

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.

effected without doing violence to critical thinking or without sacrificing significant philosophical discourse. The method adopted by him in dealing with the spiritualist as well as materialist views is evidently *analytical*. His teachings therefore came to be popularly known as a "philosophy of analysis" (*vibhajjavāda*). A truly analytical philosophy is generally believed to advocate no theories. Analysis is intended as a means of clarifying the meaning of terms and concepts without attempting to formulate alternate theories even if such theories were meaningful. However, the Buddha seems to have perceived analysis as a means, not a goal. It will be necessary to keep this in mind when we proceed to examine the Buddha's response to the Spiritualists as well as the Materialists. The response to the Spiritualists is more popular in the early discourses, for theirs was the more widespread view in pre-Buddhist India.

The Doctrine of Aggregates (*Khandha*)

To the question as to what constitutes a human person, the Spiritualists' answer was almost always: "There exists a spiritual self, permanent and eternal, which is distinct from the psychophysical personality." The Buddha therefore concentrated on the analysis of the so-called psychic personality in order to discover such a self. Every time he did so he stumbled upon one or the other of the different aspects of experience such as feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), disposition (*sankhāra*) or consciousness (*viññāna*). If there was anything other than these psychic elements that constituted the human personality it was the body (*rūpa*).⁵ Yet, none of these factors can be considered permanent and eternal. They are all liable to change, transformation and destruction. In brief, they are impermanent (*anicca*). As such, whatever satisfaction one can gain from them or through them will also be limited. Often such satisfaction can turn into *dissatisfaction*. Hence the Buddha looked upon them as being *unsatisfactory* (*dukkha*).⁶

Arguing from the impermanence and unsatisfactoriness of the five aggregates, the Buddha was led to the conception of "no-self" (*anattā*) which represents the culmination of the analytical process. Even though his treatment is very analytical, its interpretation by some of the classical and modern scholars appears to take an absolutistic turn. Let us first examine the Buddha's conception of "no-self". His assertion regarding "no self" is presented in three separate sentences. Referring to each one of the five aspects of experience or aggregates (*khandha*) mentioned above, he says:

"It is not mine. He is not me. He is not my self."
(*N' etaṃ mama. N' eso aham asmi. Na m' eso attā*).⁷

All three statements do not necessarily refer to the aggregates. Only the first one does. Hence the subject is in the neuter form.

"It is not mine." (*N' etaṃ mama.*)

What is denied in this first statement is the existence of a mysterious entity to

⁵*Samyutta-nikāya* (abbr. *S*), 2.3 ff.

⁶*Ibid.*, 3.21 ff.

⁷*Ibid.*, 3.19.

which each of the aggregates are supposed to belong. Thus, the Buddha's argument begins with the question of *possession* or *ownership*. The Buddha discovered that as a result of over-stretched emotions (*vedanā*), a natural process of sense experience gets solidified into a metaphysical subject that is henceforward taken to be the agent behind all experiences.⁸ A feeling of possession arises not simply on the basis of one's interest, but as a result of one's desire. The Buddha is here arguing that in order to explain the functioning of body, feeling, perception, disposition and consciousness, it is not necessary to posit such a mysterious entity which is perceived as the *owner* of such experiences. Therefore, the statement that follows:

"He is not me," (*N' eso aham asmi*),

refers directly to that mysterious owner negated in the first statement. This explains the use of the masculine pronoun (*eso*) instead of the neuter (*etam*) of the previous sentence. It also makes a significant difference to his claim. He is not denying each and every conception of "I" (*aham*) which is associated with the aggregates but only the metaphysical presupposition behind the statement: "Such and such aggregate belongs to such and such self." The assumption that a certain term has one meaning only and no other was contrary to the Buddha's conception of language.⁹ This is why the Buddha, after rejecting the *conception* of "I" adopted in the Brahmanical system, continued to use the very same *term* throughout his discourses.

Equally important for him was safeguarding the use of the term "self" without rejecting it altogether as absolute fiction. Hence the necessity for repeating the previous sentence replacing "I" (*aham*) with "self" (*attā*),

"He is not my self," (*na m' eso attā*).

This accounts for the constant use of the term "self" (*attā*) in a positive sense in the discourses along with its negation, "no-self" (*anattā*). It seems appropriate to say that there are two different meanings or uses of the terms "I" and "self," one metaphysical and the other empirical. The metaphysical meaning cannot be accounted for by any one of the aggregates, and this is the thrust of his argument in the above context.

