

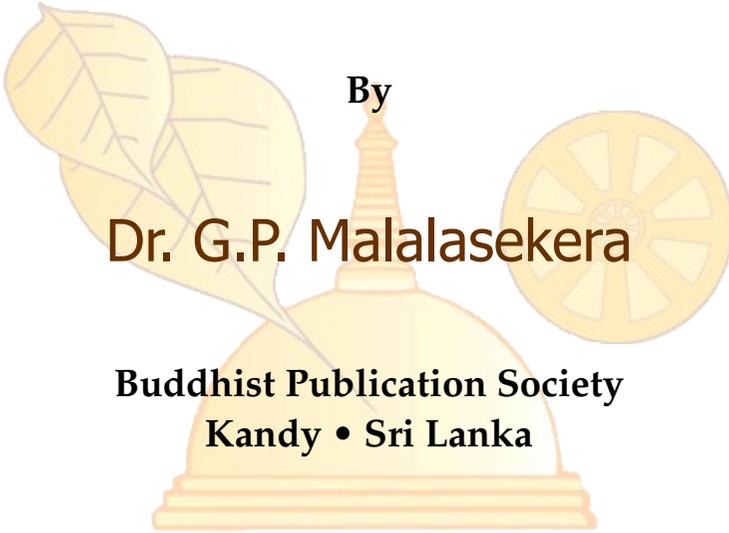
*Wheel Publication No. 94*

# **The Truth of Anattā**

*Dr. G.P. Malalasekera*



# The Truth of Anattā



## The Wheel Publication No. 94

Reprinted from Encyclopaedia of Buddhism Vol. I (Fascicle 4)

Published by the Government of Sri Lanka

First edition 1966

Reprinted 1986

BPS Online Edition © (2008)

Digital Transcription Source: BPS Transcription Project

For free distribution. This work may be republished, reformatted, reprinted and redistributed in any medium. However, any such republication and redistribution is to be

made available to the public on a free and unrestricted basis, and translations and other derivative works are to be clearly marked as such.

# Prefatory Note

*Anattā* is the last of the ‘three characteristics’ (*ti-lakkhaṇa*) or the general characteristics (*sāmañña-lakkhaṇa*) of the universe and everything in it. Like the teaching of the four Noble Truths, it is the teaching peculiar to Buddhas (*buddhānaṃ sāmukkaṃsikā desanā*: M I 380).

Etymologically, *anattā* consists of the negative prefix plus *attā* (cf. Vedic Sanskrit *ātman*). There are two Pali forms of the word, namely, *attā* (instr. *attanā*) and *atta* (instr. *attena*). Neither form seems to be used in the plural in the Tipiṭaka.

In the texts and the commentaries the words *attā* and *atta* are used in several senses: (1) chiefly meaning ‘one’s self’ or ‘one’s own’ e.g. *attahitāya paṭipanno no parahitāya* (acting in one’s own interest, not in the interests of others); or *attanā vā kataṃ sādhu* (what is done by one’s own self is good); (2) meaning ‘one’s own person,’ the personality, including both body and mind, e.g., in *attabhāva* (life), *attapaṭilābha* (birth in some form of life); (3) self, as a subtle metaphysical entity, ‘soul,’ e. g., *atthi me attā* (Do I have a ‘soul?’), *suññaṃ idaṃ attena vā attaniyena vā* (this is void of a ‘self’ or anything to do with a ‘self’) etc. It is with the third meaning that we are here concerned, the entity that is conceived and sought and made the subject of a certain class of views called in early Buddhist texts *attadiṭṭhi attānudiṭṭhi* (self-views or heresy of self) and *attaḡāha* (misconception regarding self).

# The Truth of Anattā

In most systems of religion or philosophy the question of the nature of man and his destiny centres largely in the doctrine of the soul, which has been variously defined. Some call it the principle of thought and action in man or that which thinks, wills and feels, knows and sees and, also, that which appropriates and owns. It is that which both acts and initiates action. Generally speaking, it is conceived as a perdurable entity, the permanent unchanging factor within the concrete personality which somehow unites and maintains its successive activities. It is also the subject of conscious spiritual experience. It has, in addition, strong religious associations and various further implications, such as being independent of the body, immaterial and eternal.

What has been said above regarding systems of philosophy holds true about the history of thought in India also. The Sanskrit word ātman, of which attā is the Pali counterpart, is found in the earliest Vedic hymns, though its derivation and meaning are uncertain. It is sometimes held to have meant 'breath,' but breath in the sense of 'life,' or what might be called 'self' or 'soul' in modern usage. Thus, the sun is called the ātman of all that moves or stands still and the soma drink is said to be the ātman of the sacrifice. This ātman was something that could leave the body and return and, in that connection, manas was used as a synonym (e.g. Ṛg Veda V 58). Such conceptions, coming down from the

earliest times, were continued in later systems such as those found in the Upaniṣads.

Very briefly stated, the old Indian religion was a kind of pantheism with Brahman (eternal, absolute, etc.) as the first cause of the universe. The manifestation of Brahman was sometimes personified and called Brahmā (God or the Great Self). Every human being had in him a part of Brahman, called ātman or the little self. Brahman and ātman were one, and of the same 'substance.' Salvation consisted in the little ātman entering into unity with Brahman. The ātman was eternal substance, exempt from the vicissitudes of change and incapable of entering into combination with anything else except itself.

In process of time, however, various theories grew up regarding the ātman. Many of these are to be found in the Brahmajāla Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya (D I 44ff) which is assumed to contain the whole of what is possible to assert concerning the self (*attā*) and the universe, treated from every point of view—positively, negatively and both. Thus, some doctrines set forth that the self and the universe are eternal (*sassata-vāda*). Some hold that the self and the universe are in some respects eternal and in some not. Some teachers wriggled like eels, and refused to give a clear answer. Some assert that the self and the universe have arisen without a cause (*adhicca-samuppanna*). These are theories concerned mainly with the origin of the self.

