

Antā Sutta

The Discourse on Limits

[“Identity” in the light of the four noble truths]

(Sāmyutta Nikāya 22.103/3:157 f)

Translated by Piya Tan ©2005

Introduction

1 Sakkāya, diṭṭhi

1.1 DEFINITIONS. The compound *sakkāya, diṭṭhi* (self-identity view)¹ is made up of *sakkāya* (self-identity) and *diṭṭhi* (view). As evident from this Sutta, *sakkāya* is a term for the five aggregates (*pañca-k, khandha*), or more technically, the five aggregates of clinging (*pañc’upādāna-k, khandha*), that is, the aggregates of those still with clinging (referring to the unawakened).² The term *sakkāya* comes from *sat + kāya*, and literally means “the existing body (as an assemblage),” the body (assemblage) of existent phenomena serving as the objective bases for clinging. Here, **Bodhi** makes a useful note on terminology:

Most translators render it [as] “personality,” a practice I followed in [the Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha] (departing from Ven Nānamoli, who rendered it, too literally in my view, [as] “embodiment”). But since, under the influence of modern psychology, the word “personality” has taken on connotations quite foreign to what is implied by *sakkāya*, I now translate it as “identity” (a suggestion made to me by Ven Thanissaro Bhikkhu). *Sakkāya-diṭṭhi* accordingly becomes “identity view,” the view of a self existing either behind or among the five aggregates. (S:B 53)

The term *diṭṭhi* (Skt *dr̥ṣṭi*) means “view, belief, dogma, theory, speculation, especially false theory, groundless or unfounded opinion” (PED). Wrong view (*diṭṭhi*, or more specifically, *micchā, diṭṭhi*) is rejected by the Buddha as *pāpa, diṭṭhi*³ or *pāpika, diṭṭhi*, both meaning “evil view.”⁴

Another term for “wrong view” is *micchā, diṭṭhi*,⁵ the opposite of which is *sammā, diṭṭhi*, “right view.”⁶ The indeclinable prefix *sammā*⁷ means “thoroughly, proper, rightly; in the right way, as it ought to be, best, perfectly” (PED), also “fully, supreme” as in *sammā, sambuddha*, “the fully self-awakened one” or “the supreme Buddha.”⁸ In this sense, all arhats are *buddha*, “awakened.”⁹ The term *buddhānubuddha* (*Buddha + anubuddha*)¹⁰ refers to the Buddha and those who come “after” (*anu-*) him, that is, who have truly followed, namely, the saints of the path.

1.2 THE 20 SELF-VIEWS. The Buddha’s second discourse, **the Anatta, lakkhaṇa Sutta** (S 22.59), contains this important *anicca-dukkha-anattā* formula:

“Therefore, bhikshus,
any kind of form...
any kind of feeling...
any kind of perception...

¹ A 3:438, 5:144; Sn 231 (cf KhA 188); Nc 271 (20 types as *diṭṭhi, lepa*, “smearing, plastering, coating”).

² **Cūḷa Vedalla S** (M 44.2/1:299) = SD 21.7.

³ A 4:172.

⁴ V 1:98, 323; Dh 164. Its opp is *bhaddika, diṭṭhi* (good view) (A 4:212 f, It 26).

⁵ M 3:71; S 1:145, 2:153 (caused by ignorance) Dh 167, 316; Nc 271; Vbh 361, 389.

⁶ V 1:10; S 2:17, 5:11, 14, 30 f, 458 f; M 1:315, 2:12, 29, 87, 3:72; Nc 485; Vbh 104 f.

⁷ Cognate with Ved *samyac* = *samyak* & *samīś*, “connected, in one.”

⁸ D 1:49; M 1:179; S 1:47, 2:69, 3:184, 5:343; Vism 198 f (*buddhānussati*).

⁹ Eg A 4:449.

