (see SN 22:47/S III 46 quoted below and SN 21:151/S III 182).

Why this characteristic is hard to see is explained in the commentaries as follows:

The characteristic of not-self does not become apparent because, when resolution into the various elements is not given attention, it is concealed by compactness. However... when the resolution of the

compact [*ghana-vinibbhoga*] is effected by resolving it into its elements, the characteristic of not-self becomes apparent in its true nature. (Vism Ch. 21/p. 640)

The *Paramatthamañjūsā* further explains as follows,

“Resolution of the compact” is effected by resolving [what appears compact] in this way: “The earth element is one, the water element is another” and so on, distinguishing each one. And in this way: “Contact is one, feeling is another” and so on, distinguishing each one. “When the resolution of the compact is effected” means that what is compact as a mass [*samūha*] or as a function [*kicca*] or as a supporting object [*ārammaṇa*] has been analysed. For when material and non-material dhammas have arisen, mutually steadying each other [i.e., “name and form”], then, owing to misinterpreting [*abhinivesa*] that as a unity, compactness of mass is assumed through failure to subject formations [*saṅkhāra*] to pressure. And likewise compactness of function is assumed when, although definite differences exist in such and such dhammas or functions, they are taken as one. And likewise compactness of supporting-object is assumed when, although differences exist in the ways in which dhammas that take supporting-objects make them so, those supporting-objects are taken as one. But when

they are seen after resolving them by means of knowledge into these elements, they disintegrate like froth subjected to compression by the hand. They are mere dhammas occurring dependent on conditions and void. That is how the characteristic of not-self becomes more evident. (Vism-a 824)

The *Visuddhimagga* repeatedly emphasises that no “doer” (*kāraṇa*) is discoverable, but only “doing” (*kiriya*); Ch. 16/p. 513; 19/p. 602); that there is no “experiencer” (*upabhuñjaka*) of the fruit of action (Ch. 17 p. 555); and that there is no “one who feels” (*vedaka*: Ch. 17/p. 576). The simile of the blind man able to walk who mounts on his shoulder the cripple who can see so that together they can travel as far as they like is used to illustrate the radical contingency of dhammas (Ch. 18/p. 596), and contingency also forms the subject of a verse quoted from the *Mahā-Niddesa* (Vism, Ch. 20/p. 624–5).

## Suññatā

“‘Void world, void world’ is said, Lord. In what way is ‘Void world’ said?” — “It is because of what is void of self or self’s property that ‘Void world’ is said, Ānanda. And what is void of self or self’s property? The eye... forms... eye-consciousness... eye-contact... any feeling, whether pleasant or unpleasant or neither-unpleasant-nor-pleasant, that

arises born of eye-contact, is void of self or self's property [and likewise with the other five bases]."  
(SN 35:85; S IV 54)

Voidness as "voidness in formations" (*saṅkhāra-suññatā*) (for instance, the more general as void of the more particular) is exemplified in one Sutta (MN 121), and "voidness of self" (*atta-suññatā*) in another (MN 122; see also MN 43 and 44). Voidness is variously classified in the *Suññakathā* of the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*. The "void mind-deliverance" (*suññata-cetovimutti*) is that connected with *atta-suññatā* (MN 43).

## The conceit "I am"

One discourse shows how the tendency to perceive in terms of "I" underlies theories of self:

"Whenever *samaṇas* or *brāhmaṇas* see self in its various types, all of them see the five categories affected by clinging, on one or other of them. What five? Here an untaught ordinary man who disregards the *ariyas*, is unconversant with their teaching and undisciplined in it... sees materiality as self, or self as possessed of materiality, or materiality in self, or self in materiality; he sees feeling... perception... formations... consciousness as self, or self as possessed of consciousness, or self in consciousness, or consciousness in self. So he has this way of seeing [*samanupassanā*] and also this attitude [*adhigata*] 'I

am.’ When there is the attitude ‘I am’ then there is the organisation [*avakkanti*] of the five faculties [*indriya*] of eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body. There is mind [*mano*], and there are ideas [*dhamma*], and there is the element of ignorance [*avijjā-dhātu*]. When an untaught ordinary man is touched by whatever is felt born of the contact of ignorance, it occurs to him ‘I am’ and ‘I am this’ and ‘I shall be’ and ‘I shall not be’ and ‘I shall be formed’ and ‘I shall be formless’ and ‘I shall be percipient’ and ‘I shall be non-percipient’ and ‘I shall be neither percipient nor non-percipient.’ Now in the case of the well-taught disciple of the *ariyas*; while the five faculties persist in the same way, nevertheless ignorance is abandoned and knowledge [*vijjā*] arisen in him. With the fading out of ignorance and the arising of knowledge it no more occurs to him ‘I am’ and... ‘I shall be neither percipient nor non-percipient.’” (SN 22:47/S III 46–7)