There are others dealing with its future destiny. Some hold

that the soul exists as a conscious entity after death, others that it exists but is unconscious. Then, there are those who say that the individual ceases to exist after death and is annihilated (*ucchedavāda*). This annihilation is further elaborated by stating that it may take place (1) with the death of the body, (2) with the death of the divine ātman in the world of sense (*kāma-loka*), (3) in the world of form (*rūpa-loka*) or (4) in one of the stages of the formless world (*arūpa-loka*). Whether all these doctrines were in actual existence or whether any of them were only possibilities, added to make the 'net' complete is not certain. Some of them can be identified [1] with the actual teachings of certain schools of philosophy but not all.

In the history of Indian philosophic development it is in the Upaniṣads that we find formulated a doctrine of the self which has remained fundamental in Indian thought and, it is this, more than anything else, which needs investigation when dealing with the Buddhist teachings on the self. The Upaniṣads contain many descriptions of the ātman apart from those already quoted above from the Pali Brahmajāla Sutta. It is always assumed that there does exist a self (*ātman*) in one's personality and the problem—where there is a problem—is to locate it. It is also assumed (e.g., in Chand. Up. 8 7. 1) that this ātman is free from death (*vimṛtyuḥ*), free from sorrow (*visokaḥ*) and has real thoughts (*satyasamkalpaḥ*). Sometimes the ātman is identified with the physical personality as seen reflected in a vessel of water. Elsewhere, the ātman is identified with the self in the

dream-state, or in the state of deep sleep (e. g., Bṛhad. Up. IV 3, 9; *ibid.* II 1. 16f.). After death, the soul has form, because it appears in its own form and is without defect or disease. The soul, being conscious, can if it so desires be conscious of enjoyment with women, chariots or relations (Chand. Up. 8 12. 3). Then, there is, for instance, the conception of the self as something almost physical, the size of a thumb, which abides in the heart. There are a hundred and one channels radiating from the heart through any of which the ātman may leave the body in sleep. From the aperture at the top of the head it may pass on to immortality (Bṛhad. Up. IV 3. 13).

Some of the Upaniṣads hold (e.g., Kaṭha Up. II 3. 17) that the soul can be separated from the body like the sword from its scabbard, or the fibre from the stalk of grass. Thus, the soul can travel at will away from the body, especially in sleep. Some theories state that the ātman cannot be identified with any aspects of the personality, physical or psychological, and then proceed to the metaphysical assumption that the ātman is an unobservable entity, a 'pure ego,' within the personality with all its aspects and, like the air, rises up from the body and reaches the highest light and appears in its own form (*ibid.* 8 11. 3).

In the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad is the famous *neti neti* (not this, not this) doctrine attributed to Yājñavalkya who speaks of the unknowableness of the ātman by any process of reasoning. The ātman cannot, according to him, be apprehended by any of the standard ways of knowing

(Bṛhad. Up. It 4. 14). The thought implied here is that the supreme ātman (Brahman) is unknowable because he is the all-comprehending unity, whereas all knowledge presupposes a duality of subject and object. The individual ātman is also unknowable because in all knowledge he is the knowing subject and consequently can never be the object. But there were other thinkers in the time of the Upaniṣads who believed that the ātman could be known by all the usual ways of knowing, that it could be empirically perceived, be heard or heard of, and likewise metaphysically conceived of and rationally understood by thinking (e.g., Chand. Up. 8 8. I; III 13. 8; 7 I 3; 6 16. 3).

Many centuries later, even Saṃkara accepts that the ātman can be known through argument and reasoning (*tarkinopapattyā*) is in his comment on (Bṛhad. Up. IV 5.6). The middle and late Upaniṣads, however, seem to agree with Yājñavalkya, The ātman has to be seen, directly seen, but not by means of perception, with the eye, for instance (Kaṭha Up. II 3. 12). It cannot be attained by means of scriptural instructions (ibid. I 2. 23). It is not to be reasoned about (Maitri Up. 6 17) because it is inconceivable being subtler than the subtle and it cannot be apprehended by the intellect (Kaṭha Up. 1. 2. 23; Maṇḍaka Up. II 2. s). The ātman, which is hidden within all things and does not shine forth, is seen by the subtle, awakened intuition, by the purification of knowledge and not by any of the sense-organs (Kathā Up. I 3. 12; Mund. III 2. 8).

Sometimes the ātman is spoken of in spatial terms, but not

metaphorically, since to speak of the size of the soul would be meaningless. It can be expressed only in contradictory terms: 'more minute than the minute, greater than the great' (e.g., Chand. Up. 6 3, 14;) 'That which is the most minute, this universe has it as its ātman. That is the real. That is the ātman. 'That-thou-art' tat tvam asi (ibid. 6 8. 6).

Apart from the teachers of the Vedas, the Brāhmaṇas and the Upaniṣads, there were in India also other thinkers who had their own views on the ātman or self, some of them contemporaries of the Buddha himself. Most Important among them were the Jains and the Ājīvakas. For the Jains, the soul (*jīva*) which is identified with life, is finite and has variable though definite size and weight. It is not only human beings that have soul but also everything else in the universe. When Mahāvīra, one of the founders of Jainism, was asked whether the body was identical with the soul or different from it, he is said (Bhagavati Sutra 13 7, 495) to have replied that the body is identical with the soul as well as different from it, probably meaning thereby that the soul is identical with the body from one point of view and different from it from another point of view. The soul was also considered by the Jains to be intrinsically omniscient but cluttered up by the material particles of Karma. When the influx of karmic particles is at an end by the complete exhaustion of past karma, the soul shines forth with its natural vision and intrinsic lustre. Some of the Ājīvakas seem to have held the view that the soul was octagonal or globular and five hundred yojanas in extent. It was also blue

in colour. (A. L. Basham: *History and Doctrine of the Ājīvakas*, London 1951, p. 270).

