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This Self Business and Other Essays

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This Self Business

by O'C. Walshe

From *The Buddhist Path*, Journal of Wat Dhammapadipa, London
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"Do it yourself"—"There is no self"—"Be a lamp (or an island) unto yourself." It is not very surprising that the newcomer to Buddhism (and sometimes even the old stager) gets rather puzzled about this "self" business. Let us therefore attempt to shed a little light on this difficult but important subject.

The best place to begin is at the beginning. The observance of this simple rule makes a lot of things easier, though the fact is not always remembered. The English language possesses several pronouns such as myself, yourself, and so on, which are rendered in Pali by *attā* (in Sanskrit *ātman*). This is the everyday use, which is completely matter-of-fact and unmetaphysical. Some such terms are inevitably used

in all languages. They are convenient and conventional, implying nothing whatever about the reality or otherwise of the "entity" they refer to. We merely need to note that in Buddhism such an entity is considered, for the best of reasons, only relatively or conventionally real. In terms of absolute truth there is no such thing, but in terms of relative truth there is. All we have to observe, then, is whether in any given case a statement is made in terms of the relative or the absolute truth. This alone obviates much confusion.

But this distinction, though vital, does not of course remove all difficulties. Let us first take a look at the "self" which does—relatively—exist. We are very familiar with this, our nearest and dearest, and so it comes as something of a shock to learn that it is not "really" real. We may even be quite indignant at such a suggestion. And yet even here there is something rather odd. Many people today do not believe in an immortal soul, or any entity that survives bodily death. But if this "self" does not survive the death of the body, it surely cannot be very real even now. We are not, for the moment, discussing the Buddhist view of rebirth, but merely suggesting that for the non-believer in survival the self must after all be a very peculiar thing.

However, there is at least one important sense in which the relatively real self is taken quite seriously

even in Buddhism. If I robbed a bank last week, I can't avoid the consequences by declaring that, as I don't really exist, it wasn't really me, whether in a court of human law or in terms of the law of karma. Neither human nor karmic justice will accept such a plea. In fact in the Buddhist view of things, karma will even catch up with me after death if it has not done so before! So our relative reality, however ultimately illusory, is not without its importance.

At this point it may lookGeorgia, serif; padding-left: 1em; suspiciously as if Buddhists were trying to have it both ways. They agree, it appears, with the implication of materialism that there is no permanent or immortal soul, while also apparently agreeing with the Christian idea of post-mortem rewards or retribution. Curiouser and curiouser, as Alice would have said.

Let us see. The relatively real "entity" is in fact a process—a constantly flowing river which, though not one drop of water remains stationary, nevertheless is for us, conventionally and practically, "the same" river. If we prefer the image of an electric current, we can also think of rebirth as the continuing flow of such a current even though successive bulbs are worn out. This flow goes until the fuel that feeds it—craving—has ceased.

One of the various factors that go to make up our "personality" is volition (*cetanā*). It is this which many people identify with the self "I want." Yet this too is just as impersonal as all the rest, which is why we can become aware of conflicting desires within us. The whole of karma is based on this volition factor, so that for the relatively real "me" it is very important. This is the main reason why self-knowledge is so vital. But it should by now be clear that "self-knowledge" in Buddhism does not mean getting to know one's true self (for there is no such thing), but seeing through the spurious self.

People learning to practise mindful self-awareness sometimes ask at this point: "If I am supposed to be observing myself, what is it that does the observing?" In the light of what has been said, this may be quite a puzzle. But the simple answer is actually that one moment of consciousness has for its object a previous moment of consciousness. And by practising this exercise we gradually learn to realise that the process actually is just as described. A point is then eventually reached when, craving being temporarily suspended, the whole thing is seen with utter detachment and thus seen through. This is the beginning of the decisive stage of the cure, the beginning of the path that leads to the cessation of craving and therefore of all sense of frustration and pain.

All things (including our precious "selves") are in truth impersonal (*anattā*) or "void" (*sūnya*) as the Mahāyanists generally prefer to say. Despite certain occasional polemically-tinged suggestions to the contrary, the two expressions are virtually synonymous. And, curiously enough, the realisation of this truth, which looks so negative and perhaps even rather frightening, is bliss ineffable. That, however, is another story.

