

## Against No-*Ātman* Theories of *Anattā*

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**ABSTRACT** *Suppose we were to randomly pick out a book on Buddhism or Eastern Philosophy and turn to the section on 'no-self' (anattā). On this central teaching, we would most likely learn that the Buddha rejected the Upaniṣadic notion of Self (Ātman), maintaining that a person is no more than a bundle of impermanent, conditioned psycho-physical aggregates (khandhas). The rejection of Ātman is seen by many to separate the metaphysically 'extravagant' claims of Hinduism from the austere tenets of Buddhism. The status quo has not, however, gone unchallenged. I shall join forces against this pernicious view, integrating some recent contributions into a sustained, two-pronged argument against no-Ātman theories of anattā. At the end it shall be suggested, in line with Thanissaro Bhikkhu, that anattā is best understood as a practical strategy rather than as a metaphysical doctrine.*

### Introduction

The doctrine of 'no-self' (*anattā*) is deemed central to Buddhism. However, the exact meaning of *anattā* is a complex, controversial matter. The most popular readings centre around 'no-*Ātman*' theories of *anattā*, which have positive and negative counterparts. The 'negative doctrine of *anattā*', as I shall call it, takes the Buddha to have rejected all Upaniṣadic notions of *Ātman*; these notions depicting an 'eternal', 'conscious', 'blissful' element in human nature that is usually covered over by illusion (*māyā*) but fully realised in Enlightenment (*Mokṣa*) to be identical with Ultimate Reality (*Brahman*). The rejection of *Ātman* is seen as pivotal in what is taken, by its advocates, to be a metaphysical turning point from Hinduism to Buddhism, the latter being regarded as far less 'extravagant' than the former. This leads naturally to what I shall refer to as the 'positive doctrine of *anattā*'. The positive doctrine ascribes to the Buddha the metaphysically austere position that a person, or what we commonly call the 'self', is nothing over and above an impermanent flux of psycho-physical, causally conditioned aggregates, known as *khandhas*: physical form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and six types of consciousness (corresponding to five senses and mind).

This dual interpretation of *anattā*, as two sides of a no-*Ātman* coin, is not, however, the sole currency. There is another, less popular, school of thought which suggests that the Buddha did not reject all Upaniṣadic notions of *Ātman*. Christian Lindtner has recently argued that Buddhism should be seen as 'reformed Brahmanism' while Karel Werner has suggested that modern scholars have misappropriated notions of *Ātman* when formulating their theories of *anattā* [1]. The scholar-monk Thanissaro Bhikkhu holds that *anattā* should be regarded less as a metaphysical doctrine and more as a practical strategy for disidentifying with elements of conditioned existence [2]. But so ingrained are no-*Ātman* modes of thought, that even such canonically well-grounded accounts as these, strike the reader as isolated exceptions to the status quo, to be

subsequently overlooked by the likes of Prasad [3]. I hope to underscore the importance of these contributions by developing some of their points, amongst others, into a sustained argument against no-*Ātman* theories of *anattā*.

I shall argue that the negative doctrine of *anattā* is bought at the expense of grossly misrepresenting the Upaniṣadic notion of *Ātman*; in particular, that expounded by Śaṅkara. Methodological differences between Buddhism and (Advaita) Vedānta may be overplayed to the point of being distorted into the familiar metaphysical differences. I shall then argue that the positive doctrine of *anattā*, by contrast, commits a sin of omission: it underplays the similarities between Buddhism and Vedānta, to the point where they are ignored. In doing so, unfillable gaps are left in any explanation of how, given that the five conditioned khandhas exhaust human reality, it is possible to attain *Nibbāna*. These problems are not encountered by Thanissaro's pragmatic reading of *anattā*, which also sits more easily with the Buddha's main emphasis of teaching – to know and escape from suffering. Once no-*Ātman* doctrines of *anattā* are rejected, it becomes difficult to find grounds upon which to draw a systematic metaphysical division between Buddhism and Hinduism. The difference may be only in emphasis and method.

