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Buddhism and Belief in *Ātmā*

by Y. Krishan

The question whether the Buddhists believed in a permanent entity, soul or *ātmā* has been the subject of great debate. In fact, many scholars of Buddhism hold that the Buddha upheld the doctrine of *anattā* or *anātmavāda*, no soul. As Oldenberg put it, the Buddhists believed in a becoming and not in a being. In consequence, it is concluded “In Buddhism there is no actor apart from action, no percipient apart from perception. In other words, there is no conscious subject behind consciousness.”¹ This, in short, leads to action (karma) without a doer (*kartā*). It also repudiates the concept of transmigration and rebirth (*punarjanma*). To believe in the doctrine of karma without accepting the concepts of *jīva* and its rebirth is evidently perplexing.

T.W. Rhys Davids² expresses the resultant dilemma thus: “We have thus arrived at a deadlock; to save what it holds to be a psychological truth, Buddhism rejects the notion of a soul; to save what it holds to be the necessity of justice, it retains the belief in transmigration.”

The source of this controversy is to be found in the *Anattalakkhana-sutta* of the *Vinaya-piṭaka* (1.6.38 ff.), wherein the Buddha asserts that neither the body (*rūpa*) nor any of the psychological factors of existence, feeling (*vedanā*), ideas (*sañña*), volition (*sankhāras*), consciousness (*viññāna*) can be said to be *attā*, the self—the five *khandhas* or factors of individual existence are perishable, non-enduring, *aniccā*, impermanent.

At the outset, it would be appropriate to set out the views of different schools and sects of Buddhists on this subject.

The Stharviravādins or Theravādins, Kāśyapīyas (also called Sthavariyas) and Vibhājayavādins had a pluralistic conception of the constituent elements of the universe, *nāmarūpa*. As Anurudhācārya explains in his *Abhidhammattha samgaho* 1.2

(8th–12th Century A.D.), these schools believed that there were four ultimate categories: *citta* or *viññāna* (consciousness), *caitasika* (mental properties), *rūpa* (material qualities) and *nirvāṇa*. They admitted of a *pudgala* (individual self) only at the empirical level of reality and not as an ultimate real. It needs to be noted, however, that while they believed in *pudgalaśūnyatā*, they also accepted that *citta* or *viññāna* was one of the ultimate categories. The *Majjhimanikāya* (1.2.66) speaks of a *gandhabba* (*gandharva*) as an essential feature in conception. This *gandhabba* appears to be a form of *pudgala*. Buddhaghōṣa, at *Vissuddhimagga* XVII 158–173, speaks of *paṭisandhi viññāna*, rebirth-linking consciousness. *Paṭisandhi viññāna* appears to be another version of *pudgala*.

The Mahīśāsakas and the Dharmaguptikas believed in nine *asamskṛta dharmas* such as *pratisamkhyānirrodha*, *aprasamkhyānirrodha*, *ākāśa*, etc., including *pratītya samutpāda tathatā*. They also believed in *pudgalaśūnyatā*.

The Sarvāstivādins held that *sarvam asti*, all things exist. They also subscribed to the doctrine of *nairātmya*, non-soul or the absence of any permanent substance in an individual. They believed in the eternal existence of 75 dharmas, 72 material categories, and three *asamskṛta dharmas* viz., *pratisamkhyānirrodha*, *aprasamkhyānirrodha*, and *ākāśa*. They also believed in *pudgalaśūnyatā*, but surprisingly, believed in *antarābhava*, a being having intermediate existence between death of a being and its rebirth.

The Vātsīputrīyas and Sāmmitīyas believed in the existence of a *pudgala*, or a soul, but held that it was *avācya* inexpressible (*Tattvasaṃgraha* 337).

Sautrāntikas, also called Saṃkrāntivādins, repudiated the *pudgalavāda* of the Vātsīputrīyas, and called it a metaphysical fiction, like a sky lotus. They did, however, hold that consciousness, *viññāna*, one of the five skandhas, migrates at the death of an individual. They postulated an incorruptible seed (*bīja*) of goodness, an innate, indestructible and perfectly pure factor which persists throughout all change until emancipation or *nirvāṇa*.

Vasubandhu, a Kashmiri Vaibhāṣika, discusses the Vātsīputrīya doctrine of *anātman* exhaustively in the *Pudgala viniścaya* (also called the *Ātmavāda-pratiśedha*) of his *Abhidharmakośa*,

and demolishes it. He cites, *inter alia*, the *Bimbisāra-sūtra* to emphasise, “there is no self, nothing mine”;³ inner life is void, the outer life is void.⁴ He explains the parable of the *bhārahāra*, the carrier of the burden as not justifying the existence of a permanent self. He cites the *Paramārtha-śūnyatā-sūtra*: actions do exist, and they also fructify or bear consequences, but the doer thereof cannot be found.⁵

In the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* (AKB) he elaborates: Just as milk and water conventionally describe all their features, like form, etc., likewise, the collection of skandhas, elements of conscious ego, are called *puḍgala*.⁶ According to Vasubandhu, a person, e.g., Devadatta is “only an unbroken continuity of momentary forces (flashing into existence), which simple people believe to be unity, to which they give the name Devadatta.” But, as noted earlier, Vasubandhu, while repudiating belief in *ātmā*, or soul, subscribes to a belief in *antarābhava*, at *Abhidharmakośa* III.10.12.14–18. Evidently, he only denied the existence of an *ātmā* as a permanent ego.

