

## ANALYSIS ON NO-SELF CONCEPTION OF BUDDHISM

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What does 'all dhammas are not-Self' (anatta/ anātman) mean-what kind of self does Buddhism accept, what kind does it not accept? What is the spiritual point of the teaching, and what extent does the impact of contemplating things as not-Self depend on a prior holding (conscious or unconscious) of an idea akin to the Brahmanical concept of ātman?

**1. Introduction.** It is widely accepted that the teaching of no-Self is the most important and unique discovery of the Buddha. In Buddhist thought it ensures Buddha's superiority over all other teachers and understanding it has crucial importance to liberate from all suffering. Hence, this essay attempts to discuss the nature and different aspects of non-Self.

The essay consists of eight sections. Following the introduction the second section discusses the issue of whether or not the Suttas allude to some real Self. The third section describes what does mean 'all dhammas are no Self' in the mainstream Buddhism. The fourth and the fifth sections discuss in detail the varieties of Self and which kind of Self is accepted by which schools of Buddhism and which are denied. The sixth section is on how liberation can be reached through seeing things as not-Self in Buddhist thought. The seventh section discussed how far the Buddhist denial of Self went from just denying prior holding concept of Atman. The eighth section concludes the essay.

### **2. Did the Buddha really teach that 'all dhamma are no self'?**

Before trying to describe the meaning of the no-Self, one needs to understand the meaning of 'all dhammas' and its scope. It is fairly complicated and many scholars argued on the extent to which the term non-Self confirmed by Buddha applies.

In Buddhist thought, dhamma has various meanings (BUDM01, Session 22, section 01). But here it is used in its broadest meaning as any mental quality, state or thing. In short, it refers to any basic component of reality (Harvey 2004, p52). According to Thanissaro Bhikkhu ('The No-Self Strategy' 1993), in the Pali Sutta the Buddha applied the concept of no-Self to all dhammas in the following passage between the Buddha and Ānanda:

- "The world is empty, the world is empty" is the saying, revered sir, how far does this saying go?

- Since, Ānanda the world is empty of Self or what pertains to self, therefore it is said that world is empty [this is then explained with respect to the eighteen 'elements': the six senses, their six objects and the six related forms of consciousness] S.IV.54

Since all Buddhist traditions agree that phenomena of 'emptiness' is no-Self-ness, therefore all eighteen elements mentioned by the Buddha are no-Self. In the Northern Buddhism, it is considered that all entities are comprised of these eighteen elements. Even Nirvana, which could be thought to be beyond of all 'describable reality', is also an object of a certain form of consciousness implying that it merely belongs to these eighteen elements<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> However, some argue that behind all negations the Buddha left some kind of real Self. They usually explain that the eighteen elements, what were affirmed to be not-Self, do not cover the real-Self. In particular, this can be seen from the way of explanation of Jo nang pa, whose school is known by its acceptance of gzhan stong (other empty). Generally, it appears that in Northern and Eastern Buddhism, who accept the Self, do so because of literally taking tathagatagarbha teaching.



In Tibetan Buddhism, especially in the dGe Lugs tradition, to accept 'all dhammas are no-Self' is one of the main factors to consider one to be an exponent of Buddhist philosophical tenet. According to Jam-yang-shay-ba (Grub-mtha-chen-mo 1999), there are four logical notions that all Buddhist schools suppose to accept. They are:

- All conditioned dhammas are impermanent
- All defiled dhammas are dukkha (pain and suffering)
- All dhammas are no-Self
- Nirvana is pacified.