### **The Negative Doctrine of *Anattā***

In the effort to set Buddhism apart from its forerunners, David Kalupahana writes:

... the basic self-assertive tendency survived [among the Upaniṣadic teachers]; hence the emphasis on belief in the immortality of the soul ... . The Upaniṣadic theory of 'self' [*ātman*] is intended, no doubt, to satisfy this deep-seated craving on the part of man for self-preservation. The acceptance of this eternal and immutable 'self' enabled the Upaniṣadic thinkers to explain without much difficulty many problems such as rebirth, continuity, and moral responsibility. But for the Buddha a theory that [is] ... merely ... plausible (*bhāvanīya*) is not true in itself.... Truth for him was what accords with facts (*yathābhūta*), not that which catered to one's likes. Hence he did not want to contribute to a theory which merely caters to the instincts of the individual [4].

In a similar vein, Prasad writes:

Buddhism in general is known for its severe opposition to the belief in any substance called soul as the agent of all sorts of cognitive and psychological acts ... . The Śaṅkarites, the Cartesian 'Cogito' ... have in modern time further strengthened the belief in this substantial soul. The Buddhists reduce this posited soul ... to 'I-ing' (*ahaṅkāra*) ... and 'mine-ing' (*mamakāra*), causally conditioned (*pratītyasamutpanna*) ... but separate acts of consciousness flowing in quick succession (*saṃtāna*) ... . According to Buddhism, this belief in a soul is ... disposition-loaded and a false security-giving device [5].

The spirit (if not detail) of this interpretation finds its way into a recent introductory text on Eastern thought:

The Orthodox schools of Hindu philosophy are all concerned with the nature of the self and with the notion that *Ātman* is Brahman. The Buddha takes a completely different line. Buddhism asserts that there is no unique individual self [6].

## Ātman is not a ‘Substantial Soul’

The above interpretations depict the Upaniṣadic notion of *Ātman* as being (a) an eternal and immutable soul or *res cogitans* which is doer of the deeds, thinker of the thoughts, etc., which (b) for Kalupahana and Prasad is motivated by wishful thinking or the desire for self-preservation, rather than a quest for the truth.

Let it be said straight away that at the time of the Buddha, who had encountered only non-enlightened spiritual seekers, the Upaniṣadic notion of *Ātman* may well have been expounded by the populace in the above way, and for the above reasons [7]. To this day, the word ‘*Ātman*’ continues to be translated as ‘soul’, with the above connotations in tow. However, this does not give one licence to portray the whole of the Upaniṣadic tradition in this light. If Sankara’s *Crest Jewel of Discrimination*, or Eliot Deutsch’s philosophical reconstruction of *Advaita Vedānta*, are anything to go by, we will see that (a) and (b) are at direct variance with the heart of Vedānta [8]. Let us deal with each in turn, before addressing the general issue of how (a)- and (b)-type views come to be held.

(a) According to Karel Werner ‘No Indian school of thought has ever regarded the human soul or the carrier of human personal identity as a permanent substance’. He holds that early Buddhist thinkers, as well as modern scholars, came to misleadingly equate *Ātman* (identical with *Brahman*) with the notion of a substantial individual soul or personality. This would imply that any *anattā* doctrine based on rejecting such a ‘soul’ is misdirected, since the ‘soul’ was never posited in the first place [9].

Werner’s contention – at least with respect to Advaita Vedānta – is strongly supported by Śaṅkara’s construal of *Ātman*. That the *Ātman* is not to be understood as a Cartesian thinking substance, or eternal soul, or individual agent of cognitive acts, is stated plainly in *The Crest Jewel of Discrimination*:

The Ātman is the witness – beyond all attributes, beyond action. It can be directly realised as pure consciousness and infinite bliss. Its appearance as an individual soul is caused by the delusion of our understanding, and has no reality. ... We see that a previous state of non-existence may come to an end, even though it is beginningless. It is the same with the semblance of an individual self. This semblance is due to a false identification of the Ātman with the intellect and the other coverings ... . The mind, together with the organs of perception, forms the ‘mental covering’. It causes the sense of ‘I’ and ‘mine’ [10].

