

Buddhism and the Self

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One of the most perplexing concepts in Buddhist philosophy is the doctrine of *anatta*, or ‘not-self’. Many have interpreted *anatta* to be a metaphysical assertion that there is no self, but I argue that this is mistaken. Rather, in line with Thanissaro Bhikkhu, I understand *anatta* as a practical strategy that has heuristic value in guiding one towards liberation. Furthermore, I propose that the acceptance of a subjective self can be consistent with and justified in Buddhism. This will be the focus of this essay.

Before I commence, I would like to issue a health warning. The ideas presented in this essay are in no way intended to be assertions of orthodoxy. I concede that they diverge from conventional attitudes, and so are likely to be considered controversial. My defence for this is that the Buddha discouraged reverence of dogma, and instead encouraged the gaining of insight through experience, enquiry, and reasoning, as evidenced by the following passage from the *Kalama Sutta*:

Now, Kalamas, don't go by reports, by legends, by traditions, by scripture, by logical conjecture, by inference, by analogies, by agreement through pondering views, by probability, or by the thought, ‘This contemplative is our teacher.’ When you know for yourselves that, ‘These qualities are skillful [*sic*]; these qualities are blameless; these qualities are praised by the wise; these qualities, when adopted & carried out, lead to welfare & to happiness’ — then you should enter & remain in them. (AN 3.65, trans. Thanissaro, 1994)

As different people vary in their experiences, interests, and temperament, this empirical approach would lead to each person’s perspective of Buddhism being idiosyncratic. My own perspective is no exception. I therefore do not intend my perspective to be considered the authoritative view, but hope it can be forgiven as a personal interpretation, albeit one arrived at through the reflective approach encouraged by the Buddha.

To begin with, it is apparent, on exploration of the *Pali Canon*, that the Buddha never denies the existence of the self. To the contrary, he very clearly rejects annihilationism. In the *Alagaddupama Sutta*, he states:

Speaking in this way, teaching in this way, I have been erroneously, vainly, falsely, unfactually misrepresented by some brahmans and contemplatives [who say], ‘Gotama the contemplative is one who misleads. He declares the annihilation, destruction, extermination of the existing being.’ But as I am not that, as I do not say that, so I have been erroneously, vainly, falsely, unfactually misrepresented by those venerable brahmans and contemplatives [who say], ‘Gotama the contemplative is one who misleads. He declares the annihilation, destruction, extermination of the existing being.’ (MN 22, trans. Thanissaro, 2004)

Another passage can be found in the *Yamaka Sutta*, where some of the Buddha’s disciples advise Yamaka against annihilationism:

Don’t say that, friend Yamaka. Don’t misrepresent the Blessed One. It’s not good to misrepresent the Blessed One, for the Blessed One would not say, ‘A monk with no more effluents, on the break-up of the body, is annihilated, perishes, & does not exist after death.’ (SN 22.85, trans. Thanissaro, 1997)

A blanket denial of the self therefore has no basis in scripture, and directly contradicts the Buddha’s discouragement of annihilationist thought.

Interestingly, when confronted with direct questions about the metaphysics of the self, the Buddha often chose to maintain silence. A famous example is found in the *Ananda Sutta*:

Having taken a seat to one side, Vacchagotta the wanderer said to the Master, ‘Now then, Venerable Gotama, is there a self?’ When this was said, the Master was silent. (SN 44.10, trans. Thanissaro, 2004)

Edmond Holmes, in *The Creed of Buddha* (1908), interprets the Buddha's maintenance of a dignified silence in response to Vacchagotta's question as evidence of his acknowledgement of the existence of the self:

The words that are ascribed to him – words which may well have been his – suggest that some such thoughts as these were passing through his mind: “The Ego is real beyond all reality, but I cannot hope to make Vacchagotta understand this.” (Holmes, 1908, p. 114)

Holmes suggests that if the Buddha did not believe in the self, he would have answered Vacchagotta's question in the negative without hesitation, since “metaphysical atomism, like every other development of materialism, is very easy to explain” (p. 142). However, rather than directly answering Vacchagotta's question in the affirmative, the Buddha remained silent. Holmes proposes that this is because the transcendental nature of the self would have been beyond the comprehension of Vacchagotta's naïve mind at that stage in his spiritual development, and so Vacchagotta would have misunderstood the affirmative answer to his question. This in turn would have had a negative effect on his struggle for liberation.

