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## Is There a Soul?

A study based on the Pali Canon

From *The Buddha's Teachings* (Piyasilo, 1991b), revised by Piya Tan ©2010

### 1 What is “soul”?

#### 1.1 ANATTĀ.

**1.1.1 Attā.** In the centuries leading up to the Buddha's time, the dominant religious specialists were the brahmins who exploited religious ideas to divide their society up into divinely ordained hierarchical classes (*vaṇṇa*, literally, “colours”), holding themselves up as the highest class, born of the mouth of Brahmā (God) himself. The other classes—the nobles, the business class and the working class—were said (by them) have issued forth from lower parts of primordial man.<sup>1</sup> And then there were the fifth group, a non-class of outcastes, who had no social rights or privileges at all. They were mostly the dark-skinned conquered natives.

The brahmins further claimed that it was only through them that anyone could go to heaven or liberate their departed to ascend to heaven. Underlying such ideas was the eternal soul, the spiritual fate of which is in the hands of the brahmins and their elaborate and costly rituals. For the living, their religious quest was to identify their true self (Skt *ātman*; P *attā*). This was said to be a person's permanent nature, the source of true happiness, and the “inner controller” of action (Skt *antaryāmin*).<sup>2</sup>

In Brahmanism, the brahmin-centred religion, this *ātman* was seen as the ungraspable inner subject, the unseen seer, a universal self, identified as Brahman, the divine source and substance of the universe. Jainism, too, taught some kind of soul, which was seen as the individual “life principle” (*jīva*). The Buddha rejected all these views, for the simple reason that they were false and fabricated, and were of no use in the spiritual quest.<sup>3</sup>

**1.1.2 The Buddha's rejection of attā.** The Indian term for “soul” is *attā* in Pali or *ātman* in Sanskrit. The Buddha rejects any notion of a permanent entity in the form of a self or soul. This teaching forms the third and last of the three characteristics (*ti, lakkhaṇa*). The opposite term, *anattā*, etymologically consists of the negative prefix *na* > *an* (before a vowel) + *atta*. It is usually rendered as “no-self,” “not self” or “non-self”; sometimes the adjectives “egoless,” “impersonal” and “soulless” are used. The translation of *anattā* as “non-self” is preferred [1.2].

However, through centuries of religious conditioning, many Westerners and those who have brought up in a theistic environment find it difficult to accept the term “soulless.” However, if “soul” is taken to mean “spirit” or “quality,” as in “the soul of music, art, etc” this is acceptable usage in Buddhism as it merely describes how one feels and has nothing to do with a permanent entity. Sometimes, one may speak of people as “souls” as in the sentence: “Many souls were lost during the war.” This usage is acceptable with the understanding that there is nothing permanent in a human being. As such, it is a matter of usage. However, when explaining Buddhist doctrine, one has to be very clear about one's usage of terms and the audience should be able to relate to the terms used.

Like the four noble truths, *anattā* is a “teaching peculiar to Buddhas” (*buddhāna samukkaṇṇika desanā*, M 1:380). In his Commentary on the Vibhaṅga, Buddhaghosa says: “The characteristics of impermanence and suffering are known whether Buddhas arise or not; but that of non-self (*anattā*) is not known unless there is a Buddha...for the knowledge of it is the province of none but a Buddha” (VbhA 49 f).

The Buddha sometimes shows the nature of non-self through impermanence (eg **the Cha, chakka Sutta**, M 148),<sup>4</sup> sometimes through suffering (**the Pañca, vaggī Sutta**, S 3:67), and sometimes through both (eg **the Arahanta Sutta** S 3:83 f, and **the Ajjhattānicca Sutta**, S 4:1). Why is that? While impermanence and suffering are both evident, non-self or soullessness is not evident (MA 1:113).

<sup>1</sup> D 3:81-84.

<sup>2</sup> See Bṛhad-Āraṇyaka 3.7.2-23.

<sup>3</sup> For the historical background of the Buddha's times, see Harvey 2007:121-133.

<sup>4</sup> M 148 = SD 26.6.

**1.2 NO-SELF, NOT-SELF OR NON-SELF.** During the first decade of Sutta Discovery translation project, I have rendered *anattā* as “**not-self**,” mainly persuaded by Thanissaro (1996, 2001), partly also out of deference for a learned monk’s view. However, reflecting on the modern philosophical discussions on self, consciousness and related topics, the implications of this translation has troubled me. If we speak of “not-self,” it implies that there is or are real “self” or “selves” in existence, whether Buddhists accept them or not. Although, early Buddhism does accept a conventional idea of a functional or grammatical “self,” this translations allows space for the notion of an abiding self.

Another possible, less problematic is “**no-self**,” which clearly rejects the notion of a self. However, it is still problematic in that it hints of annihilationism. This is clear from **the (Ānanda) Vaccha, -gotta Sutta** (S 44.10), where the Buddha remains silent, not answering Vaccha, gotta’s asking the “ten questions,” which include those concerning the soul.<sup>5</sup> The Buddha reject all notions and rejects any discussion on such a self as being unhelpful and unrelated to the spiritual goal.

In 2012, after reading an email by Peter Harvey, I’m finally convinced that “**non-self**” is the best rendition<sup>6</sup> for our purposes. Not only, is it an acceptable literal translation of *an-attā*, but also reflects best its senses as found in the suttas. Furthermore, it gives no suggestion of some “other” kind of soul or self that exists.<sup>7</sup>

## 2 Psychological Fears

Man is not able to see the non-selfhood or soullessness of things as long as he is blinded by his psychological fears and complexes that arise through conditioning and ignorance. In his book *What the Buddha Taught*, Walpola Rahula philosophically writes:

Two ideas are psychologically deep rooted in man: self-protection and self-preservation. For self-protection man has created God, on whom he depends for his own protection, safety and security, just as a child depends on its parents. For self-preservation man has conceived the idea of an immortal Soul or Atman, which will live eternally. In his ignorance, weakness, fear, and desire, man needs these two things to console himself. Hence he clings to them deeply and fanatically. (1978:51)

In their ignorance, some people panic at the thought that nothing permanent is to be found within oneself. In **the Alagaddûpama Sutta** (M 22), the Buddha speaks of a person who holds the view: “The world is that self; I shall be that after death, permanent, abiding, everlasting, unchanging, and I shall exist as such for eternity.” When that man hears the Buddha or his disciple teaching the doctrine of non-self, he despairs, thinking, “I will be annihilated, I will be destroyed, I will be no more.”<sup>8</sup> Elsewhere the Buddha says “O bhikshus, this idea that I may not be, I may not have, is frightening to the uninstructed ordinary person.” (MA 2:112)

## 3 Scientific proofs that there is no soul

**3.1 PHILOSOPHICAL INSIGHTS.** The modern western notion of the self traces its roots to the ideas of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century French philosopher, mathematician, scientist and writer, **René Descartes** (1596-1650), especially his famous quote, “Cogito, ergo sum” (Latin: “I think, therefore I am”) or “Dubito, ergo cogito, ergo sum” (Latin: “I doubt, therefore I think, therefore I am”).<sup>9</sup> This philosophical statement, until recent-

<sup>5</sup> S 44.10/4:140 f = SD 2.16(5). Cf **Aggi Vaccha, gotta S** (M 72.7-14/1:484-486) = SD 6.15.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Harvey: “Since writing this, though, I would hold out for the translation ‘non-Self’ rather than ‘not-Self’—both because it is the literal translation, and also because it makes it clearer that what it is applied to is not just not ‘Self’, but also not the possession of ‘Self’—it is ‘empty of Self or what belongs/pertains to Self’.” (Buddha-L email 24 June 2012; also Harvey 2007:331-337.

<sup>7</sup> If “**non-self**” as an adj sounds a bit awkward to some, take its sense as “bereft or any permanent entity.”

<sup>8</sup> M 22.20/1:136 = SD 3.13 (§20).

<sup>9</sup> *Cogito ergo sum* is a tr of Descartes’ orig French statement: “*Je pense, donc je suis*,” which occurs in his *Discourse on Method* (1637). See *Principles of Philosophy*, pt 1, art 7: “Ac proinde hæc cognitio, *ego cogito, ergo sum*,

ly, became a foundational element of Western philosophy [18]. Although the idea expressed in “*Cogito ergo sum*” is widely attributed to Descartes, many predecessors offer similar arguments—particularly the Christian rhetor,<sup>10</sup> Neoplatonist and doctor<sup>11</sup> of the Roman catholic Church, **Augustine of Hippo** (354-430)<sup>12</sup> in *De Civitate Dei* (The City of God): “Si...fallor, sum” (“If I am mistaken, I am”) (book 9,26), who also anticipates modern refutations of the concept.<sup>13</sup>

The best known critic of Descartes was the most famous of the British philosophers, **David Hume** (1711-1776).<sup>14</sup> In fact, in his *A Treatise of Human Nature*, he once and for all debunked Descartes’ position. For when he looked within he reports that he could not find anything in his experience corresponding to Descartes’ single, simple, continuing self,

When I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception.  
(Hume, 1740:252)<sup>15</sup>

Hume pointed out that we tend to think that we are now the same person we were say five years ago. Though we have changed in many respects, we appear to be as the same person then. We might investigate which features can be changed without changing the underlying self. However, he denies that there is a distinction between the various features of a person and the mysterious self that supposedly bears those features. When we start introspecting, he writes in *A Treatise of Human Nature*,

We are never intimately conscious of anything but a particular perception; man is a bundle or collection of different perceptions which succeed one another with an inconceivable rapidity and are in perpetual flux and movement.  
(*Treatise* 1.4.6)

It is plain, that in the course of our thinking, and in the constant revolution of our ideas, our imagination runs easily from one idea to any other that resembles it, and that this quality alone is to the fancy a sufficient bond and association. It is likewise evident that as the senses, in changing their objects, are necessitated to change them regularly, and take them as they lie contiguous to each other, the imagination must by long custom acquire the same method of thinking, and run along the parts of space and time in conceiving its objects.  
(*Treatise* 4.1.2)

According to Hume, these perceptions do not belong to anything. Rather, he sees the self as a part of an ensemble or aggregate, which retains its identity not by virtue of some enduring core substance, but by being composed of many different, related, and yet constantly changing elements. The question of person-

est omnium prima & certissima, quæ cuilibet ordine philosophanti occurat.” Traditionally, Descartes’s *cogito* used to be translated as “I think.” Yet Descartes, in both the Latin and French eds, makes it clear that what he intends is what we would now call “being conscious” rather than merely “thinking,” including, eg, willing, sensing, and imagining, as well as such things as asserting, understanding, and doubting. Compare, eg, Anscombe and Geach’s now widely used translation of the *Meditations* in their *Descartes: Philosophical Writings* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971). [Shear 1999 fn1]. See <http://www.iep.utm.edu/d/descarte.htm> & [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cogito\\_ergo\\_sum](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cogito_ergo_sum).