¹⁰ Tha 1, 679, 1246.

any kind of formations...
 any kind of consciousness
 whatsoever, whether past, future or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near¹¹—all forms should be seen as they really are with right wisdom thus:
 ‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’¹² (S 22.59.17-21/3:68) = SD 1.2

It is the attainment of this vision that distinguishes the noble listener (*ariya, sāvaka*) from the uninstructed worldling (*assutavā puthujjana*).¹³ The unawakened ordinary person, unlike the disciple, tends to see the aggregates in four wrong ways, and is obsessed by his wrong view—this is formulated in **the attānudiṭṭhi formula**, thus:

he regards form, feeling, perception, formations, or consciousness, as self;
 or, he regards self as possessing form, etc,
 or, he regards form, etc, as in self,
 or, he regards “I am form; form is mine,” etc. (M 3:188, 227; S 3:3, 16, 96; conflated)

When listed in full, this formula gives twenty wrong views by which the unawakened worldling falls short of the saint’s vision.

In both the Suttas and the Abhidhamma, these twenty wrong views regarding the aggregates are used to define the nature of self-view (*sakkāya, diṭṭhi*), that is, the wrong view that the body is a permanent entity.¹⁴ Although these wrong views generally define an unawakened worldling, more significantly, they are said to be absent from the four dhyanas (*jhāna*) and the first three formless attainments (*samāpatti*).¹⁵ In **the Mahā Māluṅkyaputta Sutta** (M 64) and **the Jhāna Sutta** (A 9.36), it is stated that

Whatever there is in form, in feeling, in perception, in formations, in consciousness, he sees those states as impermanent...as not self. He turns his mind away from those states and directs it to the deathless element...

If he persists in that,¹⁶ he attains the destruction of the cankers. But if he does not attain the destruction of the cankers because of desire for the Dharma, that delight in the Dharma, then with

¹¹ See S 22.48/3:47. This classification of the aggregates is explained in detail in the Vibhaṅga and briefly in the Visuddhimagga: “**internal**” = physical sense-organs; “**external**” = physical sense-objects; “**gross**” = that which impinges (physical internal and external senses, with touch = earth, wind, fire); “**subtle**” = that which does not impinge (mind, mind-objects, mind-consciousness, and water); “**inferior**” = unpleasant and unacceptable sense-experiences [sense-world existence]; “**superior**” = pleasant and acceptable sense-experiences [form & formless existences]; “**far**” = subtle objects (“difficult to penetrate”); “**near**” = gross objects (“easy to penetrate”) (Vbh 1-13; Vism 14.73/450 f; Abhs 6.7). “Whether or not the details of the Vibhaṅga exposition are accepted as valid for the *nikāyas*, it seems clear that this formula is intended to indicate how each *khandha* is to be seen as a class of states, manifold in nature and displaying a considerable variety and also a certain hierarchy” (Gethin 1986:41). See also Gethin 1986:43-46.

¹² *N’etaṃ mama, n’eso ’ham asmi, na mēso attā ti*. This threefold formula is the contrary of “the 3 graspings” (*ti, vidha gāha*), that is, of view (*diṭṭhi*), of craving (*taṇhā*), of conceit (*māna*) (MA 2:111, 225): here applied to the 5 aggregates [17-21]. A brief version, “There can be no considering that (element) as ‘I’ or ‘mine’ or ‘I am’” (*ahan ti vā maman ti vā asmī ti vā*) is found in **Mahā Hatthipadōpama S** (M 28/1:184-191 §§6b-7, 11b-12, 16b-17, 21b-22). These three considerations represent respectively the 3 kinds of **mental proliferation** (*papañca*) of self-view (*sakkāya diṭṭhi*), of craving (*taṇhā*) and of conceit (*māna*) (Nm 280; Vbh 393; Nett 37 f). In **Anatta, Jakkhaṇa S** (S 22.59.12-16/3:68), the formula is applied to the 5 aggregates & in **Pārileyya S** (S 22.81/ 3:94-99) to the 4 primary elements. See also **Rāhula S** (A 4.177/2:164 f). See **Pārileyya S**, SD 6.16 Intro (5).

¹³ S 3:18 f; cf S 3:16.

¹⁴ M 1:300, 3:17 f; S 3:102; Dhs 182.