If one does not accept any of them, then he/she could not be a Buddhist doctrine holder (nang pai grub mtha pa). Jam-yang-shay-ba further explained that not-Self applies to the denial of acquired Self, but not the deep-rooted Self due to acceptance of the latter by some earliest schools of Buddhism. However, there are schools that do not deny both Self such as Jo nang pa and some Eastern Buddhist schools and according to dGelugs pa's school they cannot be considered as Buddhist doctrine. From the point of view of followers of Self-empty, ie dGelugs pa school, their (Jo nang pa and some Eastern schools) acceptance of Self is no different from the Self doctrine of non-Buddhist schools. But Williams (1989, p 108) states, 'though some Western scholars too have sometimes given the notion that the Jo nang school and its other-empty doctrine were a strange non-Buddhist aberration. This is... misleading...' Indeed, it is obvious that dGelugs pa's suggestion classifying Jo nang pa school as non-Buddhist rests on the notion of what Buddhism 'really is', and in return it leads to reconsider dGelugs pa's strict criteria of Buddhist doctrine. Hence, the difference has to be made between what is Buddhist doctrine and what/who is Buddhist (nang pa). According to Jam-yang-shay-ba (Grub-mtha-chen-mo 1999), accepting the Buddha as his or her teacher is the main criterion to be a Buddhist. Therefore, there is no doubt of classifying the followers of Jo nang pa as Buddhist, however accepting its doctrine as a Buddhist doctrine is another matter. The 'doctrine' is no different from doctrine of ātman. So far I have never seen any statement in the works of dGelugs pa scholars that Jo nang pa was a non-Buddhist. This is similar to, for example, determining a criterion or criteria (not ultimate) to categorize an object to be a 'table'. Although everything is relative, standards have to be set to consider any system of thought or doctrine to be 'Buddhist'. And to my mind, such standards are no other than the ones described by dGelug pa. There are many anomalies in such classification indicating that everything is not resistant to analysis and scrutiny.

Now, a Southern Buddhist, who implied that there is some exclusion in the Buddha's not-Self teaching is Thanissaro Bhikkhu. He claimed in his paper ('The Not-Self Strategy') that the above cited passage applied only to describable realities, not all of the reality which maybe experienced. The ground for his statement appears in the following passages in Pali:

*What is the All? Simply the eye & forms, ear & sounds, nose & odors, tongue & flavors, body & tactile sensations, intellect & ideas. This, monks is termed the All. Anyone who would say 'Repudiating this All, I will describe another,' if questioned on what exactly might be the grounds for his statement, would be unable to explain, and further more, would be put to grief. Why? Because it lies beyond range. S XXXV.85*

*I. Now, if the six senses & their objects-sometimes called the six spheres of contact-constitute the world or the All, is there anything beyond them?*

*MahaKotthita: With the remainderless stopping & fading of the six spheres of contact, is it the case that there is anything else?*



Sariputta: *Do not say that my friend...*

MahaKotthita: *Being asked...if there is anything else, you say 'Do not say that, my friend', 'Being asked...if there is not anything else...if there both is & is not anything else...is it the meaning of this statement to be understood?*

Sariputta: *Saying...is it case that there neither is nor is not anything else, one is differentiating non-differentiation. However far the six spheres of contact go, that is how far differentiation goes. However far differentiation goes, that is how far the six spheres of contact go. With the remainderless fading & stopping of the six spheres of contact, there comes to be the stopping, the allaying of differentiation. A IV.174*

II. Monks, that sphere is to be realized where the eye stops and perception of form fades...where the intellect stops and the perception of idea/ phenomenon fades: That sphere is to be realized. S XXXV. 116

Williams (2000, pp 60-61) raised some undeniable critiques to all these declarations that proclaim the Buddha taught Real Self behind all denial:

*'I confess I cannot quite understand this. If Buddha considered that he had shown only what is not the self, and the Buddha actually accepted a Self beyond his negations, a Self other than and behind the five aggregates, fitting the paradigmatic description for a Self, then he would surely have said so. And we can be quite sure he would surely have said so very clearly indeed. He does not. It seems that all the other renouncers of his day saw the search for liberation from all suffering as terminating in discovering the Self. Indian systems which do teach the ātman, like the Brhadāranyaka Upanisad, for example, devote a great deal of attention to the issue, and make it quite clear in what way they assert the Self. No one has ever argued that the Upanisads do not teach the Self. Nor could they possibly do so. In early and mainstream Buddhist text on the other hand all find are denials, statement that various things are not the Self. If the Buddha had thought there was a Self, and merely wanted to indicate here what is not the Self, it is in conceivable that he would have thought finding the Self really had nothing to do with liberation. Thus in the Anattalakkhana Sutra we should expect that he would have continued by explaining how, having seen what is not the Self, one finds the Self and that leads to 'the knowledge: to 'the knowledge: "It is liberated" '. But he does not do this. He makes no mention of discovering the True Self in the An Anattalakkhana Sutra. As we have seen, the Buddha explains how liberation comes from letting-go of all craving and attachment simply through seeing that things are not Self.'*

Another argument that brought out is the fact that the Buddha did not take a certain position on the issue of Self (specifically indicated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu). Probably all scholars would agree that the Buddha's no-Self teaching is not 'a mere philosophical or ontological denial'. This is true as long as the position does not content any soteriological aim. Then it becomes just a view or a theory, which could not encourage the aspiration to be liberated<sup>1</sup>. Then question arises: Isn't it the case that at least realizing dukkha (pain and

