

The Buddha's Teaching of

Selflessness

Anattā

An Essay, with extracts from the Saṃyutta-Nikāya

by

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(In accordance with modern usage, the word "ego," has been replaced by "self" throughout this new 2007 digital edition of this essay, which was originally published as *The Buddha's Teaching on Egolessness*. BPS editor.)

Selflessness: Anattā

More and more the noble teaching of the Buddha seems to be on the way to conquer the world. More than ever before, Buddhists are working for its propagation in nearly all the countries of the earth. Especially in India, the birth place of Buddhism (from where it disappeared for nearly a thousand years), Buddhism has again made its entrance and gained a firm footing, and with rapid strides it is gaining more and more ground. One therefore should rather think it a good omen that India, having regained its independence, has adopted as its emblem the Buddhist Four-Lion symbol of Emperor Asoka, and that, at the proclamation of the Indian Republic there appeared the Buddha's statue (behind the presidential throne, crowned with this Buddhist emblem).

Also all over Europe and America a mighty Buddhist wave is set in motion, which no longer can be kept back and suppressed, and which, sooner or later, will flood the world with its beneficial influence. The world is no longer satisfied with dogmas based on blind belief. Everywhere in the world there is found today a striving for freedom and independence, externally and internally. And ever more the thinking man feels that the destinies of beings are not dependent on the omnipotence and infinite goodness of an imaginary creator, but that they rest entirely on the beings themselves. It is in Buddhism that one may find the true answers to many of the problems that are troubling men, and which they wish to have solved. Everybody knows that Buddhism is not a revealed religion and not based on blind belief, but is a doctrine to be realized by man's own understanding (a doctrine that makes man free and independent in his thinking, and assures him of happiness and peace).

But of one thing I wish to warn all those who are working for the propagation of Buddhism: not to allow themselves to be influenced or carried away by seemingly identical theosophical, Christian, or (what is still worse) materialistic teachings. For all these are, in essence and substance, very often diametrically opposed to the Buddha's doctrines, and prevent a real understanding and realization of the profound law discovered and proclaimed by the Buddha.

The most crucial point for most men seems to be the Buddha's fundamental teaching of phenomenality, selflessness and impersonality of existence (in Pali *anattā*). It is the middle way between two extremes: on the one hand, the spiritualistic belief in an eternal ego-entity, or soul, outlasting death; on the other hand, the materialistic belief in a temporary ego-entity becoming annihilated at death.

Therefore it is said: There are three teachers in the world. The first teacher teaches the existence of an eternal ego-entity outlasting death: that is the Eternalist (as for example the Christian). The second teacher teaches a temporary ego-entity which becomes annihilated at death: that is the annihilationist, or materialist. The third teacher teaches neither an eternal, nor a temporary ego-entity: this is the Buddha. The Buddha teaches that what we call ego, self, soul, personality, etc. are merely conventional terms not referring to any real independent entity. And he teaches that there is only to be found this psycho-physical process of existence changing from moment to moment. Without understanding the selflessness of existence, it is not possible to gain a real understanding of the Buddha-word. And it is not possible without it to realize that goal of emancipation and deliverance of mind proclaimed by the Buddha. This doctrine of selflessness of existence forms the essence of the Buddha's doctrine of emancipation. Thus with this doctrine of selflessness, or *anattā*, stands and falls the entire Buddhist structure. Indeed, for anyone who wishes to engage in the study of the Buddhist scriptures, the best thing would be, from the very start, to get himself acquainted with the two methods in which the Buddha taught the Dhamma to the world. The first method is the teaching in conventional language; the second method is the teaching in philosophically correct language. The first one relates to conventional truth, *voḥāra-sacca*, the second, to truth in the ultimate sense, *paramattha-sacca*.

Thus, whenever the Buddha uses such terms as I, person, living being, etc., this is to be understood as conventional speech, and thus not correct in the highest sense (*paramattha-vacana*). It is similar to speaking of the rising and setting of the sun, though we know thoroughly well that this does not correspond to reality. Thus the Buddha teaches that, in the ultimate sense, amongst all these psychophysical phenomena of existence there cannot be found any eternal or even temporary ego-entity, and hence that all existence of whatever kind is something impersonal (or *anattā*).