Buddhaghoṣa (a Theravādin), in his *Visuddhimagga* also elaborates the non-ātman doctrine. At *Visuddhimagga* XVII 162, he observes: there is no transition of the past existence into (consciousness aggregates), nor does it come into existence without a cause.⁷ Buddhaghoṣa (*ibid.* XVII 164) reiterates: (consciousness) does not arrive here from its past existence, nor does it appear without karmas, *saṃskāras*, etc., as the cause.⁸ In other words, present-life consciousness does not arise from the previous existence but from past causes, like an echo, a lamp, the impression of a seal and a reflection (*Visuddhimagga* XVII 166). Buddhaghoṣa goes on to explain: (consciousness) is a continuous series; there is neither identity nor dissimilarity.⁹ He cites the analogy of milk and curds: if there be identity or dissimilarity between the two, the curds cannot be formed from milk (*Visuddhimagga* XVII 167). It is significant, however, that Buddhaghoṣa also uses the term *paṭisandhi*, rebirth, reunion in explaining the phenomenon of transmigration and rebirth, and does not call it a new birth.

Buddhaghoṣa goes on to elaborate, at *Visuddhimagga* XVIII, that *nāma* consists of sensation (*vedanā*), perception (*sañña*) and *samkhāra* (volition); consciousness (*viññāna*) however, is not a part of *nāma*. *Rūpa* is form, and is composed of the four *mahā-*

bhūtas, or elements. He explains, "Name has no power of its own, nor can it go on of its own impulse . . . form is also without power and cannot go on its own impulse." They are, however, mutually indispensable to each other. Form goes or moves when supported by name (*nāma*), and name when supported by form. He likens the two to a blind and a cripple; unless they mutually support each other, it is not possible for them to move.¹¹ In short, consciousness manifests itself only as *nāma-rūpa* (name and form). At *Visuddhimagga* XX,¹² Buddhaghōṣa asserts that *nāma* and *rūpa* do not arise from any material; so, when *nāmarūpa* ceases to exist (i.e., when a person dies), they do not exist anywhere in a material form.

. . . just as when a flute is played upon, there is no previous store of sound; and when the sound comes into existence, it does not come from any such store, and when it ceases, it does not go to any of the cardinal or intermediate points of the compass; and when it has ceased, it exists nowhere in a stored up state . . . in exactly the same way, all the elements of being, both those with form and those without form, come into existence after having been non-existent; and having come into existence, pass away.

At *Visuddhimagga* XIX,¹³ he echoes what was said by Vasubandhu: "Of karma there is no doer; nor is there somebody to experience its results. It is nothing but bare states that come to pass." If there is no *kartā*, or doer, there is no moral responsibility for any act, good or evil. In consequence, the entire edifice of Buddhist ethics falls. This, in turn, raises very difficult issues relating to Buddhist religious beliefs and metaphysics. There is unanimity among all students of Buddhism, irrespective of their sectarian affiliation, that there is a law of karma and *punarjanma* (rebirth). It is karma that explains the phenomena of suffering and inequality. The karmas, or actions, of an individual in this life mature in the subsequent births or rebirths. Thus, the doctrines of karma and *punarjanma* (rebirth) are inseparably linked. If there be no soul or transmigrating entity that takes rebirth, who bears or enjoys the consequences or fruits of karma?

In the *Devadūta-sutta* of the *Majjhimanikāya* (3.178–179)¹⁴ the Buddha claims that with his celestial eye he sees "creatures

in the act of passing hence and of reappearing elsewhere, creatures lowly or debonair, fair or foul to view, happy or unhappy, . . . they fare according to their past." Those who had done good deeds are either born in states of bliss in heaven or as human beings . . . creatures given to evil in act, at the body's dissolution became ghosts, animals or are born in purgatory.

In the *Cūḷa-Kamma-Vibhanga-sutta* of the *Majjhimanikāya* (3.203–206), the Buddha specifically identifies certain actions as leading, after death, to rebirth in purgatory, or among human beings, or in heaven. For example, violence and murder, etc., lead to rebirth in hell, or as a human being for a brief period, or as a human constantly ailing, poor, or of low social status, etc. Likewise, in the *Mahā-Kamma-vibhanga-sutta* of the *Majjhimanikāya* (3.207–215), the Buddha identifies the states of existence attained by various living individuals after death with reference to their karma, viz., purgatory, heaven, etc.

On the other hand, the Buddha speaks of *pratītya-samutpāda*, conditioned genesis. The *Saṃyuttanikāya*¹⁵ (2.64–65) states that "The body . . . is not yours, nor does it belong to others. It should be regarded as former karma effected through what has been willed and felt. . . ."

Again, ignorance produces *samkhāras* (*saṃskāras*) *avijjāpacavyā samkhāra* (*Vinayapitaka*¹⁶ 1.1 and *Saṃyuttanikāya*¹⁷ (2.1–2, 43, 65). In the *Majjhimanikāya*¹⁸ (1.54) the Buddha explains that the *samkhāras* are the kārmic formations of body, speech and thought or mind. In brief, the *saṃskāras* are the psychic roots or substrates of consciousness.