<sup>1</sup> Maybe this line of thought is related to my knowledge that follows the dGelugs pa tradition, where importance is given to analytical investigation and ontological positions.



suffering) is the base of soteriological aspiration? Taking position is an acceptance of what he/she sees or thinks. It could not lead to any affliction as long as it is not stained by craving. For example, if someone has seen a rope and mistaken it was a snake, then to get rid of his or her fear, one should say 'Do not be afraid, friend! What you saw is a rope'. Here, 'whether or not there is a real snake' does play a significant role. If the Buddha did say that he is beyond of all positions, then it merely means beyond of positions which stained by craving. Otherwise, if 'beyond of all positions' is taken literally then he would never answered any question. In other word, saying 'there is no position' in itself is an indication of having a position. Moreover, if the Buddha answered either 'there is Self or there is no Self', then it would have led some externalists or annihilationist disciples, respectfully, to cling more to those their view.

**3. What does 'all dhamma are no-Self mean?** To understand the mainstream Buddhists' concept of no-Self and their critique on Self doctrine, one needs to know the notion of Self the Buddha's denial directed to. The concept of Self has really little relevance to the Western idea of Soul or Ego and has deep roots in ancient Indian spiritual quest. That is why scholars using capital letter to refer to it. Late Indian Buddhism preferred to use the term of 'pudgala' to mean conventional 'self'.

While Upanisad and Jain concepts of Self differ from each other by some 'universal' and 'Individual' characters, they generally imply permanent and absolute substance which is behind the changing phenomenal world (Gethin, 1998, p134). The Buddha denied such Self in his second sermon, by rejecting each of those characters Upanisads declared. Although the Buddha's denial was to some extent directed to such prior holding conception of Self, the main intention was to touch one's deep rooted notion of Self, which is the base of one's suffering. Then what is our deep rooted idea of Self? Everybody says about themselves as 'yesterday I did...' or 'tomorrow I will do...' or even 'when I was seven years old...' From this one can see that we do assume, usually unconsciously, there exists something 'Me', which came from yesterday and will go tomorrow, who produces my thoughts and emotions, who feels the happiness or sorrow, which lies unchanged behind all of my physical and mental changes and by what we are identified as a person through time. The mainstream Buddhist schools search such Self from where it can be and revealed that every possible candidate, which should indicate 'Me', was falling short of such Self. For example, a chariot is a convenient label for something consisting of wheels, pole, axle, framework, yoke, reins etc, but in reality no 'real chariot' could be find. Through similar reasoning the Buddhist thought suggests that a person is also just a convenient label which depends on physical and mental phenomena. Hence, every single thing is nothing more than a label of a complex phenomena, which lack metaphysical reality. That is essentially what 'all dhamma are no-Self' means.

**4. What kind of Self does Buddhism accept?** It might be that there is no answer to this question. This is mainly due to the fact that Buddhist traditions have very diverse views on this issue. Besides, Buddhism in itself is just a convenient label of scattered though/schools, which all claim themselves to follow the Buddha's genuine teaching. Even it is impossible to say that 'Buddhism does not accept permanent, never lasting and unchanging substance within us', because some widely accepted 'Buddhist' schools do accept this.

However, in mainstream Buddhism (also this might be an ambiguous term) the Self, asserted by Upanisads and Jain, is clearly critiqued and not accepted. Such idea of Self is considered as an acquired Self-idea, not the innate or deep rooted one. It is hard to say whether



or not the deep-rooted Self-idea (to think of Self as being apart from a particular experience) was denied by *Anattalakkhana* sutta, but it was clearly denied by later Abhidharma scholars. Maybe searching for Brahmanical Self from five aggregates could suggest that any kind of Self could not be found apart from five skhandhas or particular experience. The terms of innate and acquired ideas of Self are widely used in Northern Buddhism and it seems that in Southern Buddhism innate one is considered more as a feeling rather than a view. However, both traditions consider it as relevant to the first link in Conditioned Arising.

So then, what is the difference of two deep-rooted and acquired (Brahmanical or Jain etc) concepts of Self? The difference seems to lie in conscious or unconscious appearance. Moreover, the deep-rooted Self idea does not contemplate the Self as ever lasting. It regards the Self as existing permanently only during the life time. These two ideas of Self are both rejected by mainstream Buddhist thought. So it can be said that mainstream Buddhism does not accept the following:

- Self, which is everlasting, inner controller, different from five khandhas
- Self, which is different from five skhandhas

In addition, most mainstream Buddhist sects do not accept

- Self, which is neither same nor different from the five skhandhas.