¹⁵ In the case of the formless attainments, only the 4 formless aggregates apply. The form aggregate, for example, is not included in the object of insights for the basis of contemplation.

¹⁶ *Etam santam etam paṇītam*.

the destruction of the five lower fetters¹⁷ [connected with the lower realms of existence], he is spontaneously reborn [becomes a non-returner, reborn in the Pure Abodes]¹⁸ and there attain final nirvana, without ever returning from that world.

This is the path, the way, to the abandoning to the abandoning of the five lower fetters.

(M 64.10-15/1:436 f = A 9.36/4:422-424;¹⁹ cf A 2:128 (×2), 130 (×2))

However, as noted in **the Khemaka Sutta** (S 22.89), one may not regard the five aggregates as self (*attā*) or as belonging to self, but, as the monk Khemaka himself declares, this does not mean that one is an arhat. This is because even after the destruction of the five lower fetters, there still remains a residue of the conceit “I am,” of the desire “I am,” and of the latent tendency, “I am.” Only when one has totally uprooted the notion that “I am” the aggregates, that one becomes an arhat.²⁰

Another important application of the twenty self-views is found in **the Satta-ṭṭhāna Sutta** (S 22.57), that is, in the detailed explanation of the point that *in whatever diverse ways that ascetics or brahmins view the self, they all view the five aggregates of clinging or one of them*.²¹ In other words, the twenty self-views cover all that one can have regarding the five aggregates; there are none besides. **Gethin** adds a cautionary note:

Now, a number of scholars have drawn attention to the fact that the *nikāyas* fail to categorically deny the *attā* and declare only that the *khandhas* are *anattā*.²² Yet, when this is taken in the context of the former statement, it must be added that the *nikāyas* refuse to allow the *attā* as a meaningful concept apart from the five *khandhas*, that is, apart from views or notions of the *attā* that are ultimately to be abandoned. The *attā* is in this way squeezed out [of] the *nikāyas*’ ultimate frame of reference, and deliberately confined to the level of speculations and views.

This can be seen, up to a point, as a challenge to those *samaṇas* and *brāhmaṇas* who maintained views concerning the *attā* to explain the exact nature of that *attā*. Their response seems to have been to accuse the Buddha of declaring the destruction of the existing being, or to demand an answer to the question of whether or not the Tathāgata exists after death. The Tathāgata is untraceable (*ananuvejja*), the question of his existence or not after death is unexplained (*avyākata*), was the reply.²³ (1986:45 f)

Another set of twenty wrong views, called **the sakkāya,diṭṭhi views** or the self-identity views, are mentioned in **the Parileyya Sutta** (S 22.81), which relates how an uninstructed ordinary person tends to

¹⁷ That is, the first 5 of the 10 fetters (*dasa,samyojanā*): the 10 fetters are: (1) Personality view (*sakkāya,diṭṭhi*), (2) persistent doubt (*vicikicchā*), (3) attachment to rules and rites (*sīla-b,bata,parāmāsa*), (4) sensual lust (*kāma,-rāga*), (5) repulsion (*paṭigha*), (6) greed for form existence (*rūpa,rāga*), (7) greed for formless existence (*arūpa,-rāga*), (8) conceit (*māna*), (9) restlessness (*uddhacca*), (10) ignorance (*avijjā*) (S 5:61, A 5:13, Vbh 377). In some places, no. 5 (*paṭigha*) is replaced by illwill (*vyāpāda*). The first 5 are the lower fetters (*orambhāgiya*), and the rest, the higher fetters (*uddhambhāgiya*).

¹⁸ That is, reborn in **the Pure Abodes** (*suddh’āvāsa*), the five highest heavens of the form world (*rūpa,loka*) inhabited only by non-returners who assume their last birth to become arhats and attain nirvana. These worlds are Āviha (“Non-declining”), Ātappa (“Unworried”), Sudassā (“Clearly Visible”), Sudassī (“Clear-visioned”) and Akaniṭṭhā (“Highest”) (D 3:237, M 3:103, Vbh 425, Pug 42-46). It should be noted that one could be become a non-returner in this world itself, and upon dying, be reborn in the Pure Abodes.