In this connection I would like to emphasize the fact that this fundamental doctrine of selflessness and emptiness is not (as some misinformed Western Buddhists assert) only taught in the southern

school of Buddhism, but that even in the so-called Mahayana schools it forms a most essential part. Without this teaching of *anattā* (or egolessness), there is no Buddhism; and without having realized the truth of egolessness no real progress is possible on the path to deliverance.

The Buddha is, in every respect, a teacher of the golden mean, ethically as well as philosophically. From the ethical standpoint, for example, the Buddha rejects two extremes: the way of sensual pleasures and the way of self-torture. From the philosophical standpoint he rejects eternity, as well as the temporary nature of an ego-entity. Just so he rejects belief in an absolute identity and an absolute otherness of the various stages of the process of existence. He rejects determinism, as well as the belief in chance. He rejects the belief in absolute existence and absolute non-existence, in freedom of will, as well as in non-freedom of will.

All these things will become clear to one who understands the selflessness and conditioned nature of all phenomena of existence. On the understanding of these two truths depends the understanding of the entire doctrine of the Buddha. Hence the understanding and final penetration of selflessness and conditionedness of all phenomena of existence are the necessary foundation to the realization of the noble eightfold path leading to deliverance from all vanity and misery: right understanding, right thought, right speech, right bodily action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration of mind. Only this golden middle path, based on these two kinds of right understanding, namely of "selflessness and conditionedness," can alleviate and destroy these vain illusions of "self" and craving, which are the root-causes of all war and bloodshed in the world. But without these two kinds of understanding there is no realization of the holy and peaceful goal pointed out by the Buddha. There are, however, various would-be Buddhists in the West who are attached to an imaginary Great Self; who uphold that the Buddha did in no way reject the view of an "eternal Atman," or soul, behind and independent of the phenomena of existence; and who believe that the Mahayana texts teach such a doctrine. Such assertions, however, do not in the least prove correct, for neither the Pali texts, nor the early Mahayana texts, proclaim an eternal self. From a study of the Buddhist scriptures, any reader, unbiased in mind and free from prejudices, will never from a study of the Buddhist scriptures come to the conclusion that the Buddha ever taught any such ego-entity within or outside the corporeal, mental and spiritual phenomena of existence. Nowhere in the world can there be found such an entity, as was clearly pointed out by the Buddha.

Regarding the questions whether the Holy One will continue after death, or not continue etc., the Buddha says that all such questions are wrongly put. And why? Because what is called the "Holy One" is here only a conventional term and refers to no real entity, while in reality there is only to be found a process of corporeal, mental and spiritual phenomena. In another text, the Buddha asks a monk whether he considered corporeality as the Holy One (*Tathāgata*), or feelings, or perceptions, or mental formations, or consciousness. Or whether he believed the Holy One to exist within these five groups of phenomena or outside of them. Or whether all these phenomena heaped together were the Holy One. And denying all these questions, the Buddha further said that, even during a lifetime, the Holy One could not be discovered in reality. Therefore it would be wrong to ask whether the Holy One will continue or not continue after death, etc. Thus, no entities are existing in the world, but only ever-changing processes. The Buddha further says: Because man does not understand that corporeality, feeling and the other mental and spiritual phenomena are impermanent, unsatisfactory and impersonal (*aniccā, dukkha, and anattā*), does not understand their conditioned origin, their extinction, and the path leading to their extinction, he therefore will think that the Holy One does continue, or does not continue after death, etc. This, therefore, is the reason why the Buddha did not answer such questions.

According to Buddhism, the whole of existence is comprised of the five groups of phenomena mentioned above, or more briefly still, expressed in three groups: corporeality, consciousness and the mental factors. And within these three groups are comprised the only and ultimate things given, though also these again are mere fleeting and evanescent phenomena, flashing up for a moment, in order to disappear immediately thereafter forever. Thus whenever in the Buddhist scriptures mention is made of I, self, living being, etc. (even of the Buddha), these expressions accordingly are used merely as conventional terms, without referring to any real entities. Therefore the Buddha has said, "It is impossible, it cannot be that a man with real understanding should ever consider anything as a real entity."

