Is There a Soul?

A study from the Pali Canon

Texts selected from *The Buddha's Teachings* (Piyasilo, 1991b)
Revised, expanded and annotated by Piya Tan ©2003

1 What is "soul"?

The Indian term for "soul" is *attā* in Pali or *ātman* in Sanskrit. The Buddha rejects any notion of a permanent entity in the form of a self or soul. This teaching forms the third and last of the three characteristics (*ti,lakkhaṇa*). The opposite term, *anattā,* etymologically consists of the negative prefix *na* > *an* (before a vowel) + *atta*. It is usually rendered as "not-self," "not self" or "non-self";[1] sometimes the adjectives "egoless," "impersonal" and "soulless" are used.

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

Like the four noble truths, *anattā* is a "teaching peculiar to Buddhas" (*buddhāna samukkaṁsika desanā,* M 1:380). In his Commentary on the Vibhaṅga, Buddhaghosa says: "The characteristics of impermanence and suffering are known whether Buddhas arise or not; but that of not-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 not-self through impermanence (eg **the Cha,chakka Sutta**, M 148), sometimes through suffering (**the Pañca,vaggī Sutta**, S 3:67), and sometimes through both (eg **the Arahanta Sutta** S 3:83 f, and **the Anicca Sutta**, S 4:1). Why is that? While impermanence and suffering are both evident, not-self or soullessness is not evident (MA 1:113).

2 Psychological Fears

Man is not able to see the not-selfness 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 says:

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

In their ignorance, some people panic at the thought that nothing permanent is to be found within oneself. In **the Alagaddûpama Sutta** the Buddha speaks of a person who holds the view: "The universe is that Self; I shall be that after death, permanent, abiding, ever lasting, unchanging, and I shall exist as such for eternity." When that man hears the Buddha or his disciple teaching the doctrine of not-self, he despairs thinking, "I will be annihilated, I will be destroyed, I will be no more." (M 1:135 f). Elsewhere the Buddha says "O bhikshus, this idea that I may not be, I may not have, is frightening to the uninstructed ordinary person." (MA 2:112)

[1] See Thanissaro, "No-self or not-self," 2001.

3 Scientific proofs that there is no soul

3.1 PHILOSOPHICAL INSIGHTS. The modern western notion of the self traces is 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").[2] 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,[3] Neoplatonist and doctor of the Roman catholic Church, **Augustine of Hippo** (354-430)[4] 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.[5]

The best known critic of Descartes was the most famous of the British philosophers, **David Hume** (1711-1776).[6] 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)[7]

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

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[2] *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.

[3] **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. **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.

[4] http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/augustine.html.

[5] http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/augustine/.

[6] http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hume/.

[7] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature.* Oxford Oxford University Press, 1740, 1978.

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 pof an ensemble or aggregate, which retains its identity not by virtue of some enduring core substance, but by being composed of many different, related, and yet constantly changing elements. The question of personal identity then is a matter of characterizing the loose cohesion of one's personal experience.[8] **Nicholas F Gier** gives a succinct summary of our present discussion:

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

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

During open-brain surgery, the surgeon may use fine electrodes 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**,[9] in a dialogue with the Dalai Lama during the second Mind and Life Conference (1989) on brain science and Buddhism, notes:

> When a particular part of the brain is stimulated, the patient may find that they can't express certain words that they would like to utter. Or they may unexpectedly experience very specific memories that return to them from the remote past, or they may hear old popular songs.
> (*Consciousness at the Crossroads,* 1999:26)[10]

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

> Bhikshus, **form** is not self. For, bhikshus, if form were self, this form would not lead to illness [affliction], and it would be possible to tell the form: 'Let my form be such. Let my form not be such.'[11]
>
> 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.'

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[8] 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.

[9] Professor of Philosophy at the University of California at San Diego.

[10] See Zara Houshmand et al (eds), 1999.

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

The same applies to ***feeling, perception, formations,*** *and* ***consciousness****....* (S 22.59/3:66-68)

The five aggregates are what constitute our whole being, that is, our body (form) and mind (feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness).[12] Churchland continues her philosophical arguments thus:

> 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.
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> …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)[13]

4 How the self-notion develops

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

(1) The conception of an ego or self begins from birth, from the instinct for survival
—a baby cries whenever it has a need (it is hungry, wet, in pain, etc), calling attention to itself.