¹⁹ **Jhāna S** contains an archer parable not found in **Mahā Mālunṅka,putta S**.

²⁰ S 22.89/3:126-132 = SD 14.13.

²¹ S 22.57/3:61-66 = SD 29.2.

²² Eg E Conze, *Buddhism—Its essence and development*, 2nd ed pbk, Oxford, 1978:39 & EJ Thomas, *History of Buddhist Thought*, London, 1933:101 n2. (Gethin’s fn)

²³ M 1:140; S 3:119; cf S 3:124, where Māra searches in vain for the consciousness of a monk who has just attained arhathood and then died. The most extensive treatment of this aspect of the *khandha* is found in **Avyākata Sāmyutta** (S 4:374-403). On this whole question, cf S Collins, *Selfless Persons*, Cambridge, 1982:117-138. (Gethin’s fn)

regard any of the five aggregates (form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness) in these ways:

- (a) as the self, or
- (b) the self as possessing the aggregate, or
- (c) the aggregate as in the self, or
- (d) the self as in the aggregate. (S 22.81/3:97 f) = SD 6.1; Dhs 1003

The **Mahā Puṇṇama Sutta**²⁴ and the **Cūḷa Vedalla Sutta**,²⁵ too, list these twenty self-identity views in connection with the five aggregates. The **Paṭisambhidā, magga** illustrates the four basic modes of the self-identity view in connection with form in this way. One might wrongly regard form as self in the way that a burning oil-lamp's flame is identical to the colour of the flame. Or one might wrongly regard self as possessing form just as a tree possesses a shadow. Or one might wrongly regard form as in self as the scent in the flower. Or one might wrongly regard self as in form, as a jewel in a casket.²⁶ These self-identity views have been abandoned by the stream-winner.

2 Meanings of *anta*

The Pali dictionaries give a range of meanings for *anta* [§3]. Here I have culled the main meanings and usages of *anta* from the Critical Pali Dictionary (CPD) and Cone's A Dictionary of Pali, giving only the canonical usages:

- (1) (ts)²⁷ (lit & fig) end, limit, conclusion; edge, boundary; extreme.
 1. the outmost end of something, extremity: *kāya, bandhanassa* ~, "the end of a body-cord (belt)" (V 2:136); in the phrase, *n'ev'~am na koṭṭim passati (jānāti)*, metaphorical, "not to see where to begin, to be unable to unravel, to be at a loss."
 2. (a) border, edge (V 1:47, of a *cīvara*, "outer robe"; opp *bhoga*, "body (of the robe)").
(b) boundary, frontier (J 6:23).
 3. extreme, contrast; pl opposing or different principles: *dve ~ā...na sevitabbā*, "the two extremes not to be taken up" (V 1:10,10 = S 1:62,27* = 5:421,2 ≠ 4:330,28); cf *anta-g, gāhikā diṭṭhi*, "the view that grasps at extremes" and *majjhimā paṭipadā*, "the middle way."
 4. end, limit, interruption, discontinuance: *~o n'atthi*, "no end to" (gen).
- (2) (n) (Skt *antra, āntra*) bowels, entrails, intestines (denoting now the whole alimentary canal, now the guts, or esp the rectum): *kesā...~am anta, guṇam* (head-hair...large intestines, small intestines) (Khp 3 (p2,7) = D 3:293,15 = 3:104,26 = M 1:57,18 = 185,19 = Vbh 82,12).
- (3) (mfn, ts) end: *~kara*, "making an end," one who puts an end to (gen): *dukkhass'~o*, "an end of suffering" (D 2:123,11*; M 1:47,25 vl *antaṃ, karo*; Sn 337; It 18,5*); *dukkhassa ~kiriya*, "for making an end of suffering" (V 1:13,1; S 4:93, Sn 454).
- (4) (m, ts) death: *~ka*, lit "end-maker," referring to death personified as Māra the evil one, or a designation of the god of death (Yama, sometimes identified with Māra): *~o vasavatti...Māro*, "the end-maker, the overlord, Māra" (V 1:21,21); *~kenādhipanassa*, "seized by the end-maker" (S 1:72,14* = Dh 288; Comy: *maraṇena abhibhūta*, "under the power of death," DhA). [For other senses of *antaka*, see DP sv.]
- (5) (mfn) (Skt *antya*) last, ultimate; worst, mean, contemptible.
 1. last, ultimate: *~m-antaṃ*, the most remote, in *so ~m-antan'eva sevati*, "he seeks the most remote (area)" (D 3:38,13).
 2. worst, mean, contemptible: *~am idaṃ...jīvikam yad idaṃ piṇḍolyam*, "this is the lowest form of livelihood, that is, alms-collecting" [abusive usage] (S 3:93,4).

