

Attā and Anattā

by

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Studies in Comparative Religion, Vol. 7, No. 1. (Winter 1973) © World Wisdom, Inc.
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IT is becoming more and more general to think and to say that Buddhism teaches not-self, *anattā*. Certainly it is in this doctrine that all Abhidhamma thought converges and reaches its culmination¹ But Early Buddhism, the Buddhism of the *Vinaya* and the *Suttapitaka*, does not exactly teach not-self, except in so far as it says that certain definite things are not-self; therefore put them away, they are not yours (*S.* iii. 33-34; *M.* i. 140-141)² What are these things? The five *khandhas*, or groups—of grasping: material shape, feeling, perception, the formations, consciousness. One and all of these are repeatedly said to be suffering, impermanent and liable to change or alteration; they are therefore not self. Had they been self: *rupam* (etc.) *c'idam attā abhavissa* (*Vin.* i. 13), there would have been power of disposal over them: Let my body be such, let it not be such. But as they are not self, one cannot alter them. One can only, by training and in meditation, develop such even-mindedness in regard to them as to remain unaffected by them, as they are manifested to us in the world by their impingement on our five senses—all of which: sense-data, sense-organs, sensory impingement and sensory awareness are also called *anattā*.

Because these things are not-self, although usually accepted as self by the ignorant worldling, the disciple is exhorted to "uproot false view of self", an achievement to be effected by regarding the "world" as void, that is of self (*Sn.* 1119). For the "world" is none other than the realm of the sensory activities (*S.* iv. 95), and like them it is

¹ Nyanaponika, "The Abhidhamma Philosophy", in "Maha-Bodhi", vol. 59, no. 11, Nov. 1951

² *Abbreviations: A.*—Anguttara-Nikāya; *D.*—Dīgha-Nikāya; *Dhp.*—Dhammapada; *It.*—Itivuttaka; *M.*—Majjhima-Nikāya; *MA.*—Commentary on Majjhima; *S.*—Samyutta-Nikaya; *Sn.*—Sutta-nipata; *Ud.*—Udāna; *UdA.*—Commentary on Udāna; *Vin.*—Vinayapitaka.

impermanent, it ages and wears away (*Dhp.* 151). A wrong conception of this "world" also gives rise to a false view concerning one's own body, *sakkayaditthi*, namely, that it is self. But, as already indicated, the right view of body is that: This is not mine, this am I not, this is not my self.

Completely pithless is the "world",

All its quarters shake;

Wanting an abode for self

No shelter did I see.

Sn. 937

It is the false notion of self that has to be rejected, the self that is at home in this pithless world, not the one that finds no shelter there; and even so have the ideas "I am", "mine", "I am the doer", "another is the doer" to be eradicated also (*A.* ii. 216; *S.* iii. 83; *M.* i. 139, etc.). To see self in what is not self (*anattāni ca attā*) is an erroneous view of the scatter-brained whose is the road of birth and death (*A.* ii. 52). This is the self that is to be "denied"; it is not what it seems to be.

"What is not self, that is not my self" (*yad anattā . . . na meso attā*) (*S.* iii. 45, iv. 2) a strong statement, showing as clearly as the *Vinaya* one, already cited, that in Early Buddhism there was a definite recognition of both *attā* and *anattā*. At the same time the ethical, intellectual and metaphysical difficulties involved in saying either yes or no to such questions as "Is there self, is there not self?" are very great. The wandering recluse Vacchagotta asked Gotama (*S.* iv. 400-401) if there is self. Gotama was silent. The wanderer then asked: "What then, is there not self?" Gotama was again silent, and Vacchagotta departed. Then Ananda asked Gotama why he had not answered these questions. He replied: "If I had said there is self, this would have been a siding-in with the Eternalists. And if I had said there is not self, this would have been a siding-in with the Annihilationists. Again, if I had answered there is self, this would not have accorded with my knowledge that 'all things are not-self' (meaning *all* things including the

unconditioned Nibbâna are *anattā*, *Dhp.* 279). But if I had said there is not self (here, and above, not *anattā*, but *n'atth' ana*) the wanderer, already confused, would have been increasingly so, and would have thought: "Was there not formerly self for me? There is not now". This passage indicates the confusion surrounding the whole subject. It would need a long dissertation even as much as to approach a solution of the problem of self

All I propose to do here is to submit various passages, some of which have been too much overlooked, and which mention the logical opposite of *an-attā*. By this means it may be possible to form some idea of the significance attributed to the word *attā* in the *Vinaya* and the *Nikāyas*, even if the meaning that we attach to this word *now* is not the same as was attached to it *then* by the people who used this word. Since they asked the question: By which self, *kena attena*, does one reach the Brahma-world? (*Sn.* 508), it would appear that they drew a distinction between two or more uses of the word "self". Even if *attā* when used as a reflexive pronoun: yourself, myself, and so on, or when used in some other way, is relegated to the sphere of "conventional truth" as opposed to "philosophical truth", because it is not everlasting or permanent and has a beginning and an end, I suggest that in the passages collected below, this is not necessarily always the self that is meant.

