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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.¹ 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*).²

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 rejects all these views, for the simple reason that they are false and fabricated, and are of no use in the spiritual quest.³

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, lakkaṇa*). 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 4 noble truths, *anattā* is a “teaching peculiar to Buddhas” (*buddhāna samukkaṃsika desa-nā*, M 1:380). In his Commentary on the Vibhaṅga, Buddhaghosa says: “The characteristics of imperma-

¹ D 3:81-84.

² See Brhad-Āraṇyaka 3.7.2-23.

³ For the historical background of the Buddha’s times, see Harvey 2007:121-133.

nence 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),⁴ 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 is not (MA 1:113).

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, term, 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 (Vaccha,gotta) Ānanda Sutta** (S 44.10), where the Buddha remains silent, not answering Vaccha,gotta's asking the "10 questions," which include those concerning the soul.⁵ The Buddha rejects all notions and discussions 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 rendition⁶ 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.⁷

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 Alagaddūpama 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

⁴ M 148 @ SD 26.6.

⁵ 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.

⁶ 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.

⁷ If "non-self" as an adj sounds awkward to some, its sense should be taken as "bereft or any permanent entity."

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.”⁸ Elsewhere the Buddha says “O bhikshus, this idea that I may not be, I may not have, is frightening to the untutored ordinary person.” (MA 2:112)

3 Scientific proofs that there is no soul

3.1 PHILOSOPHICAL INSIGHTS

3.1.1 Self and language

3.1.1.1 The modern western notion of the self traces its roots to the ideas of the 17th-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”).⁹ This philosophical statement, until recently, 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,¹⁰ Neoplatonist and doctor¹¹ of the Roman Catholic Church, **Augustine of Hippo** (354-430)¹² 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.¹³

3.1.1.2 The Kaccā(ya)na Sutta (S 12.15) reminds us that the world tends to be caught in a narrow gap of the notions that a thing either exists or not exist. Caught in this unrelenting gap, the world is also used to the idea of a “thing” that either exists or not. It is this preconception that is the ghost in whole mechanical mind of the west—the eternal “I” or soul.

We often hold the simplistic notion that “I” exist simply because “I” am here, and we cling to our experience of ourselves as something physical, substantial and self-centred: “**I think, therefore I am,**” as Descartes puts it, which by the very same argument, means that the “I” is just as impermanent and unpredictable as our thoughts.

⁸ M 22,20/1:136 (SD 3.13).

⁹ *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*, est omnium prima & certissima, quæ cuilibet ordine philosophanti occurrat.” Traditionally, Descartes’s *cogito* used to be tr 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.

¹⁰ **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 3rd cent, based on the teachings of Plato and the earlier Platonists. Many early Christians (like Augustine) were profoundly influenced by Neoplatonism.

¹¹ **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.

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

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

Interestingly, the Latin quote, *cogito, ergo sum*, when rendered into Pali—*cintemîtyasmi*—but *cintemi* does not occur in the Nikāyas or even the Abhidhamma, but in Comys. *Maññāmi*, though rare, does occur in Pali (Sn 1049b, 1142d): perhaps we can tr the Latin as *maññe'tyasmi*, which however can also mean simply “I think I am.” The point here is that Pali does not have “self” that Descartes sees in his Latin. There is no ghost in the dynamic language of early Buddhism.

3.1.2 The best known critic of Descartes was the most famous of the British philosophers, **David Hume** (1711-1776).¹⁴ 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)¹⁵

3.1.3 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.

3.1.4 The question of personal identity then is a matter of characterizing the loose cohesion of one's personal experience.¹⁶ **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 misinter-

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

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

¹⁶ 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.

pretation, 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

3.2.1 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**,¹⁷ 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 memoandaries that return to them from the remote past, or they may hear old popular songs. (*Consciousness at the Crossroads*, 1999:26)¹⁸

3.2.2 The Anatta Lakkhaṇa Sutta (S 22.59) states a similar argument in connection with the 5 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.’¹⁹

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)²⁰

The 5 aggregates are what constitute our whole being, that is, our body (form) and mind (feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness).²¹ Churchland continues her philosophical arguments thus:

¹⁷ Professor of Philosophy at the Univ of California at San Diego.

¹⁸ See Zara Houshmand et al (eds), 1999.

¹⁹ This is the first argument against the self-notion, that is, the nature of the 5 aggregates are not subject to one’s control (*avasavattitā*), but they are all subject to illness [affliction], and as such cannot be our self.

²⁰ See SD 1.2.

²¹ 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 not “heaps” or “bundles” of factors occurring simultaneously, but are merely a classifying convention. Feeling,

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)²²

3.3 IF THERE IS NO SELF, WHAT IS THERE?

3.3.1 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 4 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.

3.3.2 As a set, *form* and these 4 mental aggregates are known as the "5 aggregates" (*pañca-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.²³

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

3.3.3 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.²⁶

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*).

²² See Zara Houshmand et al (eds), 1999.

²³ S 12.2,12/2:3 @ SD 5.11. See *Rūpa*, SD 17.2a (10).

²⁴ On the body's composition of "31 parts," see *Mahā Rāhu'ovāda S* (M 62,8-12/1:422 f), SD 3.11.

²⁵ See *Rūpa*, SD 17.2a.

²⁶ See *Vedanā*, SD 27.3.

3.3.4 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*.

3.3.5 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 *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).²⁷ While some such states are morally neutral, many are good or “wholesome” (*kusala*). The most characteristic of the “volitional activities” is, of course, volition (*cetanā*) itself, sometimes translated as “will,” and which is identified with karma (A 3:415).²⁸

3.3.6 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).

3.3.7 In normal sense-experience, consciousness is of 6 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.

3.3.8 Understandably, Buddhist training places great emphasis on the purifying (moral conduct), development (mental cultivation) and understanding (wisdom) of these 5 aggregates.²⁹ An underlying mindfulness or meditation practice is the reflection and understanding that we are nothing but these 5 aggregates, which are *impermanent*, and as such *unsatisfactory*, and being both, are therefore *non-self*.³⁰

The practitioner understands a “person” as a mere cluster of ever-changing physical and mental processes (*dhamma*).³¹ The wise practitioner is then able, in due course, to transcend the measuring conceptions of self and other,³² limit the proliferating of thoughts,³³ and finally see through even the

²⁷ On latent tendencies, see *Anusaya*, SD 13.3.

²⁸ See *Saṅkhāra*, SD 27.4.

²⁹ On the 3 trainings, see *Sīla samādhi paññā*, SD 21.6.

³⁰ See eg *Anatta Lakkhaṇa S* (S 22.59/3:66-68), SD 1.2.

³¹ See *The body in Buddhism*, SD 29.6a.

³² See *Self and selves*, SD 26.9.

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

conception of a “self” or “person.”³⁴ In this way, we abandon ignorance and craving, the roots of suffering.³⁵

4 How a self-notion develops

4.1 By way of developmental psychology, we can describe the evolution of a “**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.”
- (5) The adult person then thinks in terms of being and non-being,³⁶ 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.