Any allusions that one may have, to being in essence a soul or *res cogitans* are regarded by Śaṅkara to be the work of *māyā*, that grand illusion by which *Ātman* is confused into identifying with mental and physical attributes. Through ignorance (*avidyā*), the infinite and indescribable nature of *Ātman* is superimposed (*adhyāsa*) upon what is finite and describable (the physical and mental coverings of body and intellect). The ensuing sense of individual self (*jīva*) is a hybrid of Appearance and Reality; the sense of immutability and witness-consciousness issuing from *Ātman*; the sense of separation from the world – manifested in egoistic tendencies towards ‘I-the-agent’ and ‘mine’ – arising from the illusory coverings of *māyā* [11]. This creates the impression of a substantial ‘I-the-agent’ continuing on indefinitely by its own light, which is what advocates of (a) seem to mean by ‘soul’ or ‘self’ – but it is an impression that Śaṅkara advocates escaping from, not perpetuating:

... the ego-sense is deep-rooted and powerful, for it has existed from beginningless time. It creates the impression that ‘I am the actor, I am

he who experiences'. This impression causes our bondage to rebirth and death. It can be removed only by the earnest effort to live constantly in union with Brahman. The sages define liberation as freedom from all such impressions, and hence the cravings which are caused by them [12].

The advocates of (a) thus equate *Ātman* with the individual self or *jīva*, implying, furthermore, that this view is held by all Hindu schools of thought – so as to allow an easy contrast with Buddhism. In doing so, however, they commit the classic 'strawman' fallacy. There is at least one major school of Hindu thought that does not subscribe to the 'soul' theory of *Ātman*: Advaita Vedānta.

(b) That Śaṅkara was not catering to instincts of self-preservation is plain from the quotations above, which show that he rejected the ultimacy of a soul by denouncing all tendencies towards 'I-the-actor' and 'mine'. In Advaita Vedānta, any sense of a bounded individual 'I', with its egoistic trappings (such as craving for sense objects) is to be thoroughly abandoned – just as in the Buddhist tradition. Through mistaken identification with mental and physical coverings, says Śaṅkara:

... man, who is *Ātman*, regards himself as being separate from it [*Ātman*], and from Brahman, who is the one *Ātman* in all creatures [13].

The idea of 'realising' *Brahman* who is the one *Ātman* in all creatures – as far as it can be cognized from the perspective of Appearance – could hardly be *less* comforting to those who value their individual identity. Upon enlightenment, all sense of individual identity is lost, not re-affirmed.

### The Source of Suspicion

There will still be those who remain unhappy with Śaṅkara's repeated reference to the bliss of *Ātman*, or to *Ātman* as the witnessing principle of all experience, not to mention frequent injunctions to 'identify' with *Brahman* in order to 'Realise that you are that Being which is eternal happiness' [14]. This is what after all likely contributes to (a)- or (b)-type views: such parallel allusions to the 'joy of *Nibbāna*' are comparatively scarce in the early Buddhist suttas (which inform the Theravādin tradition), while the word 'identify' always appears in prohibitory contexts, associated with unwholesome (*akusala*) tendrils of the ego. It is well known that the Buddha cautioned against 'eternalism' as a position to be avoided. In short, the positive, celebratory, 'forever' mood of the Upaniṣadic teachings seems to clash with the more conservatively styled message of the Buddha, which urges one to abandon anything liable to cause attachment (hence suffering), including ideas about the eternity and bliss of *Ātman*. For those already committed to the positive doctrine of *anattā*, Śaṅkara's allusion to our real nature as being of eternal happiness and peace will especially appear to mask a reluctance to face up to cold hard facts of the truth; that we are nothing but suffering, perishable *khandhas*.

We will for now put aside concerns stemming from the positive doctrine of *anattā*, since arguments for its negative counterpart, which motivate the positive doctrine, are currently being considered: it will not do to pre-judge the issue. Any remaining concerns will be addressed in a later section. It will now be argued that when the context of Śaṅkara's teachings is better understood, the grounds for positing a meta-physical rather than a methodological divide between Advaita Vedānta and Buddhism, become yet shakier.