From the point of *Prāsangika* view, all of the above three ideas of Self could only arise due to wrong reasoning, so they are not the deep-rooted or innate idea of Self. They confirm that Self, imagined by innate idea of Self is something that is not apart from five khandhas. Moreover, it is dominant among them. The analogue is the chief merchant who is a merchant himself but also the ruler of other merchants. Therefore, *Prāsangika* School denies

- Self, which is no apart from five khandhas, but also rules them.

**5. What kind does it not accept?** While Buddhists denying a metaphysical Self, which was in worldly thought only one connection of yesterday's and today's 'I', they also faced with the question 'If there is no such entity, then how it come that there is a moral responsibility of karmic continuity and what goes from this to the next life as you Buddhists abide?'. To answer this critique one of the mainstream Buddhist schools, Personalists (*Pudgalavādins*) held that even though there was no-Self, there is something called a Person. This is ineffable whether or not the Person same or different from five khandhas (Strong 2002 p92).

Buddhism never denied conventional or empirical Self, which is determined merely a label of particular cluster of mental and physical continuity of events, which are casually connected to each other. This concept of Self may fully answer opponent's question but most North Indian schools have a tendency to accept that though there is no metaphysical Self apart from five khandhas, there is something dominant among those skhandhas. That is a basic state of mind. *Yogācāra* School proclaims this as '*ālaya*' consciousness, while *Vibhajjavādins* defines it as *bhavanga* consciousness. The deep reason of holding such basic state of mind, according to dGelugs School, they could not put any reality without essence or without existing quality from their own side.



6. What is the spiritual point of no-Self teaching? Although the later traditions carefully distinguish that what was denied by no-Self doctrine and what was not, the Buddha himself may have been more interested the stereological goal (Williams, 2000 p62). It seems that all ancient Indian traditions commonly saw that the craving is the fundamental cause of all suffering. To liberate from it or to uproot it all schools were looking for some ways to decrease the personal valuation toward tempting objects of sense. Some schools were trying to propose more absolute essence or Self in order to shrink worldly desire. But mainstream school state that there is no such entity or absolute Self which could be reliable. The rigorous experiential examination reveals that everything lacks of such quality, so no one should grasp at it. Here, again it can be seen what important role ontological examination plays to encourage liberation and how the 'reality' and the right steps towards liberation are connected.

7. To what extent does the impact of contemplating things as no-Self depend on a prior holding (conscious or unconscious) of an idea akin to the Brahmanical concept of Atman? The most important sutta to understand the position of the Buddha on Self (at least in mainstream Buddhism) and how things as no-Self related to liberation is the *Anattalakkhana Sutta* (the 'Discourse on the definition of no-Self'). The first examination on Self in this sutta is as follows (Cānamoli, 1992 p47):

*Bhikkhus (monks), material form (physical form, rūpa) is not self. If material form were self, this material form would not lead to affliction, and could be had of material form: 'Let my material form be thus; let my material form be not thus'. And it is because material form is not self that it therefore leads to affliction, and that it cannot be had of material form: Let my material form be thus; let my material form be not thus'.*

*Feeling (sensation; vedanā) is not self...*

*(Determinate) perception (conception; saccā) is not self...*

*Formations (volitions etc; saṃskhara) are not self...*

*Consciousness (saṃkhārā) is no self...*

And second discussion is:

*How do you conceive this, bhikkhus, is material form permanent or impermanent?*

*- Impermanent, Lord.*

*- But is what is impermanent unpleasant or pleasant?*

*- Unpleasant, Lord.*

*- But is it fitting to regard what is impermanent, unpleasant and subject to change as: 'This is mine, this is what I am, and this is my self?'*