“‘I am’ is derivative, not un-derivative. Derivative upon what? Derivative upon materiality [and the rest].” (SN 22:83/S III 105)

It is this conceit that takes on the appearance of pride:

“When any *samaṇa* or *brāhmaṇa*, with materiality [etc.] as the means, which is impermanent, painful, and subject to change, says ‘I am superior’ or ‘I am equal’ or ‘I am inferior,’ what is that if not blindness to what actually is?” (SN 22:42/S III 48)



Again, when the Elder Khemaka was questioned by other elders, he said:

“I do not see in these five categories affected by clinging any self or self’s property... Yet I am not an arahat with taints exhausted [*khīṇāsava*]. On the contrary I still have the attitudes [*adhigata*] ‘I am’ with respect to these five categories affected by clinging, although I do not say ‘I am this’ [with respect to them]... I do not say ‘I am materiality’ or ‘I am feeling’ or ‘I am perception’ or ‘I am formations’ or ‘I am consciousness,’ nor do I say ‘I am apart from consciousness.’ Yet I still have the attitude ‘I am’ with respect to the five categories affected by clinging, although I do not say ‘I am this’ [with respect to them]. Although a disciple of the *ariyas* may have abandoned the five immediate fetters [of embodiment-view, uncertainty, misapprehension of virtue and duty, desire for sensuality, and ill will, and so reached the third stage of realisation, the path of non-return], still his conceit ‘I am,’ desire [*chanda*] ‘I am,’ underlying tendency ‘I am,’ with respect to the five categories affected by clinging remains unabolished. Later he abides contemplating rise and fall thus: ‘Such is materiality, such its origin, such its disappearance,’ [and so with the rest], and by so doing his conceit ‘I am’ eventually comes to be abolished.” (SN 22:89/S III 128–32 abbr.)

## The Continuity of the Person

On a certain occasion it had been stated by the Buddha how, when a man knows and sees the five categories, whatever their mode (thus “This is not mine, this is not what I am, this is not myself.”), there come to be no more underlying tendencies to treat this body with its consciousness, and all external signs, in terms of “I” and mine” (*ahaṅkāra-mamaṅkāra*). Then in a certain bhikkhu’s mind this thought arose “So, it seems, materiality is not self, nor are feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. Then what self will the action done by the not-self touch?” (MN 109/M III 18–9). He was rebuked for ignoring the Buddha’s teaching of dependency. Again, when the Buddha was asked by the naked ascetic Kassapa whether suffering was of one’s own making, or of another’s, or both, or neither, the Buddha replied “Do not put it like that.” When asked whether there was no suffering or whether the Buddha neither knew nor saw it, the Buddha replied that there was, and that he both knew and saw it. He then said “Kassapa, if one asserts that ‘He who makes [it] feels [it]; being one existent from the beginning, his suffering is of his own making,’ then one arrives at eternalism. But if one asserts that one makes [it], another feels [it]; being one existent crushed out by feeling, his suffering is of another’s making,’ then one arrives at annihilationism. Instead of resorting to either extreme a Tathāgata teaches the Dhamma by the middle way [by dependent origination]” (SN 12:17/S II 20).

Now what is called an “acquisition of self” (*atta-paṭilābha*; see end of section on “Attā,” above), in other words, the person or individuality, may be physical or mental or immaterial according to the plane of being (sensual, material, or immaterial) in which rebirth has taken place. Also from birth to birth any one kind can succeed and so must exclude any other. That being so, it cannot be successfully argued that only one of the three kinds is true and the others wrong. One can only say that the term for each one does not apply to the other two. Just as with milk from a cow, curd from milk, butter from curd, ghee from butter, and fine-extract of ghee from ghee, the term for each applies only to that and not to any of the others. (But they are not disconnected.) That is how there are these “worldly usages... by which a Tathāgata communicates without misapprehending [them]” (DN 9/D I 201–2).

“Individual self-hood” (*atta-bhāva*) is what the physical body is called; or it is simply the pentad of categories, since it is actually only a descriptive device derived (*upāda-paññatti*) from the pentad of categories (Vism Ch. 9/p. 310). “Here when the categories are not fully known, there is naming [*abhidhāna*] of them and of the consciousness as ‘self,’ that is, the physical body or alternatively the five categories... [it is] presence [*sabhāva*] as a mere description in the case of what is called a ‘being’ [*bhūta*], though in the ultimate sense the ‘being’ is non-existent [*avijjamāna*]” (Vism-a 298).