4.2 In the **Anatta Lakkhaṇa Sutta** (S 22.59), the Buddha explains that since everything (*sabba*)—form (including the physical 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?”³⁷

“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.’?”³⁸

“No, bhante.”

(S 22.59/3:66-68)³⁹

Seeing thus, the noble wise disciple is revulsed with the 5 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.

³⁴ See **The person in Buddhism**, SD 29.6b.

³⁵ See Harvey 2007:331-337.

³⁶ “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).

³⁷ *Dukkhaṃ vā sukhaṃ vā*, lit “suffering or happiness?”

³⁸ 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.

³⁹ See SD 1.2.

4.3 Outside of the Buddha’s teaching, it is nearly impossible that people would ever realize that the answer to the universal problem of life lies not in seeking something permanent or eternal (there simply is none), but to see with the inner eye that this whole universe is impermanent. To exist is to change, there is meaning only in impermanence.

The nature of impermanent points to the fact that the present moment is the only reality that we have. The past is a memory, true and false (but mostly false, as we tend to edit or revise or review our memories as we mature). The future is our own projection based on past conditioning and present perceptions, but the future never comes for us because we keep changing our minds, or when the future (or what we think is the future) comes, we realize that it is not that satisfactory or it is not what we really want. In short, the future never comes. All this is suffering.

In all the dynamic interplay between impermanence and suffering, therefore, there is no abiding entity or eternal state, any God or soul, the moving mind move on, not tarrying for a moment. While we might find it not difficult to appreciate the nature and impact of impermanence and suffering, we often do not see their significance at once.

A key reason for this is that we tend to think in terms of a duality, especially in terms of whether something exists or not exist.⁴⁰ But, as the saying goes, nothing is really black and white. There are shades of colours in the spectrum of life, but then again many of us simply cannot distinguish all the colours of white light, or we might even be colour-blind. Take the case of Vaccha,gotta for example as recorded in the following sutta.

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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,gotta⁴¹ 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 [soul] (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?”

⁴⁰ See esp **Kaccā(ya)na,gotta S** (S 12.15,4-5/2:17), SD 6.13.

⁴¹ See **Aggi Vaccha,gotta S** (M 72), SD 6.15 (1).

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 the knowledge⁴² 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 —

5.2 Comments

It is evident from the Buddha’s closing remark that Vaccha,gotta 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:⁴³

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)⁴⁴

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.

⁴² “Would my reply be conducive to the arising of the knowledge ...” *api nu me taṃ anulomaṃ abhaviṣṣa ñāṇassa upādāya ...* See S:B 1456 n384.

⁴³ For further discussion, see Harvey 1995:28-33.

⁴⁴ Further, see SD 44.1 (1.1.2.3 f).

(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. 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 adjust them “right” side up!]

7 The 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.⁴⁵

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.”⁴⁶

(Vbh 48)

It is the lack of this mastery that it is non-self for these 4 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 5 aggregates (*pañca-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 5 aggregates, and nothing more. The second reason is that the Buddha categorically denies the existence of any *ātman* or abiding soul or eternal self within man or without, or anywhere else.

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 5 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:

⁴⁵ For further discussion, see Harvey 1995:34-38.

⁴⁶ *Etaṃ uppannaṃ ṭhitaṃ mā pāpuṇatu, ṭhāna-p, patta mā jiratu, jara-p, patarṃ mā bhijjatu*; cf Vism 640.

“This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.”⁴⁷ (S 22.59/3:66-68 = V 1:33 f), SD 1.2

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) ⁴⁸

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 5 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

⁴⁷ *N’etaṃ mama, n’eso’ham asmi, na mēso attā ’ti.* This threefold formula is the contrary of “the 3 graspings” (*ti, vidha gāha*), that is, of view (*diṭṭhi*), of craving (*taṇhā*), of conceit (*māna*) (MA 2:111, 225): here applied to the 5 aggregates [17-21]. A brief version, “There can be no considering that (element) as ‘I’ or ‘mine’ or ‘I am’” (*ahan ti vā maman ti vā asmī ti vā*) is found in **Mahā 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 **Pārileyya S**, SD 6.16 (5).

⁴⁸ 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).

dharma). Therefore, it is clear that, according to this statement—“All things (*dhammā*) are non-self”—there is no self, not only in the 5 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.⁴⁹

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!

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.⁵⁰

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 samsara 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.⁵¹

11 Uses of the self^{f52}

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*):

⁴⁹ See **Dhamma,niyāma S** (A 3.134/1:285), SD 26.8. See also **Unanswered questions**, SD 40a.10.

⁵⁰ For further discussion, see “How does rebirth occur without a soul?” at SD 18.11 (3.1)

⁵¹ 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.

⁵² See Steven Collins, *Selfless Persons*, Cambridge University Press, 1982: section 2.2.

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,kammantataṃ</i>	
<i>attani sampassamāno,</i>	seeing 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.⁵³

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)
<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>sādhukam attanā va attānaṃ</i>	
<i>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) ⁵⁴
<i>attā’nudittī,</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

12.1 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,”⁵⁵ as seen in this quote from the opening of the **Cakkavatti Sīhanāda Sutta** (D 26):

⁵³ For other examples, see Collins’ *Selfless Persons* (1982:75 f), where he gives *atta* the sense of “conscience.”

⁵⁴ Also *Buddhist Dictionary*, pp 184 f.

“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.⁵⁶

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,⁵⁷ bhikshus, a monk, having put away covetousness and displeasure in the world,

- | | |
|--|---|
| (1) dwells exertive, clearly comprehending, mindful, | <u>observing body in the body</u> , ⁵⁸ |
| (2) ... dwells exertive, clearly comprehending, mindful | <u>observing feelings in the feelings</u> . |
| (3) ... dwells exertive, clearly comprehending, mindful, | <u>observing mind in the mind</u> . |
| (4) ... dwells exertive, clearly comprehending, mindful, | <u>observing dharmas in the</u> |

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 refuge, with no other refuge—they become the highest,⁵⁹ but, bhikshus, they must be those who desire to learn [who have desire for training].⁶⁰

Keep to the pasture, bhikshus, the haunt [range] of our ancestors [fathers].⁶¹ Keeping to your pastures, the haunt of our ancestors, Māra will not find access to you [not descend upon you], Māra will not find⁶² you as an object of his consciousness.⁶³ Bhikshus, it is on account of undertaking wholesome mental states that this merit thus grows. (D 26,1/3:58), SD 36.10

⁵⁵ See for example Harvey 1995:54-63.

⁵⁶ *Tasmā-t-ih'Ānanda atta,dīpā viharatha atta,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 (6a) above.

⁵⁷ 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.

⁵⁸ “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 3 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.

⁵⁹ “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.

⁶⁰ 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,⁶⁰ 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.

⁶¹ *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.

⁶² “Will not find” (*lacchati*), fut of *labhati* (“he gains, finds”).