(2) The baby grows into a child and plays with toys, and begins to identify with them: he collects the toys
—the conceptions of "my" and "mine" arise.

(3) As the child matures, he organizes these ideas into a more sophisticated self-identity
—the conceptions of "I" and "me" arise.

(4) Once there is a habitual idea of a **self** or **ego**, then there is the fear of losing "it."

(5) The adult person then thinks in terms of being and non-being,[14] 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 personal realization.

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

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[12] 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, 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*).

[13] See Zara Houshmand et al (eds), 1999.

[14] "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).

Now, what do you think, bhikshus, is **form ⟨feeling | perception | formations | consciousness⟩** permanent or impermanent?"

"Impermanent, venerable sir."

"Is what is impermanent unsatisfactory or satisfactory?"[15]

"Unsatisfactory, venerable sir."

"Is what is impermanent, unsatisfactory and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: 'This is mine, this I am, this is my self.'?"[16]

"No, venerable sir." (S 22.59/3:66-68)

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

5 (Atth'atta) Ānanda Sutta (S 44.10)

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

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

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

When this was said, the Blessed One remained silent.

"Then, master Gotama, is there no self?"

A second time, the Blessed One remained silent.

Then the wanderer Vacchagotta rose from his seat and departed.

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

"Why is it, venerable sir, that when the Blessed One was asked a question by the wanderer Vacchagotta, he did not answer it?"

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 a no self?' were to answer, 'There is no self,' **[401]** this would be siding with those ascetics and brahmins who are **annihilationists** [who believe that there is no afterlife]**.**

7 If I, Ānanda, when asked by the wanderer Vacchagotta, 'Is there a self?' were to answer, 'There is a self,' would my (reply) be conducive to the arising of knowledge[17] that 'all things are not self'?"

"Certainly not, venerable sir!"

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!'" (S 44.10/4:400f)

5a. Comments

It is evident from the Buddha's closing remark that Vacchagotta held the view that there was a self and that he was not ready to see the truth of not-self. Bhikkhu Bodhi makes this important note:[18]

> 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

[15] *dukkhaṃ vā sukhaṃ vā,* lit "suffering or happiness?"

[16] 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.

[17] "would my reply be conducive to the arising of knowledge…" *api nu me taṁ anulomaṁ abhavissa ñāṇassa upādāya…* See S:B 1456 n384.

[18] For further discussion, see Harvey 1995:28-33.

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 not self" (*sabbe dhammā anattā*), which means that if one seeks a self anywhere one will not find one. Since "all phenomena" includes both the conditioned and the unconditioned, this precludes an utterly transcendent, ineffable self. (S:B 1457 n385)

6 Reflections on not-self

Here are some methods of reflecting on the nature of not-self based on the suttas applied to our own times:

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

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

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

(4) A mirage. The illusion of a self is best illustrated by the simile of a mirage. A mirage is not mere imagination. In a mirage, there is real light arriving in our eyes. There is an image at the back of our eyes. The point is that the mind misinterprets what we are seeing and gives it a label it does not deserve. [In fact, the images we have in our eyes right now are inverted, but our minds adjusts them "right" side up!]

7 Proof of not-self

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.[19]

> 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,
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> "Let it ⟨the eye, etc⟩, 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."[20] (Vbh 48)

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

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

[19] For further discussion, see Harvey 1995:34-38.

[20] *Etaṁ uppannaṁ ṭhitaṁ mā pāpuṇatu, ṭhāna-p,patta mā jiratu, jara-p,pataṁ mā bhijjatu*; cf Vism 640.

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

8 All things are not 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	*sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā*	
All conditioned things are unsatisfactory	*sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā*	
All things are not self	*sabbe dhammā anattā.*	(Dh 277, 278, 279)

In the first two verses the term *saṅkhārā* ("conditioned things") is used; in the third, the word *dhammā* ("things") is used. The first term, *saṅkhāra*, denotes the Five Aggregates, all conditioned, interdependent, relative things and states, both physical and mental. The term *dhamma* covers a much wider scope than *saṅkhāra*. In fact, there is no term in Buddhist terminology wider than ***dhamma*** (Skt *dharma*). It includes not only the conditioned things and states, but also the unconditioned, the Absolute, nirvana. There is nothing in the universe or outside, good or bad, conditioned or unconditioned, relative or absolute, which is not included in this term. Therefore, it is clear that, according to this statement—"All things (*dhammā*) are not self"—there is no self, not only in the Five Aggregates, but nowhere else too outside them or apart from them.

