

THE CONCEPTS OF SELF AND FREEDOM IN BUDDHISM

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Conception of Self

One of the most controversial views expressed by the Buddha is said to be that regarding the nature of the subject, the self or the human person who experiences the objective world. It is generally assumed that he, as a strong advocate of what is popularly known as the doctrine of "no-self" (*anattā, anātman*), is unable to give a satisfactory account of human action and responsibility, not to speak of problems such as knowledge and freedom. Such criticisms were directed at him by his contemporaries as well as by some classical and modern writers on Buddhism.

For some of his contemporaries, the continuity in the human personality can be accounted for only by the recognition of a spiritual substance different from the physical body (*aññam jīvaṃ aññam sarīraṃ*).¹ For some others, it required only a sensibly identifiable physical body (*taṃ jīvaṃ taṃ sarīraṃ*).² Those who opted for a spiritual substance could not depend upon the ordinary events or occurrences such as continuity in perceptual experience and memory in order to speak of a self because such events are temporal and changeable. Their search culminated in the conception of a permanent and immutable spiritual substance. Others who assumed the self to be identical with the physical body were not merely claiming that the self survives recognizably from birth to death and not beyond, but, like the behaviourists, also were denying the reality of conscious life. When the Buddha himself rejected the self as a spiritual substance, he was perceived as someone who, like the latter, advocated the annihilation of an existing conscious person.³

The Buddha had a difficult task before him, especially when he realized that the negation of a subjective spiritual entity will produce great anxiety in ordinary human beings.⁴ However, he also felt that the appeasement of such anxieties had to be

¹ *Majjhima-nikāya* (abbr. *M*), 1.485 ff.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, 1.140.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.136.