<sup>10</sup> **Rhetor** was the Greek term for *orator*: A *rhetor* was a citizen who regularly addressed juries and political assemblies and who was thus understood to have gained some knowledge about public speaking in the process. Here it refers to the fact that Augustine often addressed his assembly to propagate his ideas. **Neoplatonism** is the modern term for a school of religious and mystical philosophy that arose in the 3<sup>rd</sup> cent, based on the teachings of Plato and the earlier Platonists. Many early Christians (like Augustine) were profoundly influenced by Neoplatonism.

<sup>11</sup> **Doctor** here is used in its earliest sense of “teacher” (from Latin *docere*, to teach), and in Roman Catholicism refers to a saint whose writings are sanctified and accepted by the whole church.

<sup>12</sup> <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/augustine.html>.

<sup>13</sup> <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/augustine/>.

<sup>14</sup> <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hume/>.

<sup>15</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Oxford Oxford University Press, 1740, 1978.

al identity then is a matter of characterizing the loose cohesion of one's personal experience.<sup>16</sup> **Nicholas F Gier** gives a succinct summary of our present discussion:

The Buddha's response to the Axial Age's discovery of the self was strikingly unique: he proposed the doctrine of no-self (*anatman*), which literally means "no *ātman*," the Hindu soul substance. This conceptual innovation was so provocative that it was bound to invite misinterpretation, and unfounded charges of Buddhist "nihilism" continue even to this day. The Buddha anticipated David Hume's view that the self is an ensemble of cognitions, perceptions, and bodily feelings that is the center of agency and moral responsibility. The Buddha's view, however, is different from Hume's, primarily because the Buddha supported real causal efficacy among internally related phenomena. (Hume may have been misled by the current scientific model of externally related atoms.) While Hume deconstructed any theory of causality, the Buddha reconstructed causal relations with his theory of interdependent coorigination. The Buddha agrees with Hume about the absence of causal power, but disagrees with him about the absence of causal relations. (Gier 2007:48)

**3.2 CONSCIOUSNESS AT CROSSROADS.** Buddhists do not subscribe to the notion of an abiding self or ego, simply because there is no such thing. If one were to say that unicorns do not exist (as living beings, that is), one does not have to prove it, but the onus is on those who claim that they do exist (outside the story books, that is) to prove their claim. On the other hand, scientific research, especially electrical stimulation of the brain (ESB), clearly shows that it is untenable that such an abiding self or soul could ever exist.

During open-brain surgery, the surgeon may use fine electrodes with a weak electrical current to test and identify certain brain structures functionally to map specific sensory or motor areas by studying corresponding responses to electrical stimulation. **Patricia Churchland**,<sup>17</sup> in a dialogue with the Dalai Lama during the second Mind and Life Conference (1989) on brain science and Buddhism, notes:

When a particular part of the brain is stimulated, the patient may find that they can't express certain words that they would like to utter. Or they may unexpectedly experience very specific memories that return to them from the remote past, or they may hear old popular songs.

(*Consciousness at the Crossroads*, 1999:26)<sup>18</sup>

**The Anatta,lakkhaṇa Sutta** (S 22.59) states a similar argument in connection with the five aggregates in this way:

Bhikshus, **form** is not self. For, bhikshus, if form were self, this form would not lead to illness [affliction], and it would be possible to tell the form: 'Let my form be such. Let my form not be such.'<sup>19</sup>

But because form is not self, form leads to illness [affliction], and it is not possible to say of form: 'Let my form be such. Let my form not be such.'

⟨The same applies to *feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness*.⟩ (S 22.59/3:66-68)<sup>20</sup>

The five aggregates are what constitute our whole being, that is, our body (form) and mind (feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness).<sup>21</sup> Churchland continues her philosophical arguments thus:

<sup>16</sup> It is interesting, however, that in the Appendix to the *Treatise*, Hume mysteriously wrote that he was dissatisfied with his account of the self, but he never returned to the discussion.

<sup>17</sup> Professor of Philosophy at the University of California at San Diego.

<sup>18</sup> See Zara Houshmand et al (eds), 1999.

<sup>19</sup> This is the first argument against the self-notion, that is, the nature of the five aggregates are not subject to one's control (*avasavattitā*), but they are all subject to illness [affliction], and as such cannot be our self.

<sup>20</sup> See SD 1.2.

<sup>21</sup> Although **consciousness** (*viññāṇa*) is a "formless" aggregate, it is dependent on both "name" (*nāma*) (ie feelings, perception, and formations) and "form" (*rūpa*), ie the body (by way of the 6 senses). These 5 aggregates are

If there were a soul in there, you might wonder how the electrical current has these effects. Does the soul somehow intervene at the points of stimulation? It doesn't appear likely...

How might it work, say, in patients with brain degeneration, who can't remember where they were born, or what they did yesterday, or who their children are? Would the memories of things that they had experienced ten years ago be preserved in the soul, but unavailable now? That is implausible.

...Children who are born after a difficult delivery where the oxygen supply to the brain was cut off may have brains that are very defective. You wouldn't expect that reduction in oxygen supply would bother a soul. If it did, it would also do so in the course of ordinary dying.

Finally, there is the question as to how the idea of the mind or soul fits in with the rest of science... Admittedly, no one can be quite sure that established science is true, but it looks like the best thing we've got so far, and like Buddhism, it is subject to correction in the light of evidence.

(*Consciousness at the Crossroads*, 1999:26 f)<sup>22</sup>

**3.3 IF THERE IS NO SELF, WHAT IS THERE?** If we begin, socratically, by asking, "What can we really know?" the answer at best is "*body and mind*." I know I have a *body*; the fact that I "know" is the *mind*. From here we go on to investigate what "body" and "mind" really are. **The body** comprises the four primary "elements" (*dhatu*), that is, basic aspects of our physical being (we will elaborate below). We can also see the body as consisting of the faculties of the eye (vision), ear (hearing), nose (smelling), tongue (tasting), and body (touching). As a whole, these constituent elements are called "body" (*kāya*) or "form" (*rūpa*). **The mind** is more complex, comprising feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness.

As a set, *form* and these four mental aggregates are known as the "five aggregates" (*pañca-k, khandha*). The first aggregate, **form** (*rūpa*) or material form, is the physical aspects of existence, whether within the body of a living being (constituting it) or in the outer world (as solidity). Form or "the body" is said to comprise of 4 basic elements or forces, and their "derived forms" of subtle, sensitive matter.<sup>23</sup>

The 4 elements are "earth" (solidity), "water" (cohesion), "fire" (energy or plasma), and "wind" (motion). From their interactivity and stability, our physical body arise.<sup>24</sup> The remaining four aggregates, lacking any physicality, are all *mental* in nature, that is, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness.<sup>25</sup>

The second aggregate is **feeling** (*vedanā*). This is the hedonic tone, that is, *how* we experience our sense-faculties. When we are conscious of an experience, we invariably regard it as being pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. The first two are opposites and are the most common of our feelings, the hedonic duality, but the third is, as a rule, only known after the fact, often through reviewing. These feelings are not only those arising from the body, but also include those from the mind, that is, feelings of happiness, unhappiness or indifference.<sup>26</sup>

The third aggregate is **perception** (*saññā*), which processes sensory and mental experiences, classifying and labelling them, for example, as "person," "blue," or "joy." Such mental processes, often unconscious, help us to recognize and make us interpret—or more often misinterpreting (when we are unmindful)—our experiences or "sense-objects." Yet, without perception, we might be conscious but would be unable to know *what* we are conscious of. Consciousness *cognizes*, perception *recognizes*.

The fourth aggregate is **formations** (*saṅkhāra*), "volitional activities" or "mental constructions." They comprise a number of states that initiate action, or motivate and mould our character. These are

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not "heaps" or "bundles" of factors occurring simultaneously, but are merely a classifying convention. Feeling, perception and formations are only aspects of a moment of consciousness, "what redness, softness, sweetness, etc, are to an apple, and have little separate existence as those qualities" (BDict: *khandha*).

<sup>22</sup> See Zara Houshmand et al (eds), 1999.

<sup>23</sup> S 12.2.12/2:3 = SD 5.11. See **Rūpa** = SD 17.2a (10).

<sup>24</sup> On the body's composition of "31 parts," see **Mahā Rāhu'ovāda S** (M 62.8-12/1:422 f) = SD 3.11.

<sup>25</sup> See **Rūpa** = SD 17.2a.

<sup>26</sup> See **Vedanā** = SD 27.3.

*deliberate mental activities*, whether unconscious or conscious, that compel us to think, speak and act with greed, hate or delusion, and so accumulate bad karma. Conversely, if we act with non-greed, non-hate or non-delusion, we accumulate good karma.

Such states also include effort, joy and attention, and sensory stimulation, arising automatically, as it were (on account of our latent tendencies).<sup>27</sup> While some such states are morally neutral, many are good or “wholesome” (*kusala*). The most characteristic of the “volitional activities” is, of course, volition (*ce-tanā*) itself, sometimes translated as “will,” and which is identified with karma (A 3:415).<sup>28</sup>

The fifth aggregate is **consciousness** (*viññāṇa*), a broad term with a range of meanings, including the mind, sensory awareness, discriminating consciousness, and perceptual discernment. It includes both the basic awareness (cognition) of an object, whether sensory or mental, and the discrimination (conation) of its basic aspects, which are actually recognized by perception (*saññā*). In this sense, while consciousness functions *cognitively* (knowing) and *conatively* (willing), perception functions *affectively* (feeling).

In normal sense-experience, consciousness is of six types, according to whether it arises “in” the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body or mind faculty (*mano*). Here, it is also known as “**mind**” (*citta*), the central focus of personality, often also rendered as “heart.” This is our thinking process itself, or how we make sense of things. As such, it is our “mentality,” thinking processes that arise from moment to moment, or our “mindset,” recurring thought-patterns or “habits of the heart,” defining our character. Such a thought-process, at any moment, arises conditioned by the other mental aggregates, but it then goes on to interactively determine the subsequent process.