The Soul and I

by Natasha Jackson

From *Metta*, Journal of the Buddhist Federation of Australia
September 1968

The doctrine of *anattā* is the most characteristic Buddhist doctrine and also the most difficult to understand, especially

for anyone living in a predominantly Christian environment. The influence of a theistic religion, even though it may be given merely lip-service when not openly repudiated, nevertheless has seeped into the "collective unconscious" and in a thousand subtle ways has permeated the whole of our national life and outlook.

To attempt to gain some understanding of anattā (Pali, *an*, "without" and *attā*, "soul"), one has first of all to blot out from the mind (if only temporarily) the concept that "everything must have a beginning" and the tendency to equate that beginning with God as creator or prime mover of the universe.

Strangely enough, while many people reject the dogma of a special creation as the work of God in favour of the Darwinian hypothesis of evolution, they still remain very loath to give up the idea of an indestructible, immortal soul, even though they no longer believe it to have been breathed into creatures by an almighty God, recognising that and similar legends as attempts by primitive people to explain some of the unsolved mysteries.

The Buddha did not speculate about the beginnings of the physical universe which, in his estimation, was a wasteful use of precious time that could be spent otherwise in more practical and profitable ways. He

plunged straight into consideration of an observable fact—*aniccā*, which is change, flux, motion, mutability, impermanence. Something arises, is born, develops and grows to maturity, then inevitably decays and finally dies. That is the life-cycle of everything, including man; and it is also true of nations, empires, social systems, worlds and universes.

Hence, the Buddha conceived the idea of a dynamic, constantly changing universe, completely discarding the concept of a static one.

Turning his attention to man, he analysed the human being as made up of five "*khandha*", or "aggregates." One is the physical body and the other four are mental properties: perception, feelings, the kamma-formations and consciousness. Since all these are in a state of constant flux, changing from moment to moment, and since all are perishable at death, he came to the conclusion that there was nothing in them that could rightly be called a permanent, abiding entity, self, soul or ego.

That, stated briefly, is the anattā doctrine.

However, while the empiricist within the Buddha could not admit the possibility of any permanent substance, however subtle or rarefied (such as a soul) within a dynamic universe of constant flux, he also could not accept the proposition that man was nothing

more than his physical body, for he considered the mind of man to be of greater importance and more basic than the material shell that housed it. Within that mind was the in-built thirst for life, tanhā, a driving force so strong and powerful that it could propel a dying being into existence again and again. Thus, according to Buddhist doctrine, taṇhā is the causative link between one life and the next.

Thus, the Buddha saw all life as essentially the same as everything else within the universe, a process of constant change, something like a wave in motion which rises and falls again and again, never the same nor yet quite different, yet remaining within the volume of water that is the ocean.

As to how the doctrine of anattā can be reconciled with the further Buddhist doctrine of rebirth, Sir Charles Eliot clarifies it as well as it can be clarified:

> But in reality, the denial of the *ātman* (Pali *attā*) applies to the living rather than the dead. It means that in a living man there is no permanent, unchangeable entity, but only a series of mental states, and since human beings, although they have no ātman, certainly exist in this present life, the absence of the ātman is not in itself an obstacle to belief in a similar life after death or before birth. Infancy, youth, age

> and the state immediately after death may form a series of which the last two are connected as intimately as any other two. The Buddhist teaching is that when men die in whom the desire for another life exists—as it exists in all except saints—then desire, which is really the creator of the world, fashions another being, conditioned by the character and merits of the being which has just come to an end. Life is like fire: its very nature is to burn its fuel. When one body dies, it is as if one piece of fuel were burnt: the vital process passes on and recommences in another and so long as there is desire for life, the provision of fuel fails not.
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> *Hinduism and Buddhism*, Vol. 1, London, 1921

However, these are only words and with words we can only go along so far and no further. Thoreau conveys something of this thought when he writes:

> A man sits as many risks as he runs. We must walk consciously only part way towards our goal, and then, leap in the dark to our success.

To grasp the Buddhist doctrines of anattā and rebirth, the mind must have sufficient resilience and courage

to make a leap in the dark. Some can, others cannot—not at the present stage of their development, anyway. For that matter, a very similar sort of mental leap is required to accept the latest findings of neo-physics, that matter is energy and energy can become matter. This does not make sense—not common sense at any rate, but it works.

That Tiresome "Self"

by Dr. Elizabeth Ashby

From *Sangha*, October 1960

Come, let us catch the "I"
that's always on the wing
and flittering through the hedge
of all conditioned things.