At the same time, the Buddha denounces as erroneous those who believe in an eternal soul (eternalists) or that nothing exists after death (annihilationists). In the *Brahmajāla-sutta* of the *Dīghanikāya* (1.34–35) the Buddha speaks of annihilationists who aver: "Since . . . the soul has form, mind, space, ideas, etc., is built up of the four elements . . . it is cut off, destroyed, on the dissolution of the body, and does not continue after death; and then . . . the soul is completely annihilated." In the same *sutta* (1.40) the Buddha rejects as erroneous the view of certain recluses and brahmins who are eternalists, that is, who believe that the soul and the world are eternal and arise without cause. In the *Saṃyuttanikāya* (2.19–21) he observes:

“Who so says, ‘He who does (a deed) is he who experiences (its results) is thereby saying that from the being’s beginning suffering was wrought by (the being) himself’—this amounts to the Eternity view. Who so says ‘One does (a deed), another experiences (the result)’ is thereby saying that when a being is smitten by feeling, the suffering was wrought by another—this amounts to the Annihilation view.”

The Buddha claims to avoid both these “dead ends.”

In the *Samyuttanikāya*¹⁹ (4.400–401) the Buddha explains his view with greater clarity:

“If I, Ānanda, on being asked by the Wanderer Vacchagotta, if there is a Self, should have answered that there is a Self, this, Ānanda, would have been a siding-in with those recluses and brāhmaṇs who are Eternalists (*sāsstavādins*). If I, Ānanda, on being asked by the Wanderer Vacchagotta, if there is not a Self, should have answered that there is not a Self, this, Ānanda, would have been siding-in with those recluses and brāhmaṇs who are Annihilationists (*ucchedavādins*).”

In the *Samyuttanikāya*²⁰ (1.134–35) it is said:

‘Being’ why does thou harp upon that word?
 ‘Mong false opinions, Mara has thou strayed
 Mere bundle of conditioned factors, this!
 No ‘being’ can be here discerned to be,
 For just as, when the parts are rightly set,
 The word ‘chariot’ ariseth (in our mind)
 So doth our usage covenant us to say,
 ‘A being’ when the aggregates are those.

In other order words, the term *sattva*, being, is only a conventional designation for impermanent aggregates.

Again, at *Samyuttanikāya*²¹ XXII 22(1), the Buddha explains the burden and the bearer of the burden; the five attachment groups (*skandhas*) are the burden, the *puḍgala* (individual) is the carrier of the burden. Again, *Samyutta*²² XII 61.8 likens the self to a monkey jumping from branch of a tree to another:

“As a monkey faring through jungle and wood catches hold of a bough and, having let it go, takes hold of another, even so that which is called thought and mind and consciousness this by night and day dissolves as one thing and reappears even as another.”

At *Samyuttanikaya*²³ XXII 85(6), the bhikṣu Yamaka understands the teaching of the Buddha thus:

“In so far as a brother has destroyed the *āsavas* (impurities), he is broken up and perishes when the body breaks up, he becomes not after death.”

Sāriputta calls this *pāpakam ditthigatam* (evil heresy). He explains:

“Surely the Bhagavat would not say ‘A brother who has destroyed the *āsavas* is broken up and perishes when the body breaks up, he becomes not after death.’ ”²⁴

Buddhaghōṣa says at *Visuddhimagga*²⁵ XVII.113 that a man who is confused about these things (rebirth, death and round of births) . . . does not consider that “every where the aggregates break-up at death,” but thinks that a being dies, and his individuality (consciousness) is transferred to another body.²⁶ The same text²⁷ (XVIII 29) observes: “To say ‘the living entity persists’ is to fall short of the truth; to say ‘It is annihilated’ is to outrun the truth.”

The logical implications of the absence of *ātmā*, ego, *puḍgala*, are set out with great clarity in the *Milindapañha*.²⁸ King Milinda asks Nāgasena:

“Bhante Nāgasena, if there is no ego to be found . . . who keeps the precepts, who applies himself to meditation, who realises the fruit of the discipline (path) that is Nirvāna, who destroys life, who commits immorality, who tells lies, who drinks intoxicating liquor, who commits the five crimes that constitute proximate karma? (As there is no personal responsibility for such lapses) there is no merit, there is no demerit; there is no one who does or causes to be done meritorious or demeritorious deeds; good and evil deeds can have no fruit or result!”

In reply, Nāgasena establishes that the person called Nāgasena cannot be identified with the several components of his body: hair, nails, teeth, skin, bones, blood, form, sensation, perception, consciousness, etc. He could as well have been called Nāgasena, Sūrasena, Virasena or Sihasena. He also cites the analogy of a chariot: a chariot cannot be identified with its components: pole, axle, wheels, chariot-body, etc. Nāgasena impresses upon the king that the word “chariot” “is but a way of counting, term, appellation, convenient designation. . . .” and that “In exactly the same way . . . Nāgasena is but a way of counting, term, appellation, convenient designation, mere name for the hair of my head, hair of my body . . . brain of the head, form, sensation, perception, predispositions and consciousness. But in the absolute sense there is no Ego (self) here to be found” Nāgasena explains at *Milindapañha* 40:

“Just so, O king, is the continuity of a person or thing maintained. One comes into being, another passes away; and the rebirth is, as it were, simultaneous. Thus neither as the same nor as another does a man go on to the last phase of his self consciousness.”

The *Samyuttanikāya*³⁰ (III 3.1.5) explains the concept of rebirth lucidly:

He whose conduct in body, speech and thought is bad, “at the breaking up of the body after dying he arises in the abyss, the bad bourn, the downfall.” On the other hand, a person whose conduct in body, speech and thought is good “at the breaking up of the body after dying, he arises in a good bourn in a heavenly world. . . .”

