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Theravāda Philosophy of Mind and the Person

Anatta-lakkhaṇa Sutta, Mahānidāna Sutta, and Milindapañha

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Of the following three selections, the first two, the *Anatta-lakkhaṇa Sutta* and a part of the *Mahānidāna Sutta*, are from the Theravādin Pali canonical collection of discourses attributed to the Buddha. The third is from a postcanonical Pali text, the *Milindapañha*. While they all contain points and arguments of philosophical relevance, they are not as such systematic philosophical texts, and to properly appreciate their nuances and implications, one needs to understand something of their context of thought and practice.

The Buddha's Religio-Philosophical Context

As mapped by the discourses of the Theravāda canon, the brahmins and non-Buddhist renunciants of the Buddha's day were sometimes divided into "eternalists," "annihilationists," and "eel-wrigglers." "Eternalists" were those who believed in some kind of eternal self that existed from rebirth to rebirth and also in liberation from rebirth: the variously understood *ātman* (Skt.) of the *Upaniṣads*, seen as a universal essence within all beings, and the individual *jīva*, or "life principle," of the Jains. "Annihilationists" were those who believed that a person is totally destroyed at death. This is sometimes characterized as a denial of any kind of self (S. IV.400–401), and sometimes as belief in an unchanging self, mental or purely physical, that was then destroyed at death (D. I.34–35).¹

1. For abbreviations, see chapter 15 here.

“Eel-wrigglers” were skeptics who believed that humans could have no knowledge of such matters as what happened after death (D. I.26–27).

The Buddha did not accept any of these views, but saw unenlightened beings as subject to rebirth after death, according to the nature of their previous actions (karma).² The link from one life to the next was a stream of conditioned and changing states: a “middle” way of understanding that avoided both eternalism and annihilationism, and was not skepticism either (S. II.20).

Given that the Buddha was not a materialist, could he simply be called a mind-body “dualist”? Not in a Cartesian sense. He did not see either mind or body as unitary substances. Rather, both were bundles of changing, conditioned, and interacting processes.³ Yet as any mental or physical process can only exist due to supporting conditions (other processes), it is not accepted that “everything is a unity” or “everything is a (disconnected) diversity” (S. II.77).

The Early Buddhist Approach to “Self”

The term *attā* (Pali, Skt. *ātman*), or “self,” was much used in the Buddha’s day and has various applications in early Buddhist texts. In many, it simply means “myself,” “herself,” or “oneself.” In some, it is equivalent to “character,” that is, what is known in self-knowledge, or to body, or personality, or the mind (*citta*) as the center of emotions (Harvey 1995: 19–21). In the last of these senses, a spiritually developed person is even said in Buddhist texts to have a “great self” (*mah-attā*; A.I.249; Harvey 1995: 55–58).

However, there is also a referent of the term *attā* which is not accepted: when it refers to “self” or “I” as something that is permanent, an unchanging essence of a person that is fully autonomous and so in total control of itself and its possessions: the kind of self accepted particularly by the Brahmanical *Upaniṣads* or Jain texts. Early Buddhist texts never accept anything as being *this* kind of “self.”⁴

Whenever anyone claimed any item, whether physical or mental, as “Self,” the Buddha always critically examined the claim, to argue that the item is really *an-attā* (Pali, Skt. *an-ātman*): not-Self, a non-Self, not a Self.⁵

2. His belief in rebirth is presented in the texts as based on his memory of many thousands of lives, a memory that arose when his mind was deeply calmed and hence sensitized in an alert state of profound meditative stilling (e.g. D.I.81–83).

3. One might characterize this view as “twin-category process pluralism” (Harvey 1993).

4. While Pali and Sanskrit have no capital letters, in translation it is appropriate to signal reference to this kind of self by writing it “Self.”

5. The term on its own does not mean “no self” or “no Self,” and certainly not “no soul.” While the meaning of “soul” in Western thought varies, it is primarily that which gives life to the body, and Buddhism does not deny that there is something that does this. In Buddhism, it is simply that any “soul” must be recognized as not being a fixed, permanent, unitary entity, which at least rules out any idea of an *immortal* soul.

Equivalent to saying something is “not-Self” is to say it is “empty” (Pali *suñña*, Skt. *śūnya*) of Self and what belongs to Self (S. IV.54).

Even nirvana (Pali *Nibbāna*), the final goal of early and Theravāda Buddhism, is included in what is not-Self (Harvey 1995: 23). While being unconditioned (A. II.34), and beyond impermanence and any suffering, as a *dhamma*, a basic item of possible experience, it is included in “all *dhammas* are not-Self” (A. II.286): that is, everything is not-Self.