The Sāṅkhyas taught the existence of a plurality of souls on the one hand, and of unique, eternal pervasive substantial matter on the other. How many of these doctrines were extant in the time of the Buddha and were, in fact known to him, cannot be said with any definiteness. The Buddha makes no claim, to omniscience in these respects but he does, by implication at least, claim to have had a total vision of reality (*yathābhūta*). There is no statement attributed to the Buddha in which He makes mention of Brahman (neuter) as the one reality or of any identity of this with the ātman. The Brahmā that is found so often mentioned in the Sutta is a personal god ruling over a particular region of the universe and born and reborn as inevitably as any other being. And this Brahmā is never brought into relation with the Buddhist the theory of the 'self.' But, whatever be the theories enunciated by various thinkers regarding the self before the Buddha's day, during his lifetime and thereafter, it would seem correct to say that the Buddhist teaching of anattā or non-self contradicts them all in an all-embracing sweep.

The Buddha made no concessions at all to the doctrine of self. He denied the view that there is in man an ātman or a self that is permanent and unchanging, possessed of bliss and autonomous. He denied equally emphatically that at death man is utterly destroyed. He denied that man is divine, but he said that man should and could become

divine, by good thoughts, good words and good deeds. Man, in Buddhism, is a concrete, living, striving creature and his personality is something that changes, evolves and grows, as composite existent and changing. It is the concrete man, not the transcendental self that ultimately achieves perfection by constant effort and creative will.

The Buddhist argument against the doctrine of ātman is twofold. In the first place the Buddha takes various aspects of the personality and contends that none of them can be identified with the ātman since they do not have characteristics of the ātman. Thus, the question is asked (e.g., in M I 232 ff): Is the body (the physical personality) permanent or impermanent? The answer is: It is impermanent. Is what is impermanent sorrowful or happy? Sorrowful. Of what is impermanent, sorrowful and liable to change, is it proper to regard it as 'This is mine, this I am, this is my soul?' It is not. The canonical commentary, the Paṭisambhidāmagga (I 37), adds that rūpa etc., is not self in the sense that it has no core (*sāra*).

The same argument is repeated for the other aspects of the personality such as feeling (*vedanā*), perception or ideation (*saññā*), dispositions or tendencies (*saṅkhāra*) and consciousness (*viññāṇa*).

A similar procedure is attributed to Prajāpati in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad (8 7-12) but there is a very great difference in the attitudes of the two questioners. Prajāpati assumes the existence of an ātman and, when he fails to

identify it with any of the aspects of the person-personality, continues to assume that it must exist within it, somewhere, somehow, in spite of its failure to show up in a purely empirical investigation. The Buddha, on the other hand, accepts, the definition of the ātman, without assuming its existence or non-existence; and when the empirical investigation, fails to reveal any such ātman, He concludes that no such ātman exists because there is no evidence for its existence.

The second argument of the Buddha is that belief in a permanent self would negate the usefulness of the moral life. More of this later. In the first discourse, the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, given after his Enlightenment, the Buddha set out the Four Noble Truths. In the second, the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta, [2] He stated the characteristics of his doctrine of the not-self (*anattā*). Here He begins by emphasizing that if there were a self it should be autonomous, but no such thing is to be found. Matter (*rūpa*) is not the self. Were matter self, then the body would not be subject to affliction, one should be able to say to it 'Let my body be thus. Let my body be not thus.' But this is not possible; the body is shifting and ever in change and, therefore, ever accompanied by misery and affliction. Accordingly, it cannot be the self. The same is repeated for the other aspects of the personality. The conclusion is, therefore, reached that all these things, whether past, future or presently arisen, in one self or external, gross or subtle, inferior or Superior, far or near, are all to be viewed thus:

'This is not mine, this is not what I am, this is not my self.' Then it is added, when a man realises that all these things are not the self he turns away from them and by the extinction of desire he attains release. Here we find for the first time indication of the Buddha's purpose in enunciating His doctrine. All misery, in His view, arises from the delusion of self which causes man to strive to profit himself, not to injure others. The most effective therapeutic against the folly of seeking to gratify longings is the realization that there is no truth in the doctrine of a permanent self.

The Mahānidāna Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya (D II 66ff) puts the argument in a different way. Here, three hypotheses are selected for investigation. The first is that the self is feeling (*vedanā*). It is argued that feelings are threefold: pleasant, painful and neutral. They are impermanent, they are products and certain to pass away. If then, when a pleasant feeling exists, the conclusion is drawn, 'This is my self' then, when a painful feeling supersedes it, one must conclude 'my self has passed away.' To call, therefore, feeling the self is to regard self as impermanent, blended of happiness and pain and liable to begin and end. The next hypothesis is that the self is neither feeling nor is insentient, i.e. the soul and the body are identical. This would mean that where there is no feeling it is impossible to say 'I am,' for a self without self-reference has no meaning. Thirdly, the self is regarded as not identical with feeling but as possessing feeling. If so, were feeling of every kind to cease absolutely, then, there being no feeling whatever, no one could say 'I myself am.'

