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Anatta and Moral Responsibility

A. D. Jayasundere

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Anatta and Moral Responsibility

And Two Other Essays

By

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Preface

The author of these essays, Abraham Dias Jayasundere, was born on the 1st February 1869 at Meepe, a village in the Talpe area of the Galle District. He received his education at the Central School, Galle (presently All Saints' School), and at St. Thomas College, Colombo. His leaning was towards the Classics, and he was particularly proficient in English and Latin which was eventually shown in the facility with which he explained the most abstruse points of the Dhamma.

In accordance with the wishes of his father, who was himself learned in Sinhalese and had a fair knowledge of Pali and Sanskrit, he decided to enter the legal profession. It was during this period of his studentship that Colonel Olcott first visited Ceylon and inaugurated the revival of Buddhist education. The task of infusing the Buddhist public with enthusiasm as to the necessity of establishing Buddhist schools for the education of their children was laborious, but Mr. Jayasundere flung himself with all his energy into the work and spent several years in such service. The outcome of his efforts was the inauguration of the Galle Buddhist Theosophical Society and the establishment of Mahinda College. He

was Secretary of the Society and later its president. He took the keenest interest in its work till his retirement from active practice at the bar.

In the year 1894 he qualified for admission to the profession and was enrolled a proctor of the District Court of Galle. While a keen student of the law, he devoted much time during this period to the study of literature and philosophical subjects. He was an active supporter of the Rationalist Press and read every book turned out by that Association. He was also for many years a regular reader of the *Open Court*of Chicago, and all theosophical and many philosophical publications. He founded the Galle Debating Society and was for many years its Secretary and guiding spirit. He not only contributed his share to practically every debate, but he also read many papers before the society and worked so hard for its improvement that before long it acquired a reputation equal to that of the well-known Smallpass Literary Association of Colombo.

He came into contact with several noble men who influenced his life and gave impetus to his study of the Buddha Dhamma: the Venerable Yatamalagala Somananda Thera, incumbent of the Gunaratana Avasa; E. R. Gooneratne, Wisala Mudaliyar and Acting Mahā Mudaliyar of Atapattu Walauwa; Godage Sagiris de Silva, Sinhalese Pandit of Mahinda

College; and Frank Lee Woodward, Principal of the same college.

Mr. Jayasundere first read every available publication on Buddhism in English and later decided to study the Dhamma in the original text, and for that purpose started a Pali study class under the said Venerable Thera. He continued his studies and remained a pupil of the Venerable Thera till the latter's death in 1936.

As a result of his studies he decided to translate the Catukka Nipāta of the Aṅguttara Nikāya in continuation of the work begun by K. R. Gooneratne, the first local representative of the Pali Text Society of England.

He also organised the Buddha Dhamma Saṅgama which was later merged in the Galle Young Men's Buddhist Association. For many years he held the office of president of these associations. In addition he induced many Buddhists from the professional spheres to join in the observance of the Eight Precepts on Vesak day. He was a life member of the Colombo Young Men's Buddhist Association, and a Trustee of the Buddhist Congress Tripiṭaka Trust.

He died of heart disease on the 31st July, 1947 at his residence.

Mr. Jayasundere was a firm believer that the Theravada school had handed down the Teachings of the Lord Buddha in their pristine purity. The following essays were of his sifting of the Dhamma are illustrated in the following essays which the Mahā Bodhi Society have placed before the public.

—P. P. Siriwardana

Anattā and Moral Responsibility

Our esteemed brother, Pandit Sheo Narain, has written: "One point has always puzzled me in my readings of Buddhist literature and it is this: What survives death to bear the results of karma in one's life? … I wish some learned Buddhist scholar who has studied the subject in Pali would throw some light to set at rest the controversy."

Let me confess at the outset that I do not intend to pose as "a Buddhist scholar who has studied the subject in Pali." Far from it. But as an earnest student

of the Dhamma, who had experienced the same difficulty, our friend will pardon me if I venture to intrude where angels should fear to tread.

Difficulties on religious questions are, in the very nature of things, altogether personal to the individual concerned. This is obviously the reason why our Lord in common with other religious teachers, adopted the dialogical method of instruction. A most persuasive reasoning was the *argumentum ad hominem*. A fully sounded thesis or a set discourse often missed the point of en enquirer's doubt or difficulty.

