

Soul or no soul?

The Buddha's teaching on non-self
[Previously published as fb210128 Piya Tan]

Some teachers assert that “the Buddha never said that there is no self. He never said that there is a self. The whole question of whether or not the self exists was one he put aside.” Hence, it is argued, the Buddha starts with no self and then teaches karma, “which makes no sense.” If there’s no self, nobody does the kamma and nobody receives the results, so actions and their results wouldn’t matter, because there’s no one choosing to act, and no one to suffer the results.

But that’s putting the context backwards, as Thānissaro Bhikkhu explains, “Actually, the Buddha started with the reality of kamma, and then viewed ideas of ‘self’ and ‘not-self’ as types of kamma within that context. This means that he focused on seeing the way we define our sense of self as an action.”

Karma

Then, the question becomes: When is the act of identifying things as our self wholesome, and when is it not? When is the act of identifying things as not-self wholesome, and when is it not? When a healthy sense of self is needed to be responsible, self-reliant and heedful of the future, it’s a wholesome view. When the perception of non-self helps us not to identify with harmful desires, it’s a wholesome view.

In other words, both “self” and “non-self” are “skilful means” or strategies for achieving happiness. They should be used and mastered, he adds, as needed for the sake of true happiness, and abandoned when no longer needed. Hence, instead of getting involved in the tangle of trying to define what a self is and whether it exists, the Buddha advises us to see “self” and “non-self” as processes to be mastered as mental tools.

Rebirth

Similarly with rebirth, the Buddha avoids talking about “what” gets reborn. Instead, he focuses on “how” it happens—as a process, depending on conditions. Now, the process is a type of karma, something that we are responsible for. It’s wholesome to master karma, making our actions wholesome. As we learn to master our actions, we are happier, we are reborn in better places. Then, with further understanding and better practice, we learn not to be reborn at all.

In a broader context, then, we should see KARMA as “what we do or don’t do,” and REBIRTH as “what happens to us” as a result. However, we should not merely see karma as “consequences,” good and bad, of our actions. In fact, this is how we often see it—merely as “merit” and “demerit.” This is not wrong but not liberating. It is a way of preventing bad things from happening to us.

Conditions

We need good rebirths and better conditions for Dhamma practice. In other words, these are merely CONDITIONS, causes and effects, of how we think, act and speak. This still keeps us caught in samsara, which is an endless interplay of good and bad. Having understood this, we should, then, see it and live on a “higher” level, so to speak.

From “what karma DOES to us,” we should now learn to think: “we ARE our karma.” We become our karma. How we think, how we act, how we speak, are karma—we ARE that karma. Now it makes sense to live a moral life of shaping our actions and speech so that we ARE happy, which helps us to cultivate our MIND.

Mental cultivation

A wholesome moral life is the basis for MENTAL CULTIVATION: we cultivate our mind so that we see how our views arise, how to let go of them. This is an aspect of TRUE RENUNCIATION: letting go of views. Less views, better views. This is the basis for WISDOM, which is really LESS VIEWS, cutting them down to merely seeing everything as being impermanent; hence, suffering; and what is impermanent and suffering as being non-self, without any abiding entity.

On the highest level, that of the arhat, less views becomes NO VIEWS: the mind is then fully free and awakened. No more ideas of self or no self, neither soul nor no-soul. These are merely ideas, views, how we think, that do not really reflect true reality.

Context

There is the notorious case of the wanderer, Vacchagotta, who holds on to the soul-view. He asks the Buddha whether there is a soul or not. On account of his strong view, the Buddha decides to remain wisely SILENT. To simply answer him, there is NO soul, would traumatize him, since he is not ready. For the Buddha to agree with him and say there IS a soul would be against his own teaching. Of what we cannot speak, we must remain silent.¹

The context here is important. The Buddha is not saying that there is NEITHER self nor non-self. Great words, superb sophistry of a Cult Guru; but confusing and unhelpful. After all, the Buddha does teach that there is NO soul, no abiding entity, such as in the famous Anatta,lakkhaṇa Sutta (S 22.59, SD 1.2).

Nirvana has no attributes

One famous monk scholar even claimed that while all “formations” (*saṅkhārā*) are impermanent and suffering (Dh 277-278), all “states” (*dhamma*) are non-self: so, he concluded,

¹ See Aggi,vacchagotta Sutta (M 72), SD 6.15: <https://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/6.15-Aggi-Vacchagotta-S-m72-piya.pdf>; (Vaccha,gotta) Ānanda Sutta (S 44.10), SD 2.16: <https://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/2.16-Is-there-a-soul.-piya.pdf>

“nirvana, too, is nonself”! We then have “described” or “delimited” nirvana: we are speaking of a “fire” that has been extinguished. There is no more fire to speak about: it is not hot, not bright, does not burn, not useful for cooking, etc.

“Dhamma” here refers to the “nature” of existence, the “state” of things: this we can say as far as words go. But nirvana is really neither existence nor non-existence, neither state nor status. Nirvana cannot be predicated. Perhaps, to help our unawakened minds to “see” what being AWAKENED is like, we may imagine that nirvana is NOT this, NOT that; or it is some safe island in the floods, a cool cave in the burning weather, and so on.

But these are mental mirages: mirages are real all right, but we never reach them. So long as we are in the desert, we have to keep moving on safely until we reach our safe destination, out of the desert.

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