Some Buddhist concepts have filtered through to the general public and have been very well received, such as rebirth or "reincarnation" as people usually express it. Somebody gleefully munching lettuce will exclaim "I must have been a rabbit in my last life." But the universality of *dukkha* and the idea of *anattā* repel the western mind. The sequence of thought seems to run like this: "No self—no soul—no immortality." We have most of us grown up with the idea that immortality is a desirable thing; the doctrine of the resurrection promises it. But is it really so much to be desired? Do you remember the Greek myth of Chiron, the wise centaur? He kept a kind of school in a cave where he educated the sons of the local chieftains, teaching them manners and the warlike arts. Hercules, Jason and Theseus were numbered amongst his pupils. Now it happened that Chiron was accidentally wounded by a poisoned arrow. The wound would not heal and caused him great agony; he longed for death, but centaurs are demigods, and as such are immortal. Faced with an eternity of pain the centaur begged a bystander to become immortal in his stead. The request was granted, and Chiron was then able to die. As a reward for his services on earth the gods placed him in the sky where he became the constellation Sagittarius, the Archer, the ninth sign of the Zodiac.

We are all in the position of the wounded centaur, for unless we become enlightened we are faced with aeon after aeon of dukkha: that being inseparable from the samsāric round of death and birth.

A potent source of the desire for immortality is the hope that we shall be reunited to our dear ones in heaven. This involves some curious problems. Will our parents be as we knew them in their honoured old age, or in the prime of life? Or as young married people? Likewise, do dead children grow up in heaven, or must they remain children throughout eternity? And what about people who were not so dear? Those worthy beings, Cousin Lil and Uncle Joseph, who lacking either the courage or the capacity to sin, have been wafted into heaven on the wings of blamelessness. On earth they were crashing bores, and if their recognisable personalities persist, the profane mind shrinks from spending eternity in their company. There is also the possibility of meeting our pet enemies and aversions—a real source of dukkha unless we have all become so purged and refined that personal characteristics have been washed out. From which it could be argued that the conventional heaven is not a stage of unmixed bliss.

Personal characteristics, or personality, are nothing more or less than the five aggregates of grasping—body, feeling, perception, habitual tendencies (the

saṅkhāras), and consciousness. We can go through them again and again, as though with a fine tooth comb, but we cannot lay in them any separate "self," still less a permanent "soul." The Poṭṭhapāda Sutta (D I 9) makes the point that what we call a personality appears perfectly real while it is functioning in any particular life-span, and for convenience sake we must treat it as such. But the personalities that preceded it in the kammic continuum, though they appeared real when they were functioning, have now faded out and become insubstantial. Also the personalities that will succeed it are equally nebulous and in no sense real at the present time. There is a continuity, due to kamma, but no true identity or anything to be called a permanent soul. Apart from five empty heaps there is nothing. The idea of a "self" is just a concept firmly embedded in consciousness, and thriving on our habits of thought.

The feeling of egoity ("I"-ness) is so firmly entrenched in us that the French philosopher Descartes, who flourished in the 17th century, went so far as to say: "I think, therefore I am." But of all the transitory things in the saṃsāric flux, consciousness is the most transient. Our thoughts chase one another with the inconsequence of sheep jumping through a gap in a hedge. There is no abiding "self" in thought to be regarded as stable or permanent. Our

personalities that we think of as being identical or homogenous throughout life are nothing of the sort. This is easily demonstrated.

Find an old photograph of yourself at the age of three or four and compare that image with the phenomenon that "you" are now. The difference is remarkable. Between the child and the adult lie 20, 40, or possibly 70 years of varied experience. The childish personality has completely faded out; it is only linked to the adult by the tenuous thread of memory. Our present personalities are still changing, from day to day, almost from minute to minute. Each new contact, every experience modifies them in some way or another. It is impossible to get close enough to the "self" to "put salt on its tail," still less to pin it down like a dead butterfly.ome Buddhist concepts have filtered through to the general public and have been very well received, such as rebirth or “reincarnation” as people usually express it. Somebody gleefully munching lettuce will exclaim “I must have been a rabbit in my last life.” But the universality of dukkha and the idea of anattā repel the western mind. The sequence of thought seems to run like this: “No self—no soul—no immortality.” We have most of us grown up with the idea that immortality is a desirable thing; the

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It has been said that our fundamental delusion is “self-importance.” This is true, and therefore it is sometimes also said: “Kill out the self.” This is psychologically unsound. The more we think of the self, the more fixed becomes the idea of selfhood. There is nothing the ego enjoys so much as occupying the centre of the stage in the full blaze of the lights. It is equally futile to run around thinking “I must be unselfish.”