Nevertheless, the not-Self teaching is not a bald denial of Self, but a persistent undermining of any attempt to take anything as “Self,” and thus be attached to it. It is a contemplative strategy to induce, in the end, a letting go of *everything*. To reduce it to a bald “there is no Self” would be to short-circuit this process. Indeed, the Buddha was once directly asked “Is there a s/Self?” to which he responded with silence, as he did to “Is there no s/Self?” (S. IV.400–401). After the questioner had left, he explained that if he had said “There is a s/Self,” this would have been to side with the eternalists, and contradicted his knowledge that “all *dhammas* are not-Self.” To have said “There is no s/Self,” would have been to side with the annihilationists, and make the confused questioner think that he had lost a s/Self he previously had. The simplest explanation of this response is that the Buddha accepted a changing empirical self that was not destroyed at death, but flowed on into a future rebirth. The annihilationist denial of s/Self rejected any idea of rebirth, and thus denied “self” in this sense.

The Five Aggregates

In the texts of Theravāda Buddhism, the most common way of dividing up the processes making up a person is in terms of the five *khandhas* (Pali, Skt. *skandhas*). The *khandhas*, “aggregates” or “bundles,” or five “aggregates (as objects) of grasping” (Pali *upādāna-kkhandhas*), are material form, feeling, perception, constructing activities, and consciousness.

Material form (Pali, Skt. *rūpa*) consists of the physical elements (solidity, cohesion, heat, and air) that make up the body of a living being, and more subtle processes derived from these. Feeling (Pali, Skt. *vedanā*) is the quality of experience that is hedonic tone, whether pleasant, painful, or neither. This is not the same as emotion, though it accompanies any emotion or sensory experience. Perception (Pali *saññā*, Skt. *saṃjñā*) is associative knowledge as cognition, mental labeling, interpretation, recognition, how one sees things. Constructing activities (Pali *saṅkhāras*, Skt. *saṃskāras*) are a range of mental responses⁶ to objects, with will or volition (Pali, Skt. *cetanā*) being the leading one, others being planning, lines of thought, emotions, habits. Consciousness (Pali *viññāṇa*, Skt. *viññāna*) is discriminative consciousness, sensory discernment, awareness of sensory and mental objects, object-processing intelligence.

6. The *Abhidhamma* literature lists fifty constructing activities.

In the *Abhidhamma* literature, the aggregates are seen to change from moment to moment, and at any one instant, there is only one kind of consciousness, perception, and feeling, though various constructing activities. Hence mental processing is in one sense in series (only one type of consciousness at once) and in another in parallel (a consciousness is accompanied by various other processes).

Levels of Belief in a Self

Belief in a Self is seen to come in two forms. The first is Self-identity view:⁷ to take any of the aggregates as (1) Self, (2) the property of Self, (3) in Self, or (4) containing Self. It is to view something specific as “this am I” (S. III.128). This is overcome by a person who is a “Stream-enterer”: one who has a foretaste of nirvana and is certain to fully realize it, as an *arahat* (Pali, Skt. *arhat*), a liberated saint, within seven lives at most.

Second, there is the more deep-rooted “I am conceit” (*asmi-māna*), which remains even once a person becomes a Stream-enterer. This is a vague attitude of “I am” with respect to *all* of the aggregates, just as the scent belongs to the whole flower, not just to a particular part of it (S. III.130). While seen as rooted in delusion, it is regarded as a really occurring state—ego, self-centeredness, or self-importance—one that is seen to weigh down the empirical self. The *arahat* has overcome it.

Accordingly, when the Buddha is asked by a monk “Who feels?” or “Who craves?” (S. II.13–14), he says that these are not valid questions. It is, however, valid to ask what feeling or craving are conditioned by, namely, sensory stimulation and feeling, respectively. That is, the enlightened see a person as a stream of interacting processes, but see no “I” operating them.

The *Anatta-lakkhaṇa Sutta*: The “Discourse on the Characteristic of Not-Self”

This discourse (S. III.66–68) is seen as the second that the Buddha gave, to five former ascetics who had already practiced with him so as to become at least Stream-enterers. On two grounds, it argues that each of the aggregates must be seen as not-Self.