*Milindapañha*³¹ 46 reiterates the position: “Just so, great king, deeds, good or evil, are done by this name and form and another is reborn. But that other is not entirely released from its deeds (karma).” The *Mahāvastu*³² (III 65) states:

“From what cause is a thing born (*jayati*)? From what cause does a thing endure? From what cause is it broken up? From what cause is it reconstituted?” The Buddha replies, “. . . It is because of ignorance, craving and karma; that is why . . . a thing is born It endures because of the karma of life (*āyuhkarma*) and of the sustenance it gets It is broken up because of the decay of life, of karma, and because of the deprivation of sustenance It is reconsti-

tuted through the non-elimination of ignorance and because of subjection to craving and so it has maturing karma."³³

The controversy regarding the non-existence of *puḍgala*, soul, is set out with great clarity in the *Kathāvatthu*³⁴ (1.1.158) in the question and answers between a Theravādin and Puggalavādin. In brief, the Puggalavādin maintains that the soul of a deceased person transmigrates from this world to another and *vice versa*, that it cannot be said that the soul in each transmigrating journey is identical with the other, nor can it be said that they are both identical and different. The Theravādin avers that, if they be identical there will be no destruction of life, and concludes that while karmas mature, it is wrong to say that the transmigrating soul is the same. *Kathāvatthu* 1.1.170 sums up:

“At the dissolution of each aggregate,
If then the ‘person’ doth disintegrate,
Lo! by the Buddha shunned, the Nihilistic creed.
At the dissolution of each aggregate,
If then the ‘soul’ doth not disintegrate,
Eternal, like *Nibbāna*, were the soul indeed.”

While the Buddha repudiated any belief in an immutable and abiding soul, he also rejected the view that there was no consciousness principle apart from the material body, or that consciousness was only a function of material aggregates. This is conclusively established by the phenomenon of memory of previous births or past incarnations. In the *Āṅguttaranikāya*³⁵ (V.III.23) the Buddha teaches that one can, through self concentration, call to mind one’s various temporary states in a previous existence, such as one birth, two births, three, four . . . a thousand or a hundred thousand births, and about one’s name, family, caste, mode of earning livelihood, age, etc. This is reaffirmed in another passage in the *Āṅguttaranikāya*³⁶ (X.III.21) wherein it is averred that through yoga “. . . he calleth to mind the various appearances and forms of his previous births . . .” The *Visuddhimagga*³⁷ (XI 371) also speaks of acquiring insight into repeated births through developing concentration and (XI 372) of desiring to obtain rebirth in the Brahmā world.

It is important to note that all the Buddhist schools unanimously repudiated the materialism of the Cārvākas, who maintained that consciousness was merely a product of the combination of physical elements (*mahābhūtas*) and that consciousness ceases absolutely when the physical constituent elements disintegrate. It would be erroneous to interpret the *anātman* theory of the Buddhists in a manner which will lead to their doctrines being identified with those of Cārvākas.

To sum up, the Buddha denied the existence of any eternal, unchanging self or soul. He also repudiated the belief that there is no self or conscious entity after death. The whole existence both material and "spiritual" has been aptly compared to the current of a river (*nadī soto viya*),³⁸ which is constantly changing and yet continuous. This was entirely in keeping with the doctrine of dependent origination (*pratītya samutpāda*), inasmuch as everything in this universe including the conscious self is, at any moment of time, in the process of continuous change. In other words, there does not exist a continuous, abiding unchanging personal entity: the *puḍgala* of the Buddhists, like dharmas or material categories, is always in a state of flux; only the rate of change differs and is not always patently manifest.

The biological phenomenon of metamorphosis in the case of butterflies and frogs from the time of their birth to the stage of adulthood provides vivid examples of physical changes in an individual.³⁹ Similar, though less pronounced, changes are also visible not only in the physical characteristics of human beings, but also in their personality, their mental and moral make-up. At birth, the personalities of children are not distinguishable; they have physical differences in their shape, colour, size, weight, etc., but their personality or character as a function of moral and mental nature, are undeveloped, dormant and apparently similar. As they grow, their personality differences, and hence their individuality, manifest themselves. In fact, it can be said that growth means changes in physical and mental characteristics; as a person grows, his personality characteristics, and hence his individuality, become more pronounced, and passion, anger, greed, detachment, fear, courage, etc., exhibit themselves in varying degrees in different individuals. In other words, as a being grows, his body and character undergo

change and progressively become more marked and individualized. So, while an individual is undergoing continuous changes of personality, physical, mental and moral, there is a continuity of each personality in his own memory and in the perception of his fellow beings. It is this individuality of an existent being which is a surviving sub-stratum "*puḍgala*," but which is perishable and which ceases to exist in nirvāṇa.

Thus, *puḍgala*, self or consciousness undergoes changes in an individual body from the time of birth, in childhood, growth, maturity and death. This *puḍgala* is the *sūkṣama śarīra* of the Yoga school. It is the *bhūtātman* of the *Maitri Upaniṣad*. It is this *puḍgala* that transmigrates at death and undergoes re-birth (*punarjanma*) in accordance with one's deeds. It is this *puḍgala*⁴⁰ that is the storehouse of memory and of accumulated karmas. It is on the sundering of the bonds of the *trṣṇā* (craving for existence) that binds the skandhas, elements of consciousness, together that a person attains nirvāṇa. There are weighty grounds for arriving at this conclusion.