He who does not understand the selflessness of existence, and who is still attached to self-illusion, one cannot comprehend and understand the four Noble Truths of the Buddha in the true light.

These four truths are:

the truth of the impermanency, unsatisfactoriness and impersonality of existence;

the truth that repeated rebirth and misery are rooted in self-illusion and craving for existence;

the truth that through the extinction of all self-illusion, vanity and craving, deliverance from all rebirth will be attained; and

the truth that the eightfold path, based on right understanding, is the path leading to this goal.

He who has not penetrated the ego-illusion and is still attached to self-vanity will believe that it is he himself that suffers, that it is he himself that performs the good and evil deeds leading to his rebirth, that it is he himself that will enter Nibbāna, that it is he himself that will bring the eightfold path to perfection.

One who, however, has fully penetrated the selflessness of existence, knows that, in the highest sense, there is no individual that suffers, that commits the kammic deeds, that enters Nibbāna, and that brings the Eightfold Path to perfection. In the *Visuddhimagga* it is therefore said:

Mere suffering exists, no sufferer is found.

The deeds are, but no doer of the deeds is there.

Nibbāna is, but not the man that enters it.

The path is, but no traveller on it is seen.

Further:

No doer of the deeds is found,

No being that may reap their fruits.

Empty phenomena roll on!

This is the only right view.

Therefore, wherever the doctrine of the selflessness of all existence is rejected, the Buddha's word is rejected, But wherever, through penetration of the selflessness of all existence, the ego-vanity has reached ultimate extinction, there the goal of the Buddha's teaching has been realized: freedom from all vanity of I and Mine, and the highest peace of Nibbāna.

Extracts from the Saṃyutta-Nikāya on selflessness

SN¹ 5:10

When certain things we find are combined,

We speak of 'chariot,' speak of 'car.'

Just so when all Five Groups appear,

We use the designation 'man.'

'Tis naught but woe that does arise,

And that exists and passes off.

Nothing but suffering appears,

Nothing but woe that vanishes.

The 'five groups' are a classification, in which the Buddha has summed up all the physical and mental phenomena of existence, and in particular, those which appear to the ignorant man as his self or personality. They are: corporeality, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness.

It is said in the *Visuddhimagga*:

"Whenever different parts, as axle, wheels, frame, pole, etc., are combined in a certain manner, we use the conventional designation 'chariot.' But if we examine one part after the other, we cannot, in the ultimate sense, discover anything that can be called a chariot. It is likewise with the five groups of existence (*khandha*). If they are present, one uses the conventional designation 'being' or 'personality,' etc. But if we examine each phenomenon in its ultimate sense, there is nothing that can form a basis for such conceptions as 'I am' and 'I'. Hence, in the ultimate sense, only mental and physical phenomena exist."

SN 12:12

"Through sense-impression is conditioned feeling-thus it is said in the formula of dependent origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*).

"But who, Venerable One, is it that feels?"

"This question is not proper," said the Exalted One. "I do not teach that there is one who feels. If however the question is put thus: 'Conditioned through what, does feeling arise?' then the right answer will be: 'Through sense-impression is feeling conditioned... ; through feeling, craving; through craving, clinging;...'"

SN 12:35

But what are old age and death, and to whom do they belong? I do not teach that there is one thing called old age and death, and that there is someone to whom they belong. Verily if one holds the view that life (*jīva*: life principle, soul, etc.) is identical with the body, in that case there can be no holy life. And if one holds the view that life is one thing but body another thing, also in that case a holy life is

¹ SN = Saṃyutta-Nikāya, the "Collection of Grouped Discourses." The first figure refers to the number of the Saṃyutta, the second to the Sutta.

impossible. Avoiding both these extremes (i.e. complete identity and complete otherness), the Perfect One has taught the doctrine that lies in the middle, namely: 'through rebirth conditioned are old age and death; ... through the (karmical) process of becoming, rebirth; ... through clinging the process of becoming ... through craving, clinging, ... through feeling, craving; ... etc...