9 Rebirth and not-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.[21]

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 *saṁsāra* 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 Interdependent Origination.[22]

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[21] For further discussion, see "How does rebirth occur without a soul?" at SD 18.11a(3.5).

[22] See **Titthāyatana S** (SD 6.7) or *The Buddha's Teaching,* ch 22; also Bucknell & Stuart-Fox, *The Twilight Language*, London: Curzon, 1986:82 f.

11 Uses of the self[23]

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 not-self doctrine in a book entitled *Selfless Persons* (1982:71-78), **Steve Collins** discusses 3 important ways of talking about the "self" (*attā*):

11.1 As reflexive pronoun (narrative in daily life). *Attā* is a regular reflexive pronoun in Pali, used in the masculine singular for all numbers and genders, as in "we restrain ourselves" and "she enjoys herself." Here are some canonical expressions of *atta* used in a reflexive sense:

suddhaṃ attānaṃ pariharati, he keeps himself pure (A 1:148 f, 4:109 f; DhsA 128).

parisuddha,kāya,kammantataṁ attani sampassamāno, sees in himself complete purity of bodily conduct (M 1:17).

attā'nuvāda, self-reproach.

atta,vetana, supporting oneself.

attā,dhīna, master of himself, independent, free (used of a liberated slave).

khem'atta, at peace with himself, tranquil.

rakkhit'atta, self-guarded, prudent.

pahit'atta, 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.[24]

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 one-self, 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).

so karohi dīpaṃ attano, make an island unto yourself (D 2:100; S 3:43; Dh 236, 238, etc).

attā hi attano nātho, the self is the lord of self; you are your own master (Dh 160, 380).

attān'upekhī, watching oneself (A 3:133 f).

atta,gutta, self-guarded (S 5:169; A 2:27 f, 3:6; Dh 379 etc).

bhāvit'atta, self-developed (A 4:26).

att'aññū, know oneself (D3:252; A 4:113).

sādhukaṃ attanā va attānaṃ paccavekkhanti, the practice of strict self-examination (A 1:53).

attanā va attānaṃ sañjānāmi, 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.

atta,vāda, the doctrine of self (D 3:230, S 2:185; A 3:447, etc).[25]

attā'nudiṭṭhi, speculation about the [or "a"] self (D 2:22; S 3:185; A 3:447, etc).

12 Not-self is a "self" without boundaries

In early Buddhism, the path leading to arhathood is sometimes presented as one of self-reliance (*atta,-vihāra*)**,** that is, the building up of an "inner centre of calm,"[26] as seen in this quote from the opening of **the Cakkavatti Sīhanāda Sutta** (D 26):

> Bhikshus, be an island unto yourselves; be a refuge unto yourselves, with no other refuge.[27]
> Here, bhikshus, a monk,[28] having put away longing and displeasure for the world,[29] dwells

[23] See Steven Collins, *Selfless Persons*, Cambridge University Press, 1982: section 2.2.
[24] For other examples, see Collins' *Selfless Persons* (1982:75 f), where he gives *atta* the sense of "conscience."
[25] Also *Buddhist Dictionary*, pp 184- 185.
[26] See for example Harvey 1995:54-63.

contemplating the body in the body,…feelings in the feelings,…mind in the mind…mind-objects in the mind-objects,[30] ardent, clearly aware and mindful.[31] Thus, bhikshus, a monk lives as an island unto himself; as a refuge unto himself, with no other refuge.

Keep to your own pastures, bhikshus, keep to the resort of your own fathers.[32] If you do so, then Māra will not find a chance, he will not find an opportunity (for an attack). This is the reason, bhikshus, for the undertaking of the wholesome states: it builds up merit.[33] (D 26.1/3:58)

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 not-self is the cultivation of the divine abodes (*brahma,-vihāra*). All the four cultivations—of lovingkindness, of compassion, of altruistic joy and of equanimity—are only fulfilled when one has "broken the barrier" between self and other (Vism 9.40; cf KhpA 248). In fact, all the preliminary stages of this practice lead to this "universalizing" stage of regarding others as one would oneself.

13 The "great self"

In the **Iti,vuttaka**, a collection of teachings made by the laywoman Khujj'uttarā[34], 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 *mahâtmā* is used to describe an advanced Buddhist practitioner:[35]

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[27] As at **Mahā Parinibbāna S** (D 16.2.26/2:101).

