

2.2 Is There a Soul?

A study from the Pali Canon

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Revised, expanded and annotated by Piya Tan ©2003

1. What is “soul”?

The Indian term for “soul” is *anattā* in Pali or *ātman* in Sanskrit. **The Buddha rejects any notion of a permanent entity** in the form of a self or soul. This teaching forms the third and last of the Three Characteristics (*ti, lakkhaṇa*). Etymologically, *anattā* consists of the negative prefix *na* > *an* (before a vowel) + *atta*. It is usually rendered as “not-self”, “not self” or “non-self”;¹ sometimes the adjectives “egoless”, “impersonal” and “soulless” are also used.

However, through centuries of religious conditioning, many Westerners and those who have brought up in a theistic environment find it difficult to accept the term “soulless”. However, if “soul” is taken to mean “**spirit**” or “**quality**”, as in “the soul of music, art, etc” this is acceptable usage in Buddhism as it merely describes how one feels and has nothing to do with a permanent entity. Sometimes, one may speak of people as “souls” as in the sentence: “Many souls were lost during the war.” This usage is acceptable with the understanding that there is nothing permanent in a human being. As such, it is a matter of usage. However, when explaining Buddhist doctrine, one has to be very clear about one’s usage of terms and the audience should be able to relate to the terms used.

Like the four Noble Truths, that of *anattā* is a “**teaching peculiar to Buddhas**” (*buddhāna samukkamsika desanā*, M 1:380). In his Commentary on the Vibhaṅga, Buddhaghosa says: “The characteristics of impermanence and suffering are known whether Buddhas arise or not; but that of not-self (*anattā*) is not known unless there is a Buddha...for the knowledge of it is the province of none but a Buddha.” (VbhA 49 f).

The Buddha sometimes shows the nature of not-self through impermanence (eg the Cha, chakka Sutta, M 148), sometimes through suffering (the Pañca.vaggi Sutta, S 3:67), and sometimes through both (eg the Arahanta Sutta S 3:83 f, and the Anicca Sutta, S 4:1). Why is that? While impermanence and suffering are both evident, not-self or soullessness is not evident (MA 1:113).

2. Psychological Fears

Man is not able to see the not-selfness or soullessness of things as long as he is blinded by his psychological fears and complexes that arise through conditioning and ignorance. In his book *What the Buddha Taught*, Walpola Rahula says:

Two ideas are psychologically deep rooted in man: self-protection and self-preservation. For self-protection man has created God, on whom he depends for his own protection, safety and security, just as a child depends on its parents. For self-preservation man has conceived the idea of an immortal Soul or Atman, which will live eternally. In his ignorance, weakness, fear, and desire, man needs these two things to console himself. Hence he clings to them deeply and fanatically. (1978:51)

In their ignorance, some people panic at the thought that nothing permanent is to be found within oneself. In **the Alagaddûpama Sutta** the Buddha speaks of a person who holds the view: “The universe is that Self; I shall be that after death, permanent, abiding, ever lasting, unchanging, and I shall exist as such for eternity.” When that man hears the Buddha or his disciple teaching the doctrine of not-self, he despairs thinking, “I will be annihilated, I will be destroyed, I will be no more.” (M 1:135 f). Elsewhere the Buddha says “O monks, this idea that I may not be, I may not have, is frightening to the uninstructed ordinary person.” (MA 2:112)

¹ See Thanissaro, “No-self or not-self”, 2001.

3. How the Self develops

- (1) The conception of an ego or self begins from birth, from the instinct for survival —a baby cries whenever it has a need, calling attention to itself.
- (2) The child then plays with toys and begins to identify with them: he collects the toys —the concept of “my” and “mine” arises.
- (3) As the child matures, he organizes these ideas into a more sophisticated self-identity —“I” and “me”
- (4) Once there is a clear idea of an **ego**, then there is the fear of losing it.
- (5) The adult person then thinks in terms of **life and death** (opposites): life is desirable, death is feared (as loss).

4. (Atth’atta) Ānanda Sutta (S 44.10)

2 Then the wanderer Vaccha,gotta approached the Blessed One and exchanged greetings with one another. When they had concluded their greetings and cordial talk, he sat down at one side.

3 Sitting thus at one side, he said this to the Blessed One:

“How is it, master Gotama, is there a self (*attā*)?”

When this was said, the Blessed One remained silent.

“Then, master Gotama, is there no self?”

A second time, the Blessed One remained silent.

Then the wanderer Vacchagotta rose from his seat and departed.

4 Then, not long after the wanderer Vacchagotta had left, the venerable Ānanda said to the Blessed One:

“Why is it, venerable sir, that when the Blessed One was asked a question by the wanderer Vacchagotta, he did not answer it?”