I shall, therefore, with our learned brother's permission, present my views on the question at issue in the form of a dialogue, at the same time tendering him my humble apologies for the liberties I propose to take with him, by imputing to him words which he may perhaps repudiate.

S.N.: My friend, let us have a heart to heart exchange of views on the subject of " *anattā*(no-soul) and moral responsibility."

A.D.: I shall be only too glad. But you must pardon my shortcomings.

S.N.: That it all right. We are not infallible—not even the youngest of us.

S.N.: Let me plunge in *medias res*. To put it

categorically—did the Buddha teach *anattā*or a *ttā* (self or soul)?

A.D.: Most emphatically *anattā*, and not *attā*.

S.N.: Are you quite sure on the point?

A.D.: I am as certain as the sun is the centre of our solar system. Until Copernicus discovered the heliocentric system the world believed the Ptolemaic theory. Likewise, until the Lord Buddha proclaimed the *anattā*-doctrine, mankind was enmeshed in the ego-centric, ātmanistic heresy.

S.N.: That sounds rather dogmatic, does it not? But quote your authority please.

A.D.: Why, my first authority is the first step of the Eightfold Path.

S.N.: That is strange indeed. Where is *anattā*in the first step? I can't find it.

A.D.: I am not surprised. In the Saṃyutta Nikāya (21:5) the Master says: "When one understands that form, feeling and the other *khandha*s are transient, subject to pain and soul-less (*anattā*), in that case one possesses Right Understanding."

S.N.: That bears you out, I admit. Do you then maintain that one who hugs the *attā*-heresy is a *micchādiṭṭhika*, one of wrong beliefs, *ergo*—not a

Buddhist?

A.D.: Most certainly, yes, if we abide by the Master's teaching.

S.N.: Your second authority please?

A.D.: I rely on Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta, the second sermon delivered to the Pañca-vaggiya-bhikkhus on the fifth day after the first sermon, "The Turning of the Wheel of the Law."

S.N.: Now, my friend. There I think I catch you napping. I put to you this poser: Did not myriads attain Nibbāna as a result of the first sermon, even before the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta was preached? If so, the *anattā*-teaching was not a *sine qua non*for winning Arahantship.

A.D.: Bear with me, Sir, for a moment. The wonder is that not one of the five Bhikkhus, let alone the myriads of Deities and Brahmas became an Arahant on hearing the first sermon, and only one out of the five, namely Aññā-Kondaññā, gained the "Spotless Eye of Truth" as a Sotāpanna, a Stream-enterer.

S.N.: But how did Aññā-Koṇḍaññā break the first of the fetters, that of personality belief, without the aid of the *anattā*-teaching?

A.D.: Quite right, Sir, that is just the point. I am glad you appreciate it. May I recall what I have already

said? I showed you by a quotation from the Saṃyutta that *anattā*is implicit in the first step of the Path; and that fact barely sufficed a Stream-enterer to break asunder the gross fetter of personality belief. But the explicit elucidation of *anattā*in the second sermon was a *sine qua non*for an Arahant to do away with the finer fetters of conceit, agitation and ignorance.

S.N.: I regret I do not follow you. Do you contend seriously that full realisation of *anattā*is not indispensable to break a gross fetter, whereas it is essential to get rid of a finer fetter?

A.D.: That does sound paradoxical. But I do submit it is so. Every Arahant extinguishes the *āsavas*(taints), but not the *vāsanās*(impressions or taint traces) of these *āsavas*, which a Buddha alone can eliminate. Does that not demonstrate to a nicety, that a keener insight, a greater realisation is essential to get rid of a finer and, therefore, more elusive, evil?

S.N.: That hits the nail on the head. It is sound reasoning, I grant. But need we further expatiate upon a basic teaching like *anattā*?

A.D.: Surely not; *anattā*runs like a streak of scarlet right through the Piṭakas. There is no mistake about that. One can gauge its utmost value from this fact. It is by clear insight into the reality of things—*yathābhūta-ñāṇa-dassana*that one sees Nibbāna.

S.N.: What is this clear insight—*ñāṇadassana*? I am curious to know.