If a metaphysical self cannot be explained in terms of the aggregates, can a non-metaphysical or empirical self be accounted for by them? The general tendency among Buddhist scholars is to assume that the aggregates serve only the negative function of denying a metaphysical self. However, a careful reading of the early discourses will reveal that these five aggregates explained in terms of the principle of dependence (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) also perform a positive function of clarifying what an empirical self is. Thus, while the analytical process leads to the negative conception of "no-self", it is to be supplemented by the positive description in terms of dependence which provides meaning for the empirical conceptions of "I" and "self".

Body or material form (*rūpa*) is the first of the five aggregates. Since the theory of aggregates was intended to replace the spiritualist conception of "self", it is not surprising that the first of the aggregates listed is the body (*rūpa*). Allowing the physical personality such a prominent role, the Buddha was simply insisting upon the importance of *sensible* identity as one of the requirements for maintaining the identity of a human person, the "I" or "self". Of course this physical identity does not involve

⁸M 1.111-112.

⁹Ibid., 3.234-235.

any permanence even during the time the body survives, but it is a convenient way of individuating and identifying a person, even though it is not the only way, as it is for some modern philosophers.¹⁰ In this connection it will be of interest to note that the early discourses do not speak of a human person without a body or material form (*arūpa*). *Arūpa*, the formless or the immaterial, is more often a state of contemplation that goes beyond the perception of materiality (*rupasaññānam samatikkama*)¹¹ or a reference to one who has no idea of form (*arūpasaññī*).¹²

Feeling or sensation (*vedanā*) refers to the emotive content of human experience which is another important aspect or constituent of the personality. It accounts for emotions which are an inalienable part of a living person, whether he be in bondage or has attained freedom (*nibbāna*). Feeling consists of three types: the pleasant or the pleasurable (*manāpa, sukha*), the unpleasant or the painful (*amanāpa, dukkha*) and neutral (*adukkhamasukha*). Except in the higher state of contemplation (*jhāna*) characterized by cessation (*nirodha*) of all perception and the experienced or the felt, which is a non-cognitive state,¹³ feelings are inevitable in experience. Such feelings can be twofold depending on how far they are stretched. In the most rudimentary form they can account for interest. If they are over-stretched they can produce continuous yearning or thirsting for the object.

Perception (*saññā*) stands for the function of perceiving (*saññānātīti saññā*). As in the case of feelings, perceptions are also related to all other constituents of the human personality. Thus, they are not atomic impressions that are compounded into complex entities as a result of the activities of mind such as imagination. Each one of our perceptions constitutes a mixed bag of memories, concepts, dispositions as well as material elements. A pure percept undiluted by such conditions is *not* recognized by the Buddha or any subsequent Buddhist psychologist who has remained faithful to the Buddha. A pure percept is as metaphysical as a pure *a priori* category.

Dispositions (*sankhāra*) explain why there cannot be pure percepts. In the Buddha's perspective, this is *the* factor that contributes to the individuation of a person, and therefore, of his perceptions. Almost everything, including physical phenomena, come under the strong influence of this most potent cause of evolution of the human personality as well as its surroundings.

Indeed, the dispositions are responsible not only for the manner in which we groom our physical personality with which we are identified, but also in partly¹⁴ determining the nature of a new personality with which we may be identified in the future. It is not merely the human personality that is moulded or processed by dispositions. Our physical surroundings, even our amenities of life, housing, clothing, utensils, and in a major way, our towns, cities, etc., our art and architecture, our culture and civilization, and in the modern world, even outer space come to be dominated by our dispositions. Karl Popper calls this the World Three.¹⁵ For this very reason, the Buddha when describing the grandeur in which a universal monarch lived, with palaces, elaborate pleasure gardens and all other physical comforts, referred to all of them as dispositions

¹⁰Strawson (1959).

¹¹*M* 1.174-175.

¹²*Dīgha-nikāya* (abbr. *D*), 2.110.

¹³*M* 1.175 where it is distinguished from *paññā* or wisdom.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 1.389.

¹⁵Popper and Eccles (1985), pp. 38ff.

(*saṅkhāra*).¹⁶

Epistemologically, the dispositions are an extremely valuable means by which human beings can deal with the world of experience. In the absence of any capacity to know everything presented to the senses, that is, omniscience, dispositional tendencies function in the form of interest, in selecting material from the "big blooming buzzing confusion" of sensible experience¹⁷ in order to articulate one's understanding of the world. The total elimination of dispositions would therefore be epistemological suicide. Furthermore, the recognition of the importance of dispositions prevented the Buddha from attempting to formulate an ultimately objective view of the world.

Consciousness (*viññāna*) is intended to explain the continuity in the person who is individuated by dispositions (*saṅkhāra*). Like the other constituents, consciousness depends upon them for existence as well as nourishment. It is not a permanent and eternal substance or a series of discrete momentary acts of conscious life united by a mysterious self. Thus, consciousness, when separated from the other aggregates, especially material form (*rūpa*), cannot function. It is said to act with other aggregates if thoughts were to occur.