[28] DA says that "monk" (*bhikkhu*) here indicates "whoever undertakes that practice…is here included under the term *bhikkhu*." See Dh 142; also Dh 362, 260-270. Cf **Bhikkhu Vagga** (ch 25) and **Brāhmaṇa Vagga** (ch 26) of Dh.

[29] "World" (*loka*). **Vibhaṅga** says: "This very body is the world, and the five aggregates of clinging (ie form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness) are the world—this is called the world." (Vbh 195). However, in his amplified tr at Vibh 105, U Thittila has "world (ie, in ideational objects)" (*dhammā*, mental objects) (Vibh:T 139).

[30] "Contemplating the body as body," "contemplating feelings as feelings," "contemplating mind as mind," and "contemplating mind-objects as mind-objects." 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). These three are also known as "latent tendencies to 'I'-making, 'mine'-making and conceit" (*ahaṅ,kāra,mamaṅ,kāra mānânusaya*) (M 22.15, 72.15, 112.11 20, S 2:75, 3:236, 4:41, A 1:132, 133). They are called the three obsessions (*gāha*) and are the main factors behind conception (M 1) and mental proliferation (*papañca*) (M 18). In short, such experiences are not "beliefs" but direct experiences of reality. See Bodhi 1980:8-11; Harvey 1995:32 f.; Gethin 2001:158.

[31] This sentence is as at **Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna S** (D 22.1/2:290) & **Satipaṭṭhāna S** (M 10.3/1:56). "Clearly aware and mindful" *sampajāno satimā*: Vism 163=4.172 explains that clear awareness (*sampajañña=paññā*) has the characteristic of non-confusion; its function is to investigate and manifested as scrutiny. Mindfulness (*sati*) has the characteristic of remembering. Its function is not to forget and is manifested as guarding. *Sampajāno* is also tr as "fully understanding," "clearly comprehending" (see Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi 2001 n147; also Prayudh 2001: 265).

[32] "The resort of your own fathers," *sake pettike visaye* (D 3:58; S 5:146; J 2:59, 6:193). alt trs "the way of your ancestors," "your own home-ground" (PED), "in your own native beat" (Harvey 1995:54). **The Sakuṇagghi S** (S 47.6/5:147 f) explains this expression: "Not one's own pasture…the domain of others" refers to the five strands of sense-pleasures (*pañca kāma,guṇa*), namely, the sense-objects, that is, one should not be distracted by pleasurable sense-objects. "Your own pastures…the resort of your own fathers" refers to the Stations of Mindfulness (as defined in the sutta passage here).

[33] "Merit" *puñña,* "goodness-power" (Harvey 1995:54).

[34] Khujj'uttarā, "Uttarā the Hunchback," a laywoman Stream-winner, declared the foremost of laywomen who are learned (*bahu-s,suta*) in the Dharma (A 1:26; DhA 1:208 ff; ItA 23 f.; PmA 498 f).

[35] Cf the Buddha's usage of *brāhmaṇa* to describe a true Saint, Dh ch 26.

Iti,vuttaka 2.1.8

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

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 gain, honour, fame and profit, not with the thought, "May the people know me thus!"

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

This is the meaning of what the Blessed One has spoken:

For the sake of restraint and letting go,
A holy life not based on hearsay[36];
The Blessed One taught
The path leading to one's plunging into nirvana.
This is the way of the great souls,[37]
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.

This is the meaning of what was spoken by the Blessed One: thus I have heard. (It 2.1.8/28 f)

14 Advantage of the "great self"

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

The first kind of person is "of undeveloped body,[38] undeveloped virtue, undeveloped mind, undeveloped wisdom: he is (mentally) limited (*paritta*), having a small self (*app'ātuma*),[39] dwelling with little suffering" (*appa,dukkha,vihārī*).

The second kind of person is "of developed body, developed virtue, developed mind, developed wisdom, he is (mentally) unlimited (*aparitta*), having a great self (*mah'attā*), dwelling immeasurable (*appamāṇa*)."[40]

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

A person with a "great self" might still do a small evil action that brings karmic result but he does not experience its karmic fruits in hell (nor any of the lower states). In other words, this refers to a stream-winner, or a once-returner, or a non-returner: an arhat has already transcended rebirth.

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[36] "not based on hearsay," *anîtiha,* that is, self-realized and not handed down from others (cf Sn 934).

[37] "Great souls," *mah'attā,* or "great selves," ie those who are selfless or have realized not-self. See Harvey 1995:56 f.