²⁴ M 109.10/ 3:17 f = SD 17.10.

²⁵ M 44.7 f/1:300.

²⁶ Pm 2.50, 74, 77, 90 = 1:144 f.

²⁷ ts = tatsama, meaning the word is spelt the same way both in Sanskrit and in Pali.

The Commentary on the Antā Sutta glosses *anta* as *koṭṭhāsa*, meaning, “a share, a portion, a division; a group, a faction” (DP), and notes that the sutta interprets the five aggregates by way of the four noble truths (SA 2:332). This commentarial sense is not found above (or in any dictionary) and is apparently an interpretation rather than a definition of *anta*, which here clearly refers to the extent or limit of the five aggregates. After all, the limits of five aggregates, that is, the living being, which is made up of “portions,” that is, the aggregates.

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The Discourse on Limits

(S 22.103/3:157 f)

- 1 At one time the Blessed One was residing in Anātha,piṇḍika’s Park in Jeta’s Forest near Sāvattihī.
2 There the Blessed One addressed the monks, thus:

- 3 “Bhikshus, there are these four limits.²⁸ What are the four? **[158]**
The limit of identity,
the limit of the arising of identity,
the limit of the ending of identity,
the limit of the way leading to the ending of identity.

- 4 What, bhikshus, is the limit of identity?²⁹
It should be said: **the five aggregates of clinging**.
What are the five?
The form aggregate of clinging,
the feeling aggregate of clinging,
the perception aggregate of clinging,
the formations aggregate of clinging,
the consciousness aggregate of clinging.
This, bhikshus, is called the limit of identity.

- 5 What, bhikshus, is the limit of the arising of identity?³⁰
It is this **craving** that leads to renewed existence, accompanied by pleasure [delight] and lust, seeking pleasure here and there; that is to say,
craving for sense-pleasures,
craving for existence,
craving for extinction [non-existence].
This, bhikshus, is called the limit of the arising of identity.

- 6 What, bhikshus, is the limit of the ending of identity?³¹
It is the utter fading away and ending of that very craving, giving it up, letting it go, being free from it, being detached from it [that is, **nirvana**].

²⁸ “Limits,” *antā*, alt tr “bounds.” Comy glosses *antā* (lit “ends”) as *koṭṭhāsa* (“share, portion, group”), and says that this sutta explains the 5 aggregates by way of the 4 noble truths (SA 2:332). I have taken the word *anta* literally, which I think fits the context better. See Intro (2).

²⁹ *Sakkāy’anta*.

³⁰ *Sakkāya,samuday’anta*.

³¹ *Sakkāya,nirodh’anta*.

This, bhikshus, is called the limit of the ending of identity.

7 What, bhikshus, is the limit of the way to the ending of identity?³²

It is this very **noble eightfold path**, that is to say,

right view,
right thought,
right speech,
right action,
right livelihood,
right effort,
right mindfulness,
right concentration.

This, bhikshus, is called the limit of the way to the ending of identity.

8 These, bhikshus, are the four limits.

— evarā —

051112; 061017; 080926a

³² *Sakkāya, dukkha, nirodha, gāmini, paṭipad'anta.*