12.2 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’uttarā⁶⁴, 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:⁶⁵

— — —

SD 2.16(13)

Na Kuhana Sutta 1

Paṭhama Na Kuhana Sutta The First Discourse on “Not Deceiving” | **It 35/2.1.8/28 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.
- 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 hearsay⁶⁶;
The Blessed One taught
The path leading to one’s plunging into nirvana.
This is the way of the great souls,⁶⁷

⁶³ *Na lacchati māro otāraṃ, na lacchati māro ārammaṇaṃ. Otāra* = BHS *avatāra*, “descent.” Here, *ārammaṇa* (canonical sense) means “basis (of consciousness);” in the later comy sense, it means “meditation object.”

⁶⁴ Khujj’uttarā, “Uttarā the Hunchback,” a laywoman streamwinner, declared the foremost of laywomen who is learned (*bahu-s, sutā*) in the Dharma (A 1:26; DhA 1:208 ff; ItA 23 f.; PmA 498 f).

⁶⁵ Cf the Buddha’s usage of *brāhmaṇa* to describe a true Saint, Dh ch 26.

⁶⁶ “not based on hearsay,” *anītiha*, that is, self-realized and not handed down from others (cf Sn 934).

⁶⁷ “Great souls,” *mah’attā*, or “great selves,” ie those who are selfless or have realized not-self. See Harvey 1995: 56 f.

- 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”

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

The first kind of person is “of undeveloped body,⁶⁸ undeveloped virtue, undeveloped mind, undeveloped wisdom: he is (mentally) limited (*paritta*), having a small self (*app’ātuma*),⁶⁹ dwelling with little suffering” (*appa,dukkha,viḥārī*).

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 (*appamāṇa*).”⁷⁰

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 bad 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 (*satī*). The importance of the cultivation of lovingkindness is attested by **the (Karaja,kāya) Brahma,viḥāra Sutta** (A 10.208),⁷¹ where a meditator whose mind has “grown great” and “immeasurable” through lovingkindness knows:

Formerly my mind was limited (*paritta*) and undeveloped, but now my mind is boundless and well developed. Any karma done in a limited way⁷² neither remains nor persists there.

⁶⁸ “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.”

⁶⁹ “Small self” (*app’ātumā*) or “insignificant self” (Harvey 1995:56).

⁷⁰ A 3.99/1:249-253 @ SD 3.5.

⁷¹ See **(Karaja,kāya) Brahma,viḥāra S** (A 10.208), SD 2.10.

⁷² “Karma done in a limited way,” or “limited karma,” *pamāṇa, katarāṃ kammaṃ*, as in **Tevijja S** (D 13,77/1:251) & **Saṅkha,dhama S** (S 42.8/4:322). AA here says that “limited karma” refers to sense-sphere karma (*kāmmāvacara*,-

(A 10.208/5:299)

14.2 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 teachings and passages on non-self

15.1 THE CHARACTERISTICS OF NON-SELF

15.1.1 The Buddha’s 2nd discourse, **the Anatta Lakkhaṇa Sutta** (S 22.59) explains how one should correctly regard the 5 aggregates, a practice centering around the *anicca-dukkha-anattā* (or 3-characteristics) 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 near⁷³—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.’”⁷⁴ (S 22.59,17-21/3:68), SD 1.2

15.1.2 The unawakened ordinary person, on the other hand, tends to see the aggregates in 4 wrong ways, and is obsessed by his wrong view—this is formulated in **the self-based view or self-view (*attā-nudiṭṭhi*) 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 *form*, etc as in the aggregate. (M 3:188, 227; S 3:3, 16, 96; conflated)⁷⁵

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 ‘freedom of mind’ (*ceto, vimutti*) it definitely means absorption (*jhāna*).” The point is that if a person masters the “freedom 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)

⁷³ See S 22.48/3:47. On this totality formula, see (7.3).

⁷⁴ *N’etaṃ mama, n’eso ‘ham asmi, na mēso attā ti*. See (7.3) ad loc.

⁷⁵ The Chinese version refers to these 4 self-identity views only as 見我 *jiàn wǒ*, 異我 *yì wǒ*, 相我 *xiāng wǒ*, “seeing as I, as other than I, as mutually present” (SĀ 58 = T2.11c29). Choong 2000:59 draws attention to two Saṃyukta Āgama sutras that are helpful here. The first, SĀ 45 = T2.11b5, describes the viewing of self in regard to the aggregate of form as 見色是我 *jiàn sè shì wǒ*, 色異我 *sè yì wǒ*, 我在色 *wǒ zài sè*, 色在我 *sè zài wǒ*; and SĀ 109 = T2.34b-13, giving a similar list but slightly shorter, 見色是我, 異我, 我在色, 色在我. “Thus,” notes **Analyo**, “見我 and 異我

We can tabulate these 4 self-identity views as follows:

		Mnemonics [15.2.1.2]
(1) the aggregate is	the self;	$x = a$ a flame and its colour
(2) the self	possesses the aggregate;	$x \ni a$ a tree and its shadow
(3) the aggregate is	in the self;	$a < x$ the scent in a flower
(4) the self as	in the aggregate	$x < a$ a jewel in a casket

When listed in full (4 self-identity views \times 5 aggregates), this formula gives 20 self-identity or self-based views, any of which can distract us, an unawakened worldling, from the saint's vision.⁷⁶ [15.2]

15.2 THE 20 SELF-BASED VIEWS (*ATTĀ'NUDIṬṬHI*)

15.2.0 The self-view pericope goes thus:

(1) Here, houselord, an ignorant ordinary person⁷⁷ who sees not the noble ones, unskilled in the way of the noble ones, untrained in the way of the noble ones,⁷⁸ who sees not the true individuals and is unskilled in way of the true individual,⁷⁹ untrained in the way of the true individual

—regards form as self, or self as possessing form, or form as in self, or self as in form,⁸⁰

—he lives obsessed by the notions, 'I am form. Form is mine.'⁸¹

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.' ...

refer to identifying the aggregate of self and to taking the aggregate to be owned by the self, corresponding to *rūpam attato samanupassati* and *rūpavantarṃ vā attānam* in M 109/3:17,27." The Madhyama Āgama version of this formula such as that in MĀ 210 = T1.788a28 (parallel to M 44/1:300,7) is more intelligible: 見色是神 *jiàn sè shì shén*, 見神有色 *jiàn shén yǒu sè*, 見神中有色 *jiàn shén zhōng yǒu sè*, 見神中有色也 *jiàn shén zhōng yǒu sè yě*. (See Analayo 2011:631 n218).

⁷⁶ See also SD 40a.8 (3.3): Overcoming the self-identity view.

⁷⁷ "Ignorant ordinary person," *assutava puthujjana*. See Intro (3).

⁷⁸ "The noble ones," *ariya*, that is, Buddhas, Pratyeka Buddhas, and the saints of the path. See foll n.

⁷⁹ "True person," *sappurisa*, also "virtuous person," "ideal person," "true individual." The term usually refers to a pratyeka buddha or a 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 individuals" (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.

⁸⁰ For explanations of the 4 views regarding self-identity or the self-based views (*attā'nudiṭṭhi*), see (15.2.2) below.

⁸¹ 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).