There are many such variations in the presentation of the doctrine. Thus, what is conditioned by not-self cannot be self. Matter (*rūpa*, etc.) is not self. The cause and condition for the arising of matter, etc. are not self, so, it is asked how could matter, etc. which is brought into being by what is not self, be self (S III 24)? Or, again, here someone's view is this 'This is self, this is the world. After death I shall be permanent, everlasting ...' Then he hears the true doctrine for the exhaustion of craving, for cessation, for extinction (*nibbāna*). Then he thinks: 'So, I shall be annihilated! So, I shall be lost! So, I shall be no more!' Then he sorrows and laments. That is how there is anguish about what is non-existent in oneself (M I 133 ff). Some shrink back in that way from the truth, but some go too far the other way. Being ashamed and disgusted with being (*bhava*) they relish the idea of non-being (*vibhava*), saying: 'When this self is annihilated on the dissolution of the body after death, that is peace. This is the supreme goal, that is reality (It 43–44). But one who has eyes sees how what is (*bhūta*) has come to be, and by so doing practises the way to dispassion for it' (ibid). In certain discourses the doctrine is very succinctly stated, thus: 'The eye (ear, nose, tongue, body and mind and their six external objects) is impermanent; what is impermanent is fraught with sorrow; what is fraught with sorrow is not self' ; or, 'All is not self. And what is the all that is not self? The eye is not self ... ' (S IV 28); or, again, 'All things (*dhamma*) are not' (Dhammapada, verse 279). It is worth noting that whereas in the case of the two characteristics

*anicca* (impermanence) and *dukkha* (affliction) it is the *saṅkhāra* (all component things) that are so described, in the case of the third characteristic *anattā* (not self) all dhamma, i.e. everything, without exception, is so described. This is because even Nibbāna, which being *asaṅkhata* (uncompounded) is not a *saṅkhāra*, is also without self.

In all the statements attributed to the Buddha regarding the doctrine of not-self there is complete consistency. When, for instance, he is asked who, in the absence of a self, is it that has feeling or other sensations, his answer is that there is no one who feels, but there is feeling, which is a totally different proposition. Similarly, it is not correct to ask who becomes old, who dies and who is reborn. There is old age, there is death and rebirth (S II 62). Indeed, if any assertion can be made about a self, it will be more correct to call the body the self because, whereas the body may endure as long as a hundred years, the mind in all its forms is in constant flux like an ape in a forest which seizes one branch only to let it go and grasp another (S II 94f). The doctrine of not-self is a necessary corollary to the teaching of *anicca* (impermanence). Since all things are impermanent they are fraught with sorrow and since bliss is the characteristic of the self, they are without self. Thus, there is no self in things. This is one interpretation of the three characteristics (*tilakkhaṇa*). Another is that all things, being impermanent, they are fraught with suffering because they are without self, in as much as they are not autonomous. Existence is nothing but existence depending on a series of conditions;

hence their existence is a conditional one and there is nothing in the universe that is permanent, i.e., independent of conditions. All things, matter and mind (*nāma-rūpa*) have no abiding self-reality. What appears to be real is temporary existence, an instant in a conditional sequence, the effect of two or more conditions combined.

This is rather dramatically expressed in a conversation between Māra, the Evil One, and the nun Vajirā. By whom is the person (*satta*) produced? asks Māra. Who is the creator of the person? Where is the person who comes into being? Where is the person who disappears?

Vajirā points out to him that there is no such thing as person but merely a collection of changing aggregates (*khandha*) and she illustrates her meaning by the simile of the chariot which is merely the name for a collection of various parts (S I 134f). In a late work, the *Milindapañhā*, the illustration is elaborated in great detail and it is pointed out that when a person is indicated by giving him a name it does not denote a soul but is merely an appellation for the five aggregates which constitute the empirical individual (*Milindapañhā*, pp. 25ff).

The Buddhist conception of the individual, the person, is a quite definite theory, expressed in different ways but all of them essentially the same. The individual consists of *nāma* and *rūpa*, 'name' and 'form,' mind and matter, or mind and body. More usually, he is said to consist of five *khandhas* (groups, masses, aggregates), given as *rūpa* (the physical

body), *vedanā* (feelings, sensations), *saññā* (perceptions, ideations), *saṅkhāra* (variously translated as tendencies, dispositions, character-complexes) and *viññāṇa* (cognition, consciousness, intellect). Body corresponds to *rūpa* and the four other *khandhas* to *nāma*, mind. Elsewhere (e.g., in the *Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta*, M I 53f) *nāma* is said to consist of feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), volition (*cetanā*), contact (*phassa*) and attention (*manasikāra*), while *rūpa* is defined as being made up of the four great elements (*mahābhūtā*): earth (*pathavī-dhātu*), water (*āpo-dhātu*), wind (*vāyo-dhātu*) and fire (*tejo-dhātu*), which are common both to the world and to the individual. But the distinction between the elements in the world and those that are part of the complex which constitutes the individual, is clearly defined in the texts (e.g., M III 239f). The latter are described as being upādinna, appropriated, taken-up, assimilated by the consciousness (*viññāṇa*) in order to continue the existence to which it is bound by its earlier activities (see also A I 175; D II 63).

These conceptions are elsewhere found further expanded. Just as the human being was analysed into its component parts, so was the external world with which he entered into relationship. This relationship is one of cognition (*viññāṇa*) and, in discussing how this cognition is established, mention is made of faculties (*indriya*) and their objects are called āyatana. The term simply means 'place' or 'sphere' or 'entrance' and is used to include both sense and sense-object, the meeting of which two is necessary for cognition. These three factors that together comprise a condition, i.e.

the sense faculty, the sense object and the resultant consciousness are classified under the name dhātu. The human personality and the external world with which it enters into relationship is thus divided into khandha, āyatana and dhātu. The generic name for all three of them is dhamma, which in this context, is translated as element of existence. Hence, the significance of the formula already referred to: sabbe dhamma anattā: All existence is not-self (without self).