Although Holmes' theory is attractive, I argue that it makes quite an extravagant inference based on the Buddha's silence. Quite simply, the Buddha may have remained silent because he did not find such metaphysical questions as conducive to Vacchagotta's quest for liberation. This is evidenced by the fact that when asked by the Venerable Ananda about his silence regarding Vacchagotta's question, the Buddha replied that Vacchagotta's spiritual immaturity would have lead him to misinterpret any answer in a way that would bring him further attachment. This by itself is an adequate explanation for the Buddha's silence, and there is no need to make any further inferences about the Buddha's metaphysical views.

In addition to his rejection of annihilationism, some scholars have identified instances in the scriptures in which the Buddha appears to affirm the existence of a self. An example is Tony Page's examination of the *Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, aptly entitled “Affirmation of Eternal Self in the *Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra*” (2010). Consider the two following passages identified by Page:

The Self (*atman*) is reality (*tattva*), the Self is permanent (*nitva*), the Self is virtue (*guna*), the Self is eternal (*sasvata*), the Self is stable (*dhruva*), the Self is peace (*siva*). (Trans. Hodge, 2006)

The True Self is the *tathagata-dhatu* [Buddha Principle, Buddha Element, Buddha Factor]. You should know that all beings do have it, but it is not apparent, since those beings are enveloped by immeasurable *klesas* [defects of mind, morality, and character] ... (Trans. Hodge, 2005)

These passages appear to show the Buddha affirming the existence of the self in the metaphysical sense. Reminiscent of the *Upanishads*, he asserts that each and every being has a self which is real, eternal, and unconditioned.

Those inclined to the Theravada school may question the authenticity of the *Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra* and feel compelled to overlook it. However, as observed by Joaquin Perez-Reimon in his controversial book *Self and Non-Self in Early Buddhism* (1980), the *Pali Canon* also contains passages in which the Buddha appears to speak about the self in a positive sense. Perez-Reimon identifies the following passage from the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*:

Therefore Ananda, stay as those who have the self as island, as those who have the self as refuge, as those who have no other refuge. (DN 16, trans. Perez-Reimon, 1980)

According to Perez-Reimon, this famous passage “appears to assert, implicitly at least, the reality of *atta*” (p. 20). He also identifies a similar passage in the *Dhammapada*:

Your own self is your master; who else could be? With yourself well controlled, you gain a master very hard to find. (Dhp. XII. 160, trans. Perez-Reimon, 1980)

Again, in this passage, the Buddha appears to uphold the self as something of the greatest importance.

It has been argued that when the Buddha speaks about the self in passages such as those presented above, he is merely doing so in a conventional sense in order

to facilitate communication, rather than in a metaphysical sense. However, it is when one considers the implications of such a conventional interpretation on the spiritual meaning of the above passages that one is able to appreciate the force of Perez-Reimon's argument. Perez-Reimon argues that if the self had been intended in a conventional sense, then the above passages would be suggesting that one should consider one's impermanent and insubstantial configuration of *khandhas* as an island and refuge, a line of thought which seems unlikely to have been advocated by the Buddha.

Peter Harvey (1995) argues that despite its scholarship, a problem with Perez-Reimon's thesis is that it attributes to the self qualities such as faith, "which must be seen as part of the personality-factor of 'constructing activities'" (p. 19). Although Harvey does not accept the idea of a substantial self, he rejects annihilationism, and speaks about a subjective existence in *nibbana* which he terms 'nibbanic discernment'. Along similar lines, Miri Albahari, in "Against No-*Atman* Theories of *Anatta*" (2002), argues that absolute annihilationism with respect to the self is incompatible with the doctrine of *nibbana*. To claim that there is nothing beyond the conditioned *khandhas* is to assume the unsavoury view that there is nothing left to experience, and that *nibbana* is complete annihilation. However, throughout the *Pali Canon*, the Buddha frequently describes the state of *nibbana* in positive terms, as shown by the following examples:

... the subtle, the very-hard-to-see,
the ageless, permanence, the undecaying,
the surface-less, non-objectification,
peace, the deathless,
the exquisite, bliss, solace,
the exhaustion of craving,
the wonderful, the marvelous,
the secure, security,
nibbana... (SN 43, trans. Thanissaro, 1999)

There is, monks, an unborn — unbecome — unmade — unfabricated. If there were not that unborn — unbecome — unmade — unfabricated, there would not be the case that emancipation from the born — become — made —

fabricated would be discerned. But precisely because there is an unborn — unbecome — unmade — unfabricated, emancipation from the born — become — made — fabricated is discerned. (Ud 8.3, trans. Thanissaro, 1994)

Although the above terms from the *Asankhata Samyutta* can be regarded in a metaphorical sense, they at the very least indicate that there is something it is like to experience *nibbana*, and that this experience is positive. This refutes the interpretation of *nibbana* as a state of nothingness, thus implying the existence of subjective experience beyond the *khandhas*.