## Not ‘Eternalism’

Let us first consider the charge of ‘eternalism’. It was suggested earlier that the Buddha sought to dispel Upaniṣadic concepts of *Ātman* being endorsed by unenlightened seekers at his time: these would have included, at the very least, concepts that denoted the literal existence of an eternal soul-like *Ātman*. We have seen evidence that Śāṅkara also rejected soul-theories of *Ātman*, but Śāṅkara went further than this, maintaining that the *Ātman* is ‘“neither gross nor subtle, neither short nor tall”, that it is self-existent, free as the sky, [and above all] beyond the grasp of thought’ [15]. Deutsch points to another passage by Śāṅkara:

Bāṣkali asked Bāhva three times about the nature of Brahman: the latter remained silent all the time, but finally replied: I teach you, but you understand not: silence is the *Ātman*.

‘... [W]here pure silence reigns’, summarises Deutsch, ‘all names are rejected’ [16]. Śāṅkara taught that pure *Ātman*, identical to *Brahman*, transcends any multiplicity that follows from the subject/object distinction, for *Ātman* is the unity that underlies that distinction. The real nature of *Ātman* is thus beyond Appearance and all it entails, including names and concepts, which pre-suppose a separate, divided reality. Names and concepts that are attributed to *Ātman* or *Brahman* (‘eternal’, ‘bliss’, ‘Self’ ‘consciousness’) with their associated mental images, are upon enlightenment to be superseded – in Deutsch’s terms, axio-noetically ‘subrated’ – through direct realisation of the supreme non-dual Identity between *Ātman* and *Brahman* [17]. Both Lindtner and Werner find support for this in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, Lindtner concluding that ‘*ātman* is not “something” that can be conceived and described, but it certainly can be “seen in itself”’ [18]. Werner writes: ‘The nature of *ātman/brahman* is proclaimed to be ‘ungraspable’ (*agrhya*) on the phenomenal level, and nothing can be predicated about it (*neti neti*; BU 3,9,26)’ [19]. Pure *Ātman* can thus be experienced, but not conceptualised.

Once this subtle but crucial point is acknowledged, it becomes plain that in context of the Advaitic tradition, the notion of *Ātman*, with its Identity to *Brahman*, is not to be literally understood as a brand of eternalism. *Ātman* is ultimately beyond all ‘isms’. ‘Isms’ belong to the perspective of Appearance, signifying concepts and views at the mercy of analytic debate. The Buddha famously sought to steer his disciples away from a ‘fetter of views’ concerning the self, which included misguided ‘eternalist’ notions of *Ātman* – ironically, of the sort being perpetuated today [20]. It is rarely countenanced by these Buddhist scholars that Śāṅkara, in keeping with his reading of the Upaniṣads and his own experience of the Ultimate (for he was widely regarded as Enlightened) would have also rejected ‘eternalism’.

Given that *Ātman* cannot be literally described, nor properly imagined by non-enlightened spiritual seekers, we may wonder why Śāṅkara used the words that he did – and with such enthusiasm. Deutsch has suggested, in line with Śāṅkara, that they function pragmatically to orient the mind towards the Real, by ‘affirming essential qualities that are really only denials of their opposites’. To say that ‘*Brahman* is eternal’ negates the idea that *Brahman* is non-eternal; to say that ‘*Brahman* is bliss’ negates the quality of non-bliss, and so on. Thus without limiting *Ātman* or *Brahman* by positive description, the ‘*via negativa*’ strategy uses solid terms of the familiar to help propel the mind to unfamiliar space [21].

### **‘Identify with Brahman’: A Practical Strategy?**

As well as this, I would suggest that the positive terms for *Ātman* have a more affirmative function, which sheds light upon the context in which Śaṅkara urged seekers to ‘identify with Brahman’. While the terms do not depict *Ātman* in its pure, uncovered form, they do depict *Ātman* as conceived and experienced through the lighter, subratable sheaths of *māyā* (*sattva*), as brightness of the sun is perceived through a covering of cloud (to borrow Śaṅkara’s imagery). The reported experiences include spiritual joy, a luminous and immutable sense of ‘witness-consciousness’ (from which springs the idea of eternalism), and discerning wisdom that comes with seeing through, and thus detaching from, the layerings of *māyā*. Śaṅkara’s injunction to ‘identify with Brahman’, can thus be viewed as an invitation to focus upon, and thereby uncover those intrinsic elements of our nature that are closer to *Ātman*, even while clouded into separate ‘categories’. The idea is that the more these *sattvic* qualities are cultivated, through being kept the focus of attention, the lighter the coverings of *māyā* will become. Eventually, like sun breaking through clouds, *māyā* (*sattva*) will disappear altogether, revealing an infinite radiance that was there all along. If there is indeed an ultimate source to these *sattvic* qualities (an assumption that will be addressed in a later section) then it becomes clear that Śaṅkara’s instruction to ‘identify with Brahman’ is motivated not by wishful thinking or egoistic tendencies, but by a quest for the truth – to realise that which we already are. What can be questioned is whether his *method*, to ‘focus on the light’ is always effective; and this is what I believe the Buddha, in the context of his time, was challenging.