The *Mahāvagga* (I. 2. 3) of the *Vinaya-piṭaka* says that the supreme happiness is attainable by eliminating or driving out (*vinayo*) the concept or notion (*māna*) "I am" (*asmi*): the ego, or *ahaṃkāra*. The *Alagaddūpamasutta* of the *Majjhimanikāya* (I. 22) (P.T. Society text, p. 139) says that a bhikṣu is emancipated when he abandons (*phāṇo*) the concept of ego (*asmi māno*). The context leaves no room for doubt that in this *sutta* (text, p. 135) the Buddha is speaking of the individual self when he describes the six wrong views (*diṭṭhiṭṭhānāni*) concerning *rūpa*, *vedanā*, etc., thus: *etaṃ mama, eso 'ham asmi, eso me attā* ("this is mine," "I am this," "this is my self.") The emphasis is on the ego or the individual self as distinct from the impersonal, universal self. This is further clear from the same *sutta* (text, p. 138): *Attani vā bhikkhave sati/attaniyam-me ti assāsati*: "If there is recollection of a self, this is: 'the self is myself.'" Notice that the emphasis is on the self of mine and not on the self which could mean both the great, impersonal, universal self, the *paramātman*, and the individual self, *ātman* or *ātmā*. The *Chachakka sutta* of the *Majjhimanikāya* (III.148) (text, p. 284) makes it clear that the rise or origination of the individual self (*sakkāyasamudaya*) leads to consciousness of individuality: *etaṃ mam, eso 'ham asmi, eso me attā*. It is reiterated in the same *sutta* that the absence of the sense of

selfhood *n'etam mam*, etc., suppresses the individual self (*saskāyanirodhagāmini*).

The *Dhammapāda* draws a distinction between the great self and a self. *Dhammapāda* 160 and 380 say that the self is the lord of the self (*attā hiattāno nātho*) and the self is the bourn of the self (*ātta hi attāno gati*). *Dhammanada* 379 avers that the self stimulates and controls the self (*attanā codayattānam paṭivāse at-tamattanā*). What does not exist eternally is an individual self. As the *Samyuttanikāya* (III. 130) says, "There is nowhere to be found in the *Khandas*, 'I am.' "

Harivarman (3rd Century A.D.), in the *Satyasiddhiśāstra*⁴¹ (34–35), discusses the *pudgala* controversy in the Buddhist schools, and defines ātman as an integration of five aggregates: "Action and fruition are all possible when the five aggregates are at work in succession." He warns, "If the soul is nominal, simply none would incur the sin in killing a cow." He also emphasises (*ibid.*, 84) that "the sense of 'I' is activity (*injīta*), etc.; wherein exists the sense of 'I,' therein is activity, the mind's act . . . abode of greed. What is manifested is termed abode of greed."

Vasubandhu, who, in the *Pudgalaviniścaya* of *Abhidharma-kośa*, had mounted a massive attack on the doctrine of ātman, recognised that total denial of a self would lead to erosion of responsibility for karmas,⁴² and absence of belief in a conditioned self (*samvṛtim*) would lead the tender child of moral merit to perish.⁴³ He recognises that the Buddha did not deny the existence of an empirical self (*bhūta prajñaptikah*). He continues: obscured by ignorance, the empirical or conditioned self is wandering about in the cycle of existence.⁴⁴ Further, the collection of skandhas or elements called *sattva* (conditioned or empirical self), wanders about on account of the force of craving.⁴⁵ Vasubandhu goes on to explain the dangerous implications of a belief in a permanent self or ego. He says that the idea of a self is followed by the idea of "mine."⁴⁶ Again: "Further, where the idea of mine has taken firm hold, there arises bondage to all that is deemed mine and takes a person further away from liberation."⁴⁷

Kamalaśīla, in his *pañjikā* on *Tattavasamgraha*⁴⁸ 3338 of Śāntarakṣita, explains the concept of no-soul as appertaining to egotism:

. . . . All these afflictions—love, hate and the rest—have their root in wrong notions of the soul, as has been found through positive and negative concomitance; . . . if . . . a soul existed, there would be constant appearance of the afflictions of love, etc. . . . they (the afflictions) really proceed from the wrong notion of the soul. For instance, unless one has the notion of ‘I’, . . . he cannot have the idea of anything being conducive to bringing pleasure to himself, and he cannot be attached to it as his ‘own’; hatred also towards anything does not appear unless one recognises that it is conducive to bringing pain to himself; because there can be no hatred against what is not harmful to what is his own, or against what removes the harm.

He goes on to add that the notion of the “soul” produces notion of “one’s own” and love for one’s own, and this produces hatred and the rest, and

from this positive and negative concomitance, it is clearly known to all men . . . that all these afflictions—love, etc.—have their root in the notion of ‘one’s own’, which proceeds from the notion of one’s self or soul.

Śāntarakṣita (3438–3494) observes “It is only when there are notions of ‘I’ and ‘Mine’ that the whole mass of afflictions becomes operative. . . .” Kamalaśīla explains that the doctrine of no soul is the sole destroyer of afflictions that are the source of “birth and rebirth.” He adds that there is liberation on the cessation of the “I” notion. He observes the notion of “soul” is the very root of the “I” notion and that “So long as the mind is beset with the ‘I-notion’, the series of birth and rebirth does not cease. . . .”