First, one cannot control the aggregates at will, as one could with something that was part of an essential Self. While some control can be exercised over the aggregates, this is limited. Hence one inevitably experiences various kinds of “affliction.” One can see these as: bodily illness and aging; the

7. “Self-identity view” renders *sakkāya-ditthi* (Pali, Skt. *satkāya-dṛṣṭi*), literally, “views on the existing group,” that is, views on the five aggregates, taking them as somehow related to a Self (M.I. 299).

disturbance of unwanted feelings; seeing things in distorted ways, or ways one does not like; thinking in distorted, or agitated ways, or compulsively, or other ways one does not like or choose; the mind being pulled this way and that to different objects, or awareness constantly changing and fluctuating, or being fuzzy and clouded.

Second, the aggregates are impermanent, and hence induce pain (whether physical or mental). If something pertained to an essential and unchanging Self of a person, it could not cause pain; hence it is inappropriate to take any of the aggregates as “mine,” in the sense of a reliable possession; what “I am” in an essential way; or “my Self.” As impermanent, they cannot be a permanent Self, and as associated with suffering, they cannot be within the ambit or control of something that is supposedly one’s true autonomous essence.

Translation

Thus have I heard. At one time, the Blessed One was dwelling at Baranasi in the Deer Park at Isipatana. There the Blessed one addressed the monks of the group of five thus: “Monks!” “Venerable sir!” those monks replied. The Blessed One said this:

“Material form, monks, is not-Self. Now were this material form Self, it would not lead to affliction, and one would be able to effectively say, ‘Let my material form be like this, or not like this.’ But inasmuch as material form is not-Self, therefore it leads to affliction, and one cannot effectively say, ‘Let my material form be like this, or not like this.’ [The same is then said of feeling, perception, the constructing activities, and consciousness.]

What do you think about this, monks? Is material form permanent or impermanent?” “Impermanent, venerable sir.” “But is that which is impermanent painful (*dukkham*) or pleasant (*sukham*)?” “Painful, venerable sir.” “But is it fitting to regard that which is impermanent, painful, and of a nature to change, as ‘This is mine, this am I, this is my Self?’” “No, venerable sir.” [The same is then said of feeling, perception, the constructing activities, and consciousness.]

“Therefore, monks, whatever is material form: past, future, or present; internal or external; gross or subtle; low or excellent; far or near; all material form should be seen as it really is by right wisdom, thus: ‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my Self.’ [The same is then said of feeling, perception, the constructing activities, and consciousness.] Seeing in this way, monks, the learned noble disciple turns away from (*nibbindati*) material form,⁸ and from feeling, perception, constructing activities, and consciousness. Turning away, he becomes dispassionate; through dispassion, [his mind] is freed;

8. That is, he lets go of material form, does not grasp at, lean on, or identify with it, having had enough of it, so as to even feel revulsion for it.

in freedom, there is the knowledge: ‘It’s freed.’ He understands, ‘Destroyed is birth, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more for this state of being.’”⁹

Thus spoke the Blessed One, and, delighted, the group of five monks rejoiced at what the Blessed One had said. Moreover, while this discourse was being uttered, their minds were freed of taints by nonclinging.

Extract from the *Mahā-nidāna Sutta*, the “Great Discourse on Causal Links”

The following passage (D. II.66–68) considers three ways in which those who believe in Self may relate it to “feeling” (*vedanā*). While the passage itself is not set up as a refutation of Self, its implications can be seen to rule out any possibility of a Self. The first view is that Self is simply identical to feeling. If it were only *one* of the three modes of feeling (pleasant, painful, neutral), though, it would be an intermittent thing, not permanent, and it would keep disappearing, which would be odd for a “Self.” Yet if it were something that encompassed all three kinds of feelings, it would be a fluctuating mixture of opposites, which is seen as unacceptable for a genuine Self.

The second view is that Self is not feeling, and lacks any experience. This is refuted on the grounds that the sense “I am” requires the presence of feeling of some kind, the presumption being that there could be no Self without a sense of “I am.” The third view, that Self *is* not feeling, but is something that *feels*, has a similar refutation: if feeling came to cease, how could there be the sense of a particular I-identity, “this am I”?

The unstated implications of these three refutations are far-reaching. If Self exists, it would have a sense “I am” or “this am I,”¹⁰ which would depend on feeling. But feeling is not-Self (refutation 1), and elsewhere it is stated, “How will the eye [or any of the other senses or sense-objects], which is arisen from what is not-Self, be Self?” (S. IV.130). This means that anything *dependent* on what is not-Self must *itself* be not-Self. The “I” that is Self would thus turn out to be not-Self. But if there can only be a Self under conditions that would make it *not*-Self, then it is clearly impossible for there to be such a thing as a Self: *the concept itself is self-contradictory*. In fact, S. III.105 says that there is only “I am” by clinging to the aggregates, which are, of course, not-Self. That is, a sense of Self only arises with respect to the aggregates of bodily and mental factors, but it is not *legitimately* applied even here.