The universe is made up of saṅkhāras or component things and since these are anicca or impermanent, they are regarded as being in a state of ceaseless movement. And since they have nothing perdurable or stable in them, they are in a condition not of static being but of perpetual becoming (*bhava*). The phenomenal world is therefore a world of continuous flux or flow (*santāna*), a congeries of ever-changing elements in a process of ceaseless movement. All things without exception, are nothing but strings or chains of events, instantaneous 'bits' of existence. In the Buddhist view not only are eternal entities such as God, Soul, Matter, denied reality but even the simplest stability of empirical objects is regarded as something constituted by our imagination. The empirical thing is a thing constructed by the synthesis of our productive imagination on the basis of sensation. It is nothing but an imagined mental computation.

How then is the illusion produced of a stable, material world and of the perdurable personalities living in it? It is in

order to explain this that the Buddha taught the doctrine of paṭicca-samuppāda (dependent origination or conditional causation). [3] According to this doctrine, all things that exist in time as well as all space are subject to definite laws, the laws of causation. There is nothing haphazard or predetermined. Every element (*dhamma*), though appearing only for a single instant (*khaṇa*), is a 'tiny element,' i.e. it depends for its origin on what had gone before it. Thus existence becomes 'dependent existence' and is expressed by the formula: if there is this, there comes to be that; in the absence of this, that too is absent (*asmim̐ sati idaṃ hoti asmim̐ na sati idaṃ na hoti*), The relationship is one of 'consecution' rather than of causation. There is no destruction of one thing and no creation of another, no influx of one substance into the other. There is only a constant, uninterrupted, infinitely graduated change.

Accordingly, the personality in which other systems of thought imagine the presence of a permanent spiritual principle, a self or soul (*attā*) is, from the point of view of the Buddha, only a bundle of elements or forces (*saṅkhāra*) and a stream or a series of successive states (*santāna*) originating and existing in dependence on other, previous states. Everything is a succession, there is nothing substantial or permanent. The human individual does not remain the same for two consecutive moments. The 'spiritual' part (*nāma*) of the human being and its physical frame (*rūpa*) are linked together by causal laws. The individual is entirely phenomenal, governed by the laws of life, without any

extra-phenomenal self or soul within him. Thus, in place of the Upaniṣad teaching, 'Let no man try to find what speech is, let him know the speaker, let him not try to find what the seen-thing is, let him know not what the doing is, but the doer, etc.' The Buddha, says, 'There is no doer, only doing; no seer, only a seeing, etc.' The attavādin (believer in the Soul-doctrine) would say that when a patch of colour is cognised by someone his soul is the agent, the sense of vision is the instrument. Finding its procedure would consist in light travelling from the eye to the object, seizing its form and coming back in order to deliver its impression to the soul. The Buddha would repudiate the whole of this construction as mere imagery. There are the senses, he would say, and there are the sensibilia or objects of sense. Then there is a functional interdependence or relationship between them. There are sensations and conceptions, and there is a coordination between them.

The absence in the human-being of a soul, an un-changing, undying essence, does not mean that the Buddha taught the annihilation of body and mind at death. For, besides all the doctrines mentioned earlier, he also taught the doctrine of kamma, the doctrine of the transmitted force of the act, both physical and mental. The living being is a khandha-complex, ever changing, but ever determined by its antecedent actions. The long-drawn-out line of life is but a fluctuating curve of inner experience. A man is a compound of body and its organs of sense, of feelings and perceptions, by which he is in constant contact with the external world,

of disposition, aptitudes and abilities, and summing them all up, of thought, covering the whole group of mental activities. When he began this present life, he brought as his inheritance the kamma of his many previous lives. During the course of his existence in this world he is always accumulating fresh kamma, through his actions, his thoughts and desires, his affections and passions, and these affect every moment of his life, constantly changing its character. At death when the corporeal bond which held him together falls away, he undergoes only a relatively deeper change. The unseen potencies of his kamma beget a new person. His new body, determined by his kamma, becomes one fitted to that sphere in which he is born.

When a new life is thus produced its components are present from its very inception, although in an undeveloped condition. The first moment of new life is called *viññāṇa*; in the formula of the *paṭicca-samuppāda* its antecedents are the *saṅkhāra*, the pre-natal forces which contain latent in them the *anusaya*, the resultant of all the impressions made in that particular flux of elements (*santāna*), conventionally called an individual, in the whole course of its repeated births and deaths, its faring through life (*saṃsāra*). The new person, psychologically if not physical is continuous with the deceased and suffers or enjoys what his 'predecessor' had prepared for him by his behaviour. The elements that contribute to the empirical individual are constantly changing but they will never totally disappear till the conditions and causes that hold them together and impel

them to rebirth, the craving (*taṇhā*) and the grasping (*upādāna*) and the desire separate existence are finally extinguished.

The teaching that *viññāṇa* (consciousness) forms the connecting link between one life and the next has had various interpretations, though it is clear there is no indication at all of an autonomous consciousness persisting unchanged, but only of a continuity of consciousness. The Buddha was once asked (S III 103): 'If there is no permanent self then who is affected by the acts which the not-self has performed?' The Buddha reproves the saying: 'Shall one who is under the dominion of desire, think to go beyond the mind of the Master?', meaning thereby, perhaps, that the question is wrongly put because there is an assumption in it of a permanent self.