Again, how can there be an accumulation of previous karmas without a corpus in which they accumulate? This corpus is the empirical self, *sūkṣama śarīra*, which is *anitya* and disintegrates on attainment of nirvāṇa. The conception of nirvāṇa, in turn, provides a clear indication of the nature of consciousness, *ātmā* or soul in Buddhism. For example, *Milindapañha* 321-322 likens nirvāṇa to a wish-fulfilling tree, which satisfies all desires, causes delight and is full of lustre; to clarified butter, which is beautiful in colour, and has a pleasant odor and taste.

This description of nirvāṇa conceives it as a positive entity

and not as a nothingness. According to the schools of the Hīnayāna, nirvāṇa is an *asamskṛta dharma*, an unconditioned category which has an objective existence and which can be obtained by following the path (*mārga*). Nirvāṇa consists of two such categories: *pratisamkhyānyrodha* and *apratīsamkhyānīrodha*. Buddhaghōṣa recognises that nirvāṇa can be attained by intense discipline: “. . . it cannot be non-existent, as it is realisable by transcendental intuition, born of unremitting and unflagging perseverance. . . .” Kamalaśīla, at *Tattvasaṃgraha pañjikā* 2748–2749, explains *pratisamkhyānīrodha* as the dissociation (of the principle of consciousness) from *āsravas* or *kleśas* (impurities). The Mahāyānist schools only emphasised *dharma śūnyatā*, the non-existence of any material categories besides *puḍgala śūnyatā*. Still, they also accept the concept of nirvāṇa as terminating the transmigrating process. In brief, nirvāṇa necessarily implies belief in an entity which obtains emancipation and, until such consummation, it continues to subsist.

The doctrine of *anātmavāda*, in short, only taught the unreality of an ego, self-consciousness, *jīva*, *ahaṃkāra*, a personal entity as distinct from an undifferentiated consciousness, a *nirguṇa ātmā*. It is the *jīva* that transmigrates. This alone permits a harmonious interpretation of the Buddha’s teaching about self, *ātmā*, without compromising the doctrine of personal responsibility for one’s karmas.

The dilemma of the clash between religious belief in karma and retributive rebirth, which was the foundation of Buddhist ethics, and the doctrine of *anattā* as elaborated by the adherents of the *Abhidharma*, drove the Buddhist philosophers to invent new concepts, more precisely, new terminology; these were essentially a euphemistic variant of the *puḍgala* doctrine they had repudiated.

The Sthaviravādins adopted the concept of *bhavaṅga*,⁴⁹ factor of existence, the link in the chain of transmigration and rebirth. The Sarvāstivādins or Vaibhāṣikas speak of *avijñāpati*, unmanifested hidden power, also called *prāpti*, a force having the quality of adhesion, or binding the skandhas. The Sāmmītiyas evolved the concept of *cittaviprayukta*, an undifferentiated dharma, so called because it is dissociated from differentiating thought. This *cittaviprayukta* was also deemed to be indestructible (*avipraṇāśa*). The Sautrāntikas postulated *sarvabhījaka*, which

possesses all seeds of causation and birth, each seed being a *sūkṣmacitta*. It was also called *ekarasa skandha*, that is, that which makes all skandhas one unified or integrated entity. It is also called *mūlāntika skandha*, that is which is the base of all aggregates.

All these new concepts or terms, *bhavaṅga*, *cittaviprayukta*, *avijñāpti*, *prāpti*, *sarvabījaka*, etc., were, in my opinion, semantic inventions or coining of new terminology to provide a carrier of karmas at the death of an individual. Their function was essentially similar to that of the *pudgala* of the Sarvāstivādins and the *sūkṣama śarīra*, *kārmaṇa śarīra*, or *liṅga deha* of the Brahmanical schools. This, however, they could not admit on sectarian grounds. Conze has summarised the position in this respect succinctly and graphically:

All these theoretical contributions were attempts to combine the doctrine of 'not self' with the almost instinctive belief in a 'self' empirical or true. The climax of this combination of the uncombinable is reached in such conceptual monstrosities as the 'store-consciousness' (*ālaya-vijñāna*) of Aśaṅga and a minority of Yogācārins, which performs all the functions of a 'self' in a theory which almost vociferously proclaims the non-existence of such a 'self'.

A conclusive confirmation of the Buddhist belief in a transmigrating entity after death and which "suffers" the consequences of its karmas is to be found in the exposition of the Buddhist beliefs by the early Chinese Buddhists and in the practices current among the people of Buddhist lands at present.

The pre-Buddhist Chinese did not believe in karma and rebirth, but by the 4th-5th century A.D., the Chinese philosopher Hui-yuan could write, in his *Spirit Does not Perish*,⁵⁰ that the differences among individuals, i.e., diversity in the universe, can be explained on the basis of the doctrine of karma and of the mysterious transmigration of skandhas after death. The *Saddharma-smṛtyupasthāna-sūtra*,⁵¹ translated into the Chinese in the 6th century A.D., also asserts an intermediate state of the soul after a man's death and before his soul is reincarnated.

The post-mortem practices in vogue in Buddhist lands at present are evidently founded on a belief in the existence of a

transmigrating soul. These practices are similar to those of the *śrāddha* ceremonies observed by the Hindus in India, who believe in the existence of an *ātmā*, or soul. Thus, in Thailand,⁵² gifts are presented, sermons preached and chants uttered to benefit the spirit of the deceased; the religious services are believed to improve the status of a soul in its next birth, and a minimum of seven days must elapse before it can take rebirth. Likewise, in Burma,⁵³ the death and funeral ceremonies—recitation of *paritta* and *dāna* (charity)—have the same objective in view. The relatives of the deceased also seek to transfer their merit to the soul. It is also believed that the soul of the deceased remains near its house for five to seven days after the funeral. The Tibetans⁵⁴ also believe that the soul of a deceased exists in the state of “middle being”—intermediate state, *antarābhava*—for up to 49 days; prayers are offered and rites performed to secure a good rebirth for it.