A Tathāgata is indescribable in terms of being or of

consciousness:

“Bhikkhus, when a bhikkhu’s mind [*citta*] is... liberated, the gods... when they seek him do not find the consciousness of one who is thus-gone [*tathāgata*] with anything as its support. Why is that? One thus-gone is here and now no longer knowable, I say. So saying, so proclaiming, I have been baselessly, vainly, falsely, and wrongly misrepresented by some *samaṇas* and *brāhmaṇas* thus: ‘The *samaṇa* Gotama is one who leads away [to loss: *venayika*], he describes an existent creature’s annihilation, loss, non-being.’ As I am not, as I do not proclaim, so I have been... wrongly misrepresented.” (MN 22/M I 140; cf. MN 72/M I 487)

For these and other reasons the Buddha refused to answer the “ten undecided matters” (*avyākata*) ending with the four logical questions whether after death a *Tathāgata* is, is not, both is and is not, neither is nor is not (see, e.g.. SN 44; MN 72). These ten, and some others also not answered, all contain some concealed assumptions, in fact, which either of the answers “Yes” or “No” would alike confirm.

## Arguments Used Against Self-Theories

“Self” in any form, particular or absolute, one or many, cannot be conceived apart from identification, without which no meaningful statement can be made about it... and

any identification is always wrong: *yena yena hi maññati tato taṃ hoti aññathā* (Ud 33). There are three principal types of argument used by the Buddha, with which he exposes self-theories by means of the very basis on which they are built. These are: (1) “affliction” (or insusceptibility to the exercise of mastery), (2) “impermanence” and (3) “non-existence” (of the kind postulated).

If self is identified with any of the five categories indiscriminately or with, say, the eye, then since one cannot have any of these as one wishes in the way “Let it be thus, let it be not thus,” one suffers affliction by it and so cannot claim to have mastery over it. Consequently it cannot rightly be called “self” (MN 35).

If it is claimed that self is consciousness, then it can be shown that because consciousness always arises dependent on impermanent conditions, it too is impermanent (MN 38; 109). Again, if self is identified with feeling, it can be asked: With pleasant or unpleasant or neutral feeling? Whichever is admitted, then since the three kinds of feeling come and go (for when one is present the others are absent), self must come and go too. Consequently such a self is likewise untenable (DN 15).

If, on the other hand, it is claimed that self is “not feeling and has nothing to do with it,” then it can be asked whether, where there is no feeling at all, one can say “I am,” and no affirmative answer can be given. (For without feeling there would be no experience on which the mirage “I am”

depends.) Again, if it is claimed that self “while not feeling is not without experience of feeling since it feels and is inseparable from the idea of feeling,” then it can be asked whether, if feeling altogether ceased, one could say “I am this,” and no affirmative answer can be given (for without feeling there could be no means of identifying what “I am” (DN 15).

This last argument, among others, precludes predicating attā of nibbāna, which is called “cessation of perception and feeling” (see e.g. It 44/It p.38).

The characteristic of not-self, unlike those of impermanence and suffering, does not have its opposite applied to extinction: attā cannot be, and never is, applied to nibbāna.

## Anatta as a Subject for Contemplation and Basis for Judgment

When asked how he taught his followers, the Buddha replied:

“I discipline my hearers thus...: ‘Bhikkhus, materiality is impermanent, and so are feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness; materiality is not-self, and so are feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. All formations are impermanent; all things [*dhammā*] are not-self.’” (MN 35/M I 230)

The contemplation is described as follows:

“What is perception of not-self? Here a bhikkhu, gone to the forest, or to the root of a tree, or to a room that is void, considers thus: “Eye is not self, forms are not self, ear... sounds... nose... odours... tongue... flavours... body... tangibles... mind... ideas are not self. That is how he abides contemplating not-self in these six in-oneself-and-external bases.” (AN 10:60/A V 109)

Whatever is conditioned should be judged according to its actual nature of impermanence and contingency, no matter whether it is a pleasant abiding (*sukha-vihāra*) or a quiet abiding (*santa-vihāra*). “Whatever is there to be included as materiality, or feeling, or perception, or formations, or consciousness, such things [*dhammā*] he sees as impermanent, as suffering, as ailment, as a cancer, as a dart, as a calamity, as an affliction, as alien, as disintegrating, as void, as not self” (MN 64/M I 435; AN 4:124/A II 128: elaborated by M-a quoted at Vism Ch. 20/p. 611). And again, “Whatever is not yours, abandon it. When you have abandoned it, that will be long for your welfare and happiness. What is not yours? Materiality is not yours ...” (MN 22/M I 140). “When a bhikkhu abides much with his mind fortified by perception of not-self in suffering, his mind is rid of conceits that treat in terms of ‘I’ and ‘mine’ this body with its consciousness, and all external signs” (AN 7:46/A IV 53). And “When a bhikkhu sees six rewards it

should be enough for him to establish perception of not-self unlimitedly in all formations. What six? 'I shall be aloof [*atammaya*] from the world of all [from all the world]; I shall be no more impeded by treating in terms of 'I' and likewise of 'mine;' I shall come to possess knowledge not shared [by all]; and I shall see clearly causation, and also causally arisen things'" (AN 6:104/A III 444). "When a man knows and sees the eye [etc.] as not self, his fetters come to be abolished" (SN 35:55/S IV 31–2) and "Perception of not-self reaches the abolition of the conceit 'I am,' which is extinction [*nibbāna*] here and now" (Ud 4.1/p.37). Lastly, "It is impossible that anyone with right view should see any thing as self" (MN 115/M III 64).