A.D.: It is purely and simply seeing in terms of *anicca*, *dukkha*and *anattā*, and, therefore, conversely to see wrongly is to see in terms of permanence, happiness and soul (*nicca, sukha*and *attā*), as all those of wrong beliefs (*micchādiṭṭhika*) do. Moreover, this all-important subject of *anattā*is placed at the forefront in the very first discourse Brahmajāla in the Dīgha-Nikāya, and in the Mūla-Pari-yāya of the Majjhima Nikāya; it also forms the main theme of the first chapter of the Kathāvaṭṭhu and of the later Milinda-pañha.

S.N.: But what does the author Mr Har Dayal say? "It is certain," he emphatically writes, "Mahāyānist writers believed in the continuity of personal identity in the most unmistakable terms." Surely he must have good reason to say so.

A.D.: Well, it is difficult to say whether Mr Har Dayal's grounds are good or bad until we have them before us. For the present let us be guided by the father of Mahāyāna, Asvaghosa himself, "the very first champion, promulgator and expounder" of it as Dr Suzuki aptly calls him.

Asvaghosa opens his famous Ś *raddhotpāda-śāstra* (translated as "The Awakening of Faith"), the bible of

Mahāyāna, as follows: "Adoration to the Dharma whose essence and attributes are like the ocean, revealing to us the principle of Anātman and forming the storage of infinite merits." Dr. Suzuki is perhaps the greatest authority on Mahāyāna. Do, please, mark what further he writes: "The Doctrine of Anātman is considered to be one of the most important and characteristic features of Buddhism and justly so, for both the Hinayāna and Mahāyāna uphold this as essential … In the case of the *anātman*or non-ego theory, the Mahāyanists assert that there is no Atman or ego-soul, not only in its subjective aspect but also in its objective application. That is to say, they deny with the Hīnayānists that there is such a thing as the ego-substance behind our consciousness as a cover etc., simple, ultimate independent unit; but they go still further and declare that this objective world, too, has no ātman, no ego, no God, no personal creator, no Ishvara, working and enjoying his absolute transcendence behind this concatenation of cause and effect. This is technically known at the double negation of the subjective and objective world and for this reason the Mahāyana school has often been called, though unjustifiably and quite incorrectly, Nihilism or Sunyavādin."

S.N.: Let us, at last, hark back to our original point. How do you reconcile *anattā*with moral responsibility?

A.D.: Before we tackle your very difficult question we must take, so to say, a preliminary canter. The whole world for centuries upon centuries has been nurtured on static ideas—both in the East and the West. So our norms and canon of logic have evolved from static notions. But the Tathāgata created a revolution in the mental world when he enunciated the *paccayākāra dhamma*, the dynamic conception of life and of the world. We find a modern echo of this teaching in Henri Bergson, the French philosopher.

Let us bear in mind that there is a marked difference between the Buddhist idea of identity, which is purely dynamic, and that of other schools of thought which is only static. Elsewhere I once wrote: "Identity is a static idea and strictly speaking cannot apply to life or biological values. One can correctly envisage life and its functions only from the dynamic viewpoint. Mathematics, jurisprudence and the physical sciences deal in identities but not the sciences of ethics and psychology. In Buddhist psychology both the subject and the object are transitory; only the interrelation between them remains constant. This constancy of relation, which is called by some consciousness, gives rise to the false animistic notion of personal identity. Because of the continuity of temporary selves of successive states of consciousness, man, blinded by nescience (*avijjā*) mistakes similarity for identity and

takes the river of life for one abiding soul, even as he mistakes the river of yesterday as identical with the river of today.

"Life according to Abhidhamma is like the current of a river (*nadī soto viya*) or the flame of a lamp (*dīpajālā viya*). It is a conclusion of modern science that the cells of the human body undergo constant change, so much so that every particle of the body of a boy of ten becomes completely transformed and gradually replaced in the body of a youth of eighteen. The ceaseless flux of things applies to both mind and body. In the former the flow is even more rapid than in the latter and, therefore, it is truer to speak of the body as a permanent thing (*attā*) than of the mind." To put it in a nutshell, the Buddhist's dynamic view of identity consists in continuity alone and not in the permanence of substance, which is the static idea. We have to keep this distinction clearly in mind as the last step in our argument.

S.N: But you have not yet come to the point of my difficulty: "What survives death to bear the results of *kamma*in one's life?" Please address yourself to that.