9. I.e. a person becomes an *arahat*, free of the causes of any further rebirth. He or she experiences nirvana in life, and finally enters it on dying, as a state beyond description (Harvey 1995: 227–245).

10. The sense of “I am” is the “I am” conceit, and the sense “this am I” is Self-identity view.

Translation

In what ways, Ānanda, does one who regards Self regard it? (1) Regarding Self, he regards it to be feeling: “My Self is feeling,” or (2) “My Self is not feeling, my Self is without experience,” or (3) “My Self is not feeling, but my Self is not without experience, my Self *feels*, it has the attribute of feeling.”¹¹

(1) Now Ānanda, one who says “My Self is feeling” should be told, “There are three kinds of feeling, friend: pleasant, painful, and neither-pleasant-nor-painful [neutral]. Which of these three feelings do you regard as Self?” When a pleasant feeling is felt, no painful or neutral feeling is felt, only pleasant feeling. When a painful feeling is felt, no pleasant or neutral feeling is felt, only painful feeling. When a neutral feeling is felt, no pleasant or painful feeling is felt, only neutral feeling.

Pleasant feeling is impermanent, conditioned, dependently originated, subject to destruction, to passing away, to fading away, to cessation. The same applies to painful and neutral feeling. So anyone who, on feeling a pleasant feeling, thinks “This is my Self,” must, at the cessation of that pleasant feeling, think “My Self has departed!” The same applies to painful and neutral feeling. Thus, whoever thinks “My Self is feeling” is regarding as Self something that in this present life is impermanent, a mixture of pleasure and pain, subject to arising and passing away. Therefore it is not fitting to maintain “My Self is feeling.”

(2) But anyone who says, “My Self is not feeling, my Self is without experience” should be asked, “If, friend, no feeling existed, could there be the thought, ‘I am’?” [To this he would have to reply] “No, venerable sir.” Therefore, it is not fitting to maintain “My Self is not feeling, my Self is without experience.”

(3) And anyone who says, “My Self is not feeling, but my Self is not without experience, my Self feels, it has the attribute of feeling” should be asked, “Well, friend, if all feelings entirely and completely ceased without remainder, could there be the thought ‘this am I?’” [To this he would have to reply] “No, venerable sir.” Therefore, it is not fitting to maintain “My Self is not feeling, but my Self is not without experience, my Self feels, it has the attribute of feeling.”

From the time, Ānanda, when a monk no longer regards Self as feeling, or Self as without experience, or “My Self feels, it has the attribute of feeling,” not so regarding, he clings to nothing in the world; not clinging, he does not tremble; not trembling, he personally experiences nirvana, and he understands, “Destroyed is (re-)birth, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more for this state of being.”

11. The commentary sees these three views as, respectively, identifying Self with the aggregate(s) of feeling, material form, and the three mental aggregates other than feeling: perception, constructing activities, and consciousness.

Extract from the *Milindapañha*, “Milinda’s Questions”

The *Milindapañha*, a text dating from around the first century C.E., purports to be a series of conversations between a Bactrian-Greek king, Milinda (Menandros, reigned 155–130 B.C.E.), and the Buddhist monk Nāgasena.¹² Its key point is that “person,” or “being,” or indeed “self,” is not some mysterious essence, whether identical with any body part, or with the five aggregates individually or collectively, or something apart from these. Just as a “chariot” is not any chariot component or the totality of components, or something separate from the components, but a conventional term applied by common usage to the rightly assembled collection of components, so when there is the functioning collection of five aggregates the term “a being” or “a person” is applied. In the assembled mental and physical components of “self” in the everyday sense, there is no Self, no person-essence, just a collection of conditioned interacting processes. The great Theravādin commentator Buddhaghosa (fourth-fifth century C.E.) explains, “in the ultimate sense, when each thing [*dhamma*] is examined, there is no being as a basis for the assumption ‘I am’ or ‘I’; in the ultimate sense there is only mentality and material form (*nāma-rūpa*).”¹³

Translation

“How is the venerable one known?” . . .

“Sire, I am known as Nāgasena. . . . But though (my) parents gave (me) the name Nāgesena or Sūrasena or Vīrasena or Sīhasena, yet it is but a denotation, appellation, designation, current usage, for Nāgasena is only a name, since no person is apprehended here.”