There are perils associated with the Advaitic method: just as a bright cloud can be mistaken for the sun, it is possible, without proper guidance, to become spiritually stagnant; confusing a thought or concept about *Ātman* for a direct experience of *Ātman*; or a direct experience of *māyā*-filtered *Ātman* with an experience of pure *Ātman*. There is a danger of veering off the spiritual Path altogether, becoming lost in a ‘jungle’ of thought about *Ātman*, which is no substitute for direct experience. Lindtner has noted that the word ‘*Brahman*’ was much abused in the days of the Buddha [22]. Perhaps it was to caution against this, and the suffering it could generate, that the Buddha chose to shake off the dust, and speak of identification as something to be avoided. It is notable that whenever the Buddha did warn against identification, it was invariably in connection with the conditioned *khandhas* – including attachment to mental formations (views) depicting concepts of *Ātman* and *Brahman*. As we shall see, Śaṅkara’s goal was also to ultimately dis-identify with elements of conditioned existence – although notions of *Ātman* were employed along the way. To my knowledge, there are no suttas which suggest that the Buddha cautioned against the ultimate Identity of one’s unconditioned *Ātman* with *Brahman*: on this, and other metaphysical matters, he remained silent [23]. This leaves little canonical evidence for a metaphysical disagreement about the ultimate implications of ‘identifying with *Brahman*’. The difference may be only strategic.

### **A Ultimate Similarity in Reported Goals of Advaita Vedanta and Buddhism**

Śaṅkara regarded affirmations about *Ātman* and *Brahman* as helping rather than hindering the mind along its Path; in this strategic way at least, differing from the type of Path set out by the Buddha. But it is sometimes overlooked that Śaṅkara’s strategy was two-pronged. As well as encouraging one to ‘identify with *Brahman*’ he was no less

forceful than the Buddha in urging seekers to overcome attachment to increasingly subtle layers of conditioned existence:

Stop identifying yourself with this corruptible physical body, born of the flesh of father and mother. Regard it as impure, as though it were an outcast ... . Conquer this enemy, the ego. Give it no opportunity by letting your thoughts dwell upon sense-objects. Such thoughts give it life, as water gives life to a parched citron-tree ... *sattwa* is overcome when the pure *Ātman* shines. Therefore be established in *sattwa* and strive to destroy this illusion [24].

It is no small matter that Śāṅkara's following description of the goal of spiritual progress, as ultimate freedom from influences of the ego and the craving it creates, converges with what the Buddha taught:

Abandon, also, the idea that you are the doer of actions or the thinker of thoughts. These belong to the ego, the subtle covering ... . Cease to find fulfilment of your cravings in the objective world, and you will stop dwelling on sense-objects. Stop dwelling on sense-objects, and your craving will be destroyed. When all craving has disappeared, that is liberation [25].