A.D.: Let me see. Your question is vitiated by a *petitio principii*or in plain English, it begs the question: when you say "what survives death," you assume or take for granted that something does survive—which

is not the case. Strictly speaking, the question is wrongly put and must therefore be put aside (*thapanīa*). Similar questions or something to the same effect were put to the Master by a brahmin of old: "How now, Lord Gotama? Is he who acts the same as he who feels the result of the act (*so karoti so paṭisaṃvedayati*)?" "'He who acts is the same as he who feels,' that, brahmin, is one end (heresy)." "How then Lord Gotama? Is he who acts another man than he who feels?" "'He who acts is another than he who feels' that, brahmin, is the other end. Overcoming these two ends the Tathāgata points out the doctrine in the middle, in terms of *paṭicca samuppāda*. " [1]

Now, what does this mean to us moderns? It means, as I understand it: there is no permanent, unchanging identity between the actor and the feeler, but there is at the same time a continuity between them—"neither him nor another," *na ca so na ca aññ*o. Hence, the Buddhist idea of identity consists in continuity and not in identity of substance, for the simple reason that there is no such thing as identity of substance in the universe—"all formations are impermanent," *sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā*.

S.N.: I am beginning to see some light. It all comes to this: one must alter one's viewpoint if one wishes to understand the Buddhist idea. We must give up our static way of thinking and adopt the dynamic view of

life. We must discard our coloured glasses and "think ourselves in sympathy with the Buddhist position."

A.D.: Exactly so, you put it admirably. When even in this life as it is, there is no permanent self, how can a non-existing thing "survive death to bear the results of karma in one's life," as you put it?

S.N.: So far all right, but I have not done with you. There it the further question yet outstanding—where is moral responsibility in that case? In the magisterial diction of another critic, Dr. Stace: "If the next life is only a continuation of karma and not of personality, why should anyone bother himself about the consequence of his action?"

A.D.: I have previously called attention to the fact that in both mind and body the youth of eighteen is different in every particle from the boy of ten. Let me then put this counter-question: what youth is therefore not morally responsible for his acts done when he was a boy of ten, because in all respects he is different? Is it not so?

S.N.: But the boy continued to exist till he became the youth. The boy did not die and was not reborn as the youth.

A.D.: That makes all the difference. Do you not thereby implicitly admit that moral responsibility depends on the continuity and not on the identity?

S.N.: Just so, I grant it. There being no soul, the only conceivable form of identity is continuity and not identity of an unchanging substance—which we mistakenly call personality.

A.D.: I am glad you appreciate the fine distinction. Let me make it clearer by asking you a counter-question.

Suppose that that boy of ten underwent a sudden loss of memory and recovered his consciousness to find that all his past was a perfect blank. What moral responsibility would he feel for acts done before he lost his memory and which he cannot remember?

S.N.: Moral responsibility therefore depends, as I take it, not only on continuity of personality but also on memory. Am I right in saying so? If the youth of eighteen does not actually remember the act he did as a boy of ten because of the loss of memory he subsequently underwent, he cannot feel a sense of responsibility for an act he does not remember.

A.D.: It is not a question of memory either. You are actually forced to that conclusion. Moral responsibility cannot possibly depend upon memory, for the simple reason that there can be loss of memory.

S.N.: Why do you say so? If the murderer does not remember his crime by some loss of memory, what is the use and where is the justice of sending him to the

gallows? There is no object in punishing him, except as an example to others, perhaps.

A.D.: You are quite right and your reasoning is flawless, if the universe is run, controlled and judged by some omnipotent arbiter who rewards and punishes. Unfortunately, the world is not so constituted but is governed by unintelligent and impersonal physical and moral laws. The law of *kamma*is just one of these moral laws and there is no Lord of *kamma*to dispense rewards and punishments in terms of the laws of *kamma*. In the inimitable way that our brother Silācara puts it: "If a person does something in his sleep, gets out of bed and walks over the edge of a verandah, he will fall into the road below and in all likelihood break an arm or leg or something worse. But this will happen not at all as a 'punishment' for his sleepwalking, but merely as its result. And the fact that he did not remember going out on the verandah would not make the slightest difference to the result of his fall from it, in the shape of broken bones. So the follower of the Buddha takes measures to see that he does not walk over verandas or other dangerous places, asleep or awake, so as to avoid hurting himself or anybody who might be below and on whom he might fall." Luminous words indeed!