The Mahātaṇhakkhaya Sutta (M I 256ff) relates the story of a monk, Sāti who went about saying that, according to the Buddha's doctrine, one's consciousness runs on and on and continues without break of identity (*anañña*). It is said (M-a I 477) Sāti's view was due to his having heard various characters in the Jātakas identified with the Buddha. Sāti's colleagues tried to point out his error and when they failed they brought him before the Buddha who explained to him that, according to his teaching, consciousness arises only by causation and that without assignable conditions, consciousness does not come about.

The Mahānidāna Sutta (D II 63f) contains the assertion that

there is a 'descent' of the consciousness into the womb of the mother preparatory to rebirth. Commentators have differed in regard to the question whether, in addition to the continuity of consciousness between the old and the new lives, there is also some sort of corporeal accompaniment, some kind of subtle matter. For instance, Buddhaghosa denies that the consciousness is accompanied by any physical form and holds it is in process of constant change. The 'descent' is only an expression to denote the simultaneity of death and rebirth.

The continuity of consciousness is also the theme of the amusing tale of Godhika (S I 120f). He made various attempts to win arahantship but disease prevented him from maintaining his state of trance long enough. In the end he decided to commit suicide and cut his throat. But, before he died, he put forth a final effort and won Nibbāna. Māra, the Evil One, not being fully aware of what had happened, and seeing only the suicide, assumed the form of a cloud of smoke and went about searching for the 'rebirth-consciousness' of the sage. When he failed to find it he reported this to the Buddha who explained that his search was in vain because Godhika had gone beyond Māra's sphere. The question is: Does the story mean that the rebirth consciousness is something visible or is the conception of 'visibility' purely metaphorical? It also asserts the doctrine of the moral responsibility of the individual for his actions, for it is not only his continuity that is stressed but also his identity.

This idea is emphasized with a wealth of illustration. To give only two—the milk turns into curds, the curds into butter and butter into ghee.—The thief of a mango cannot escape punishment because the mango he stole was not the mango the owner planted. The Milindapañhā (pp. 40f) explicitly raises the question: Is the infant the same as the man? Is the mother of the child the same as the mother of the man? and so on. Each succeeding state is neither the same as the one that precedes, nor yet another. The being that is born into a new life is likewise neither the same nor different from his 'predecessor.' One comes into being and another passes away and the rebirth is, as it were, simultaneous.

The statement has been sometimes made that although the Buddha has denied self as belonging to visible form (*rūpa*) or to mind (*nāma*) he has not said that there is no self at all, anywhere, of any kind at all. It is objected that to infer the absence of self altogether from the denial of self in either body or mind, is unjustified, because to do so would be to assume that the self, if it is to be found at all, must be entirely comprised under and within body and mind. 'If I pull my typewriter to pieces,' so runs the argument, 'I shall find in it no typist; would it be correct, therefore, to say that there is no typist at all?'

The argument is evidently due to a confusion of thought. In Buddhism it is not only the typewriter that has been analysed; the typist has been analysed as well, and both man and machine have been discovered to be 'bundles' of

khandhas, the typewriter having only *rūpa* (matter) in it while the typist has *nāma* (mind) as well. From the point of view of Buddhism, typist and machine agree in this, that they are both *anattā*, without self of any kind. If it is suggested, however, that there is an *attā*, outside and apart from body and mind, which uses body and mind for its expression and manifestation, in the same way as a typist uses a typewriter, it must be asserted that such a supposition finds no support in any of the records of the Buddha, as has already been stated, that the Buddha never recognised the presence of an *attā* of any nature or description either in the universe or out of it. If it be true to say that the Buddha has nowhere explicitly stated in so many words, that the 'being' (*satta*) is composed only of the *khandhas*, it would be a hundred times truer to say that nowhere has he said of 'being' that it comprises anything else at all, of any description whatsoever, apart from the five *khandhas*.

Numerous passages can be quoted from the Piṭakas which show beyond all possible doubt that, in Buddhist ontology, when 'being' (*satta*) is resolved into the five *khandhas*, there is no residuum whatever left. It is clearly stated in one passage (e.g., S III 46f) that 'all *samaṇas* and *brāhmaṇas*, who talk about the soul which is variously described by them, talk about it in reference to the five *khandhas* or one or other of them.' Buddhaghosa says (*Visuddhimagga* 14 218) that the five *khandhas* were selected for this very purpose for examination to show that there was no residual self. So

does Vasubandhu in the *Abhidharmakoṣa* (Chap. 9) where it is stated that *anātman* is synonymous with *skandha*, *āyatana* and *dhātu*.

In any event, it cannot be maintained that the Buddha was incapable of making a categorical statement on a self if it did really exist and it would certainly be conceded that if the Buddha had the least lurking belief in a self of any sort, he would not have hidden it from his own, only son. And, yet, this is what he taught Rāhula: 'Now, Rāhula, when a monk by perfect wisdom realises with regard to the elements (which comprise the human being) 'this is not mine, this is not I this a not my attā,' then does he cut himself off from craving, loosen bonds and by overcoming the vain conceit (of attā) makes an end of suffering.' As the commentator Kumāralābha asks in desperation: 'If there was an attā, what on earth was there to prevent the Buddha from saying so?'

In the *Mahāvagga* of the *Vinaya* (Vin I) there is a story of thirty young 'bloods' (elsewhere called the *Bhaddavaggiyas*) who went on a picnic with their wives. One of them who had no wife had brought a courtesan and when they were not noticing her she made off with their belongings. While seeking her they came across the Buddha and asked if he had seen a woman. The Buddha replied, 'Come now, which would be better for you, that you seek the woman or seek yourself (*attānaṃ gaveseyyatha*)?' The word *attānaṃ* has been interpreted (e.g. by Mrs. Rhys Davids, *Manual of Buddhism*, p. 147) as meaning 'the self, the God within you,' thus giving to it an import which has

deeply coloured the whole of the subsequent argument. The use of the singular accusative is quite in accordance with Pali idiom and there is no need to use here any more than the reflexive sense 'each one seeking himself,' i.e. learning the truth about himself. In this passage and in such passages as *attā hi attano nātho* (one is lord of oneself), *attadīpā viharatha* (be a refuge unto yourselves), the word *attā* merely refers to the living individual(s) to whom the statement is made or the advice given.