Understandably, Buddhist training places great emphasis on the purifying (moral conduct), development (mental cultivation) and understanding (wisdom) of these five aggregates.<sup>29</sup> An underlying mindfulness or meditation practice is that we are nothing but these five aggregates, which are *impermanent*, and as such *unsatisfactory*, and being both, are as such *non-self*.<sup>30</sup> The practitioner regards a “person” as a mere cluster of ever-changing physical and mental processes (*dhamma*).<sup>31</sup> The wise practitioner is then able, in due course, to transcend the measuring conceptions of self and other,<sup>32</sup> limit the proliferating of thoughts,<sup>33</sup> and finally see through even the conception of a “self” or “person.”<sup>34</sup> In this way, we abandon ignorance and craving, the roots of suffering.<sup>35</sup>

#### 4 How the self-notion develops

By way of developmental psychology, we can describe the evolution of the “self-notion” in this way:

- (1) The conception of an ego or self begins from birth, from the instinct for survival  
—a baby cries whenever it has a need (it is hungry, wet, in pain, etc), calling attention to itself.
- (2) The baby grows into a child and plays with toys, and begins to identify with them: he collects the toys  
—the conceptions of “my” and “mine” arise.
- (3) As the child matures, he organizes these ideas into a more sophisticated self-identity  
—the conceptions of “I” and “me” arise.
- (4) Once there is a habitual idea of a **self** or **ego**, then there is the fear of losing “it.”

<sup>27</sup> On latent tendencies, see *Anusaya* = SD 13.3.

<sup>28</sup> See *Saṅkhāra* = SD 27.4.

<sup>29</sup> On the 3 trainings, see *Sīla samādhi paññā* = SD 21.6.

<sup>30</sup> See eg *Anatta Lakkhaṇa S* (S 22.59/3:66-68) = SD 1.2.

<sup>31</sup> See *The body in Buddhism* = SD 29.6a.

<sup>32</sup> See *Self and selves* = SD 26.9.

<sup>33</sup> On “mental proliferation” (*papañca*), see *Madhu,piṇḍika S* (M 18) = SD 6.14 (2); see also *Atammayatā* = SD 19.13.

<sup>34</sup> See *The person in Buddhism* = SD 29.6b.

<sup>35</sup> See Harvey 2007:331-337.

- (5) The adult person then thinks in terms of being and non-being,<sup>36</sup> of **life and death** (opposites): life is desirable, death is feared (as loss).

Such a person goes on to harbour the notion, albeit vaguely, that there must be something permanent amidst the impermanence that surrounds him. This false notion is reified into a powerful belief by religions that centre around the God-idea where truth is defined by a select group. Such a system provides the comfort of a herd led by shepherd, but there is practically no place for individual search for personal realization.

In the **Anatta,lakkhaṇa Sutta** (S 22.59), the Buddha explains that since everything (*sabba*)—form (including the senses and the universe), feeling, perception, formations and consciousness—is impermanent, there is no place for any notion of an abiding self (*attā*):

Now, what do you think, bhikshus, is **form** (feeling | perception | formations | consciousness) permanent or impermanent?”

“Impermanent, bhante.”

“Is what is impermanent unsatisfactory or satisfactory?”<sup>37</sup>

“Unsatisfactory bhante.”

“Is what is impermanent, unsatisfactory and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine, this I am, this is my self.’?”<sup>38</sup>

“No, bhante.”

(S 22.59/3:66-68)<sup>39</sup>

Seeing thus, the noble wise disciple is revulsed with the five aggregates, with all existence, physical and mental. Through such revulsion, he becomes free of defiling passions. Through dispassion, his mind is liberated, and realizes that he has destroyed suffering.

## SD 2.16(5)

## (Vaccha,gotta) Ānanda Sutta

The Discourse to (Vaccha,gotta and) Ānanda | S 44.10/4:400 f  
also called **Atth’attā Sutta**, the Discourse on the Existence of the Soul

S 4.10.1.10 = Saṃyutta Nikāya 4, Saḷāyatana Vagga 10, Avyāktata Saṃyutta 1, Avyākata Vagga 10

Theme: The Buddha’s answer to one who is unready to understand

**2** Then the wanderer Vaccha,gotta approached the Blessed One and exchanged greetings with one another. When they had concluded their greetings and cordial talk, he sat down at one side.

**3** Sitting thus at one side, he said this to the Blessed One:

“How is it, master Gotama, is there a self (*attā*)?”

When this was said, the Blessed One remained silent.

“Then, master Gotama, is there no self?”

A second time, the Blessed One remained silent.

Then the wanderer Vacchagotta rose from his seat and departed.

**4** Then, not long after the wanderer Vacchagotta had left, the venerable Ānanda said this to the Blessed One:

“Why is it, bhante, that when the Blessed One was asked a question by the wanderer Vacchagotta, he did not answer it?”

<sup>36</sup> “Being and non-being,” ie in terms of existence and non-existence, or is and is not. See **Kaccāna,gotta S** (S 12.15/2:16) & SD 6.13(1).

<sup>37</sup> *Dukkham vā sukham vā*, lit “suffering or happiness?”

<sup>38</sup> The notion “This is mine” arises through craving (*taṇhā*); the notion “This I am” arises through conceit (*māna*); the notion “This is my self” arises through views (*diṭṭhi*). See Peter Harvey, *The Selfless Mind*, 1995:32 f.

<sup>39</sup> See SD 1.2.

5 “If I, Ānanda, when asked by the wanderer Vacchagotta, ‘Is there a self?’ were to answer, ‘There is a self,’ this would be siding with those ascetics and brahmins who are **eternalists** [who believe that the self or soul survive death].

6 And if I, Ānanda, when asked by the wanderer Vacchagotta, ‘Is there no self?’ were to answer, ‘There is no self,’ [401] this would be siding with those ascetics and brahmins who are **annihilationists** [who believe that there is no afterlife].

7 If I, Ānanda, when asked by the wanderer Vacchagotta, ‘Is there a self?’ were to answer, ‘There is a self,’ would my (reply) be conducive to the arising of knowledge<sup>40</sup> that ‘all things are non-self?’  
“Certainly not, bhante!”

8 “If I, Ānanda, when asked by the wanderer Vacchagotta, ‘Is there no self?’ were to answer, ‘There is no self,’ the wanderer, already confused, would become even more confused, thinking, ‘It seems that formerly I had a self but now it does not exist!’”

— evaṃ —

### 5a. Comments

It is evident from the Buddha’s closing remark that Vacchagotta held the view that there was a self and that he was not ready to see the truth of non-self. Bhikkhu Bodhi makes this important note:<sup>41</sup>

We should carefully heed the two reasons the Buddha does not declare, “There is no self”; not because he recognizes a transcendent self of some kind (as some interpreters allege), or because he is concerned only with delineating “a strategy of perception” devoid of ontological implications (as others hold), but (i) because such a mode of expression was used by the annihilationists, and the Buddha wanted to avoid aligning his teaching with theirs; and (ii) because he wished to avoid causing confusion in those already attached to the idea of self. The Buddha declares that “all phenomena are non-self” (*sabbe dhammā anattā*), which means that if one seeks a self anywhere one will not find one. Since “all phenomena” includes both the conditioned and the unconditioned, this precludes an utterly transcendent, ineffable self. (S:B 1457 n385)

## 6 Reflections on non-self

Here are some methods of reflecting on the nature of non-self based on the suttas applied to our own times:

(1) **A chariot (or car or computer).** When you take a computer apart, where is the computer? When you properly assemble the parts together again, it works as a computer. Moreover, from the first computer ever invented to the modern computer, so much has changed in the definition of what a computer is. As such, there is no permanent and unchanging entity called “the computer” or “mother of computers.”

(2) **A forest.** When a great number of trees grow close together in the same general area, we have a forest. But, can we say how many trees make a forest? Or, after removing how many trees, do we still have a forest? Or, if the trees were well-spaced apart, do we still have a forest? A single tree is not a forest; yet, apart from the individual trees, there is no forest.

(3) **A distant star.** We know that the twinkling stars in the sky are many light-years away. We also know that light, albeit fast-moving, takes time to travel. Since these stars are so far away, we only see their lights or images (which after all are energy) but in reality all these stars have either evolved or died out. So, we are looking at something which is not there!

(4) **A mirage.** The illusion of a self is best illustrated by the simile of a mirage. A mirage is not mere imagination. In a mirage, there is real light arriving in our eyes. There is an image at the back of our eyes.

<sup>40</sup> “Would my reply be conducive to the arising of knowledge...” *api nu me taṃ anulomaṃ abhaviṣṣa ñāṇassa upādāya...* See S:B 1456 n384.

<sup>41</sup> For further discussion, see Harvey 1995:28-33.

The point is that the mind misinterprets what we are seeing and gives it a label it does not deserve. [In fact, the images we have in our eyes right now are inverted, but our minds adjusts them “right” side up!]

## 7 Proof of non-self

**7.1 THE CHARIOT.** In the analogy of the chariot (Miln 26 f), Nāgasena shows that the self is only a conventional term without any reality of its own. Just as the axle, wheel or chariot body cannot be called “chariot,” so also the eye, ear, or tongue cannot be called the self. In current terms, one could use the analogy of a “car” or a “computer.” It is when the various parts are put together that it is called a “chariot,” “car” or “computer.” So also when the component parts of the body come together that the notion or illusion of “self” arises. But all these are impermanent and fleeting states: no permanent or abiding “soul” is there to be found anywhere.<sup>42</sup>

That there is no self or soul within oneself is proven by the fact that one cannot command any part of the body in the following three instances, namely,

“Let it (the eye | the ear | the nose | the tongue | the body | the mind), when arisen, not come to a stop” or

“Let it, when already come to stop, not age” or

“Let it, when already reached ageing, not dissolve.”<sup>43</sup> (Vbh 48)

It is the lack of this mastery that it is non-self for the following four reasons: because it is void, because it has no owner, because it cannot be done with as one wants, and because it denies the self (ibid; cf MA 2:113).

**7.2 A SELF OUTSIDE OF THE AGGREGATES?** Some people try to argue that the Buddha only taught that form, feelings, perception, mental formations and consciousness are non-self; but he does not say that there is no self at all in man or anywhere else, apart from these five aggregates (*pañca-k,khandha*). This view is untenable for two reasons.

The first reason is that, according to the Buddha’s teaching, a being is composed only of the five aggregates, and nothing more. The second reason is that the Buddha denies categorically in several places, the existence of any *ātman* or abiding soul or eternal self within man or without, or anywhere else in the universe.