*- No, Lord*

In those two analyses, the object of negation is obviously Upanisadic Self which is characterized as 'inner controller' and 'free from all suffering'. Through these two discussions one could understand that every possible candidate does not fit the Upanisadic notion of Self. But what come to mind is that above mentioned definitions are a product of a reasoning. Such ideas of Self which describe it as an 'inner controller', 'free from suffering' and 'ever lasting' could be common within a particular group of people or a particular of thought/school. Even Jain concept of permanent *jīva* (which is also opposed by mainstream Buddhism) is also appears to be quite a coarse concept because it is believed to be 'permanent'. So the question arises: Is it very common that a person thinks him/herself permanent? The model of deep-rooted idea of Self must



fit to everyone's thought, whose concept of Self is not affected by any reasoning. Then is it possible to consider unconsciously one self as permanent? What here I want to suggest is that the deep-rooted or, as some say, 'innate' feeling or the tenet of one's self must be a relatively blank idea without considering the self as permanent or not. For example, people say 'I did ... (something) yesterday', but it does not have to mean that one considers that 'there is some permanent thing behind of all events'. Even if it does, and most people have a deep-rooted feeling of that in him or her that there is a permanent Self, could this really direct him or her to let go things when one lets the conception of permanent Self go? There is no doubt that there are many people who have great awareness of their impermanent-ness but still have enough desire for impermanent world. So, to believe that by realizing every conditioned thing, especially one's own Self as permanent, one could drop all desire is flawed. Certainly, such awareness can cause a decline in some particular cravings. Moreover, using insight meditation could lead to some level of pacification of desire. Liberation process is, in theory, achieved by enhancing some particular kind of mind to overcome and abolish its opposite mind. Constantly generating a certain thought/mind is the way to enhance that it. According to the great North Indian logician *Dharmakīrti* (*Pra-māna-vārttika*), irrespective of correct or incorrect thinking, the ability to develop a certain mind through 'enhancing processes' is the nature of mind itself. Then the question came up: If in theory, through generating constantly a particular mind and that mind can have some power, then is it possible to abolish loving kindness etc through meditating anger? The answer was as follows. Although the meditation can give a certain level of power to the mind and some reduction to the opposite state of mind to the one meditated, totally abolishing the opposite state requires a background of truth<sup>1</sup>. Thus anger and loving kindness can not cause the end to each other (due to lack of mindfulness) but they can cause some reduction. Again the ontological truth underlines liberation. But not every awareness of ontological truth has a power to shake the foundation of all cravings. To drop all deep-rooted/innate clinginess, one needs to hear very shocking truth, which may shake one's all conventional thoughts and all links to the world. People like to assert that Buddhism does not deny self-existing. But when contemplating on the lack of inherent existence, and considering the *Prāsangika*'s claim that 'unless we are in some sense enlightened beings we all, whatever we may think or say, perceive things as having inherent existence' (Williams, 1989 p 61), the Self which was denied by *Prāsangika* thought might not be that much far from the Self, which we called conventional/empirical. One might think if it is so, then *Prāsangika* thought should be classified as nihilism, but when Candrakīrti heard such critique, he simply replied 'see my manner'. *Candrakīrti* saw everything is a collection of components, so there is no indivisible material form and indissoluble time. In gross thought we can bath in the same river many times, but if one thinks further, it can be seen that bathing more than once is not possible. Or if analyses went more subtle, it will be revealed that the river was constantly changing every single time. To be in a changing process an object must take the possession from one point to another. Hence, no matter how short the time is, the object under discussion moves meaning it is not possible to pinpoint due to constant movement. We cannot find any single possession/location when a form/object is in a steady state. It is perceived that movement is a collection of unmoved object, but there appears there is no such steady object. If examined thoroughly, the movement is impossible in the paradigm of our conventional thought. So, what we should say when there is seen a water where it is not possible to be? Is it mirage, hallucination or something else? When one is aware of everything, including one's own

<sup>1</sup> This interesting discussion is stated in 'Entrance For The Aspirants Of The Liberation' (date and publisher unknown) of Je-Gungthang Tenpai Donme (1762-1823) who was one of the well-known teacher in dGeLugs school



Self as hallucination, or just aware that oneself does not exist, then how is it possible to cling to it?

**8. The conclusion.** Writing this essay, I understood more clearly that it is really hard to pinpoint what Buddhism considers or confirms due to its doctrinal variety and richness. Seemingly, in mainstream Buddhism, the term of no-Self has two meanings, the gross one and the subtle one. In gross conception, it negates the Self as some particular ancient Indian philosophical schools described. To consider one Self belonging to a particular group of people could not make the grounds of all sentient being circling in the *samsāra*. In subtle use, it negates some metaphysical Self, which is separate from constantly changing experience. The idea of such Self emerges quite spontaneously and it is a source of attachment. As the idea of no-Self increases the attachment and the deep-rooted idea of Self will decrease. When the deep-rooted idea of Self is abolished then all attachments will be terminated. This is called liberation.

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