The *Visuddhimagga* quotes:

"From woe and sorrow springs delusive thinking,

No first beginning of existence can be seen.

No doer can be found, nor one that reaps the fruits.

And twelve fold empty is the cycle of rebirth,

And steadily the wheel of life rolls on and on."

SN 12:61

Better it would be to consider the body as the 'self,' rather than the mind. And why? Because this body may last for 10, 20, 30, 40 or 50 years, even for 100 years and more. But that which is called 'mind, consciousness, thinking,' arises continuously, during day and night, as one thing, and as something different again it vanishes. Now, here the learned and noble disciple considers thoroughly the dependent origination: 'If this is, then that becomes. Through the arising of this, that comes to arise; through the extinction of this, that becomes extinguished, namely: Through ignorance conditioned arise the kamma-formations; through the kamma-formations, consciousness (in next life); through consciousness, corporeality, and mind; ... through the extinction of ignorance the kamma-formations become extinguished; through the extinction of the kamma-formations, consciousness... etc.'

SN 22:9-11

Corporeality ... feeling ... perception ... mental formations ... and consciousness are impermanent ... woeful ... selfless, be they of the past or the future, not to mention the present. Understanding thus, the learned and noble disciple does no longer cling to things past, and he enters the path leading to the turning away therefrom, to detachment and extinction.

SN 22:18-20

The five Groups of Existence are impermanent, woeful and selfless. And also the causes and conditions of the arising of these groups of existence are impermanent, woeful and selfless. How could that which has arisen through something impermanent, woeful and selfless as its root, be itself permanent, joyful, and a self?

SN 22:47

All those ascetics and priests, who again and again in manifold ways believe in an 'self' (*attā*), they all do so with regard to the five groups of existence, or to one of them namely:

There the ignorant worldling ... considers one of the five groups as the self; or the self as the owner of that group, or that group as included in the self, or the self as included in that group.

SN 22:81

Now, someone holds the view: This is my 'self,' this is the world. After death I shall remain permanent, steady, eternal, and not be subject to any change.

This eternity-view is one kamma-formation (*sañkhāra*).² But through what is this kamma-formation conditioned?

It is the craving which has arisen in the ignorant worldling while being impressed by a feeling conditioned through an infatuated sense-impression. It is through this craving (*taṇhā*) arisen hereby, that the kamma-formation has arisen. Hence that kamma-formation is impermanent, created, and has conditionally arisen. In one who thus understands, thus sees the immediate extinction of biases (*āsava*) takes place. Again, someone holds the view: 'May I not be! May there nothing belong to me! I shall not be! Nothing will belong to me!' Also this annihilation-view is a kamma-formation ... is impermanent, created and conditionally arisen. In one who thus understands, thus sees, the immediate extinction of biases takes place.

SN 22:85

To the monk Yamaka once the following wrong view had arisen: 'Thus do I understand the doctrine shown by the Blessed One that he in whom all Biases have vanished, at the dissolution of the body, after death, will become annihilated and will no longer exist after death.' (Sāriputta:) "What do you think, Brother Yamaka, are corporeality ... feeling ... perception ... mental formations ... or Consciousness permanent or impermanent?"

"Impermanent, Venerable Sir." ...

"Now, do you consider corporeality etc. as the Perfect One?" "No, Venerable Sir."

"Or do you consider the Perfect One as contained therein?" "No, Venerable Sir."

"Or do you consider all these groups combined as the Perfect One?"

"No, Venerable Sir."

"Or do you think that the Perfect One is without corporeality, or without feeling, without perception, without mental formations, without consciousness?"

"No, Venerable Sir."

"Now, since you cannot, even during life-time, make out the Perfect One according to truth and reality, how can you rightly maintain that the Perfect One will, at the dissolution of the body become annihilated and no longer continue after death?"

"Should someone ask me, what will become of the Holy One, I should answer thus: 'Corporeality, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness are impermanent and what is impermanent, that is woeful; and what is woeful, that will become extinguished and annihilated.'"