5 “If, Ānanda, when asked by the wanderer Vacchagotta, ‘Is there a self?’ I were to answer, ‘There is a self,’ this would be siding with those ascetics and brahmins who are **eternalists** [who believe that the self or soul survive death].

6 And if, Ānanda, when asked by the wanderer Vacchagotta, ‘Is there a no self?’ I were to answer, ‘There is no self,’ [401] this would be siding with those ascetics and brahmins who are **annihilationists** [who believe that there is no afterlife].

7 If, Ānanda, when asked by the wanderer Vacchagotta, ‘Is there a self?’ I were to answer, ‘There is a self,’ would my (reply) be conducive to the arising of knowledge² that ‘all things are not self’?”

“Certainly not, venerable sir!”

8 “If, Ānanda, when asked by the wanderer Vacchagotta, ‘Is there no self?’ I were to answer, ‘There is no self,’ the wanderer, already confused, would become even more confused, thinking, ‘It seems that formerly I had a self but now it does not exist!’”

4a. Comments

It is evident from the Buddha’s closing remark that Vacchagotta held the view that there was a self and that he was not ready to see the truth of not-self. Bhikkhu Bodhi makes this important note:³

We should carefully heed the two reasons the Buddha does not declare, “There is no self”; not because he recognizes a transcendent self of some kind (as some interpreters allege), or because he is concerned only with delineating “a strategy of perception” devoid of ontological implications (as others hold), but (i) because such a mode of expression was used by the annihilationists, and the Buddha wanted to avoid aligning his teaching with theirs; and (ii) because he wished to avoid causing confusion in those already attached to the idea of self. The Buddha declares that “all phenomena are not self” (*sabbe dhammā anattā*), which means

² “would my reply be conducive to the arising of knowledge...” *api nu me taṃ anulomaṃ abhaviṣṣa nāṇassa upādāya...* See S:B 1456 n384.

³ For further discussion, see Harvey 1995:28-33.

that if one seeks a self anywhere one will not find one. Since “all phenomena” includes both the conditioned and the unconditioned, this precludes an utterly transcendent, ineffable self.

(S:B 1457 n385)

5. Reflections on not-self

(a) A chariot (or car or computer).

When you take a computer apart, where is the computer? When you properly assemble the parts together again, it works as a computer. Moreover, from the first computer ever invented to the modern computer, so much has changed in the definition of what a computer is. As such, there is no permanent and unchanging entity called “the computer” or “mother of computers”.

(b) A forest.

When a great number of trees grow close together in the same general area, we have a forest. But, can we say how many trees make a forest? Or, after removing how many trees, do we still have a forest? Or, if the trees were well-spaced apart, do we still have a forest? A single tree is not a forest; yet, apart from the individual trees, there is no forest.

(c) A distant star.

We know that the twinkling stars in the sky are many light-years away. We also know that light, albeit fast-moving, takes time to travel. Since these stars are so far away, we only see their lights or images (which after all are energy) but in reality all these stars have either evolved or died out. So, we are looking at something which is not there!

(d) A mirage.

The illusion of a self is best illustrated by the simile of a mirage. A mirage is not mere imagination. In a mirage, there is real light arriving in our eyes. There is an image at the back of our eyes. The point is that the mind misinterprets what we are seeing and gives it a label it does not deserve. [In fact, the images we have in our eyes right now are inverted, but our minds adjusts them “right” side up!]

6. Proof of Not-self

In the analogy of the chariot (Miln 26 f), Nāgasena shows that the self is only a conventional term without any reality of its own. Just as the axle, wheel or chariot body cannot be called “chariot”, so also the eye, ear, or tongue cannot be called the self. In current terms, one could use the analogy of a “car” or a “computer”. It is when the various parts are put together that it is called a “chariot”, “car” or “computer”. So also when the component parts of the body come together that the notion or illusion of “self” arises. But all these are impermanent and fleeting states: no permanent or abiding “soul” is there to be found anywhere.⁴

That there is no self or soul within oneself is proven by the fact that one cannot command any part of the body in the following three instances, namely,

“Let it (the eye, etc), when arisen, not come to a stop” or

“Let it, when already come to stop, not age” or

“Let it, when already reached ageing, not dissolve” (*etaṃ uppannaṃ ṭhitaṃ mā pāpuṇatu, ṭhāna-p, patta mā jiratu, jara-p, patam mā bhijjatu*, Vbh 48; cf Vism 640).

It is the lack of this mastery that it is not self for the following four reasons: because it is void, because it has no owner, because it cannot be done with as one wants, and because it denies the self (ibid; cf MA 2:113).

Some people try to argue that the Buddha only taught that **form, feelings, perception, mental formations and consciousness** are not self; but he does not say that there is no self at all in man or anywhere else, apart from these Five Aggregates (*pañca-k, khandha*). This view is untenable for two reasons: one is that, according to the Buddha's teaching, a being is composed only of the Five Aggre-

⁴ For further discussion, see Harvey 1995:34-38.

gates, and nothing more. The second reason is that the Buddha denies categorically in several places, the existence of Ātman or Self or Soul within man or without, or anywhere else in the universe.