NOTES

1. Shwe Zan Aung, *Compendium of Philosophy* (London, 1956) Introductory Essay, p. 7.

2. *The Contemporary Review*, XXIX, 1877 “On Nirvāna and in the Buddhist Doctrine of Groups, the Sankhāras, Karma and the Paths,” pp. 249–70. Quoted by L.A. De Silva, *The Problem of Self in Buddhism and Christianity* (London, 1979), p. 37.

3. *Na tvaatrātmā va ātmīyam*

4. *śūnyamādhyātmakam, śūnyam bahiragatam*

5. *asti karma, asti vipākaḥ, kāraḥasti nopabbhyate*

6. *Yathā rūpādīnyeva samastāni samudītāni ksiramiti udakamiti vā prajñāpyate tathā skandhā eva samastāḥ pudgala iti prajñāpyante iti siddham*

7. *tassa ca nāpi atītabhavato idha saṅkanti athi, nāpi tato hetum vinā idha pātubhāvo*

8. *tadetam nāpi purimabhavā idhagatam, nāpi tato kamma-sankhāra nāpi-vi-syādhihetum vinā pātubhutam ti vedītabbam*

9. *etha ca santāna-bandhato nathi ekatā nāpi nānatā*

10. S.N. Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy* (Delhi, 1975) Vol. I, pp. 88 and 123. He points out that all the sense functions and the body are rooted in consciousness, and therefore that *viññāna* (consciousness) is not a part of *nāmarūpa*

11. H.C. Warren, *Buddhism in Translations* (New York, 1963) p. 184. Also see P. Maung Tin, *The Path of Purity* (London, 1931) 3 Vols.

12. Warren, pp. 185–186.

13. P. Maung Tin, Pt. III, pp. 726–727.

14. Lord Chalmers, *Further Dialogues of the Buddha* (London, 1927) Vol. II. See also *Āṅguttaranikāya* 3.4.6, *Devadūtasuttam*, in *Devadūtavagga*.

15. E. Conze (ed.), *Buddhist Texts Through the Ages* (London, 1954), p. 66. See also Oldenberg, *Vinayapiṭaka* (London, 1969).

16. Conze, pp. 66–67.

17. Conze, p. 67.

18. Coomaraswamy & Horner, *The Living Thoughts of Gotama the Buddha* (Bombay, 1956) p. 172.

19. Coomaraswamy & Horner, p. 176.

20. *Kinṇu Satto ti pacesī māraditṭi galam nu te // suddhasankhāra puṇyo yam nagidha sattū palabbhati // Yathā hi āṅgasambhārā // hoti saddo ratho iti // evam khandesu santesu // hoti satto ti sammuti //* Leon Feer (ed.), *The Saṃyuttanikāya*, V.10, 1884; tr. by C.A.F. Rhys Davids, *The Kindred Savings* (P.T.S., London, 1917).

21. Leon Feer (ed.) *ibid.*, 1890.

22. *Seyyathāpi bhikkhave makkato arāṇṇe pavane caramāno sākhm gaṇhati tam muñcīvā aññam gaṇhati // Evam eva kho bhikkhave yad ulam vuccati cettam iti pi mano iti pi viññānam iti pi // // rattiyā ca divasassa ca aññad uppajjati aññam nīrujjhati //* Leon Feer (ed.), 1888. Coomaraswamy & Horner (tr.), p. 197.

23. *Yathā khīṇāsavo bhikkhu Kāyassa bheda ucchijjati vinassati na hote param marañā ti. //*

24. . . . *na hi Bhagavā evam vadedvya Khīṇāsavo bhikkhu Kāyassa bheda ucchijjati vinassati na hoti param marañā ti. Ibid.*, XXII, 85 (7).

25. *Kathan pana yo etesu vimuyhati . . . cutiyā tāva vimūlho, sabbattha khāṇdhānam bhedo marañam ti cutim agaṇhanto, satto marati; sattussa dehantarasan kamanan ti ādīni vikappeti* H.C. Warren & D.D. Kosambi (ed.), *Visuddhimagga of Buddhaghosa* (Harvard, 1950).

26. See also P. Maung Tin, Pt. III, p. 650.

27. . . . *sassato satto ti gaṇhanto olīyatināma; ucchijjati ti gaṇhanto utidhāvati nāma.* The translation is that of S.Z. Aung, *Compedium of Philosophy* (P.T.S., London, 1910).

28. *Atho kho Milindo rājā āyasmantam Nāgasenam etad-avoca Sace bhante Nāgasena puggalo no palabbhati . . . ko silam rakkhati ko bhāvanam anuyujjati ko maggaphala nibbānāni succakarotti, ko paṇam hanati, ko adinam ādiyati, ko kāmesu micchā carati, ko musā bhanati, ko majjam pivati, ko pañca-nantariya kammam karoti tasmā na-tthi kusalam, na-tthi akusalam; na tti kusalā kusalānam kammānam kattā vā karestā vā natthi sukata dukkātanam kammanam phalam vipāko //*

29. *Evam eva kho mahārāja dhamma santoti sandahati, añño uppajjati añño nīrujjhati apubbam acarimam vīya sandahati, tena na ca so no ca añño pacchima viññanasangham gacchatīti.*

30. *So kāyena duccharitam caratā (?) vācāya duccharitam caritvā, manasā duccharitam caritvā kāyassa bheda param marañā apāyam duggatim vinipātam uppajjati so kāyena . . . succaritam caritvā vācāya succaritam caritvā manasā succaritam caritvā kāyassa bheda param marañā suggatim suggam lokam uppajjati.*

31. *Evam eva kho mahārāja iminā nāmarūpeṇa kammam karoti subhanam vā pāpakam vā tena kammena aññam nāmarūpam paṭisandahati, tasmā nā mutto pāpa kōhi kammehīti.* Trenckner (ed.), p. 46 & 72; tr. T.W. Rhys Davids, II-2-6.