“By oneself is evil done; by oneself is evil left undone.” Statements such as this are at first very puzzling to the student. The explanation is simple. The word “self,” like the capital “I,” is a concise and convenient way of referring to any particular personality and avoids the clumsy circumlocution of always speaking about one’s own bundle of khandhas. Provided these terms are used mindfully and in moderation, “I” think we need have no inhibitions about their use. Indeed the capital “I” is sometimes necessary as it shows the reader just how much reliance can be placed on the statement that follows.

It is a strange feeling, when on holiday, to get up with the thought “Today I’ve nothing to do except enjoy myself.” What on earth does one mean by this? We really propose to enjoy the sensations that impinge on us through the doors of the senses. Physical activities, walking, cycling, swimming, the playing of tennis, all give rise to pleasant bodily feeling. Holiday sights—mountains, the majesty of the sea, alpine flowers produce enjoyment through the eye-door. Holiday sounds, the fluting of curlews on the fells and the cry of gulls on the shore, and the more

sophisticated pleasure of the Salzburg Festival reach us through the door of the ear. Sensations through the nose-door are not always so pleasant. Contrasted with the scent of the Corsican marquis and the aromatic fragrance of the Spanish countryside we have the strange and most unwelcome odour of continental “plumbing.” Such things serve to remind us that no holiday is perfect: that dukkha underlies all our lawful pleasures.

Perhaps we really enjoy our “selves” when egoity is at its height. This can occur when we have had a bit of worldly success and been praised or feted in consequence. It could also be stimulated by getting gloriously drunk—a most inadvisable proceeding. Some people get a terrific “kick” when faced by imminent danger, as in mountaineering or motor racing. Soldiers, too, have experienced it in the heat of battle. Drugs which induce psychological states, such as soma in ancient India and mescalin at the present day, heighten perception and lead their addicts to believe that the super-conscious has been attained. A similar danger attends the wrong practice of yoga. In essence these are all states of delusion; there is no real self to experience them: nothing except the mock-show of samsāra.

People who fear that anattā means annihilation often take comfort from the idea of “becoming one with the infinite,” analogous to the Indian concept of the ātman, a kind of great self, or over-soul as Emerson called it. It was said that the ātman functions in each one of us, and to realise the ātman in our individual selves was to achieve moksha or deliverance. Another interesting doctrine is the “mind-only” idea, put forward in the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra. This seems to be a vast store-consciousness or sea of unconsciousness in which we live and move and have our being. These views may be sound—I know not—but they are only views, and the Buddha would have nothing to do with “views.” He refused to discuss these things, saying that they did not lead to morality, calm or enlightenment. What then is a puzzled student to do? Why, DROP IT, as a Zen master boldly declared. Stop speculating, for it only leads to the jungle of doubt and perplexity with its attendant miseries of worry and flurry. Instead, persevere with the practice of Dhamma, including the cultivation of faith in its aspect of confidence.

Here is a suggestion for dealing with self-importance. Stop fussing about this tiresome “self” and turn the mind outwards to watch and investigate the happenings of everyday life. For instance, if one finds it necessary to suspend one’s individual bundle of khandhas from a strap in the underground, the following line of reasoning could be pursued with profit: “This unpleasant bodily situation has arisen because—impelled by some desire or other—“I” chose to travel in the rush hour. It is a conditioned thing and will therefore cease. This will happen (A) if “I” faint or (B) when the train reaches Charing Cross. The discomfort that “I” feel does not matter when compared with the universality of dukkha; it is not important.” This method can be applied to emotional states as well as mundane contretemps.

We cannot by a mere act of will get rid of the “self,” but we can cultivate the attitude of mind that is willing to let the “self” go. Wise reflection on the three marks of existence, anicca, dukkha and anatta helps to bring this about.

This article is merely a student’s attempt to produce some orderly ideal on a subject that is of vital importance. If readers find some of the conclusions only “half baked” they may be stimulated to finish the “cooking” themselves. Wise reflection helps skilled mental states to arise, and causes unskilled states to decrease.

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