The view that there is a subjective existence beyond the conditioned *khandhas* that persists after their dissolution is shared by George Grimm, who writes in *The Doctrine of the Buddha* (1958):

For, though none of the elements constituting our personality nor a soul standing behind it can form our real essence, *Still We Are*, a fundamental fact which remains even in face of this result. (Grimm, 1958, p. 132)

He then goes on to write:

On the contrary we leave the world, in leaving behind the only thing still belonging to it, our corpse, – everything else we long before threw at its feet – and thus we proceed “to the glory of our Self”, a word not used by the Buddha, but this, not because of its being false, but because, according to what in our previous pages we have been saying, it might give rise only too easily to misinterpretations, in consequence of its relation to personality. (Grimm, 1958, p. 160)

Not only does Grimm assert the reality of subjective existence beyond the *khandhas*, but he associates it with the realisation of *nibbana* and our ultimate reality, echoing his earlier observation, “I am: that is the most certain axiom there is” (p. 112).

What Grimm is emphasising is the fundamentality of subjective being to existence itself. From a metaphysical perspective, I propose that the denial of such subjective being is fallacious. My existence as a subjective being is a basic fact that is impossible for me to deny. As illustrated by Descartes’ famous maxim, “*Je pense*

donc je suis”, one can doubt the reality of the external world on the grounds that it may be no more than an illusion, but one cannot possibly doubt one’s own existence as an experiencing being, because the fact that one doubts implies that one exists. Any claim that being is illusory is therefore meaningless rhetoric, for there still needs to be something to experience an illusion. Similarly, as noted by Christmas Humphreys (1962), in the struggle for liberation, “it is the Self which is striving to understand itself” (p. 85).

Of course, the Buddha taught that a living being is constituted of a combination of conditioned *khandhas*. In the *Vajira Sutta*, the nun Vajira states:

Just as when, with an assemblage of parts, there's the word, *chariot*, even so when aggregates are present, there's the convention of *living being*. (SN 5.10, trans. Thanissaro, 1998)

The *khandhas* are a group of physical and mental aggregates which are in a perpetual state of flux and none of which can be identified with a self. Similarly, Hume observed that whenever he tried to direct his attention inwards, he was able to observe only a bundle of perceptions but not the experiencer of these perceptions. However, I argue that Hume’s difficulty was due to an attempt to objectivate something which is fundamentally subjective. Of course, he could not experience his self, because it is his self that is experiencing. What is experiencing is not an object that can be observed, but the subject. It is the existence or blank screen in which the bundle of perceptions manifests, and without which they could not manifest. Kant was fully aware of Hume’s error, and in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) observed that “there must be a condition which precedes all experience, and which makes experience itself possible” (A 107).

My perspective therefore is that I am, or my self is, my consciousness. I am not referring to the *vinnana khandha*, for which ‘discernment’ is a more suitable translation, but to the subjective existence or blank screen in which all of my experiences are realised. The fact that I exist is the necessary condition for everything that I experience to be realised. The matter of my body is always being lost and replaced, and my mental state is always changing. However, there must be an existence for these physical and mental phenomena to manifest, and for the state of *nibbana* to be realised after the dissolution of the *khandhas*.

Others, including Peter Harvey and Thanissaro Bhikkhu, have also advocated the existence of unconditioned consciousness in *nibbana*. They identify instances in the Pali Canon in which the Buddha asserts the existence of such consciousness, such as in the following passage from the *Brahmanimantanika Sutta*:

Consciousness without surface, endless, radiant all around... (MN 49, trans. Thanissaro, 2007)

As argued by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, this consciousness does not refer to the conditioned *vinnana khandha*, but to unconditioned existence beyond space and time. In this sense, it is eternal, as it is not conditioned by time. This supposes a dualism between conditioned phenomena and this unconditioned consciousness. Peter Harvey (1990) elegantly describes the process liberation as this consciousness becoming “‘unsupported’ (*apatitthita*) and free of constructing activities, so that it is released, steadfast, content, undisturbed, and attains *Nibbana*” (p. 63).

Although Harvey accepts that it is consciousness that attains *nibbana*, he does not refer to it as self. I can appreciate his hesitation, for the term ‘self’ can appear to denote a substantial object which one owns, and so the application of the term to anything is likely to encourage further attachment. Others, such as Thanissaro Bhikkhu, argue that the terms ‘self’ and ‘not-self’ do not apply to the unconditioned after the dissolution of the conditioned *khandhas*. Again, I can sympathise with this view, for if what is not self is no longer there, there would be no need to categorise anything by applying concepts such as ‘self’ and ‘not-self’. However, I argue that this is partly an issue with semantics. By identifying consciousness with self, I am not attempting to objectivate it or attribute to it any concepts associated with conditioned phenomena, but acknowledging it as the subjective basis of existence. Indeed, there is no object which I can equate with ‘I’, for ‘I’ is only a subject.