To attribute to the Buddha any teaching accepting the existence of a self or soul would necessitate the supposition that his disciples who came after him had suppressed his teaching so effectually that no one remembered anything of it. Although at the time of his death his teaching was preserved in the minds of thousands of disciples, there is no trace of it even as a heresy among the Buddhists.

Unprejudiced scholars have always been struck by the spirit of extreme hostility which undoubtedly reveals itself in the oldest Buddhist sects whenever the idea of a self or soul is mentioned. All Buddhist schools, without exception, have rejected the *atta-vāda* or the doctrine which teaches the idea of a surviving personality of some sort, a psychophysical entity. What, in the view of the Buddha's disciples, he did consider permanent is stated in the *Sarvāstivāda* version of the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*, which begins: 'Form has the nature of the destructible and with its cessation is Nirvana which is of indestructible nature,' and so on with each of the five *khandhas* (*Avadāna Sataka*, 248).

There is a discourse in the Saṃyutta Nikāya (S III 25) called the 'Burden-Sutta' (Bhārahāra Sutta) which speaks of the burden, the taking of the burden, the grasping of the burden and the laying down of the burden. The five khandhas are the burden. The grasping of the burden is the craving which tends to rebirth. The laying down of the burden is the complete cessation of this craving in all its forms. Here the word *bhara-hara* is used in reference to the individual, the person (*puggala*) of such and such a clan. It has sometimes (e.g., by Keith, Buddhist Philosophy; p. 82) been translated as 'burden-bearer,' thus supporting the view that the sutta accepts a person, i.e. an attā or self apart from the five khandhas. But the word could equally well and with greater consistency be translated 'burden-taking.' In any case, it is not important because it would be unjustified to try to prove from a single text that the individual is to be regarded as a permanent entity.

It should be added that two Buddhist schools, the Sammitīyas and the Vajjiputtakas, held the conception of a person (*puggala*) which for all practical purposes may be regarded as an effective self. They taught that the internal khandhas at a given moment constitute a certain unity which is related to them as fire is to fuel. This which is called *puggala* assumes new elements at birth and casts them off at death. Since it was obviously another name for a self, this view was rejected by orthodox Buddhists and the arguments adduced are given in the Kathāvatthu (i,1). It is significant that the 'heretics' never thought of calling this

self ātman but used instead a new term puggala. The Abhidharmakoṣa devotes a whole chapter to its refutation.

It has been asked (e.g., by Mrs. Rhys Davids, *Buddhist Psychology*, 2nd ed., p. 235) why if anattā was such a fundamental tenet in Buddhism, when the Paribbājaka Vacchagotta asked the Buddha: 'Is there an attā or is there not, the Buddha remained silent instead of saying categorically that there was no attā. The reason was given by the Buddha himself later to Ānanda, that if he had answered 'self exists,' he would have been quoted by those who held the view of a permanent soul (*sassatavādins*). Whereas if he had said 'self does not exist,' he would be siding with the annihilationists (*ucchedavādins*). Both were views with which he did not agree (S IV 400f). Besides, Vacchagotta was not yet ripe to understand the truth regarding attā. That ripeness came later and Vacchagotta became an arahant.

Buddhism has no objection to the use of the words attā, or satta or puggala to indicate, the individual as a whole, or to distinguish one person from another, where such distinction is necessary, especially as regards such things as memory and kamma which are private and personal and where it is necessary to recognise the existence of separate lines of continuity (*santāna*). But, even so, these terms should be treated only as labels, binding-conceptions and conventions in language, assisting economy in thought and word and nothing more. Even the Buddha uses them sometimes. 'These are worldly usages, worldly terms of

communication, worldly descriptions, by which a Tathāgata communicates without misapprehending them” (D I 195f).

The doctrine of *anattā*, like all other doctrines enunciated by the Buddha, has moral perfection as its purpose. The analysis of the five *khandhas* is in order to find out the condition and causes of their existence and their functioning, which are involved in impermanence and suffering, so that the Path to their cessation may be discovered and followed. To do this effectively, according to the Buddha, all false views and misconceptions should be eliminated. Among the strongest of these views are the various beliefs about self (*attā*), particularly those that conceive it as a permanent entity. The individual being entirely phenomenal, governed by causal laws, were there to be in him a supernatural self which transcends these laws, then ethical life would lose its point. Then the Exalted One took up a pinch of dust on the tip of his nail and said: ‘Even if this much *rūpa* (matter) be permanent, stable, eternal, by nature unchanging, standing fast, then the living of the holy life for the utter destruction of suffering would not be set forth by me.’ And so on with the other *khandhas* (S III 147).

The passionate sense of egoism is regarded as the root of the world’s unhappiness. For one thing, it makes the individual blind to the reality of other persons. When the notion of self disappears, the notion of ‘mine’ also disappears and one becomes free from the idea of ‘I’ and ‘mine’ (*ahaṃkāra-mamaṅkāra*), and there follows a gentler, profounder

sympathy with all sentient existence. The first factor of the Noble Eightfold Path is *sammā diṭṭhi*, Right View. When the path is trodden, the goal is ultimately reached which is Nibbāna (skt. Nirvāna), complete emancipation and supreme bliss. There are four stages to this goal, the first of which is described as *sotāpatti* (entering the stream). This is reached when three of the ten *saṃyojana* (fetters) have been cast off. These three are (i) belief in a permanent individuality (*sakkāya-diṭṭhi*), (ii) doubt (*vicikicchā*) and (iii) belief in the efficacy of mere morality and rites and ceremonies (*sīlabbata-parāmāsa*).