[38] "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."

[39] "Small self" (*app'ātumā*) or "insignificant self" (Harvey 1995:56).

[40] A 3.99/1:249 = SD 3.5.

One can transform the "small" self into a "great" one through such practices as the cultivation of lovingkindness (*mettā*) or of mindfulness (*sati*). The importance of the cultivation of lovingkindness is attested by **the Brahma,vihāra Sutta** (A 10.208),[41] 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 way[42] neither remains nor persists there.
> (A 10.208/5:299)

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

15 The fourfold emptiness

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

(1) "I'm not in anything" (*nâhaṁ kvācini*);
(2) "There is nothing of me in anything whatever" (*na kassaci kiñcana tasmiṁ*);
(3) "There is nothing whatever that is mine" (*na ca mama kvācini*); and
(4) "There is nothing in anything" (*kismiñci kiñcana n'atthi*).
(M 2:263 f; A 1:206, 2:177; cf A 3:170)[43]

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;[44]
(4) He does not see the self of another as something belonging to him.
(MA 4:63-65; VismA 840 f = MAṬ *ad loc.* See Vism:Ñ 21.53 n19; M:ÑB 1315 n1016)

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

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[41] See **Brahma,vihāra S** (A 10.208) in SD 2.10 (this volume).

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

[43] Earlier on in the same sutra, the Buddha mentions, by way of summary, the twofold Emptiness (*dvi,koṭika suññatā*): (1) "Empty is this of self" (*suññā,m-idaṁ 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.

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

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

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

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

16 Form is emptiness, emptiness form

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

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

Each of these four lines refers to the "emptiness" of the respective Noble Truth. The Heart Sutra put this in an even more dramatic way:

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

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

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

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

Capra adds:

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

17 Right view is "no view"

In the ultimate analysis, to hold a view, good or bad, is to grasp at a self. The awakened understands that to hold any view is to invite strife and dispute, since everyone is of a different level of understanding and do not see anything in the same way. A view has different understanding and meaning to different

people. In short, even Right View is just a means to a higher end: spiritual liberation. For this reason, the Buddha declares in the Alaggadûpamā Sutta:

> Bhikshus, having known the parable of the raft, you should abandon even the Teaching, how much more that which is not the Teaching![45] (M 22.14/1:135)

18 Philosophical summary

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:

The self and the body

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

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

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

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

The self and the mind

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

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

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

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

It is clear from what has been discussed thus far, that thinking is not a reliable indicator of whether or nor 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)

19 Scriptural summary

The excerpt on not-self, from **the Alaggadûpama Sutta** (M 22), summarizes our study of the subject, and is useful by way of reflection:

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

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.[46] But do you see any such possession, bhikshus?"

"No, venerable sir."

"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**[47] that would not cause sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair to arise in one who clings to it.[48] But do you see any such possession, bhikshus?"

"No, venerable sir."

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

24 Bhikshus, you may well rely on that support of views[49] that would not cause sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair to arise in one who relies on it. But do you see any such possession, bhikshus?"

"No, venerable sir."

"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.[50]

25 Bhikshus, if there were a self, would there be for me what belongs to a self?"[51]

"Yes, venerable sir."

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

"Yes, venerable sir."

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

"What else could it be, venerable sir, but an entirely and completely foolish teaching?"[52]

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

"Impermanent, venerable sir."

"Is what is impermanent painful or pleasurable?"

"Painful, venerable sir."

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[46] Linked to M 22.18.

[47] "You may well cling to a doctrine of the self," (*atta,vād'upādānaṁ upadiyetha*). For an alt tr (using "assumption" for *upādāna*), see Nyanaponika 1974:43 n27. On the difficulty of translating *atta,vād'upādānaṁ upādiyetha*, 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,bat'upādāna*) (D 3:230, M 1:66, Vbh 375). 20 kinds of self-views (*sakkāya diṭṭhi*) are listed at Dhs 1214-17. See BDict: upādāna.

[48] Linked to M22.20.

[49] "Support of views," *diṭṭhi,nissaya.* Comy says this is the 62 wrong views mentioned in **Brahmajāla S** (D 1), that emerge from personality-view, and including Ariṭṭha's evil false view (§2). DA on Mahā Sati'paṭṭhāna S (D 2:292) and MA on Satipaṭṭhāna S (M 1:56) (both identical passages) mention 2 kinds of supports, viz craving as support (*taṇhā,nissaya*) and views as support (*diṭṭhi,nissaya*).