**7.3 THE TOTALITY FORMULA.** The Buddha’s unequivocal statement on the fact that there is no abiding entity or pervasive essence within or without the five aggregates is found in the totality formula, which famously runs thus:

Therefore, bhikshus, any kind of **⟨form | feeling | perception | formations | consciousness⟩** whatsoever, whether past, future or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near—all **⟨forms | feelings | perceptions | formations | consciousnesses⟩** should be seen as they really are with right wisdom thus:

“This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.”<sup>44</sup> (S 22.59/3:66-68 = V 1:33 f) = SD 1.2

<sup>42</sup> For further discussion, see Harvey 1995:34-38.

<sup>43</sup> *Etaṃ uppannaṃ ṭhitaṃ mā pāpuṇatu, ṭhāna-p,patta mā jiratu, jara-p,pataṃ mā bhijjatu*; cf Vism 640.

<sup>44</sup> *N’etaṃ mama, n’eso ’ham asmī, 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 Hatthi, padopama S** (M 28/1:184-191 §§6b-7, 11b-12, 16b-17, 21b-22). These 3 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, lakkhaṇa S** (S 22.59-12-16/3:68), the formula is applied to the 5 aggregates & in **Parileyya S** (S 22.81/3:94-99) to the 4 primary elements. See also **Rāhula S** (A 4.177/2:164 f). See **Parileyya S**, SD 6.16 (5).

This comprehensive “classification” of the 5 aggregates is explained in detail in **the Vibhaṅga** and briefly in the Visuddhi,magga, thus:

- “**internal**” = physical sense-organs (or in oneself);
- “**external**” = physical sense-objects (in other people, things, etc);
- “**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).<sup>45</sup>

Paraphrased, this means that there is abiding self or soul within our own body or outside of it (internal/external); whether experienced through the physical senses or as a mental state, nor in any of the four primary elements (gross/subtle); whether in our pleasant sense-experiences or our unpleasant ones, or in the sense-world or in the form and formless worlds (inferior/superior); whether distant/microscopic or nearby within normal sense-range (far/near).

## 8 All dharmas are non-self

A clear example of the Buddha’s categorical denial of the existence of the self or soul is found in verses 277, 278 and 279 of the Dhammapada:

All conditioned things are impermanent	<i>sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā</i>	
All conditioned things are unsatisfactory	<i>sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā</i>	
All dharmas (principles) are non-self	<i>sabbe dhammā anattā.</i>	(Dh 277a, 278a, 279a)

Note that in the first two verses, the term *saṅkhārā* (“conditioned things”) is used; in the third, the word *dhammā* (“things”) is used. The first term, *saṅkhāra*, denotes the five aggregates, all conditioned, interdependent, relative things and states, both physical and mental. The term *dhamma* covers a much wider scope than *saṅkhāra*. In fact, there is no term in Buddhist terminology wider than **dhamma** (Skt *dharma*). Therefore, it is clear that, according to this statement—“All things (*dhammā*) are non-self”—there is no self, not only in the five aggregates, but nowhere else too outside them or apart from them.

However, it is important to note here that there is *no* mention that nirvana “is included under *dhamma*,” nor even that “nirvana is not self.” The interesting point here is that nirvana is *neither* self *nor* not-self, since it is not a category, and cannot be predicated. In fact, *dhamma* here has the sense of “principle” or the nature of things.<sup>46</sup>

## 9 Rebirth and non-self

It is a common notion amongst adherents of the Theravāda Abhidhamma tradition that we exist on only a “**moment to moment**” basis. We are but a series of mental events that rush by so fast that they are almost unnoticeable. All things really start from and exist on only one thought at a time like a rotating **wheel** that touches the flat plane at the tangent. Or, a movie film strip that gives one the impression of movement and emotions on the screen when we are actually only looking at one frame at a time at high speed and our mind fills in the rest!

<sup>45</sup> See S 22.48/3:47. “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).

<sup>46</sup> See **Dhamma,niyāma S** (A 3.134/1:285) = SD 26.8. See also **Unanswered questions** = SD 40a.10.

Just as death is only a thought moment, so is birth and rebirth. Many people, however, take the process of rebirth quite literally, that is, as one person becoming another. In a way this notion is true, but not completely true; for one has mistaken a momentary manifestation or event to be a “fixed” existence.<sup>47</sup>

## 10 Two kinds of language

Let us take the analogy of **electricity**, which is very apt, for it exists in the form of a circuit like sam-sara or cyclic existence. Now, when we connect a bulb to the circuit, we get light. When the current passes through a coiled wire (solenoid), electro-magnetism results. If a heating element is connected we can boil water. We can also produce cold, movement, sound, pictures, etc with electricity. But all these are only temporary manifestations based on the ever-moving current of electricity. Which of these manifestations is the “true” one? Such a question is said to be “wrongly put,” that is, it does not have an answer that either logical or meaningful.

There are two kinds of languages: the conventional (worldly) and the ultimate (Dharma). In conventional terms, we say that someone is born of a mother. But in Dharma language, birth is really the arising of the notion of the ego, the “I” resulting from ignorance, craving, clinging, etc. This is clearly explained by the Buddha in the doctrine of dependent arising.<sup>48</sup>

## 11 Uses of the self<sup>49</sup>

The Buddhist rejection of “I” is not a rejection of the convenient designation, the name or term “I.” It is the rejection that the “I” stands for a substantial, permanent and unchanging entity. In his analysis of the non-self doctrine in a book entitled *Selfless Persons* (1982:71-78), **Steve Collins** discusses 3 important ways of talking about the “self” (*attā*):

**11.1 AS REFLEXIVE PRONOUN (NARRATIVE IN DAILY LIFE).** *Attā* is a regular reflexive pronoun in Pali, used in the masculine singular for all numbers and genders, as in “we restrain ourselves” and “she enjoys herself.” Here are some canonical expressions of *atta* used in a reflexive sense:

<i>suddham attānaṃ pariharati,</i>	he keeps himself pure (A 1:148 f, 4:109 f; DhsA 128)
<i>parisuddha,kāya,kammantatam</i>	
<i>attani sampassamāno,</i>	sees in himself complete purity of bodily conduct (M 1:17)
<i>attā’nuvāda,</i>	self-reproach
<i>atta,vetana,</i>	supporting oneself
<i>attā,dhīna,</i>	master of himself, independent, free (used of a liberated slave)
<i>khem’atta,</i>	at peace with himself, tranquil
<i>rakkhit’atta,</i>	self-guarded, prudent
<i>pahit’atta,</i>	self-willed, resolute

Many other such examples can be found in the *Critical Pali Dictionary* and the PTS *Pali-English Dictionary* under *attā* and its uses in compounds.<sup>50</sup>

**11.2 AS RELIGIOUS EXHORTATION (CHARACTER DESCRIPTION AND AS A TEACHING).** The second usage of *attā* is found in context of spiritual education, where for various reasons concentration on oneself, either as the instigator of religious progress or as a particular character type, is the focus of interest.

In a much quoted passage, the Buddha tells some young men searching for a runaway courtesan that they would be better occupied “searching for yourselves” (*attānaṃ gaveseyyātha*, V 1:22).

<i>so karohi dīpaṃ attano,</i>	make an island unto yourself (D 2:100; S 3:43; Dh 236, 238, etc)
<i>attā hi attano nātho,</i>	the self is the lord of self; you are your own master (Dh 160, 380)
<i>attān’upekhī,</i>	watching oneself (A 3:133 f)

<sup>47</sup> For further discussion, see “How does rebirth occur without a soul?” at SD 18.11 (3.1)

<sup>48</sup> See **Titth’āyatana S** (A 3.61/1:173-177) = SD 6.8; also *The Buddha’s Teaching*, ch 22; also Bucknell & Stuart-Fox, *The Twilight Language*, London: Curzon, 1986: 82 f.

<sup>49</sup> See Steven Collins, *Selfless Persons*, Cambridge University Press, 1982: section 2.2.

<sup>50</sup> For other examples, see Collins’ *Selfless Persons* (1982:75 f), where he gives *atta* the sense of “conscience.”

<i>atta, gutta,</i>	self-guarded (S 5:169; A 2:27 f, 3:6; Dh 379 etc)
<i>bhāvit'atta,</i>	self-developed (A 4:26)
<i>att'aññū,</i>	know oneself (D3:252; A 4:113)
<i>sādhukaṃ attanā va attānaṃ paccavekkhanti,</i>	the practice of strict self-examination (A 1:53)
<i>attanā va attānaṃ sañjānāmi,</i>	by the self I know the self (M 1:8)

**11.3 AS THEORETICAL CONSTRUCT (REJECTION OF SELF-NOTION).** Here a particular use of the term *attā* is rejected, giving the essential clue to the kind of thought and discourse that refers to the denial of self, the doctrine of *anattā*. It is static, unalterable dogma which posits a permanent and reincarnating self or person which is the object of Buddhist censure.

<i>atta, vāda,</i>	the doctrine of self (D 3:230, S 2:185; A 3:447, etc) <sup>51</sup>
<i>attā'nudīṭṭhi,</i>	speculation about the [or “a”] self (D 2:22; S 3:185; A 3:447, etc).

## 12 Non-self is a “self” without boundaries

In early Buddhism, the path leading to arhathood is sometimes presented as one of self-reliance (*atta, -vihāra*), that is, the building up of an “inner centre of calm,”<sup>52</sup> as seen in this quote from the opening of **the Cakkavatti Sihanāda Sutta** (D 26):

“Bhikshus, **dwelt with yourself as an island**, with yourself as refuge, with no other refuge—dwell with the Dharma as an island, with the Dharma as refuge, with no other refuge.<sup>53</sup>

And how does a monk dwell with himself as an island, with himself as refuge, with no other refuge. And how, bhikshus, does a monk dwell with the Dharma as an island, with the Dharma as refuge, with no other refuge?

Here,<sup>54</sup> bhikshus, a monk, having put away covetousness and displeasure in the world,

(1) dwells exertive, fully aware, mindful, observing body in the body.<sup>55</sup>

(2) ...dwells exertive, fully aware, mindful observing feelings in the feelings.

(3) ...dwells exertive, fully aware, mindful, observing mind in the mind.

(4) ...dwells exertive, fully aware, mindful, observing dharmas in the dharmas.

That, bhikshus, is how a monk dwell with himself as an island, with himself as refuge, with no other refuge—dwell with the Dharma as an island, with the Dharma as refuge, with no other refuge.

Bhikshus, those who now in my time or after me, would dwell with himself as an island, with himself as refuge, with no other refuge; dwell with the Dharma as an island, with the Dharma as

<sup>51</sup> Also *Buddhist Dictionary*, pp 184- 185.

<sup>52</sup> See for example Harvey 1995:54-63.