32. J.J. Jones (tr.) (P.T.S., London, 1956).

33. *Karmam cāsya bhavati pakvam*

34. S.Z. Aung and Mrs. Rhys Davids (tr.), *Kathāvathu or Points of Controversy* (P.T.S., London, 1915)

(1) *Th.* (Theravādin): Does (a person or soul) run on (or transmigrate) from this world to another and from another to this world?

(2) *P.* (Puggalavādin): Yes.

(3) *Th.*: Is it the identical soul who transmigrates from this world to another and from another to this world?

(4) *P.*: Nay, that cannot be truly said.

Th.: Then is it a different soul who transmigrates?

P.: Nay, that cannot be truly said.

Th.: Then is it both identical and also a different soul who transmigrates . . . ?

P.: Nay, that cannot truly be said.

Th.: Then is it both identical and also a different soul who transmigrates . . .

P.: Nay, that cannot truly be said.

Th.: Then is it neither identical soul nor yet a different soul who transmigrates . . . ?

P.: Nay, that cannot be said.

Th.: Is it the identical, a different, both identical and also different, neither identical nor different soul, who transmigrates?

P.: Nay, that cannot be said . . .

Th.: Surely if the identical soul, without (becoming) different, transmigrates when deceasing hence to another world, there will then be no dying; destruction of life will cease to take place. There is action (karma); there is action's effect; there is the result of deeds done. But when good and bad acts are maturing as results, you say that the very same (person) transmigrates—this is wrong.

35. Hare (tr.), *The Book of the Gradual Savings* (P.T.S., London, 1934) Part III.

36. Woodward (tr.), *The Book of the Gradual Savings* (P.T.S., London, 1934) Pt. V.

37. P. Maung Tin, p. 429.

38. Quoted from S.Z. Aung, p. 8

39. In the case of a butterfly, it is first an egg, then a caterpillar, thereafter a pupa (chrysalis) and finally a butterfly. Likewise, a frog passes through following changes from the time of its birth: larva, tadpole with gills, tadpole with a tail acting as a sucker, tadpole with hind legs, tadpole with forelegs when the tail disappears, and finally frog. After reaching adulthood, both are relatively stable, but gradually undergo the aging process, and are therefore in a continuous process of change. In fact, even inanimate objects are also always in a state of flux.

40. This concept has been explained in Tibetan Buddhism, wherein the enduring and transmigrating spiritual entity is called *Rgyud grig-tu-gyur-pa* or *Ekotibhāva*. *Ekotibhāva* means the continued connection of one with another

without break or division. A *viññāna* (consciousness) existing from eternity has undergone numberless transmigrations. In all its births, it has run through an unbroken line of existence until it enters nirvāṇa. As S.C. Das explains, "... every being (*sattva*) is the reemodiment of its own resultant *sattva*, of which the origin is lost in eternity." Sarat Chandra Das, *Indian Pandits in the Land of Snow* (Calcutta, 1965) (reprint) pp. 84–85.

41. N. Aiyaswami Sastri (ed. & tr.), *Satyasiddhiśāstra* (Oriental Institute, Baroda, 1975).

42. *Bhramśam Karmanām*

43. *Bhramśam kuśalapotasya.*

44. *avidyāntivarnānām sattvānām sandhāvatām sansaratām.*

45. *Sattvākhyah skandhasamudāyastṛṣṇopādānaḥ sansarati.*

46. *ātmani ca satyātmīyam bhavati*

47. *Evamesam dṛḍhatarātmāmīya sneha parigāhita bandhanānām mokṣo dūrībhavet*

48. G. Jha: *Tattvasaṃgraha of Śāntarākṣita with Commentary of Kamalaśīla*. 2 Vols. (Gaekwad Oriental Series, 1937–39).

49. E. Conze: *Buddhist Thought in India* (1962), p. 132 terms it "life continuum."

50. Richard H. Robinson: *Early Mādhyamikā in India and China* (1967) pp. 99–108. Hui-Yuan observes "... the Buddhist doctrine of *kārmic* inheritance from previous lives decides one's intelligence, and the body is only adopted after the *kārmic* forces have selected it."

51. E. Conze, *Buddhist Texts Through the Ages* (London, 1954) p. 283.

52. Kenneth E. Wells, *Thai Buddhism: Its Rites and Activities* (Bangkok, 1960) p. 213.

53. Melford E. Spiro: *Buddhism and Society* (New York, 1970) p. 253.

54. Evans Wentz (ed.), *Bardo Thodol: The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (London, 1957) pp. 6, 39 ff. S.C. Das, *ibid.*, p. 89. L.A. Waddell, *Lamaism, or the Buddhism of Tibet* (New York, 1974) (reprint) pp. 488–494.

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