Hence, it is only these five groups of phenomena embracing all existence whatever, which are here to be considered, while the designations 'Perfect One,' I, Ego, self, person, man, animal etc. are merely conventional terms, not referring to any real entities. And the so-called pure 'self' is merely a metaphysical fiction or hypothesis.

SN 22:89

Five Groups of Existence forming the objects of attachment' (*upādānakkhandha*) have been taught by the Blessed One: corporeality, feeling, perception, mental formations, consciousness.

With regard to these five groups I do not find any self (*atta*), or something 'belonging to a self' (*attaniya*), but still I am not yet a Holy One, not yet freed from biases. Also concerning these groups of existence liable to attachment, I am no longer subject to the thoughts of 'I am' or 'This I am'.

SN 22:90

The world, as a rule, is fettered by attachment and clinging to things, and is firmly adhering to them. But the learned and noble disciple does no longer attach himself, cling and firmly adhere and incline to the thoughts: 'I have a self (*atta*)' and he knows: 'Merely woe is it that arises, merely woe that vanishes.'

² This is the 2nd link in the formula of the dependent origination and signifies here the unwholesome volitional action (s.v., Karma: *Buddhist Dictionary*) accompanied by wrong views and ignorance.

SN 22:95

Suppose a man who is not blind, beheld the many bubbles on the Ganges as they drive along; and he watched them, and carefully examined them. After carefully examining them, they will appear to him empty, unreal and unsubstantial. In exactly the same way does the monk behold all corporeal phenomena, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and states of consciousness, whether past, present or future, one's own or external, gross or subtle, lofty or low, far or near. And he watches them, and examines them carefully; and after carefully examining them, they appear to him empty, unreal and unsubstantial.

The body's like a lump of foam,

Feeling like a water-bubble,

Perception like a void mirage,

Formations like a plantain tree,

And consciousness like jugglery.

SN 22:96

There is no corporeality, no feeling, no perception, no mental formations, no consciousness that is permanent, enduring and lasting, and that, not subject to any change, will eternally remain the same. If there existed such a self that is permanent, enduring and lasting and not subject to any change, then holy life leading to complete extinction of suffering will not be possible.

SN 22:102

Once the contemplation of impermanency has been developed and has attained full growth then it will overcome all craving for sensuous existence, all craving for fine-material existence, all craving for immaterial existence; it will overcome and uproot all conceit of 'I am.'

Only on reaching perfect Holiness, all conceit of 'I am' (asmimāna) will forever disappear.

SN 22:117

The learned and noble disciple does not consider corporeality, feeling, perception, mental formations or consciousness as the self; nor the self as the owner of one of these groups, nor this group as included within the self, nor the self as included within this group.

Of such a learned and noble disciple it is said that he is no longer fettered by any group of existence, own or external: thus I say.

SN 22:122

... It is possible that a virtuous man, while contemplating the five groups of existence as impermanent, woeful... empty, selfless, may realize the fruit of stream-entrance...

SN 22:147f

The noble disciple who out of faith has gone forth from home to the homeless life, has with regard to the five groups of existence to fulfil the task of living in contemplation of their impermanency, woefulness, and selflessness. And while penetrating these things, he becomes freed therefrom, freed from rebirth, old age and death, from sorrow, lamentation, grief and despair, becomes freed from suffering: thus I say.

SN 22:151

“What must exist, and what must be the condition, that such views may arise as ‘This is my self, this the world. After death I shall continue, be everlasting, eternal, not subject to any change’?”

“The five groups of existence must exist ... that such views may arise.”

“What do you think: Are these five groups permanent or impermanent?”

“Impermanent, Venerable Sir.”

“But what is impermanent, is that joyful or woeful!” “Woeful, Venerable Sir.”

“But based on that which is impermanent, woeful and subject to change, may (rightly) arise such views as: ‘This is my self, this the world. After death I shall continue, be everlasting, eternal, not subject to any change’?”

“No, Venerable Sir.”

In SN 22:47 it was stated, in a more general way, that any kind of self-illusion is necessarily based upon the five groups of existence. Here, however, the same is said with special reference to the eternity-views.

SN 35:6

The visible *objects* are selfless (*anattā*); sounds, odours, tastes, bodily impressions and mind-objects are selfless. But of that which is selfless, one has, according to reality and true wisdom, to know thus: ‘That am I not, that does not belong to me, that is not my self’ ...