<sup>53</sup> *Tasmā-t-ih'Ānanda attā, dīpā viharatha attā, saraṇā anañña, saraṇā, dhamma, dīpā dhamma, saraṇā anañña, -saraṇā* (D 16.2.26/2:100 = 26.1/3:58, 26.27/77; S 22.43/3:42, 47.9/5:154, 47.13/5:163, 47.14/5:164): many of them at different venues and to interlocutors. On the tr of *dīpa* here as “island” or as “lamp” & discussion, see **Intro (6a)** above.

<sup>54</sup> As at §2.12. This well known passage is from **Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna S** (D 22.1/2:290) and **Satipaṭṭhāna S** (M 10.3/ 1:55). At §2.12 this passage defines “how a monk is mindful.” See nn there.

<sup>55</sup> “Observing body in the body,” “observing feelings in the feelings,” “observing mind in the mind,” and “observing dharmas in the dharmas.” In each case, they are not to be seen as “This is mine” (*etam mama*) (which arises through craving, *taṇhā*), or as “This I am” (*eso 'ham asmi*) (due to conceit, *māna*), or as “This is my self” (*eso me attā*) (due to wrong view, *diṭṭhi*) (**Anattā, lakkhaṇa S**, S 3:68) = SD 1.2. These three are also known as “latent tendencies to ‘I’-making, ‘mine’-making and conceit” (*ahaṅ, kāra, mamaṅ, kāra mānānusaya*) (M 22.15, 72.15, 112.11 20, S 2:75, 3:236, 4:41, A 1:132, 133). They are called the three obsessions (*gāha*) and are the main factors behind conception (M 1) and mental proliferation (*papañca*) (M 18). In short, such experiences are not “beliefs” but direct experiences of reality. See Bodhi 1980:8-11; Harvey 1995:32 f.; Gethin 2001:158.

refuge, with no other refuge—they become the highest,<sup>56</sup> but, bhikshus, they must be those who desire to learn [who have desire for training].<sup>57</sup>

Keep to the pasture, bhikshus, the haunt [range] of our ancestors [fathers].<sup>58</sup> Keeping to your pastures, the haunt of our ancestors, Māra will not find access to you [not descend upon you], Māra will not find<sup>59</sup> you as an object of his consciousness.<sup>60</sup> Bhikshus, it is on account of undertaking wholesome mental states that this merit thus grows. (D 26.1/3:58) = SD 36.10

Proper meditation makes one an island above the waters of the ocean of suffering. When the defiling waters of suffering recede or dry up, all the islands are actually of the one and same continent. As such, it is our own mental defilements that make us see ourselves as being different from others or look for differences where none exist.

A good example of a practical approach to non-self is the cultivation of the divine abodes (*brahma, -vihāra*). All the four cultivations—of lovingkindness, of compassion, of altruistic joy and of equanimity—are only fulfilled when one has “broken the barrier” between self and other (Vism 9.40; cf KhpA 248). In fact, all the preliminary stages of this practice lead to this “universalizing” stage of regarding others as one would oneself.

### 13 The “great self”

In the **Iti,vuttaka**, a collection of teachings made by the laywoman Khujj’uttarā<sup>61</sup>, one who practises the holy life (*brahma, cariya*)—the practice of moral virtue, mental cultivation and spiritual insight—is called a “great soul” (*mah’attā*, Skt *mahātmā*). In this case, a popular non-Buddhist term *mahātmā* is used to describe an advanced Buddhist practitioner.<sup>62</sup>

## SD 2.16(13)

## Na Kuhana Sutta 1

**Paṭhama Na Kuhana Sutta** The First Discourse on “Not Deceiving” | **It 35/28 f**  
Traditional: It 2.1.8 Khuddaka Nikāya, Itivuttaka 2, Duka Nipāta 1, Paṭhama Vagga 8  
Theme: The spiritual life is not for deceiving others

1 I heard this spoken by the Blessed One, spoken by the arhat:

2 Bhikshus, this holy life is lived not for the sake of deceiving people, not for the sake of cheating people, not for the sake of profit, gain, honour, or fame, not with the thought, “May the people know me so!”

3 This holy life, bhikshus, is lived for the sake of restraint and letting go.

<sup>56</sup> “The highest,” *tama-t-agge* (“the highest”). Bodhi notes that the words are not found in the fragments of the Turfan Skt version, but the Tib and Chin parallels, probably based on Skt texts, point to a meaning as “the highest” (S:B 1921 n143). See also Vajira & Story n20.

<sup>57</sup> This whole section up to this point is in **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16.2.6/2:101) = SD 9, but hereafter has instead: “Ānanda, those who now in my time or after me, would dwell with himself as an island, with himself as refuge, with no other refuge; dwell with the Dharma as an island, with the Dharma as refuge, with no other refuge—they become the highest,<sup>57</sup> but, Ānanda, they must be those who desire to learn [who have desire for training] (*ye keci sikkhā,kāmā ti*).”: see D 2:101/3:58, 77; S 3:42, 5:154, 163, 164.

<sup>58</sup> *Gocare bhikkhave, caratha sake pettike visaye*. Here the Buddha is adapting brahmanical language, referring back to the 4 focusses of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*), “Do not stray away from the focusses of mindfulness, the way of the Buddhas.” *Pettika* means “departed ones,” but here refers to the past Buddhas.

<sup>59</sup> “Will not find” (*lacchati*), fut of *labhati* (“he gains, finds”).

<sup>60</sup> *Na lacchati māro otāram, na lacchati māro ārammaṇam. Otāra* = BHS *avatāra*, “descent.” Here, *ārammaṇa* (canonical sense) means “basis (of consciousness); in the later comy sense, it mean “meditation object.”

<sup>61</sup> Khujj’uttarā, “Uttarā the Hunchback,” a laywoman streamwinner, declared the foremost of laywomen who is learned (*bahu-s,suta*) in the Dharma (A 1:26; DhA 1:208 ff; ItA 23 f.; PmA 498 f).

<sup>62</sup> Cf the Buddha’s usage of *brāhmaṇa* to describe a true Saint, Dh ch 26.

4 The Blessed One spoke on this matter. In this connection, he said this:

5 For the sake of restraint and letting go,  
A holy life not based on hearsay<sup>63</sup>;  
The Blessed One taught  
The path leading to one's plunging into nirvana.  
This is the way of the great souls,<sup>64</sup>

6 The great seers who have followed (this path)—  
They who practise it  
Just as the Buddha has taught it  
Will make an end of suffering—  
The doers of the Teacher's Teaching.

7 This is the meaning of what was spoken by the Blessed One: thus I have heard.

— evaṃ —

## 14 Advantage of the “great self”

The idea of a “great self” is explained in some detail in **the Loṇa,phala Sutta** (A 3.99). The doer of a minor evil deed might experience karmic pains in hell for it, but the same minor evil deed done by another might only bear its fruit in this life and not beyond.

The first kind of person is “of undeveloped body,<sup>65</sup> undeveloped virtue, undeveloped mind, undeveloped wisdom: he is (mentally) limited (*paritta*), having a small self (*app'ātuma*),<sup>66</sup> dwelling with little suffering” (*appa,dukkha,vihārī*).

The second kind of person is “of developed body, developed virtue, developed mind, developed wisdom, he is (mentally) unlimited (*aparitta*), having a great self (*mah'attā*), dwelling immeasurable (*appamāna*).”<sup>67</sup>

The contrast between the two is given by the parable of the grain of salt. A grain of salt put into a cup of water and makes it salty and undrinkable. But the same amount of salt when thrown into the Ganges river does not make it salty nor undrinkable.

A person with a “great self” might still do a small evil action that brings karmic result but he neither experiences its karmic fruits in hell nor in any of the lower states. In other words, this refers to a stream-winner, or a once-returner, or a non-returner. But an arhat has already transcended rebirth.

One can transform the “small” self into a “great” one through such practices as the cultivation of lovingkindness (*mettā*) or of mindfulness (*sati*). The importance of the cultivation of lovingkindness is attested by **the (Karaja,kāya) Brahma,vihāra Sutta** (A 10.208),<sup>68</sup> where a meditator whose mind has “grown great” and “immeasurable” through lovingkindness knows:

<sup>63</sup> “not based on hearsay,” *anītiha*, that is, self-realized and not handed down from others (cf Sn 934).

<sup>64</sup> “Great souls,” *mah'attā*, or “great selves,” ie those who are selfless or have realized not-self. See Harvey 1995:56 f.

<sup>65</sup> “Of undeveloped body,” *abhavita, kāya*. The explanation to this term and *bhavita,kāya* (“developed body”) is found in Mahā Saccaka S (M 36) where Saccaka initially identifies *kāya,bhāvanā* (“development of body”) as “self-mortification” (M 36.4/1:237). Comy explains that the Buddha takes “development of body” to mean “cultivation of insight” (*vipassanā bhāvanā*) and “development of mind” to be “cultivation of calmness” (*samatha bhāvanā*) (MA 2:285). Considering the bifurcation of meditation into “insight” and “calmness” is not canonical, we might take the term *abhavita,kāya* to simply mean “torturing the body” or “not taking proper care of one's health” and that *bhavita,kāya* to mean “keeping oneself physically healthy.”

<sup>66</sup> “Small self” (*app'ātumā*) or “insignificant self” (Harvey 1995:56).

<sup>67</sup> A 3.99/1:249-253 = SD 3.5.

<sup>68</sup> See **(Karaja,kāya) Brahma,vihāra S** (A 10.208) = SD 2.10.

Formerly my mind was limited (*paritta*) and undeveloped, but now my mind is boundless and well developed. Any karma done in a limited way<sup>69</sup> neither remains nor persists there.

(A 10.208/5:299)

Instructions in the practice of mindfulness with an immeasurable mind is given in the Mahā Taṇha,saṅkhaya Sutta (M 38), where it is stated that one who feels neither attraction nor repulsion for any of the six sense-objects, and who has mindfulness of the body, lives “with a mind that is immeasurable (*appamāṇa, cetaso*),” in contrast to someone with the opposite qualities who dwells “with a mind that is limited (*paritta, cetaso*)” (M 38.40/1:270).

## 15 Key passages on non-self

**15.1 THE CHARACTERISTIC OF NON-SELF.** The Buddha’s second discourse, **the Anatta, Jakkhaṇa Sutta** (S 22.59) explains how one should correctly regard the five aggregates, a practice centering around the *anicca-dukkha-anattā* formula:

“Therefore, bhikshus,  
any kind of form...  
any kind of feeling...  
any kind of perception...  
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 near<sup>70</sup>—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.’”<sup>71</sup> (S 22.59.17-21/3:68) = SD 1.2

The unawakened ordinary person, on the other hand, 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.