S.N.: What is the upshot of it all? If then memory is

not an essential factor in assessing moral responsibility, it necessarily follows that the interruption of memory by death will not prevent the operation of the law of *kamma*. The fact that the man who dies does not remember his acts in his next life is no bar to his reaping the fruits of such acts. The murderer is hanged whether he remembers his crime or not.

A.D.: I congratulate you. You have gained "the spotless eye of truth" at least in the intellectual sense. May you before long win "the Spotless Eye of Truth" in the highest spiritual sense, as a Sotāpanna. Moreover, have you not heard of such a thing as *pubbenivāsānussati-ñāṇa*—knowledge or memory of previous lives?

S.N.: Yes, I have indeed. But how is such knowledge or memory possible when death breaks up the process of thought and the body also?

A.D.: That, my dear sir, opens up a very large, deep question, so much so, I fear we both may find ourselves are long floundering beyond our depths. But subject to correction by learned Abhidhammika scholars, I shall proceed to state how I understand it in my humble way.

S.N.: Do it please, because, after all, we have reached the climax of our interesting talk.

A.D.: The Lord Buddha says, and both Eastern and Western psychology bears him out on the point, that man dies every moment (*khaṇika maraṇa*). We have seen before that the cells of the body constantly change and that the flow of thoughts in the mind is even more rapid. Philosophically speaking, i.e., in actual truth and fact, man therefore dies every moment and is reborn in the next, both as regards mind and body. What the world conventionally calls death is the termination of a life-time. The former is not apparent whereas the latter happen before the eyes of all. But according to Abhidhamma there is the strange fact that the succession of thoughts that goes on in life is not interrupted by death, and there is no interval between the dying thought (*cuti-citta*) in this life and the rebirth-thought (*paṭisandhi-citta*) in the next life.

S.N.: I see what you are driving at. Because there is no entity that passes from one thought to the next, and there is an unbroken succession of thoughts all through life and even between death and rebirth, I do not see much difficulty now in believing that memory of previous lives can be recalled. At least, it is a bare possibility.

A.D.: Memory of past lives, be it noted, is not a mere abstract conception, a mere possibility or even a probability only; it is and has been a concrete fact.

There are innumerable instances of those who have acquired this psychic power. But for a full and complete explanation of its *modus operandi*in view of the Buddhist teaching of *anattā*, we must look to the Paṭṭhāna-pakaraṇa of the Abhidhamma for an answer. This book, appropriately called the "Great Book," contains twenty-four modes of relation which is more comprehensive than and transcends the association philosophy of the West which deals with the relations of ideas only, where as the Paṭṭhāna comprises the relations between all phenomena.

According to the Paṭṭhāna, each thought is related to the one next to it both before and after in at least four of these twenty-four ways of relation. These four relations (*paccaya*) are proximity (*anantara*), contiguity (*samanantara*), absence (*natthi*) and abeyance (*avigata*). Each thought as it dies gives service to the next or gives up the whole of its energy (*paccayāsatti*) to its successor. Thus each successive thought has all the potentialities of its predecessors. Therefore, the mental principle of cognition or perception (*saññā*) in each mental state of consciousness, with all its heritage of the past, is a recognising in the image reproduced by the idea of the original object revived by the very marks which were observed by its predecessors in a certain reflection. I hope you now see more clearly how memory of past lives is recalled.

S.N.: To sum up the whole of our long but edifying discussion: The Buddhist position is that moral responsibility is possible without a soul (*anattā*). There is continuity but not identity, and memory of past lives can be recalled even though there is no soul. I offer you my grateful thanks for the great pains you have taken in enlightening me.

A.D.: I reciprocate your kind sentiments, my friend. If I have thrown even a little light on an obscure and deep subject, which an Arahant alone can fully realise, I should feel amply rewarded. Our friendly talk should be a constant reminder to all of us what puny things we mortals are with our poor feeble crutch of an intellect, and that we must diligently cultivate the higher insight (*vipassanā*) if we wish to see, as by daylight, what we now glimpse as through a glass darkly.

—*Mahābodhi*

Notes

1. Nidāna Saṃyutta [Back]

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