It is noteworthy that *sakkāya-diṭṭhi* is the first of the fetters which hinder the attainment of that complete insight on which depends the final release from all suffering and unhappiness. It is said (e.g. in S III 131ff., S II 53) that final deliverance cannot be attained till the subtle remnant of the 'I am' conceit of the 'I am' desire, of the lurking tendency to think 'I am' is utterly removed. Acceptance of the doctrine of a self (*attavāda*) is one of the four kinds of graspings (*upādāna*) which attach beings to continued rebirth. Another term *atta-diṭṭhi* (the heresy of self) is also sometimes mentioned and *atta-gāha* (misconception of self), e.g. in the Mahāniddeśa.

The individual who has attained Nibbāna is described by many names, one of them being *Tathāgata*. The question was asked of the Buddha himself, e.g., in the Alagaddūpama Sutta (M I 139f) [4] as to what happens to a Tathāgata when he dies. Would it be true to say that the Tathāgata exists

after death? When the question is thus put, every possible way of asserting or denying it is stated and rejected. It is one of the 'undetermined questions' (*avyākata*). It is worth noting, however, that among the statements denied is the view that a disciple, in whom all the fetters have been destroyed, is annihilated and destroyed with the dissolution of the body and does not exist after death (e.g. S III 109). 'A Tathāgata released from what is called body, etc., is profound, immeasurable, hard to fathom, like the great ocean. It does not fit the case to say that he is reborn or not reborn or reborn and not reborn or neither reborn or not reborn.' When dissatisfaction is expressed with this declaration the Buddha answers: 'Profound is this doctrine, hard to see, hard to comprehend, calm, excellent, beyond the sphere of reasoning, subtle, intelligible only to the wise' (M I 487).

The truth of *anattā* is, according to Buddhist teaching, of all truths the most difficult to realise. Thus Buddhaghosa says (Vibh-a 49f) that the description of the characteristics of not-self is the province of none but a Buddha. It is no idle tradition which states that even the *pañcavaggiyas*, the Buddha's first five disciples, who were very nearly his peers in knowledge and wisdom, how even they failed to realize arahantship till he preached to them the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta* on the characteristics of *anattā* (Vin I 13f). The belief in the categories of an abiding self with changing qualities is so deeply rooted in our habits of thought that we are reluctant to admit the doctrine of pure and complete change.

Even among the Buddhist schools the doctrine did not hold undisputed sway. The notion of a permanent entity, constituting reality, though officially banned and repudiated, constantly tended to appear through some back-door and to haunt the domain of Buddhist philosophy in various guises. Nor is this surprising, for it is only with the attainment of arahantship that the threefold illusion of self, known as the three conceits (*māna*), is destroyed. Even the anāgāmi who has attained the third stage of the Path is not free from the māna-maññanā, the conceit of 'I am' (S III 128f). Till the fetters of *avijjā* (ignorance) are completely broken and *paññā* (insight) has been attained our attempts to escape from belief in self are like those of the hare in the old Indian tale who, annoyed with the earth, jumped off it, hoping never to return, only to find that the higher he jumped the greater was the thud with which he fell. It is because of our clinging that this is so, says the Buddha (S III 182). To the herdsman who has no cows, the cry of 'wolf' no longer brings any terror; to him who has no clinging the realization of anattā spells the highest liberation.

# Notes

1. In other texts, various other views are mentioned e.g. that the soul has form and is minute; has form and is boundless; is formless and minute; is formless and boundless; the soul is feeling; has feeling; is non-sentient; is not non-sentient. Also the body is the *attā* (like a flame and its colour); the body exists together with or because of *attā* (like the shadow and the tree); in the body there is the *attā* (like a jewel in a box); because of *attā* a body materialises (like scent emanating because of a flower).
2. Both this one and the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* have been translated in *Three Cardinal Discourses of the Buddha*, by Ñāṇamoli Thera. The Wheel No. 17). See also *The Buddha's First Discourse* (Bodhi Leaves, B. L.).
3. See *Dependent Origination* by Piyadassi Thera. The **Wheel No. 15**).
4. See *The Discourse on the Snake Simile (Alagaddūpama Sutta)*, tr. by Nyanaponika Thera (The **Wheel No. 48/49**).

# THE BUDDHIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY

The BPS is an approved charity dedicated to making known the Teaching of the Buddha, which has a vital message for all people.

Founded in 1958, the BPS has published a wide variety of books and booklets covering a great range of topics. Its publications include accurate annotated translations of the Buddha's discourses, standard reference works, as well as original contemporary expositions of Buddhist thought and practice. These works present Buddhism as it truly is—a dynamic force which has influenced receptive minds for the past 2500 years and is still as relevant today as it was when it first arose.

For more information about the BPS and our publications, please visit our website, or write an e-mail or a letter to the:

Administrative Secretary  
Buddhist Publication Society  
P.O. Box 61

54 Sangharaja Mawatha  
Kandy • Sri Lanka  
E-mail: [bps@bps.lk](mailto:bps@bps.lk)

web site: <http://www.bps.lk>  
Tel: 0094 81 223 7283 • Fax: 0094 81 222 3679

# Table of Contents

Title page	2
Prefatory Note	4
The Truth of Anattā	5
Notes	35