8. All Things Are Not-self

A clear example of the Buddha's categorical denial of the existence of the self or soul is found in verses 277, 278 and 279 of the Dhammapada:

All conditioned things are impermanent	<i>sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā</i>	
All conditioned things are unsatisfactory	<i>sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā</i>	
All things are not self	<i>sabbe dhammā anattā.</i>	(Dh 277, 278, 279)

In the first two verses the term *saṅkhārā* (“conditioned things”) is used; in the third, the word *dhammā* (“things”) is used. The first term, *saṅkhāra*, denotes the Five Aggregates, all conditioned, interdependent, relative things and states, both physical and mental. The term *dhamma* covers a much wider scope than *saṅkhāra*. In fact, there is no term in Buddhist terminology wider than *dhamma* (Skt *dharma*). It includes not only the conditioned things and states, but also the unconditioned, the Absolute, Nirvana. There is nothing in the universe or outside, good or bad, conditioned or unconditioned, relative or absolute, which is not included in this term. Therefore, it is clear that, according to this statement—“All things (*dhammā*) are not self”—there is no self, not only in the Five Aggregates, but nowhere else too outside them or apart from them.

9. Rebirth and Not-self

It is a common notion amongst adherents of the Theravāda Abhidhamma tradition that we exist on only a “**moment to moment**” basis. We are but a series of mental events that rush by so fast that they are almost unnoticeable. All things really start from and exist on only one thought at a time like a rotating **wheel** that touches the flat plane at the tangent. Or, a **movie film strip** that gives one the impression of movement and emotions on the screen when we are actually only looking at one frame at a time at high speed and our mind fills in the rest!

Just as death is only a thought moment, so is birth and rebirth. Many people, however, take the process of rebirth quite literally, that is, as one person becoming another. In a way this notion is true but not completely true; for one has mistaken a momentary manifestation or event to be a “fixed” existence.

10. Two Kinds of Languages

Let us take the analogy of **electricity** (which is very apt, for it exists in the form of a circuit like *saṃsāra* or cyclic existence.) Now, when we connect a bulb to the circuit, we get light. When the current passes through a coiled wire (solenoid), electro-magnetism results. If a heating element is connected we can boil water. We can also produce cold, movement, sound, pictures, etc with electricity. But all these are only temporary manifestations based on the ever-moving current of electricity. Which of these manifestations is the “true” one? Such a question is said to be “wrongly put”, that is, it does not have an answer that either logical or meaningful.

There are **two kinds of languages**: the conventional (worldly) and the ultimate (Dharma). In conventional terms, we say that someone is born of a mother. But in Dharma language, birth is really the arising of the notion of the ego, the “I” resulting from ignorance, craving, clinging, etc. This is clearly explained by the Buddha in the doctrine of Interdependent Origination.⁵

11. Benefits of Knowing Not-self

(1) Mental health. Even with a simple understanding and acceptance of not-selfness, we can, on a mundane level, become more open, more comfortable, more creative people. When we cling to the notion of a self, we are always defending ourselves, our prestige, our ideas, even our words. But once

⁵ See Sutta Discovery on “Tithāyatana Sutta” or *The Buddha's Teaching*, ch 22; also Bucknell & Stuart-Fox, *The Twilight Language*, London: Curzon, 1986:82 f.

we give up the notion of an unchanging and independent self, we will be able to relate to people and situations with neither agenda nor paranoia.

(2) Spiritual liberation. Most importantly, understanding not-self is the key to enlightenment. The belief in a self is synonymous with **ignorance**, the most basic of three unwholesome roots. As long as we grasp to the notion of a permanent, independent self, we create a schism, a dichotomy, between self and other (people, things and views). Such a conceptual separation forces us to react to the people and things around us with either attraction (*anunaya*) or aversion (*paṭigha*). As such, the self-idea is the real culprit here.

12. Meditations on Not-self

Let us now spend a few moments doing a very simple but important exercise. Sit quietly and comfortably. Close your eyes and look within your body and mind.

Examine yourself this very moment. Are you happy? Or, worried? Or, simply pick on something you are feeling or thinking about right now. Can you locate or point out where that happiness or that worry or that thought, is?

No, because happiness, worry, etc, are feelings in the mind, not in the body. Without fail we will not locate any self anywhere within our body or mind, or anywhere else for that matter.

Similarly, **pain** is a feeling. It is in the mind. Do not own it. Just let it go!

There is no self, no soul, no essence apart from the ever-changing, impermanent, interdependent physical and mental factors of personal experience, such as feelings, ideas, habits and attitudes.

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