(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 40.9

15.2.1 The 4 self-views

15.2.1.1 The Cūḷa Vedalla Sutta (M 44) and **the Nakula, pitā Sutta** (S 22.1) gives a set of 20 wrong views regarding the self, that is, arising from the annihilationist view (*uccheda, diṭṭhi*) or “self-identity-based annihilationist views” (*sakkāya, vatthukā uccheda, diṭṭhi*) (1-5), while the rest (6-20) in the eternalist view (*sassata, diṭṭhi*) or “self-identity-based eternalist views” (*sakkāya, vatthukā sassata, diṭṭhi*) [1.1.5.2]. In summary, **the self-views** in terms of the form aggregate are as follows:

(1-5)	the self is identical with <i>form</i>	(when the body dies, the self dies, too);
(6-10)	the self possesses <i>form</i>	(the self is separate from the body);
(11-15)	<i>form</i> is in the self	(the self is independent or separated from body); and
(16-20)	the self is in <i>form</i>	(the body is the “owner” of the self).

15.2.1.2 In other words, for those who do not understand or accept the teaching of non-self (*anattā*), they are likely (consciously or unconsciously) to think that there is some kind of permanent or eternal self, soul or entity, in one of these 4 ways:

(1) **That the aggregate itself is the self** (*rūpaṃ attato*) (a popular materialist notion), just as the flame of an oil-lamp and its colour are inseparable. In other words, the self is identical with the form (the body): $x = a$ (where x is the self and a is an aggregate).

This is the view of the young nirgrantha Saccaka.⁸² This is also the most prevailing view amongst the urbanized people who are materially well off and schooled in some way. They generally believe that when the body dies, the self or soul perishes, too.

Such a view can be selfish, even anti-social, as the belief suggests that this is our only life, so live it well and sow all the wild oats or harvest what we can. Even if we are to commit unwholesome acts or break the law (and don’t get caught), it is all well worth it. It also rejects any notion of karma or rebirth. Hence, such a belief tends also to be amoral.

(2) **That the self possesses the aggregate** (*rūpavantaṃ attānaṃ*), that is, the formless (ie the mind: feeling, perception, formations, or some mental factor) as a self that possesses or controls form in

⁸² **Cūḷa Saccaka S** (M 35,9-22/1:229-234), SD 16.5. This is also the view of materialists who believe that the body itself is the self or soul, so that when the body dies, the self or soul dies, too (which is a form of annihilationism) (SA 2:225; cf S:B 1045 n5). On both these notions, see Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, 1963: 110 f; 243-247.

the way an object such as a tree possesses and “controls” its shadow: $x \ni a$ ⁸³ (where x is the self and a is the aggregate).

In other words, the self or soul is separate from the form aggregate. This is probably the best known soul-idea today, especially amongst theistic religions: the eternal “soul” or “breath” gives life to the body, and when this soul or breath finally departs (to heaven or to hell), the body dies. This view is often attended by the belief that some higher agency (such as God) created such a soul, which may be mortal or be immortal.

- (3) **That the aggregate is in the self** (*attani rūpaṃ*), that is, the formless self is located in form (the body), just as scent is located in a flower: $a < x$ (where a is the aggregate and x is the self: the aggregate is “less” than the self, but independent of it).

In other words, the self or soul is independent of or separated from the form aggregate. The best example of this is the brahminical belief in Brahman, the universal soul, of which ours is but an “individual soul.” The brahmins believed that such a soul is like a “divine spark” that emanated from the cosmic soul, and on earth, the physical body imprisons it. Thus, if we “free” the soul from this impure worldly body, even with great pains and death itself, the soul would be freed and re-emerges with the cosmic soul.⁸⁴

- (4) **That the self is in the aggregate** (*rūpasmim attānaṃ*), that is, the formless self is located in form like a jewel in its casket. Or, the form aggregate “possesses” or controls the self or soul. This view can be represented as: $x < a$ (where x is the self and a is the aggregate; the self is “less” than the aggregate).

This is a description of popular or animistic beliefs in some kind of extracorporeal or disembodied being that is able to leave the body at will, and even inhabit another or some external object. They also variously believe they may be able to influence such a “soul” through magic, ritual or special way. The nature or fate of such a soul depends on the beliefs of the community, tribe or belief-system.

15.2.1.3 Such notions of the self are closely related to the idea of self-identity (*sakkāya, diṭṭhi*)—one identifies with one of the aggregates [15.3]—so that “when that ‘self’ of his breaks up, he thereby comes to disaster and destruction” [§§5.2-9].⁸⁵

15.2.2 The Paṭisambhidā, magga classifies the 10 self-views into 2 groups under the headings of the 2 extreme view of “annihilationism” (*uccheda, diṭṭhi*) and of “eternalism” (*sassata, diṭṭhi*).⁸⁶ To regard any of the aggregate as self arises from the annihilationist view, which means that there are 5 annihilationist views. To regard the self as possessing any of the aggregates, or the aggregates as in self, or self as in the aggregates, arise from the eternalist view. This totals up to 15 eternalists views. (Pm 1:156 f).

The full list of **20 self-views** according the 2 extreme views of annihilationism and of eternalism [1.5.2.1] are as follows:

⁸³ \ni is an ISO (International Organisation for Standardization) symbol in mathematical logic, technically meaning the set x contains a (as an element), or, as applied here, “x possesses a,” used as a mnemonic.

⁸⁴ Eg Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad 6.16.

⁸⁵ For details, see SD 2.16 (2). On the self-identity view, see “**I**: the nature of identity, SD 19.1 esp (2.2).

⁸⁶ See **Dhamma, cakka Pavattana S** (S 56.11,2-3), SD 1.1.

The 5 annihilationist views

(1) he regards form as self,	<i>rūpaṃ attato samanupassati</i>
(2) he regards feeling as self,	<i>vedanaṃ attato samanupassati</i>
(3) he regards perception as self,	<i>saññaṃ attato samanupassati</i>
(4) he regards formations as self,	<i>saṅkhāre attato samanupassati</i>
(5) he regards consciousness as self,	<i>viññānaṃ attato samanupassati</i>

The 15 eternalist views

(6) self as possessing <u>form</u> ,	<i>rūpa,vantaṃ vā attānaṃ,</i>
(7) or form as in self,	<i>attāni vā rūpaṃ</i>
(8) or self as in form,	<i>rūpasmim vā attānaṃ</i>
(9) self as possessing <u>feeling</u> ,	<i>vedanā,vantaṃ vā attānaṃ,</i>
(10)or feeling as in self,	<i>attāni vā vedanaṃ</i>
(11)or self as in feeling,	<i>vedanāya vā attānaṃ</i>
(12)self as possessing <u>perception</u> ,	<i>saññā,vantaṃ vā attānaṃ,</i>
(13)or perception as in self,	<i>attāni vā saññaṃ</i>
(14)or self as in perception,	<i>saññāya vā attānaṃ</i>
(15)self as possessing <u>formations</u> ,	<i>saṅkhāra,vantaṃ vā attānaṃ,</i>
(16)or formations as in self,	<i>attāni vā saṅkhāre</i>
(17)or self as in formations,	<i>saṅkhāresu vā attānaṃ</i>
(18)self as possessing <u>consciousness</u> ,	<i>viññāna,vantaṃ vā attānaṃ,</i>
(19)or consciousness as in self,	<i>attāni vā viññānaṃ</i>
(20)or self as in consciousness,	<i>viññānasim vā attānaṃ</i>

15.2.3 Delusion and craving

15.2.3.1 The **Netti-p, pkaraṇa** uses the classification by way of the two extreme views [15.2.2] to show that the annihilationist views (*uccheda, diṭṭhi*) are rooted in some form of delusion (*moha*), while the eternalist views (*sassata, diṭṭhi*) are rooted in craving (*taṇhā*). It does this by showing that a person of “view temperament” (*diṭṭhi, carita*) regards the aggregate itself as self, while one of “craving temperament” (*taṇha, carita*) regards the self as possessing the aggregate, the aggregates as in self, or self as in the aggregates (Nett 111).