1. The person who torments neither himself nor others nor both lives with a self become Brahma (*brahmabhutena attana viha rati*). *A.* ii. 206; *M.* i. 349, etc. It should be noticed that *brahmabhûta* is used as an epithet of the Tathâgata (*D.* iii. 34; *M.* i. 111 s *A.* v. 226, 256; *Sn.* 561, etc.). He is also Dhamma: who sees me sees Dhamma (*It.* p. 91 ; *S.* iii. 120); while *brahma* and *dhamma* often appear as synonymous: *brahmacàrin*, *dhammacarin*: *brahmacakka*, *dhammacakka*; *brahma Yana*, *dhammayana*, and so on; and the Tathâgata is *dhamma kaya*, *brahma-kaya*, *dhammabhûta brahmabhûta* (*D.* iii. 84). If *attā* has affinity with *brahma* and this is *dhamma* and *tathâgata*, then so is *attā*. The *UdA.* (p. 340) recognises this when it explains tathâgata by *attā*, while the Commentary on the *M.* (*MA.* ii. 117; iii. 141) explains it by *satta*, being, what is real and true.

2. Similarly:

Who attachment and hatred,

and ignorance has left.

He is called: developed of self,

Brahma-become, Truthfinder,

Awakened One...

(bhavit'attà brahmabhùta tathâgata buddha) It. p.57.

3. Wherefore fare along with self as island, with self as refuge, and no other, with dhamma as island, with dhamma as refuge, and no other. D. ii. 100, etc.
4. This is the Way for great selves (*eso maggo mahattehi*). It. p. 28, 29; A. ii. 26.
5. Here some person has not developed (i.e., meditation upon) his body, moral habit, thought, intuitive wisdom. He is limited, a small self (*paritto appatumo*), a dweller in little hardness.. . But another person has developed his body, and so on. He is not limited, a great self (*aparitto mahatta*), a dweller in the immeasurable. A. i. 249.
6. Wherefore, young men, which is best, that you should seek a woman or self (*attānam gaveseyyatha*)? Yin. i. 23.
7. Let him make of self a refuge, faring as with a blazing head, seeking the state that changes not. S. iii. 143.
8. That self I've made my refuge (words ascribed to the dying Gotama) D.ii. 120.
9. Self is the lord of self, and self self's bourn, so then restrain thyself as a merchant does a goodly horse. Dhp. 380.
10. Self is the lord of self. What other lord could there be? With self well tamed one gains a lord that is hard to gain. Dhp. 169.
11. Of those who fare the good faring in regard to body, speech and thought, the

self is guarded (*rakkhito ana*). *S. i. 73*.

12. This one, steadfast, released from views, is unsmirched by the "world", not blamed by self. *Sn. 913*.

13. The self in thee (*attā te*) O man, knows what is true and what is false. *A.1.149*.

14. The mind wandering over all the quarters

Sees nothing dearer than self.

Since the self so dear to others is,

Let the self-lover harm not another.

S. i. 75 s Ud. 47.

15. So he to whom the self is dear,

Who longs for the great self,

Should homage to true dhamma pay.

A. ii. 21 ; S. i. 140.

16. I lay no wood, brahman, for fires on altars,

Only within burneth the flame I kindle.

Ever my fire burns, ever composed of self,

I, perfected, fare the Brahma-faring.

As load of fuel surely is pride, O brahman;

The altar's smoke, anger; thy false words, ashes;

The tongue's the priest's spoon; and the heart the altar; The flame thereon—
this is man's self well tamed.

S. i. 169.

17. "If, monks, there were a self, could it be said: It belongs to my self?"

"Yes, Lord".

"Or, monks, if there were what belongs to self, could it be said: It is my self?"

"Yes, Lord."

"But if self, monks, and what belongs to self, although actually existing, are incomprehensible (*saccato thetato anupalabbhamane*), is not the view and the causal relation that: 'This the world this the self; after dying I will become permanent, lasting, eternal, not liable to change, I will stand fast like unto the eternal' —is not this (view), monks, absolute complete folly?" The monks agree. (M. i. 138). The view here mentioned is one held by members of another sect. But for the disciple of the ariyans all that makes up "world": body, feeling, perception, the formations and consciousness, is impermanent, suffering, liable to change, and therefore it is not mine, this am I not, this is not my self.

Much might be written about each of the passages I have presented. But only in (1) have I given any indication of the ramifications and affinities involved. The extracts cited cannot really be understood by themselves. All need amplifying by comparison with other passages in the *Vinaya* and the *Ni kàyas*. As the idea of *brahma* in the Pali canon has been overlooked—in spite of the ever recurring *brahmacariya*, the Walk to or with Brahma, the Sublime—so has that of *attā*. Both were of the utmost significance in the Upanishads. Both have a significance, even if we have not yet assessed it, in the Pali canon.

I am aware that anyone who brings forward these notions runs the risk of abuse, even if he does not suggest that they mean the same as Brahman and Atman mean in the Upanishads, even in fact if he suggests that they do *not* mean the same thing. Nevertheless, because these two words occur fairly frequently in the Pali canon, and usually in significant passages, their evidence should not be ignored.