SN 35:23

What is the totality of things?

Eye and visible objects, ear and sounds, nose and odours, tongue and tastes, body and bodily impressions, mind and mind-objects: these are called the totality of things.

SN 35:45-49

All things are ego-less. All things one has to comprehend fully (1st truth), all things one has to overcome (2nd truth), all things one has to know directly...

SN 35:85

It is said that the world is empty. But why does one call the world empty?

Because the world is empty of a self (*attā*) and of something belonging to a self (*attaniya*), therefore the world is called empty. But which are the things that are empty of a self?

Empty of a self are eye and visible objects, ear and sounds, nose and odours, tongue and tastes, body and bodily impressions, mind and mind-objects.

SN 35:90

One should not imagine oneself being identical with the eye, should not imagine oneself being included within the eye, should not imagine oneself being outside the eye, should not imagine oneself: ‘The eye belongs to me.’

One should not imagine oneself being identical with the visible objects, should not imagine oneself being included within the visible objects, should not imagine oneself being outside the visible objects, should not imagine: ‘Visible objects belong to me. One should not imagine oneself being identical with eye-consciousness, should not imagine oneself being included within eye-consciousness, should not imagine oneself being outside of eye-consciousness, should not imagine: ‘The eye-consciousness belongs to me.’

...

One should not imagine oneself being identical with the totality of things....

Thus not imagining any more, the wise disciple clings no longer to anything in the world. Clinging no longer to anything, he trembles not. Trembling no longer, he reaches in his own person the extinction of all vanity: ‘Exhausted is rebirth, lived the holy life; and no further existence have I to expect.’ Thus he knows.

The four types of ‘imagining’ mentioned in the first paragraph of this text, correspond to those contained in the 1st Discourse of the Majjhima-Nikāya (Mūlapariyāya Sutta).

SN 35:141

... Consciousness (mind) is selfless. Also the causes and conditions of the arising of consciousness, they likewise are selfless. For, how could it be possible that consciousness having arisen through something which is selfless, could ever be a self?...

SN 35:163

... Whosoever understands and contemplates the mind as selfless, in him the self-view disappears. Whoso understands and contemplates as selfless (*anattā*) the mind-objects ... , mind-consciousness ... mind-impression ... and the agreeable and disagreeable and indifferent feeling conditioned through mind-impression, in him the self-view disappears ...

SN 35:193

... Just as this body has in various ways been revealed, disclosed and explained as selfless, in exactly the same way one should explain also mind as selfless ...

SN 35:197

... 'Empty village' is a name for the six sense-organs; Thus, whenever an experienced, learned and wise man examines the six sense-organs, eye, ear, nose, tongue, body or mind-organ, then all these things appear to him as delusive, empty, and deceitful...

SN 35:207

... 'I am' is a delusion. 'This I am' is a delusion. 'I shall be' is a delusion. 'I shall not be' is a delusion. 'Corporeal shall I be' is a delusion. 'Incorporeal shall I be' is a delusion. 'Endowed with perception shall I be' is a delusion, 'Without perception shall I be' is a delusion. 'Neither with nor without perception shall I be,' is a delusion. Delusion is a sickness, an ulcer, a thorn.

SN 41:7

... What is the mind-deliverance of emptiness (*suññata*)? There the monk repairs to the forest, to the foot of a tree, or to an empty hut. And he contemplates thus: 'Empty is all this of a self and of anything belonging to a self' ...

SN 46:72f

... If one develops the contemplation of impermanency, the contemplation of woefulness due to impermanency, the contemplation of selflessness due to woefulness, then all these contemplations are leading to high blessing. ...

SN 56:8

Do not think such evil, unwholesome thoughts, as 'Life and body are identical'; or 'Life is one thing, but another is the body'; or 'Does the Perfect One live after death?' 'Or not?' ... And why should one not think such thoughts? Because such thoughts are not profitable, do not belong to the genuine holy life, do not lead to the turning away and detachment, not to extinction, appeasement, enlightenment, and Nibbāna.