**15.2 TWENTY VIEWS REGARDING THE SELF.** **The Cūḷa Vedalla Sutta** (M 44) and **the Nakula, pitā Sutta** (S 22.1) gives a set of twenty wrong views regarding the self, arising from (1-5) the belief to be identical with form, feeling, perception, formations, or consciousness; (6-10) to be contained in them; (11-15) to be independent of them; and (16-20) to be the owner of them, thus:

<sup>69</sup> “Karma done in a limited way,” or “limited karma,” *pamāṇa, kataṃ kammaṃ*, as in **Tevijja S** (D 1:251/13.77) & **Saṅkhadhama S** (S 4:322/42.8). AA here says that “limited karma” refers to sense-sphere karma (*kāmmāvaca-ra, kamma*),” and “unlimited karma” (*appamāṇa, kataṃ kammaṃ*) refers to form-sphere karma. It is called ‘unlimited’ because it is done by transcending the limit, for it is developed by way of specified, unspecified and directional pervasion.” SA on Saṅkhadhama S explains that “When (simple) lovingkindness is mentioned, this can be interpreted either as access concentration or absorption, but when it is qualified as ‘liberation of mind’ (*ceto, vimutti*) it definitely means absorption (*jhāna*).” The point is that if a person masters the “liberation of mind by lovingkindness” at the level of absorption, the karmic potential of this absorption attainment will take precedence over sense-sphere karma and will generate rebirth into the form realm. See *Vism* 309-311/9.49-58. (S:B 1149 n346; A:B 315 n73)

<sup>70</sup> See S 22.48/3:47. On this totality formula, see (7.3).

<sup>71</sup> *N’etaṃ mama, n’eso ’ham asmī, na mēso attā ti*. See (7.3) ad loc.

(1) Here, houselord, an ignorant ordinary person<sup>72</sup> who sees not the noble ones, unskilled in the way of the noble ones, untrained in the way of the noble ones,<sup>73</sup> who sees not the true persons and is unskilled in way of the true person,<sup>74</sup> untrained in the way of the true person

—regards form as self, or self as possessing form, or form as in self, or self as in form;<sup>75</sup>

—he lives obsessed by the notions, ‘I am form. Form is mine.’<sup>76</sup>

As he lives obsessed by these notions, that form changes and alters. With the change and alteration of form, there arise in him, sorrow, lamentation, [physical] pain, [mental] displeasure and despair.

(2) He regards feeling as self, or self as possessing feeling, or feeling as in self, or self as in feeling;

—he lives obsessed by the notions, ‘I am feeling. Feeling is mine.’...

(3) He regards perception as self, or self as possessing perception, or perception as in self, or self as in perception;

—he lives obsessed by the notions, ‘I am perception. Perception is mine.’...

(4) He regards formations as self, or self as possessing formations, or formations as in self, or self as in formations;

—he lives obsessed by the notions, ‘I am formations. Formations are mine.’...

(5) He regards consciousness as self, or self as possessing consciousness, or consciousness as in self, or self as in consciousness;

—he lives obsessed by the notions, ‘I am consciousness. Consciousness is mine.’

As he lives obsessed by these notions, that form changes and alters. With the change and alteration of form, there arise in him, sorrow, lamentation, [physical] pain, [mental] displeasure and despair. (S 22.1.12-16/3:3 f) = SD 5.4; see also M 44.7-8/1:300 = SD 40a.9

**15.3 SELF-VIEW.** 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.<sup>77</sup> 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*).<sup>78</sup> In the **Mahā Mālunkya,putta Sutta** (M 64) and the **Jhāna Sutta** (A 9.36), it is stated that

<sup>72</sup> “Ignorant ordinary person,” *assutava puthujjana*. See Intro (3).

<sup>73</sup> “The noble ones,” *ariya*, that is, Buddhas, Pratyeka Buddhas, and the saints of the path. See foll n.

<sup>74</sup> “True person,” *sappurisa*, also “virtuous person,” “ideal person,” “true individual.” The term usually refers to a Pratyeka Buddha or the saint (SA 2:251). In **Mūla,pariyāya S** (M 1.3/1:1), the Buddhas alone are regarded as the “noble ones” (MA 1:21, 24; Nc 76; DhsA 349). On a worldly level, virtuous disciples such as those who respect their parents are called “true persons” (AA 3:251). The qualities of a *sappurisa* are given at D 33.2.2(6)/3:252, 34.1.8(7)/3:283; M 113; A 7.64/4:113, 8:38/4:144 f & at M 110.14-24/3:23 f.

<sup>75</sup> The **Paṭisambhidā, magga** illustrates the 4 basic modes of the self-identity view in connection with form (*rūpa*) in this manner. One might wrongly regard form as self in the way that the flame of a burning oil-lamp 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 is in the flower. Or one might wrongly regard self as in form, as a jewel is in a casket (Pm 2.50, 74, 77, 90/1:144 f).

<sup>76</sup> Beginning here are the 20 types of self-identity (or personality) view (*sakkāya, diṭṭhi*), ie, the 4 views of self is each posited to each of the 5 aggregates constituting a self-identity (*sakkāya*): see **Sakkāya S** (S 22.105/3:159). Self-identity view is the very first of the **10 fetters**: self-identity view (*sakkāya, diṭṭhi*), spiritual doubt (*vicikicchā*), attachment to rituals and vows (*sīla-b, bata, parāmāsa*), sensual lust (*kāma, rāga*), aversion (*paṭigha*), greed for form existence (*rūpa, rāga*), greed for formless existence (*arūpa, rāga*), conceit (*māna*), restlessness (*uddhacca*), ignorance (*avijjā*) (S 5:61, A 5:13, Vbh 377). When the first 3 fetters are broken, one becomes a streamwinner. See Intro (4).

<sup>77</sup> M 1:300, 3:17 f; S 3:102; Dhs 182.

<sup>78</sup> 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.

Whatever there is in form, in feeling, in perception, in formations, in consciousness, he sees those states as impermanent...as non-self. He turns his mind away from those states and directs it to the deathless element...

If he persists in that,<sup>79</sup> 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 the destruction of the five lower fetters<sup>80</sup> [connected with the lower realms of existence], he is spontaneously reborn [becomes a non-returner, reborn in the Pure Abodes]<sup>81</sup> and there attain final nirvana, without ever returning from that world.

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

(M 64.10-15/1:436 f = A 9.36/4:422-424;<sup>82</sup> cf A 2:128 (×2), 130 (×2))

**15.4 TWENTY TYPES OF SELF-VIEW.** 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 regard any of the five aggregates (form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness) in these ways:

as the self, or

the self as possessing the aggregate, or

the aggregate as in the self, or

the self as in the aggregate.

(S 22.81/3:97 f) = SD 6.1; Dhs 1003

**The *Mahā Puṇṇama Sutta***<sup>83</sup> and **the *Cūḷa Vedalla Sutta***,<sup>84</sup> 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 these ways:<sup>85</sup>

(1) taking the form as self, just as a burning oil-lamp's flame is identical to the flame's colour;<sup>86</sup>

(2) taking self as possessing form, just as a tree possesses a shadow;

(3) taking form as in self, as the scent in the flower;<sup>87</sup> or

(4) taking self as in form, as a jewel in a casket.

These self-identity views have been abandoned by the streamwinner.

**15.5 SELF AND SUFFERING.** This excerpt on non-self, from **the *Alaggadūpama Sutta*** (M 22), summarizes our study of the subject, and is useful by way of reflection:

<sup>79</sup> *Etam santam etam paṇītam.*

<sup>80</sup> That is, the first 5 of the 10 fetters (*dasa, saṃyojanā*): the 10 fetters are: (1) Self-identity view (*sakkāya, diṭṭhi*), (2) spiritual doubt (*vicikicchā*), (3) attachment to rituals and vows (*sīla-b, bata, parāmāsa*), (4) sensual lust (*kāma, rāga*), (5) aversion (*paṭigha*), (6) lust for form existence (*rūpa, rāga*), (7) lust 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 ill will (*vyāpāda*). The first 5 are the lower fetters (*orambhāgiya*), and the rest, the higher fetters (*uddhambhāgiya*).

<sup>81</sup> 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 *Aka-ñiṭṭhā* ("Highest") (D 3:237, M 3:103, Vbh 425, Pug 42-46). It should be noted that one could become a non-returner in this world itself, and upon dying, be reborn in the Pure Abodes.

<sup>82</sup> **Jhāna S** contains an archer parable, not found in **Mahā Māluṅkyaputta S**.

<sup>83</sup> M 109.10/ 3:17 f = SD 17.11.

<sup>84</sup> M 44.7 f/1:300.

<sup>85</sup> Pm 2.50, 74, 77, 90/1:144 f.

<sup>86</sup> Cf Augustine's view that the soul is wholly present both in the entire body and in each part of it: [http://cco.cambridge.org/extract?id=cco0521650186\\_CCOL0521650186A011](http://cco.cambridge.org/extract?id=cco0521650186_CCOL0521650186A011).

<sup>87</sup> Cf Plotinus's view that the body was "in the soul," is permeated by it as air is by fire (Enneads 4): [http://classics.mit.edu/Plotinus/enneads.4\\_fourth.html](http://classics.mit.edu/Plotinus/enneads.4_fourth.html).

22 “Bhikshus, you may well take hold of that possession that is permanent, everlasting, eternal, unchanging in nature, that would endure eternally the same just like that.<sup>88</sup> But do you see any such possession, bhikshus?”

“No, bhante.”

“Good, bhikshus. I, too, do not see any possession that is permanent, everlasting, eternal, unchanging in nature, eternally the same, that would endure as long as eternity.

23 Bhikshus, you may well cling to **the self-theory**<sup>89</sup> that would not cause sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair to arise in one who clings to it.<sup>90</sup> But do you see any such possession, bhikshus?”

“No, bhante.”

“Good, bhikshus. I, too, do not see any doctrine of self that would not arouse sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair in one who clings to it.

24 Bhikshus, you may well rely on that support of views<sup>91</sup> that would not cause sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair to arise in one who relies on it. But do you see any such views, bhikshus?”

“No, bhante.”

“Good, bhikshus. I, too, do not see any support of views that would not arouse sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair in one who relies on it.<sup>92</sup>

25 Bhikshus, if there were a self, would there be for me what belongs to a self?”<sup>93</sup>

“Yes, bhante.”

“Or, if there were what belongs to a self, would there be for me a self?”

“Yes, bhante.”