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

[51] "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).

[52] MA: Here a twofold emptiness is shown, ie that of the self (*atta*) and of the property of a self (*attanīya*). The 2 supplementary statements in this section suggests that the concepts of "I" and "mine: are inseparably linked, like the philosophical terms, substance ("fire") and attribute ("hotness"). See Nyanaponika 1974:44 n30.

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

"No, venerable sir."

"Bhikshus,…Is **feeling**…

"Bhikshus,…Is **perception**…

"Bhikshus,…Are **formations**…

"Bhikshus,…Is **consciousness** permanent or impermanent?"

"Impermanent, venerable sir."

"Is what is impermanent painful or pleasurable?"

"Painful, venerable sir."

"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, venerable sir."[53]

27 Therefore, bhikshus, any kind of **form** whatever—whether past, future or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near[54]—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.'[55]

Any kind of **feeling** whatever…

Any kind of **perception** whatever…

Any kind of **formations** whatever…

Any kind of **consciousness** whatever—whether past, future or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near—all forms should be seen as they really are with right wisdom thus:

'This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.'

28 Seeing thus, bhikshus, a well-taught noble disciple becomes revulsed[56] 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.

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[53] 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)

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

[55] See **Anatta,lakkhaṇa S** (S 22.59.27).

[56] "He becomes revulsed" (*nibbindati*). MA: He is dissatisfied, disgusted. This revulsion marks the culmination of insight, just before the attainment of the supramundane path (Vism 722 f). "His lust fades away" marks the attainment of the supramundane path (*magga*), when the fetters are finally eliminated. "He is liberated" refers to the attainment of the supramundane fruition (*phala*). The arhat's subsequent reviewing knowledge (*paccavekkhaṇa,-ñāṇa*) is shown by the phrase "there comes the knowledge" and "he understands: 'Birth is destroyed…'," in the following paragraph.

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)

A famous analogy should be retold here: to look for a permanent entity in oneself 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.

20 Benefits of knowing there is no enduring self

(1) Mental health. Even with a simple understanding and acceptance of not-selfness, we can, on a mundane level, become more open, more comfortable, more creative people. When we cling to the notion of a self, we are always defending ourselves, our prestige, our ideas, even our words. But once we give up the notion of an unchanging and independent self, we will be able to relate to people and situations with neither agenda nor paranoia.

(2) Spiritual liberation. Most importantly, understanding not-self is the key to awakening. The belief in a self is synonymous with **ignorance**, the most basic of three unwholesome roots. As long as we grasp to the notion of a permanent, independent self, we create a schism, a dichotomy, between self and other (people, things and views). Such a conceptual separation forces us to react to the people and things around us with either attraction (*anunaya*) or aversion (*paṭigha*). As such, the self-idea is the real culprit here that hinders liberation.

(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),[57] 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.[58]

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."[59]

21 Meditations on not-self

The Buddha's second discourse, **the Anatta,lakkhaṇa Sutta** (S 22.59) explains how one should correctly regard the five aggregates, a practice centering around the *anicca-dukkha-anattā* formula:

"Therefore, bhikshus,
any kind of form…
any kind of feeling…
any kind of perception…
any kind of formations…
any kind of consciousness whatsoever,
whether past, future or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near[60]—all forms should be seen as they really are with right wisdom thus:

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[57] S 25.1/3:225 = SD 16.7.

[58] See **Entering the Stream** = SD 3.3.

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

[60] See S 22.48/3:47. This classification of the aggregates is explained in detail in the Vibhaṅga and briefly in the Visuddhimagga: **"internal"** = physical sense-organs; **"external"** = physical sense-objects; **"gross"** = that which im-

'This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.'"[61] (S 22.59.17-21/3:68) = SD 1.2

The unawakened ordinary person, on the other hand, tends to see the aggregates in four wrong ways, and is obsessed by his wrong view—this is formulated in **the *attânudiṭṭhi* formula**, thus:

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

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

In both the Suttas and the Abhidhamma, these twenty wrong views regarding the aggregates are used to define the nature of self-view (*sakkāya,diṭṭhi*), that is, the wrong view that the body is a permanent entity.[62] Although these wrong views generally define an unawakened worldling, more significantly, they are said to be absent from the four dhyanas (*jhāna*) and the first three formless attainments (*samāpatti*).[63] 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 not self. He turns his mind away from those states and directs it to the deathless element…
>
> If he persists in that,[64] he attains the destruction of the cankers. But if he does not attain the destruction of the cankers because of desire for the Dharma, that delight in the Dharma, then with the destruction of the five lower fetters[65] [connected with the lower realms of existence], he is