The perception of not-self is the third of the "Eighteen Principal Insights" (*mahā-vipassanā*; see the article "Anicca"), of which the *Visuddhi magga* says "One who maintains in being the contemplation of not-self abandons perception of self," and "contemplation of not-self and contemplation of voidness are one in meaning and only the letter is different" (Vism Ch. 20/p. 628) since "one who maintains in being the contemplation of not-self abandons misinterpreting [*abhinivesa*]." On the development of the contemplation of not-self based on rise and fall given in the *Visuddhimagga* (Ch. 21) see the article "Anicca."

The *Paṭisambhidāmagga* connects this contemplation especially with the faculty of understanding (*paññā*), and it is there called the third "Gateway to Liberation." "When one gives attention to not-self, the understanding faculty is



outstanding” (see article “Anicca”).

## Sources

Vinaya Mahāvagga, Dīgha Nikāya (D), Majjhima Nikāya (M), Saṃyutta Nikāya (S), Aṅguttara Nikāya (A), Udāna (Ud), Itivuttaka (It), Suttanipāta (Sn), Paṭisambhidāmagga (M-a), Mahāniddeśa, Dhammasaṅgaṇī (Dhs), *Papañcasūdanī* (M-a), Visuddhimagga (Vism), *Atthasālinī* (Dhs-a), *Sammohavinodanī* (Vibh-a), *Paramatthamañjūsā = Mahā Ṭīkā* (Vism-a Sinhalese Vidyodaya ed. pp. 1–647, Burmese ed. pp. 744–910), *Vibhāvinī Ṭīkā*

SN = Saṃyutta-Nikāya. The first figure refers to the number of the Saṃyutta, the second to the Sutta.

References are to the Pali Text Society’s Pali editions unless otherwise stated. All quotations specially translated for this article.

# Notes

1. The writer can even now recall his own childish perplexity at being told that a rainbow was “the sun shining upon drops of water.” For what resemblance of any kind did it bear to either drops of water or the sun?
2. This essay was written at a time that the idea of “ether,” a medium filling all space and supporting the propagation of light and other electromagnetic waves, was still in vogue. Einstein and other scientists disproved it in the early 20th century. (BPS editor.)
3. The great Bishop Butler, however, ventured to suggest some such hope.
4. With the sinister corollary that as animals have no souls, neither have they any rights.
5. In the Buddhist countries of Asia such a sentiment has long prevailed.
6. In passing, it may well be asked what has happened with the soul. Has that divided also, or has a new soul arisen to animate one of the two bodies? And if so, which, for they are substantially equal and alike?
7. *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (London, 1970), p. 722.

8. *Oxford Dictionary of Etymology* (London, 1966), p. 602.
9. Sigmund Freud, *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* (New York, 1960), p. 423.
10. Erich Fromm, *The Heart of Man* (London, 1965), p. 62.
11. *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, p. 422.
12. *The Heart of Man*, p. 88.
13. See M W. Padmasiri de Silva, *Buddhist and Freudian Psychology* (Ceylon, 1973), p. 143.
14. See Nyanaponika Mahathera, *Anattā and Nibbāna* (Ceylon 1959).
15. *Heart of Man*, p. 67.
16. *Ibid*, p. 88.
17. *Ibid*, p. 71.
18. Erich Fromm, *Man for Himself* (New York, 1947), p. 128.
19. *Ibid*, p. 129.
20. See *Buddhist and Freudian Psychology*, pp. 126–7.
21. The concept of “symbiotic attachment” could be understood in terms of the Buddhist notion of *upādāna* (clinging).
22. In accordance with modern usage, the word “ego,” has been replaced by “self” in this 2007 digital edition of this essay. (BPS editor.)
23. This is the 2nd link in the formula of the dependent

origination and signifies here the unwholesome volitional action (s.v., Karma: *Buddhist Dictionary*) accompanied by wrong views and ignorance.

24. This means that the unwholesome actions of the past can no longer generate a new rebirth, though they might cause results (*vipāka*) to appear in the present lifetimes of stream-winners and even of arahats. [Editor, The Wheel]
25. That is, inoperative as to producing rebirth.
26. That is, absorbing it by penetrative thought, meditation, and practical conduct. [BPS Editor]

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