15.2.3.2 Ignorance and craving are the deepest twin roots of suffering. Views are the active aspect of ignorance. When we are ignorant of the true nature of life (as embodied in the 4 noble truths), we are blindly driven to seek for solutions, or at least to explain the predicament we are in, and the direction we hope to get to. In our ignorance, we are deluded, so that form views, seeking something permanent in a shifting world.

Craving tends to make us somehow identify or connect with what we see as real, substantial or promising. But all that we only body and mind, which comprises the 5 aggregates of form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness. While caught up in all this false views and cravings, we are prevented from seeing the real things.

15.2.3.3 It is interesting that the self-views (and wrong views in general) are somehow rooted in either in annihilationism or in eternalism, that is, seeing wrongly how things are impermanent and see-

ing wrongly how there must be something permanent. In other words, wrong views are actively manifested through our delusion, that is, forming ideas, wishes, hopes and prayers through what is not there, or seeing something as bigger or lesser than it really is, but never seeing them as they really are.

Hence, in our daily lives, it is delusion that we must first deal with, at least on the preconscious level, that is before we speak or act. Moral restraint is the most effective training here. Then, when our body (speech and action) are cultivated (*bhāvita,kāya*), we are better prepared to cultivate our minds so that we can see and reach deeper to see and understand the nature of ignorance as a latent tendency, and deal with it through our cultivated mind (*bhāvita,citta*).⁸⁷ When we do this rightly, or understanding where we went wrong, our insight wisdom (*paññā*) grows, bringing us mental peace and joy, and closer to mental freedom.

15.3 SELF-VIEW (*SAKKĀYA,DIṬṬHI*)

15.3.1 Overcoming the 5 lower fetters. In both the Suttas and the Abhidhamma, these 20 wrong views regarding the aggregates are used to define the nature of self-identity view (*sakkāya,diṭṭhi*), that is, the wrong view that the body is a permanent entity.⁸⁸ Although these wrong views generally define an unawakened worldling, more significantly, they are said to be absent from the 4 dhyanas (*jhāna*) and the first three formless attainments (*samāpatti*).⁸⁹ In the **Mahā Māluṅkya,putta Sutta** (M 64) and the **Jhāna Sutta** (A 9.36), it is stated that

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

If he persists in that,⁹⁰ he attains the destruction of the influxes. But if he does not attain the destruction of the influxes because of desire for the Dharma, that delight in the Dharma, then with the destruction of the 5 lower fetters⁹¹ [connected with the lower realms of existence], he is spontaneously reborn [becomes a non-returner, reborn in the Pure Abodes]⁹² and there attain final nirvana, without ever returning from that world.

This is the path, the way, to the abandoning of the 5 lower fetters.

(M 64,10-15/1:436 f = A 9.36/4:422-424;⁹³ cf A 2:128 (×2), 130 (×2))

⁸⁷ Cf *bhāvit'atta*: see SD 26.9 (2.1.2).

⁸⁸ M 1:300, 3:17 f; S 3:102; Dh 182. On self-identity (*sakkāya*), see **Sakkāya S** (S 22.105), SD 42.21.

⁸⁹ 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. On **the 4 formless aggregates** (*arūpa-k, khandhā*), see **Self & Selves**, SD 26.9 (1.3.1) & SD 47.4 (1.2.6).

⁹⁰ *Etaṃ santaṃ etaṃ pañitaṃ*.

⁹¹ That is, the first 5 of the 10 fetters (*dasa,samyōjanā*): 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*).

⁹² That is, reborn in **the Pure Abodes** (*suddh'āvāsa*), the five highest heavens of the form world (*rūpa,loka*) inhabited only by non-returners who assume their last birth to become arhats and attain nirvana. These worlds are Āviha ("Non-declining"), Ātappa ("Unworried"), Sudassā ("Clearly Visible"), Sudassī ("Clear-visioned") and Akaniṭṭhā ("Highest") (D 3:237, M 3:103, Vbh 425, Pug 42-46). It should be noted that one could become a non-returner in this world itself, and upon dying, be reborn in the Pure Abodes.

⁹³ **Jhāna S** contains an archer parable, not found in **Mahā Māluṅkya,putta S**.

15.3.2 The self-identity views. These 20 self-based views are also called **self-identity views** (*sakkāya, -diṭṭhi*). They are mentioned in **the Parileyya Sutta** (S 22.81), which relates how an untutored ordinary person tends to regard any of the 5 aggregates (form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness) in these ways:

- | | |
|--|--|
| (1) he regards ⟨form, etc⟩ as the self, or | ⟨rūpaṃ⟩ ⁹⁴ attato samanupassati ⁹⁵ |
| (2) the self as possessing ⟨form, etc⟩, or | ⟨rūpa⟩vantam ⁹⁶ attānam vā |
| (3) ⟨form, etc⟩ as in the self, or | attani ⟨rūpaṃ⟩ ⁹⁷ vā |
| (4) the self as in ⟨form, etc⟩. | ⟨rūpasmim⟩ ⁹⁸ attānam vā |
- (S 22.81/3:97 f @ SD 6.1; Dhs 1003)⁹⁹

15.4 THE 4 SELF-BASED VIEWS

15.4.1 The Mahā Puṇṇama Sutta¹⁰⁰ and **the Cūḷa Vedalla Sutta**,¹⁰¹ too, list these 20 self-identity views in connection with the 5 aggregates, that is,

- | | |
|---|----------------------------|
| (1) by regarding any of the 5 aggregates as | self; |
| (2) by regarding self as | possessing the aggregate; |
| (3) by regarding the aggregate | as in the self; or |
| (4) by regarding self as | in the aggregate. [15.3.2] |

If anyone were to have a self-view—the notion that there is some kind of immortal soul, eternal self, permanent entity, or abiding essence—it must fall into one of these 4 kinds of self-based views. In fact, we see all the other religions and world faiths, except Buddhism, holding up one or other of such self-views.

The early Buddhist teachings on non-self, then, is what differentiate it from most of the later Buddhist sects, and also from other religions. These self-identity views have been abandoned by the streamwinner.¹⁰² For this reason, the streamwinner (like the other 3 kinds of saints) is no more an “outsider” of the true teaching.¹⁰³

15.4.2 The 4 self-based views explained

15.4.2.0 The Paṭisambhidā, magga illustrates the 4 basic modes of the self-identity view¹⁰⁴ in connection with form (or any of the other 4 aggregates) [15.3.3] in these ways:

⁹⁴ These angle brackets refer to each of the 5 aggregates in turn, thus: *rūpaṃ, vedanaṃ, saññāṃ, saṅkhāre, and viññāṇaṃ*.