Then King Milinda spoke thus, “Good sirs . . . is it suitable to approve of that? . . . If, venerable Nāgasena, the person is not apprehended, who then is it that gives you the requisites of robe-material . . . who is it that makes use of them? Who is it that guards moral virtue, practices meditative development, realizes . . . nirvana? Who is it that kills a living thing? . . . Therefore, there is no wholesome action, no unwholesome action, there is no doer of wholesome or unwholesome actions, or one who makes another act thus, there is no fruit or ripening of action (karma) well or ill done. If, venerable Nāgasena, someone killed you, there would be no onslaught on a living being for him. Also, venerable Nāgasena, you would have no teacher, no preceptor, no ordination. If you say, ‘Fellows in the holy life address me, sire, as Nāgasena,’ what here is Nāgasena? Is it, venerable sir, that the hairs of the head are Nāgasena?” “O no, sire.” “That the hairs of the body are Nāgasena?” “O no, sire.” “That the nails . . . the teeth, the skin, the flesh, the sinews, the bones,

12. The extract given here is Miln. 25–28.

13. *Visuddhimagga* p.594. See Nanamoli 2003 for translation of this text.

the marrow, the kidneys, the heart, the liver, the membranes, the spleen, the lungs, the intestines, the mesentery, the stomach, the excrement, the bile, the phlegm, the pus, the blood, the sweat, the fat, the tears, the serum, the saliva, the mucus, the synovial fluid, the urine, or the brain in the head¹⁴ are (any of them) Nāgasena?” “O no, sire.”

“Is Nāgasena material form, venerable sir?” “O no, sire.” “Is Nāgasena feeling...perception...the constructing activities, or consciousness?” “O no, sire.”

“But then, venerable sir, is Nāgasena form-feeling-perception-constructing-activities-and-consciousness?” “O no, sire.” “But then, venerable sir, is there Nāgasena apart from form-feeling-perception-constructing-activities-and-consciousness?” “O no, sire.” “Though I, venerable sir, am asking you repeatedly, I do not see this Nāgasena. Nāgasena is only a sound, venerable sir. For who here is Nāgasena? You, venerable sir, are speaking an untruth, a lying word. There is no Nāgasena.”

Then the venerable Nāgasena spoke thus to King Milinda: “You, sire, are a noble, delicately nurtured... Now, did you come on foot or in a conveyance?” “I, venerable sir, did not come on foot, I came in a chariot.” “If, sire, you came by chariot, show me the chariot. Is the pole the chariot, sire?” “O no, venerable sir.” “Is the axle the chariot?” “O no, venerable sire” “Are the wheels... the body of the chariot, the flagstaff, the yoke, the reins, or the goad the chariot?” “O no, venerable sir.” “But then, sire, is the chariot the pole-axle-wheels-body-flagstaff-yoke-reins-and-goad?” “O no, venerable sir.” “But then, sire, is there a chariot apart from pole-axle-wheels-body-flagstaff-yoke-reins-and-goad?” “O no, venerable sir.”

“Though I, sire, am asking you repeatedly, I do not see the chariot. Chariot is only a sound, sire. For what here is the chariot? You sire, are speaking an untruth, a lying word. There is no chariot. You, sire, are the chief *rāja* of the whole of India. Of whom are you afraid that you speak a lie?”...

“I, venerable Nāgasena, am not telling a lie, for it is dependent on (*paṭicca*) the pole, dependent on the axle [and the other parts]... that ‘chariot’ exists as a denotation, appellation, designation, as a current usage, a name.”

“It is well; you, sire, understand a chariot. Even so is it for me, sire, it is dependent on the hair of the head, and on the hair of the body... and dependent on the brain in the head, and dependent on material form, and on feeling, on perception, the constructing activities, and dependent on consciousness that ‘Nāgasena’ exists as a denotation, appellation, designation, as a current usage, merely as a name. But according to the highest meaning, a person is not apprehended here. This, sire, was spoken by the nun Vajirā face to face with the Blessed One [at S. I.135]:

14. A standard list of “thirty-two parts of the body” contemplated in one kind of Buddhist meditation, though often the brain is not listed.

Just as, with an assemblage of parts,
 The word 'chariot' is used,
 So, when the aggregates exist,
 There is the convention 'a being.'"

"It is wonderful, venerable Nāgasena... The explanations of the questions that were asked are very brilliant."

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