When consciousness is so explained, it is natural for someone to conclude that it is a substantial entity. This was the manner in which the substantialists responded to the Buddha. Buddha's response was that consciousness is no more than the act of being conscious (*viññānāni viññānam*).¹⁸

Thus, the analysis of the human personality into five aggregates is intended to show the absence of a metaphysical self (an *ātman*) as well as the presence of an empirical self that is dependently arisen.

The Theory of Elements (*Dhātu*)

While the theory of aggregates remains more popular in the discourses, there is occasional reference to the conception of a human person consisting of six elements (*cha-dhātu*).¹⁹ The six elements are earth (*paṭhavi*), water (*āpo*), fire (*tejo*), air (*vāyu*), space (*ākāsa*) and consciousness (*viññāna*). Unlike in the theory of aggregates, here we find a more detailed analysis of the physical personality, and this may have served as a refutation of the Materialist view of a human person.

While it is true that the first four represent the basic material elements (*mahābhūta*) to which is added space, there is here no attempt to deal with them as purely objective phenomena. They are almost always defined in relation to human experience. Thus, earth represents the experience of solidity, roughness, etc.; water stands for fluidity; fire refers to the caloric; and air implies viscosity.²⁰ The Buddha recognized space as an element that is relative to the four material elements mentioned above. The fact that space is not generally included in the list of material elements led to much misunderstanding and controversy regarding its character. The scholastics, like some of the modern day scientists, believed that space is absolute, hence unconditioned (*asamskṛta*).²¹ On the contrary, the early discourses recognized the conditionality of

¹⁶D 2.199.

¹⁷James (1979), p.32.

¹⁸M 1.292.

¹⁹Ibid., 3.239.

²⁰Ibid., 1.421-423; see also Karunadasa (1967), pp. 16ff.

²¹See Karunadasa (1967), p. 93.

space, for the experience of space is dependent upon the experience of material bodies.²² Just as much as the Buddha refused to recognize a psychic personality independent of the physical, he refrained from considering the physical personality independent of conscious life (*viññāna*) as constituting a complete human person.

Presenting an explanation of the physical personality in terms of material elements all of which are understood from the perspective of human experience, the Buddha was able to avoid certain philosophical controversies generated by a more objective physicalistic approach. Prominent among them is the mind-body problem. It is true that the Buddha spoke of the human person as a psychophysical personality (*nāmarūpa*). Yet the psychic and the physical were never discussed in isolation, nor were they looked upon as self-subsistent entities. For him, there was neither a "material-stuff" nor a "mental-stuff", because both are results of reductive analyses that go beyond experience. On a rare occasion, when he was pressed to give a definition of the physical and the psychic components by an inquirer who had assumed their independence, the Buddha responded by saying that the so-called physical or material (*rūpa*) is contact with resistance (*patigha-samphassa*) and the psychic or mental (*nāma*) is contact with concepts (*adhivacana-samphassa*), both being forms of contact.²³ Interestingly, such an explanation of the psychophysical personality where conscious or mental life is analysed in terms of concepts (for *adhivacana* literally means "definition") brings into focus the relationship between language and consciousness.

The description of the human personality in terms of the five aggregates as well as the six elements is an elaboration of the knowledge and insight referred to in the *Sāmaññaphala-suttanta*.²⁴

With his thought thus serene, made pure, translucent, cultured, devoid of evil, supple, ready to act, firm and imperturbable, he applies and bends down his thought to knowledge and vision. He comes to know: "This body of mine has material form, it is made up of the four great elements, it springs from mother and father, it is continually renewed by so much boiled rice and juicy foods, its very nature is impermanence, it is subject to erosion, abrasion, dissolution and disintegration, and there is in this consciousness of mine, too, bound up, on that does it depend.

The explanation of that insight in positive conceptual terms required the avoidance of two extreme views prevalent during his day. The negative conception of "no-self" discussed above referred to the views of the Spiritualists as well as the Materialists which were not only substantialist but also deterministic. While the Materialist view appears more like hard determinism, the Spiritualist version is a form of soft determinism with emphasis upon the knowledge of the eternal and strictly determined self as constituting freedom. In the backdrop of these different versions of determinism was a theory of indeterminism referred to as *yadrccchā-vāda*.²⁵ The term *yadrccchā*, which means "whatever way [it] falls on or happens", is generally translated

²²S 2.150

²³D 2.62.

²⁴Ibid., 1.76.

²⁵Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad 1.2 (in Radhakrishnan (1953), p. 709).