A similar view is expressed by the Burmese scholar Shwe Zan Aung in “A Dialogue on Nibbana” (1918). Aung depicts a Socratic dialogue in which the protagonist Agga, a Buddhist monk, presents his perspective that *nibbana* is one’s fruitional consciousness, and defends the existence of individuals in *nibbana*. He does so by qualifying that individuality refers to each consciousness being a different subjective reality, and not to the characteristics of any substantial soul or ego.

Consciousnesses differ from each other not because of any tangible properties, but merely with respect to their subjective personalisation:

Agga. This grammatical distinction is due to your view of the mind as subject and of Nibbana as object. But the latter cannot be an object without a subject. The fact is that the subject and the object are merged in an intuition. This follows from Buddhaghosa's dictum that Nibbana is the fruitional consciousness itself. Nibbana is not *thought* but *lived*. Else Nibbana would be merely lip-bliss.

Sumana. Am I to understand you to say that individuals exist in Nibbana?

Agga. It all depends upon what you mean by 'individual'. If you mean a soul in the sense in which it is generally understood in the West, I would reply No, because the ego idea is but a concept. But if you use the word as a mere label for realities, I would say Yes. Sariputta was a distinct individual from Moggallana on this side of the veil. Why should not their continuations be individually distinct on the other side?

Each lives his own Nibbana. (*Paccattam veditabbo vinnuhi*). But it does not follow that they draw a line of demarcation between *meum* and *tuum* on the other side any more than they do on this side. (Aung, 1918)

To further support this idea, there are instances in the *Pali Canon* in which the Buddha makes positive statements about individual beings after they had attained *nibbana*:

That is Mara, the Evil One. He is searching for the consciousness of Vakkali the clansman: "Where is the consciousness of Vakkali the clansman established?" But, monks, it is through unestablished consciousness that Vakkali the clansman has become totally unbound. (SN 22.87, trans. Thanissaro, 2005)

The Buddha also makes a similar utterance about the clansman Godhika in the *Godhika Sutta*. These passages suggest the acknowledgement of the existence of individuals in *nibbana*, very much in the manner suggested by Shwe Zan Aung's protagonist Agga.

What I have presented in this essay so far suggests that the interpretation of the doctrine of *anatta* as a metaphysical denial of the self is incorrect. Rather, I propose that a more correct interpretation of the doctrine is the view advocated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. He writes in his essay "No-self or Not-self?" (1996):

In this sense, the *anatta* teaching is not a doctrine of no-self, but a not-self strategy for shedding suffering by letting go of its cause, leading to the highest, undying happiness. (Thanissaro, 1996)

The doctrine of *anatta*, therefore, is not a metaphysical assertion, but a practical strategy that guides one to let go of attachment to conditioned phenomena and thus to achieve liberation.

This view is supported by the way the term *anatta* is used in the *Pali Canon*. Consider the following passage from the *Girimananda Sutta*:

And what is the perception of not-self? There is the case where a monk — having gone to the wilderness, to the shade of a tree, or to an empty building — reflects thus: 'The eye is not-self, forms are not-self; the ear is not-self, sounds are not-self; the nose is not-self, aromas are not-self; the tongue is not-self, flavors are not-self; the body is not-self, tactile sensations are not-self; the intellect is not-self, ideas are not-self.' Thus he remains focused on not-selfness with regard to the six inner & outer sense media. This is called the perception of not-self. (AN 10.60, trans. Thanissaro)

Here, the term *anatta* is not used to deny the reality of the self, but to describe conditioned phenomena as not being the self. Therefore, the correct translation of *anatta* is not 'no self', but 'not self'.

Indeed, it makes sense for the doctrine of *anatta* to be a practical strategy and not a metaphysical assertion. After all, it was not in the Buddha's interests to teach metaphysics, but to help people to overcome suffering:

Both formerly & now, it is only stress that I describe, and the cessation of stress. (SN 22.86, trans. Thanissaro, 2004)

As a practical strategy, the doctrine of *anatta* teaches one to avoid falsely identifying oneself with conditioned phenomena, and thus to free oneself from attachment. It also helps one to overcome greed, for if even this body and this mind do not genuinely belong to me, how could I possibly justify being strongly attached to material possessions? Finally, I argue that it promotes respect and compassion for others, for the recognition of the insubstantiality of the material differences between people encourages one to respect others as being equal and to treat others as one would wish to be treated. When viewed in this light, one is able to appreciate what a wonderful teaching the doctrine of *anatta* is.

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