⁹⁵ On *samanupassati*, “he regards,” see **Samanupassanā S** (S 22.47), SD 26.12.

⁹⁶ Insert here each of the 5 aggregates, thus: *rūpa, vantam, vedanā, vantam, saññā, vatnam, saṅkhāra, vantam, and viññāna, vantam*.

⁹⁷ Insert here each of the 5 aggregates, thus: *rūpaṃ, vedanaṃ, saññāṃ, saṅkhāre, and viññāṇaṃ*.

⁹⁸ Insert here each of the 5 aggregates, thus: *rūpasmim, vedanāya, saññāya, saṅkhāresu, and viññāṇasmim*.

⁹⁹ See **Sāra S** (S 22.93/3:137 f), SD 42.19 (2.2.1).

¹⁰⁰ M 109,10/3:17 f (SD 17.11).

¹⁰¹ M 44,7 f/1:300.

¹⁰² See **Emotional independence**, SD 40a.8 (3).

¹⁰³ On the “outsider” (*bāhira* or *bāhiraka*), see **Dakkhiṇa Vibhaṅga S** (M 142,5(11)) & nn, SD 1.9, & SD 47.1 (1.1.2).

¹⁰⁴ On the 4 modes of self-view, see **Nakula, pitā S** (S 22.1,12-23/3:3-5) & SD 5.4 (4), **Arahata Sutta 2** (S 22.7/3:84), SD 42.9, **Samanupassanā S** (S 22.47) @ SD 26.12 (1), **Parileyya S** (S 22.81,14-19/3:96 f), SD 6.1 & **Puṇṇama S** (M 109,10/3:17 f = S 22.82,11/3:102), SD 17.11. For a summary, see SD 42.18 (2.2.1).

<u>Self-view</u>	<u>Analogy</u>	<u>Well known example</u>
(1) taking the <u>form as self</u>	a flame and its colour are identical	materialist view of life
(2) taking <u>self as possessing form</u>	a tree possesses a shadow	eternal soul of God-religions
(3) taking <u>form as in self</u>	the scent in the flower	brahminical universal soul
(4) taking <u>self as in form</u>	a jewel in a casket	popular soul belief

(Pm 2.50, 74, 77, 90/1:143-145) [16.2]

15.4.2.1 Taking the aggregate as the self. Here, we mistakenly take form or matter in the form of any of the external 4 elements—earth, water, fire or wind—as self or soul or some eternal entity. This false view is even more likely to arise when someone with wrong views or a non-Buddhist meditates on a kasina (meditation device) for any of these elements. Understandably, we can also include space or emptiness (the 5th element) in this category, too.

The Paṭisambhidā, magga also includes the colour kasinas, that is, blue, yellow, red and white (Pm 1:144). In other words, it is also possible for us to be taken up by a colour, and regard it as being permanent, and as an eternal essence, soul, etc.

We, especially if we are meditators, then mistakenly regard the earth, water, fire, the wind, or space, as self, for example, “What the earth kasina is, I am that. What I am, that is the earth kasina,” and so on. We see the kasina or the element and self as being identical.

This is like seeing the flame of a lamp or candle as being the same as its colour. We cannot distinguish between the flame and its colour. In other words, the body and the soul are regarded as being the same. Thus, when the body dies, the soul dies, too. This is an annihilationist view, and is a common view amongst materialists. This is the view of the young nirgrantha Saccaka.¹⁰⁵

15.4.2.2 Taking the self as possessing the aggregate. Here, we regard one or other of the formless aggregates—feeling, perception, formations, or consciousness—or the mind, as self or as being some kind of permanent entity. We wrongly think, “This is my self, but this self of mine possesses form (etc) by means of this form (etc).” We see this just the way that we see a tree having a shadow, but we see the tree as one thing and the shadow another, and that the tree possesses the shadow.

This is like Peter Pan and his shadow which follows him around.¹⁰⁶ The wrong view here is that when the body changes or dies, the self or soul (the “shadow”) remains the same and eternal. This is the first of the three pentads based on the eternalist view, the view that the self or soul is eternal, but separate or separated (but not independent) from the aggregates [1.5.2.1].

Form, feeling, perception, formations or consciousness simply occur in such a self or soul, which survives death, and exists on its own therefrom, in heaven or in hell (according to the theistic religions). This is probably the best known soul-idea today, especially amongst theistic religions: the eternal “soul” or “breath” gives life to the body, and when this soul or breath departs (to heaven or to hell), the body perishes.

15.4.2.3 Taking the aggregate as being in self. Here, we regard feeling, perception, formations, or consciousness as self or some permanent entity. We wrongly think, “This is my self, but this form is in

¹⁰⁵ **Cūḷa Saccaka S** (M 35,9-22/1:229-234), SD 16.5. This is also the view of materialists who believe that the body itself is the self or soul, so that when the body dies, the self or soul dies, too (which is a form of annihilationism) (SA 2:225; cf S:B 1045 n5). On both these notions, see Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, 1963: 110 f; 243-247.

¹⁰⁶ This is an allusion from the main character in Scottish novelist and playwright, James M Barrie’s children classic, *Peter Pan, or The Boy Who Wouldn’t Grow Up* (1904).

the self,” as hold such a view. It is like our seeing a fragrant flower, and we take the flower to be one thing, and the fragrance another. So we see them as two different things.¹⁰⁷

This is the second of the three pentads based on the eternalist view, the view that the self or soul is eternal [1.5.2.1]. Here, the view is that the eternal self or soul is independent from the aggregates. After death, the self or soul survives, and is reunites with the universal Soul or Brahman of the brahmanical religion, that is, the universal soul, of which ours is but an “individual soul.”¹⁰⁸

15.4.2.4 Taking the self as being in the aggregate. Here, we wrongly see feeling, perception, formations or consciousness as the self. We wrongly think, “This is my self, but this self of mine is in this form.” Just as we were to place a gem in a casket, and regard the gem as one thing and the casket as another, we see the self as being separate from the body which only temporarily holds that self.¹⁰⁹

This is the third of the three pentads based on the eternalist view, the view that the self or soul is eternal [1.5.2.1]. This is probably the most common or popular belief, that is, there is some kind of permanent self or eternal soul or “same” consciousness that move on when the body dies and continues to exist in a new body. This is the infamous wrong view held by Sāti, the fisherman’s son, as recounted in **the Taṇhā,saṅkhaya Sutta** (M 38), who holds that “it is this same consciousness, not another, that runs and wanders through the rounds of births.”¹¹⁰

In more modern terms, this is clearly a description of popular or animistic beliefs in some kind of extracorporeal or disembodied entity that is able to leave the body at will. The nature or fate of such a soul depends on the beliefs of the community, tribe or belief-system.

For the early Buddhist rejection of these 4 self-views, see (18) below.

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

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.¹¹¹ 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**¹¹² that would not cause sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair to arise in one who clings to it.¹¹³ But do you see any such possession, bhikshus?”

¹⁰⁷ 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>.