“Bhikshus, since in truth and in fact, one can find neither self nor what belongs to a self, then this ground for views—’The self is the world: after death, I will be permanent, everlasting, eternal, unchanging in nature, eternally the same, I will endure eternally the same just like that’—would it not be a entirely and completely foolish teaching?”

“What else could it be, bhante, but an entirely and completely foolish teaching?”<sup>94</sup>

26 “Bhikshus, what do you think? Is **form** permanent or impermanent?”

“Impermanent, bhante.”

“Is what is impermanent painful or pleasurable?”

“Painful, bhante.”

<sup>88</sup> Cf “anxiety over the non-existent *externally*” at **Alagaddûpama S** (M 22.18/1:136) = SD 3.13.

<sup>89</sup> “You may well cling to a doctrine of the self,” (*atta,vād’upādānam upadiyetha*). For an alt tr (using “assumption” for *upādāna*), see Nyanaponika 1974:43 n27. On the difficulty of translating *atta,vād’upādānam upadiyetha*, see M:ÑB 2001:1197 n176. Clinging to a self-theory (*atta,vād’upādāna*) is one of the 4 clings, the first three being: (1) clinging to sensual pleasure (*kām’upādāna*), (2) clinging to views (*diṭṭh’upādāna*), and (3) clinging to mere rules and rites (*sīla-b,bat’upādāna*) (D 3:230, M 1:66, Vbh 375). 20 kinds of self-views (*sakkāya diṭṭhi*) are listed at Dhs 1214-17. See BDict: upādāna.

<sup>90</sup> Cf “anxiety over the non-existent *internally*” at **Alagaddûpama S** (M 22.20/1:136) = SD 3.13.

<sup>91</sup> “Support of views,” *diṭṭhi,nissaya*. Comy says this is the 62 wrong views mentioned in **Brahmajāla S** (D 1), that emerge from self-identity view, and including Ariṭṭha’s evil false view (§2). DA on Mahā Sati’paṭṭhāna S (D 2:292) and MA on Satipaṭṭhāna S (M 1:56) (both identical passages) mention 2 kinds of supports, viz craving as support (*tanhā,nissaya*) and views as support (*diṭṭhi,nissaya*).

<sup>92</sup> MA: In this section, a threefold emptiness is shown, ie referring to external possessions, self-theory and views as support.

<sup>93</sup> “What belongs to a self” (*attaniya*) applies to any of the 5 aggregates as well as external objects (all of which have no self). “This passage shows the mutual dependence, and thus equal untenability, of the twin notions “I” and “mine” (Nyanaponika 1974:44 n30; M:ÑB 2001:1211 n264).

<sup>94</sup> MA: Here a twofold emptiness is shown, ie that of the self (*atta*) and of the property of a self (*attanīya*). The 2 supplementary statements in this section suggest that the concepts of “I” and “mine: are inseparably linked, like the philosophical terms, substance (“fire”) and attribute (“hotness”). See Nyanaponika 1974:44 n30.

“Is what is impermanent, painful, and subject to change, fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine; this I am; this is my self?’?”

“No, bhante.”

“Bhikshus, ... Is **feeling** permanent or impermanent?”

“Bhikshus, ... Is **perception** permanent or impermanent?”

“Bhikshus, ... Are **formations** permanent or impermanent?”

“Bhikshus, ... Is **consciousness** permanent or impermanent?”

“Impermanent, bhante.”

“Is what is impermanent painful or pleasurable?”

“Painful, bhante.”

“Is what is impermanent, painful, and subject to change, fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine; this I am; this is my self?’?”

“No, bhante.”<sup>95</sup>

**27** Therefore, bhikshus, any kind of **form** whatever—whether past, future or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near<sup>96</sup>—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.’<sup>97</sup>

Any kind of **feeling** whatever...

Any kind of perception whatever...

Any kind of formations whatever...

Any kind of consciousness whatever—whether past, future or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near—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.’

**28** Seeing thus, bhikshus, a well-taught noble disciple becomes revulsed<sup>98</sup> with form, revulsed with feeling, revulsed with perception, revulsed with formations, revulsed with consciousness.

**29** Being (thus) revulsed, (his lust) fades away. Through the fading away (of lust) [that is, dispassion], (his mind) is liberated.

When it is liberated, there comes the knowledge: ‘It is liberated.’ He directly knows: ‘Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, done what had to be done, there is no more of this state of being.’ (M 22.22-29/1:137-139 = SD 3.13)

## 16 Non-self and emptiness

**16.1 THE AGGREGATES ARE NON-SELF.** The *Mahā Puṇṇama Sutta*<sup>99</sup> and the *Cūḷa Vedalla Sutta*,<sup>100</sup> 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 these ways:<sup>101</sup>

<sup>95</sup> Norman on this and the following section: “It is important to note that this answer can only be given by those who know, in advance, that the term *attā* is by definition *nicca* [permanent] and *sukha* [pleasant], and therefore anything which is *anicca* and *dukkha* cannot be *attā*. This gives us a clear indication of the type of *attā* that is being discussed. It is the Upanishadic idea of an *ātman* which is *nitya* and *sukha*, and this is in complete agreement with the fact... that some of the phraseology of the non-Buddhist view which is being rejected has Upanishadic echoes.” (Norman 1981:22)

<sup>96</sup> See S 22.48/3:47. On this *totality formula*, see (7.3).

<sup>97</sup> See *Anatta Lakkhaṇa S* (S 22.59/3:66-68) = SD 1.2.

<sup>98</sup> “He becomes revulsed” (*nibbindati*). MA: He is dissatisfied, disgusted. This revulsion marks the culmination of insight, just before the attainment of the supramundane path (Vism 722 f). “His lust fades away” marks the attainment of the supramundane path (*magga*), when the fetters are finally eliminated. “He is liberated” refers to the attainment of the supramundane fruition (*phala*). The arhat’s subsequent reviewing knowledge (*paccavekkhaṇa-nāṇa*) is shown by the phrase “there comes the knowledge” and “he understands: ‘Birth is destroyed...’” in the following paragraph.

- (1) taking the form as self, just as a burning oil-lamp's flame is identical to the flame's colour;<sup>102</sup>
- (2) taking self as possessing form, just as a tree possesses a shadow;
- (3) taking form as in self, as the scent in the flower;<sup>103</sup> or
- (4) taking self as in form, as a jewel in a casket.

These self-identity views have been abandoned by the streamwinner.

**16.2 THE FOURFOLD EMPTINESS.** Total mental liberation and freedom from cyclic existence (*sam-sāra*) can only be attained when one clearly understands the nature of conditioned existence. To do this one has to apply the three characteristics [1] to one's daily life and reflect on the four kinds of emptiness (*catu,koṭika suññatā*). In the **Āneñja Sappāya Sutta** (M 106), the Buddha speaks of these fourfold emptiness:

- (1) "I'm not in anything" (*nāham kvācini*);
- (2) "There is nothing of me in anything whatever" (*na kassaci kiñcana tasmim*);
- (3) "There is nothing whatever that is mine" (*na ca mama kvācini*); and
- (4) "There is nothing in anything" (*kismiñci kiñcana n'atthi*).

(M 2:263 f; A 1:206, 2:177; cf A 3:170)<sup>104</sup>

The Majjhima Commentary to this passage explains these fourfold emptiness as follows:

- (1) He does not see a self of his own anywhere;
- (2) He does not see a self of his own as something belonging to another, such as a brother, friend, supporter, etc;
- (3) He does not see the self of another;<sup>105</sup>
- (4) He does not see the self of another as something belonging to him.

(MA 4:63-65; VismA 840 f = MAṬ ad loc. See Vism:Ñ 21.53 n19; M:ÑB 1315 n1016)

**16.3 EMPTINESS.** The Mahāyāna, too, speaks of the fourfold emptiness (*śūnyatā*) which helps to illustrate right view:

(1) The emptiness of conditioned things. Anything that is conditioned depends on some other causes for its existence, eg pleasure, beauty and happiness. When those conditions are absent, the conditioned things disappear. This is the meaning of "I'm not in anything." The self or any abiding entity is not to be found in our conditioned world where nothing remains the same for even a moment.

(2) The emptiness of the unconditioned. This refers to nirvana, which is unconditioned. That is to say that in nirvana, one will find neither happiness nor sorrow, pleasure nor pain, beauty nor ugliness. Nirvana is even beyond space and time, but it exists! For that reason it is known as "unconditioned" and there is no accurate way of putting it into words. "There's nothing of me in anything whatever" means that the self is not to be found in all things (dharma), including nirvana.

(3) The great emptiness, that is, the voidness of nature itself. This is the unreality of space which is erroneously conceived by some as objectively real. The great emptiness swallows everything up both the conditioned and the unconditioned. It does not distinguish between the two, between subject and object,

<sup>99</sup> M 109.10/ 3:17 f = SD 17.11.

<sup>100</sup> M 44.7 f/1:300.

<sup>101</sup> Pm 2.50, 74, 77, 90/1:144 f.

<sup>102</sup> Cf Augustine's view that the soul is wholly present both in the entire body and in each part of it:

[http://cco.cambridge.org/extract?id=ccol0521650186\\_CCOL0521650186A011](http://cco.cambridge.org/extract?id=ccol0521650186_CCOL0521650186A011).

<sup>103</sup> Cf Plotinus's view that the body was "in the soul," is permeated by it as air is by fire (Enneads 4):

[http://classics.mit.edu/Plotinus/enneads.4\\_fourth.html](http://classics.mit.edu/Plotinus/enneads.4_fourth.html).

<sup>104</sup> Earlier on in the same sutra, the Buddha mentions, by way of summary, the twofold Emptiness (*dvi,koṭika suññatā*): (1) "Empty is this of self" (*suññā,m-idam attena*); (2) "(Empty of whatever as) belonging to the self" (*attāniyena*). Also at S 4:53, Pm 2:36; cf Nyanatiloka's *Path to Deliverance*, Bauddha Sahitya Sabha, 1969:180.

<sup>105</sup> I think it makes better sense if this sentence (3) is interchanged with the last sentence (4) *pace* Buddhaghosa.

or between what is real or unreal (which, after all, are dualities). “There is nothing whatever that is mine” means just that all things, conditioned or unconditioned have no owners.

(4) The emptiness of emptiness. This emptiness even removes the concept of emptiness itself. No word, even “emptiness” or “nirvana” can take you all the way because “There is nothing in anything.” In the end your own inexpressible (wordless and conceptless) vision will bring you to the Real. This is the highest level of spiritual experience.