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

[61] *N'etaṁ mama, n'eso 'ham asmi, na mêso 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,padôpama S** (M 28/1:184-191 §§6b-7, 11b-12, 16b-17, 21b-22). These three considerations represent respectively the 3 kinds of **mental proliferation** (*papañca*) of self-view (*sakkāya diṭṭhi*), of craving (*taṇhā*) and of conceit (*māna*) (Nm 280; Vbh 393; Nett 37 f). In **Anatta,lakkhaṇa S** (S 22.59.12-16/3:68), the formula is applied to the 5 aggregates & in **Pārileyya S** (S 22.81/3:94-99) to the 4 primary elements. See also **Rāhula S** (A 4.177/2:164 f). See **Pārileyya S,** SD 6.16 Introd (5).

[62] M 1:300, 3:17 f; S 3:102; Dhs 182.

[63] 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.

[64] *Etaṁ santaṁ etaṁ paṇītaṁ.*

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

spontaneously reborn [becomes a non-returner, reborn in the Pure Abodes][66] and there attain final nirvana, without ever returning from that world.

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

(M 64.10-15/1:436 f = A 9.36/4:422-424;[67] cf A 2:128 (×2), 130 (×2))

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

(1) Here, householder, an ignorant ordinary person[68] who sees not the noble ones, unskilled in the way of the noble ones, untrained in the way of the noble ones,[69] who sees not the true persons and is unskilled in way of the true person,[70] untrained in the way of the true person,

—regards form as self, or self as possessing form, or form as in self, or self as in form;[71]

—he lives obsessed by the notions, 'I am form. Form is mine.'[72]

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

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

—he lives obsessed by the notions, 'I am feeling. Feeling is mine.'…

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

—he lives obsessed by the notions, 'I am perception. Perception is mine.'…

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

—he lives obsessed by the notions, 'I am formations. Formations are mine.'…

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[66] 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 Akaṇiṭṭhā ("Highest") (D 3:237, M 3:103, Vbh 425, Pug 42-46). It should be noted that one could be become a non-returner in this world itself, and upon dying, be reborn in the Pure Abodes.

[67] **Jhāna S** contains an archer parable not found in **Mahā Māluṅkya,putta S.**

[68] "Ignorant ordinary person," *assutava puthujjana.* See Introd (3).

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

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

[71] The **Paṭisambhidā,magga** illustrates the four basic modes of self-identity view in connection with form (*rūpa*) in this manner. One might wrongly regard form as self in the way that the flame of a burning oil-lamp is identical to the colour of the flame. Or one might wrongly regard self as possessing form just as a tree possesses a shadow. Or one might wrongly regard form as in self as the scent is in the flower. Or one might wrongly regard self as in form, as a jewel is in a casket (Pm 2.50, 74, 77, 90 = 1:144 f).

[72] 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*), persistent doubt (*vicikicchā*), attachment to rules and rites (*sīla-b,bata,parāmāsa*), sensual lust (*kāma,rāga*), repulsion (*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 Stream-winner. See Introd (4).

(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 21.7

Another set of twenty wrong views, called **the *sakkāya,diṭṭhi* views** or the self-identity views, are mentioned in **the Parileyya Sutta** (S 22.81), which relates how an uninstructed ordinary person tends to regard any of the five aggregates (form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness) in these ways:

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

The Mahā Puṇṇama Sutta[73] and **the Cūḷa Vedalla Sutta,**[74] too, list these twenty self-identity views in connection with the five aggregates. The **Paṭisambhidā,magga** illustrates the four basic modes of the self-identity view in connection with form in this way. One might wrongly regard form as self in the way that a burning oil-lamp's flame is identical to the colour of the flame. Or one might wrongly regard self as possessing form just as a tree possesses a shadow. Or one might wrongly regard form as in self as the scent in the flower. Or one might wrongly regard self as in form, as a jewel in a casket.[75] These self-identity views have been abandoned by the stream-winner.

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.

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[73] M 109.10/ 3:17 f = SD 17.10.
[74] M 44.7 f/1:300.
[75] Pm 2.50, 74, 77, 90 = 1:144 f.

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