¹⁰⁸ Eg Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad 6.16.

¹⁰⁹ 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.

¹¹⁰ M 38,5/1:258 @ SD 7.10.

¹¹¹ Cf “anxiety over the non-existent *externally*” at **Alagaddûpama S** (M 22.18/1:136), SD 3.13.

¹¹² “You may well cling to a doctrine of the self,” (*atta,vād’upādānaṃ upadiyetha*). For an alt tr (using “assumption” for *upādāna*), see Nyanaponika 1974:43 n27. On the difficulty of translating *atta,vād’upādānaṃ upadiyetha*, see M:ÑB 2001:1197 n176. Clinging to a self-theory (*atta,vād’upādāna*) is one of the 4 clingings, 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,baṭ’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.

¹¹³ Cf “anxiety over the non-existent *internally*” at **Alagaddûpama S** (M 22.20/1:136), SD 3.13.

“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 views¹¹⁴ 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.¹¹⁵

25 Bhikshus, if there were a self, would there be for me what belongs to a self?¹¹⁶

“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 an entirely and completely foolish teaching?”

“What else could it be, bhante, but an entirely and completely foolish teaching?”¹¹⁷

26 “Bhikshus, what do you think? Is **form** 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.”

“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.”¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ “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 bad false view (§2). DA on Mahā Satī’paṭṭhāna S (D 2:292) and MA on Satīpaṭṭhāna S (M 1:56) (both identical passages) mention 2 kinds of supports, viz craving (*taṇhā, nissaya*) and views (*diṭṭhi, nissaya*).

¹¹⁵ MA: In this section, a threefold emptiness is shown, ie referring to external possessions, self-theory and views as support.

¹¹⁶ “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).

¹¹⁷ MA: Here a twofold emptiness is shown, ie that of the self (*atta*) and of the property of a self (*attaniya*). 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.

27 Therefore, bhikshus, any kind of **form** whatever—whether past, future or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near¹¹⁹—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.’¹²⁰

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 revulsed¹²¹ 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

15.6 OVERCOMING SELF-VIEWS

15.6.1 There are three consecutive suttas in **the Sāḷayātana Saṃyutta** (S 35) dealing with the overcoming of wrong views, of self-identity and of self-based views, as follows:

		<u>for the destruction of</u>		
(1) Micchā,diṭṭhi Pahāna Sutta	S 35.164/4:147	wrong views	<i>micchā,diṭṭhi</i>	SD 53.11
(2) Sakkāya,diṭṭhi Pahāna Sutta	S 35.165/4:147	self-identity	<i>sakkāya,diṭṭhi</i>	SD 53.12
(3) Attā’nudiṭṭhi Pahāna Sutta	S 35.166/4:148	self-based views	<i>attā’nudiṭṭhi</i>	SD 53.13

According to these Suttas, **wrong views** (*micchā,diṭṭhi*) is overcome by the knowledge and vision—“by knowing and seeing”—that the 6 sense-faculties, their respective external sense-objects, their respective sense-consciousnesses, their respective sense-contacts, and respective feelings, are all **impermanent** (*aniccato*).

¹¹⁸ 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)

¹¹⁹ See S 22.48/3:47. On this totality formula, see (7.3).

¹²⁰ See **Anatta Lakkhaṇa S** (S 22.59/3:66-68), SD 1.2.

¹²¹ “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 review knowledge (*paccavekkhaṇa, -ñāṇa*) is shown by the phrase “there comes the knowledge” and “he understands: ‘Birth is destroyed ... ’,” in the foll para.

Self-identity views (*sakkāya, diṭṭhi*) are overcome by the knowledge and vision—“by knowing and seeing”—that the 6 sense-faculties, their respective external sense-objects, their respective sense-consciousnesses, their respective sense-contacts, and respective feelings, are all unsatisfactory (*dukkhato*).

Self-based views or self-views (*attā'nudiṭṭhi*) are overcome by the knowledge and vision—“by knowing and seeing”—that the 6 sense-faculties, their respective external sense-objects, their respective sense-consciousness, their respective sense-contacts, and respective feelings, are all non-self (*anattato*).

The structure of the three Suttas are practically the same: they deal with the 6 sense-faculties, their external sense-objects, sense-consciousnesses, sense-contacts, and resulting feelings (the 30 “elements”) and apply the 3 characteristics to them. Impermanence is applied to *the 30 elements* in the Micchā, diṭṭhi Pahāna Sutta, unsatisfactoriness or suffering to them in the Sakkāya, diṭṭhi Pahāna Sutta, and non-self to them in the Attā'nudiṭṭhi Sutta.¹²²

15.6.2 In other words, Sutta (1) teaches the perception of impermanence (*anicca, saññā*) as taught in the first five suttas of **the Okkanta Samyutta** (S 25).¹²³ **The (Dukkha) Koṭṭhita Sutta** (S 35.163)¹²⁴ The benefits of this perception—those relating to streamwinning—is given in **the (Anisaṃsa) Anicca Saññā Sutta** (A 6.102).¹²⁵

Sutta (2) teaches the perception of suffering (*dukkha, saññā*), as taught in **the (Dukkha) Koṭṭhita Sutta** (S 35.163)¹²⁶ and **the Dukkha (Saññā) Sutta** (S 46.72).¹²⁷ More commonly, the practice is called the perception of the unsatisfactory in the impermanent (*dukkhe anicca, saññā*).¹²⁸

And Sutta (3) teaches the perception of non-self (*anattā, saññā*), such as in **the (Anatta) Koṭṭhita Sutta** (S 35.1643),¹²⁹ and **the Meghiya Sutta** (A 9.3 = U 4.1).¹³⁰ This practice is more often known as the perception of non-self in the unsatisfactory (*dukkhe anattā, saññā*).¹³¹

Any of these practices will lead to streamwinning in this life itself, if not certainly at the moment of dying. However, the easiest method here is that of the perception of impermanence.¹³²

¹²² Bodhi, in his Samyutta tr apparently missed these important differences, and abridged his translations, taking them all as dealing with impermanence (S:B 1120, see S:B 35.165+166+167).

¹²³ That is, **(Anicca) Cakkhu S** (S 25.1), **(Anicca) Rūpa S** (S 25.2), **(Anicca) Viññāṇa S** (S 25.3), **(Anicca) Phassa S** (S 25.4) and **(Anicca) Vedanā S** (S 25.5), all in **Okkanta Samyutta** (S 25/3:225 f).

¹²⁴ S 35.163/4:145 (SD 108.11) = **(Khandha) Anicca S 1**, SD 108.3.

¹²⁵ A 6.102/3:443 (SD 93.7).

¹²⁶ S 35.163/4:145 (SD 108.11) = **(Khandha) Dukkha S 1**, SD 108.4.

¹²⁷ S 46.72/5:132.