## 17 Form is emptiness, emptiness form

On a simple level, we can say that there is no permanent entity or ego except the arising and passing away of physical and mental processes.<sup>106</sup> In other words, only *deeds* exist but not the doer; only *thinking* occurs, but there is no thinker. Thus, it is said in **the Visuddhi,magga**:

Only suffering exists, no sufferer is found;  
The deeds are, but no doer of the deeds is there;  
Nirvana is, but not the person who enters it;  
The Path exists, but no traveller is seen on it. (Vism 16.90/513)

Each of these four lines refers to the “emptiness” of the respective noble truth. **The Heart Sutra** put this in an even more dramatic way:

Form is here emptiness, emptiness is form...  
There is no suffering, no cause, no end, no path.

It is vital to note here that this is not mere clever philosophizing, but a Mahāyāna attempt to point to the ultimate truth of “no view.”<sup>107</sup> Before we can even have a taste of “no view,” we need to clear our present views! This is one of the key purposes of early Buddhist meditation: getting rid of the mental hindrances, all of which are rooted in some aspect of view.<sup>108</sup>

The field theories of modern science (pioneered by Einstein) have forced physicists and scientists to abandon the classical distinction between material particles (‘form’) and the void (‘emptiness’). As one scientist puts it:

The field exists always and everywhere; it can never be removed. It is the carrier of all material phenomena. It is the “void” out of which the proton creates the pi mesons. Being and fading of particles are merely forms of motion of the field.

(W Thirring quoted by F Capra in his *The Tao of Physics*, Shambala, 1975:222)

Capra adds:

Like the Eastern Void, the “physical vacuum” as it [empty space] is called in field theory is not a state of mere nothingness, but contains the potentiality for all forms of the particle world. These forms, in turn, are not independent physical entities but merely transient manifestations of the underlying Void. As the sutra says, ‘Form is emptiness, and emptiness is indeed form.’ (id)

## 18 Philosophical summary

**18.1 NO SELF WITHIN AND WITHOUT.** The Buddha applies the following analyses to indicate that the self is nowhere to be found either in the body or in the mind or anywhere else:

<sup>106</sup> On mind-moments, see **Raho,gata S** (S 36.11) = SD 33.6 Intro (2.4).

<sup>107</sup> See **The notion of *ditthi*** = SD 40a.1.

<sup>108</sup> **The 5 mental hindrances** (*pañca-k,khandha*) are sensual lust, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and remorse, and doubt. See **Nīvaraṇa** = SD 32.1.

### The self and the body

(1) The body is not the self. For if the body were the self, the self would be impermanent, subject to change, decay and destruction. If the body is the same as the self, then when the body dies, the self also dies.

(2) The self does not own the body. We can own a car or a television. We might even say that we “own” our body: after all, we do say this is “my” body. However, we do not really have much control over it. So ownership and control are two quite different things.

(3) The self does not exist in the body. If we examine our body from head to toe, we can nowhere locate a self. It is not in the brain, or the heart, or the bone, or hair, or saliva,

(4) The body does not exist in the self. For the body to exist in the self, the self would have to be found apart from the body and mind, but the self is nowhere to be found.

### The self and the mind

(5) The mind is not the self. Like the body, the mind is subject to constant change and is ever agitated like a monkey. The mind is happy one moment, sad the next. Hence, the mind is not the self since it is ever-changing.

(6) The self does not own the mind. The mind usually acts against our wishes: excited one moment, depressed the next. It pursues unwholesome thoughts and disregards wholesome ones. Hence, the self does not possess the mind because the mind acts on its own.

(7) The self does not exist in the mind. No matter how carefully we search the contents of our mind, feelings, ideas or inclinations, we do not find a self in the mind or the mental states.

(8) The mind does not exist in the self. Again, the self would have to exist apart from the mind and body, but such a self is nowhere to be found.

**18.2 BEYOND THINKING.** It is clear from what has been discussed thus far, that thinking is not a reliable indicator of whether or not there is a self. When the French philosopher, René Descartes, thought, “I think, therefore I am” (*cogito ergo sum*), he worked on the assumption that there is a self behind the thinker [3.1]. However, as Hamilton explains,

Unlike Descartes, the suggestion is, the Buddha did not fall into the trap of erroneously inferring the existence of a self from the activity of thinking. All one can know from the fact of thinking is that there is thinking: it is not that “one thinks,” but that “thinking is occurring.” (2000:136)

**18.3 THE PARABLE OF THE ONION.** We need to rise beyond thinking so that we can have an unbiased and direct look at true reality. To begin with, we can do this simple reflection of the “parable of the onion.” To look for a permanent entity within ourselves or anywhere else (in a being or in the universe itself) is like looking for the seed inside an onion.

One could go on peeling off the layers of onion skin and leaves, when one comes to the “centre,” one finds neither pit nor pith. One could go on peeling life’s onion and seeking for that permanent entity: one is only led ON and ON by false notion of the “I” in the middle of it. It is just an ONiON.

## 19 Benefits of knowing there is no enduring self

**19.1 MENTAL HEALTH.** Even with a simple understanding and acceptance of non-self, we can, at least on a mundane level, become more virtuous, more open, more comfortable, more creative people. When we cling to the notion of an abiding self, that we are “permanent souls,” we will be ever defending ourselves, our prestige, our ideas, our words, our actions, even when they are clearly wrong. But once we give up the notion of an unchanging and independent self, we will be able to relate to people and situations without fear, without favour, without paranoia.

**19.2 SPIRITUAL LIBERATION.** Most importantly, understanding non-self is the key to awakening. The belief in a self is synonymous with **ignorance**, the most basic of three unwholesome roots. As long as we grasp to the notion of a permanent, independent self, we create a schism, a dichotomy, between self

and other (people, things and views). Such a conceptual separation forces us to react to the people and things around us with either attraction (*anunaya*) or aversion (*paṭigha*). As such, the self-idea is the real culprit here that hinders liberation.

**19.3 POSSIBILITY OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH.** The fact that nothing here is permanent, that everything has no enduring self, means that in the final analysis we live from moment to moment. Every moment is an opportunity for us to turn to a new and better direction in life, to give up old negative habits and cultivate wholesome new ones. The constant reflection on impermanence, as taught in **the (Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25.1),<sup>109</sup> for example, keeps us on the right path of true reality. In this way, we will keep our life's priorities right, placing personal development first always, understanding that this is closely link with our wholesome connection with others and our environment. In this way, we will never fall into subhuman levels of pernicious greed, hate and delusion, but surely in this life itself attain to the path of awakening.<sup>110</sup>

In this connection, it is worthwhile recalling a witty observation by the Russian author and mystic, **Leo Tolstoy**, thus: "A man is like a fraction whose numerator is what he is and whose denominator is what he thinks of himself. The larger the denominator the smaller the fraction."<sup>111</sup>

## 20 Right view is "no view"

**20.1 WHERE IS THE PAIN?** Let us now spend a few moments doing a very simple but important exercise. Sit quietly and comfortably. Close your eyes and look within your body and mind.

Examine yourself this very moment. Are you happy? Or, worried? Or, simply pick on something you are feeling or thinking about right now. Can you locate or point out where that happiness or that worry or that thought, is?

No, because happiness, worry, etc, are feelings in the mind, not in the body. Without fail we will not locate any self anywhere within our body or mind, or anywhere else for that matter.

Similarly, **pain** is a feeling. It is in the mind. Do not own it. Just let it go!

There is no self, no soul, no essence apart from the ever-changing, impermanent, interdependent physical and mental factors of personal experience, such as feelings, ideas, habits and attitudes.<sup>112</sup>

**20.2 BEYOND VIEWS.** In the ultimate analysis, to hold a view, good or bad, is to grasp at a self. The awakened understands that to hold any view is to invite strife and dispute, since everyone is of a different level of understanding and do not see anything in the same way. A view has different understanding and meaning to different people. In short, even Right View is just a means to a higher end: spiritual liberation. For this reason, the Buddha declares in **the Alaggadûpamā Sutta**:

Bhikshus, having known the parable of the raft, you should abandon even the Teaching, how much more that which is not the Teaching!<sup>113</sup> (M 22.14/1:135)

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## Reading [For details, see under Bibliography]

- (1) Bodhi, Bhikkhu, "The true nature of existence," 2001(?).

<sup>109</sup> S 25.1/3:225 = SD 16.7.

<sup>110</sup> See **Entering the stream** = SD 3.3.

<sup>111</sup> In H Eves, *Return to Mathematical Circles*, Boston: Prindle, Weber and Schmidt, 1989.

<sup>112</sup> At this point, you should go on to read **Self and selves** = SD 26.9.

<sup>113</sup> *Dhammā pi vo pahātabbā pag'eva adhammā*. Comy takes *dhammā* here to mean "good states," ie calm and insight (*samatha, vipassanā*), citing **Laṭutikôpama S** (M 1:455 = 66.26-33) as an example of the teaching of the abandonment of attachment to calm, and **Mahā Tanhā,saṅkhaya S** (M 1:260 f = 38.14) as one of the abandonment of attachment to insight. Bodhi, however, is of the view that "*dhamma* here signifies not good states themselves, but the teachings, the correct attitude to which was delineated just above in the simile of the snake." (M:ÑB 1209 n255). See Introd.

- (2) Ajahn Brahmavamso, "Using Non-self to Let Go." 2002:17-28.
- (3) Buddhist Publication Society, *The Three Basic Facts of Existence: III. Egolessness*, 1974.
- (4) Steven Collins, *Selfless Persons: Imagery and Thought in Theravada Buddhism*, 1982.
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- (6) James Giles, *No Self To be Found: The search for personal identity*, 1997: ch 5 (Hume & Buddhism).
- (7) Sue Hamilton, *Identity and Experience: The constitution of the human being according to early Buddhism*. London: Luzac Oriental, 1996: 53-65 (ch 3), 91-96.
- (8) Peter Harvey, *The Selfless Mind*, 1995:19-53.
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- (15) W Penfield, *The Mystery of Mind*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975.
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- (19) W Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 1967: ch VIII.
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- (25) D W Shrader, "Atman, Anatta and Sunyata: Negation without Annihilation," 1991.
- (26) D W Shrader, "The logic beneath the caution," 1992.
- (27) Thanissaro Bhikkhu, "No-self or not-self?" [1996] rev 2001.
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- (29) J D Thomas, "The Bodhisattva as metaphor to Jung's concept of self," 1982:28-52.
- (30) Y Ueda, "The world and the individual in Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy," 1964:157-166.
- (31) B R van Oist, "Right Views or No Views?" 1990.
- (32) O H de A Wijesekera, "An aspect of Upaniṣadic Ātman and Buddhist 'Anattā'," 1994.

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