¹²⁸ **Saṅgīti S** (D 33,2.1(26)/3:243, 33,2.2(26)/3:251; **Das'uttara S** (D 34,2.2(8)/3:290); **Ceto.vimutti, phala S 2** (A 5.72/3:85); **Rāga Peyyāla** (A 3:277); **Vijjā, bhāgiya S** (A 6.35/3:334); **Rāga Peyyāla** (A 6.123/3:453); **Saññā S 1+2** (A 7.45/4:46); **Saññā S** (A 9.16/4:387); **Rāga Peyyāla** (A 9.93/4:465); **Saññā S 1** (A 10.576/5:105); **Rāga Peyyāla** (A 10.217/5:309).

¹²⁹ S 35.164/4:1465 (SD 108.11) = **(Khandha) Anatta S 1**, SD 108.7.

¹³⁰ A 9.3 = U 4.1/37 (SD 34.2).

¹³¹ **Saṅgīti S** (D 33,2.1(26)/3:243, 33,2.2(26)/3:251; **Das'uttara S** (D 34,2.2(8)/3:290); **Anatta S** (S 5:133); **Saññā S 1** (A 5.62/3:79); **Rāga Peyyāla** (A 3:85); **Vijjā, bhāgiya S** (A 6.35/3:334); **Rāga Peyyāla** (A 6.123/3:452); **Saññā S 1+2** (A 7.45/4:46); **Saññā S** (A 9.16/4:387); **Rāga Peyyāla** (A 9.93/4:465); **Saññā S 1** (A 10.56/5:105); **Rāga Peyyāla** (A 10.217/5:309).

¹³² See **Entering the stream**, SD 3.3.

16 Non-self and emptiness

16.1 THE AGGREGATES ARE NON-SELF. The *Mahā Puṇṇama Sutta*¹³³ and the *Cūḷa Vedalla Sutta*,¹³⁴ list these twenty self-identity views in connection with the 5 aggregates. The *Paṭisambhidā, magga* illustrates the 4 basic modes of the self-identity view in connection with form in these ways:¹³⁵ [15.4.2.0]

- (1) taking the form as self, just as a burning oil-lamp's flame is identical to the flame's colour;¹³⁶
- (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;¹³⁷ 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 (*saṃsāra*) can only be attained when one clearly understands the nature of conditioned existence. To do this one has to apply the 3 characteristics [1] to one's daily life and reflect on the 4 kinds of emptiness (*catu,koṭīka suññatā*). In the *Āneñja Sappāya Sutta* (M 106), the Buddha speaks of these fourfold emptiness:

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

(M 2:263 f; A 1:206, 2:177; cf A 3:170)¹³⁸

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;¹³⁹
- (4) He does not see the self of another as something belonging to him. [15.4.2]

(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

¹³³ M 109,10/3:17 f @ SD 17.11.

¹³⁴ M 44,7 f/1:300 @ SD 40.9..

¹³⁵ Pm 2.50, 74, 77, 90/1:144 f.

¹³⁶ 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.

¹³⁷ 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>.

¹³⁸ Earlier on in the same sutra, the Buddha mentions, by way of summary, the twofold Emptiness (*dvi,koṭīka 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.

¹³⁹ I think it makes better sense if this sentence (3) is interchanged with the last sentence (4) *pace* Buddhaghosa.

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, 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

17.1 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.¹⁴⁰ 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**:

*Dukkham eva hi, na koci dukkhito
kārako na, kiriyā va vijjati
atthi nibbuti, na nibbuto puma
maggaṃ atthi, gamako na vijjatīti*

There is only suffering, no sufferer is found;
there is no doer, only the deeds is there.¹⁴¹
nirvana is but not the person who nirvanas—
there is the path, there is no one who goes (on it).

(Vism 16.90/513)

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

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

17.3 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.”¹⁴² 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 viewing, that is, seeing only an aspect and missing the whole picture.¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ On mind-moments, see **Raho, gata S** (S 36.11), SD 33.6 Intro (2.4).

¹⁴¹ The Pali *vijjati* is sg; the tr takes “only the deeds” as its object.

¹⁴² See **The notion of *ditṭhi***, SD 40a.1.

¹⁴³ **The 5 mental hindrances** (*pañca-k, khandha*) are sensual lust, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and remorse, and doubt. See **Nivarana**, SD 32.1.

17.4 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)

17.5 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. Here is a summary of the early Buddhist rejection of notions based on any of the 4 self-views [15.4.2]:

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. The Buddha, however, teach karma and rebirth: this is not our only life, and karmic effects continue for countless lives as long as the conditions are there to support them.

(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. Moreover, the word "owner" and its related forms are simply grammatical and conventional forms for human communication, and reflect no real control that we have over the beings, situations or objects they refer to.

(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. In early Buddhism, even the mind is not located anywhere, but exists "everywhere" in the body, but may move even outside and beyond our bodies. Such a consciousness is ever-changing, dependent on its karmic support and conditioned by our sense-experiences. Only when we attain nirvana, can we say that consciousness finally find "no footing," that is, is not reborn, but it does not exist in itself either. Simply put, it simply ceases to exist as a conditioned reality.

(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. This is a popular religious belief, dogma or superstition that seems to give us hope for a better life or future, when we think that we are suffering in some way, or desire some kind of future happiness in a permanent way. Both our mind and body change. Every thing, physical or non-physical, in this universe, too, change. To exist is to be in

time, and time is change; hence, everything that exists must change, without any abiding self or eternal essence.

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. There is meaning only in change: the mind is the experiences of such changes and makes sense of them.

(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. However, by this very same token, we can train the mind, which means we need to begin with the fact that it is impermanent.

(7) The self does not exist in the mind. No matter how carefully we search the contents of our mind, feelings, ideas, inclinations, even consciousness itself, we do not find a self or anything permanent in the mind or the mental states. The point is that the moment we try to see the “present” mind, it is gone. All we are dealing with is our perception of the past or memories of them.

(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. Our mind is how we are conscious of things (experiences of the 6 sense-faculties), how we make sense of them, and are conditioned by them. As long as we do not know how all this works—when we do not see their impermanent nature—we would be deluded into thinking or wanting some kind of permanent self or eternal soul in a constantly shifting mind and world.

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 FREEDOM. 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 freedom.

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),¹⁴⁴ 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.¹⁴⁵

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."¹⁴⁶

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.¹⁴⁷

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.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁴ S 25.1/3:225 @ SD 16.7.

¹⁴⁵ See **Entering the stream**, SD 3.3.

¹⁴⁶ In H Eves, *Return to Mathematical Circles*, Boston: Prindle, Weber and Schmidt, 1989.

¹⁴⁷ At this point, you should go on to read **Self and selves**, SD 26.9.

¹⁴⁸ See **Notion of diṭṭhi**, SD 40a.1.

In short, even right view is just a means to a higher end: spiritual freedom. For this reason, the Buddha declares in **the Alaggadûpamā Sutta**:

Bhikkhus, having known the parable of the raft, you should abandon even the Teaching, how much more that which is not the Teaching!¹⁴⁹ (M 22,14/1:135)

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¹⁴⁹ *Dhammā pi vo pahātabbā pag'eva adhammā*. Comy takes *dhammā* here to mean "good states," ie calm and insight (*samatha, vipassanā*), citing **Laṭutikōpama S** (M 1:455 = 66.26-33) as an example of the teaching of the abandonment of attachment to calm, and **Mahā Taṇhā,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 Intro.

- (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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