### Rejecting the Negative Doctrine of *Anattā*

The negative doctrine of *anattā* depicts the Buddha as having rejected the Upaniṣadic notion of *Ātman*, in a way that implies a systematic metaphysical difference between Buddhism and Hinduism. It has been argued that attempts made by Buddhist scholars to draw this contrast are founded upon stereotypes that misrepresent at least one major school of Hindu thought: Advaita Vedānta. First, the Upaniṣadic notion of *Ātman* is not understood by Advaita's chief proponent, Śāṅkara, to be a substantial soul (touted as a major point of contrast with Buddhism). Like the Buddha, Śāṅkara rejected soul-theories of *Ātman*. Second, Śāṅkara was not, as has been implied by various authors, motivated by self-preservation: quite the opposite. The quest to realise the one *Ātman* in all beings is a quest to destroy individual identity. Third, Śāṅkara's notion of *Ātman* is not a brand of 'eternalism': like the Buddha, he held that no 'isms', belonging to Appearance, can capture Ultimate Reality. Fourth, if there is an ultimate source to the *sattvic* qualities, then Śāṅkara's injunction to 'identify with Brahman' is best viewed as a practical strategy, motivated by truth-seeking rather than by egoistic tendencies or wishful thinking. Fifth, the call to 'identify with Brahman' clashes with Buddhist suttas in what appears to be method, not metaphysics. Whenever the Buddha spoke against identification, it was in context of the conditioned *khandhas*, not the unconditioned *Ātman* beyond name and concept. Sixth, and finally, Śāṅkara, like the Buddha, urged that the ultimate goal of spiritual progress is to let go of *all* ego-driven attachment to layerings of *māyā*, or conditioned existence. This fundamental similarity between the reported spiritual goals of Buddhism and Advaita Vedānta cannot reasonably be ignored – although it has been by many.

While the Buddha's teachings might so far appear to be metaphysically compatible with the teachings of Śāṅkara, it remains to be seen whether they are in fact compatible. This partly hinges upon whether the Buddha endorsed the positive doctrine of *anattā*.

### The Positive Doctrine of *Anattā*

The Buddha chose not to teach about *Ātman*, but could his teachings have *implied* a notion of *Ātman*? If we take as our guide the following passages, which represent the dominant view, then there are no such implications:

The whole human personality, according to Buddhism, is nothing more than the effectively functional psycho-physical organism. The whole endeavour of the Buddha and Buddhism is to make one realise one's own personality and existence in terms of these unenduring and dependently arisen factors ... [26].

Buddhist thought presents these five aggregates as an exhaustive analysis of the individual. They are the world for any given being – there is nothing else besides [27]

What we call a 'being', or an 'individual', or 'I', is only a 'convenient name or a label given to the combination of these five groups ... These five aggregates together ... are *dukkha* itself (*samkhāra-dukkha*) [28]

Therefore, he [the Buddha] undertook the task of redefining the concept of man. According to him, this was merely a 'bundle of perceptions' (*saṅkhārapuñja*) or a group of aggregates (*khandha*), not discrete and discontinuous, but connected and continuous by way of causality, a 'bundle' (*kāya*) which, for the sake of convenience, is designated by such names as *Sāriputa* and *Moggallāna* [29].

### The Problem of *Parinibbāna*

The Buddha's Path to liberation is one that urges the spiritual seeker to know perfectly the nature of *conditioned* existence (*anicca, dukkha, anattā*) and in this way, overcome suffering and bondage that follows from ignorance of conditioned existence:

Both formerly and now, *Anurādha*, it is only stress (suffering) that I describe, and the stopping of stress. (*Samyutta Nikāya*, XXII.86)

The Buddha did not choose to teach about what lies beyond suffering. On several occasions, he indicated that words and concepts, inherently suited to describing conditioned existence, can serve to confuse matters if applied to the wrong sphere:

Upasīva:

He who has reached the end:

Does he not exist,  
or is he for eternity free from affliction?

Please, sage, declare this to me

as this phenomenon has been known by you.

The Buddha:

One who has reached the end has no criterion  
by which anyone would say that –  
for him it doesn't exist.



When all phenomena are done away with  
 All means of speaking are done away with as well. (*Sutta Nipāta*, V.6)

Advocates of the positive doctrine seem to infer that because the Buddha focused his teachings on conditioned, phenomenal existence, then he meant to say that conditioned phenomenal existence exhausts our reality of person. Similarly, they seem to infer that because *Nibbāna* cannot be described, then the term must depict nothing at all, save those *khandhas* which lack elements of craving and ignorance. The death of an Arahant (by which he passes into *Parinibbāna*), must on this view, logically entail his absolute extinction, since the fuel of desire for further existence, in the form of *khandhas*, has burnt up. It is therefore interesting that several advocates of the positive doctrine, such as Rahula, stop short of admitting to this last point [30]. This is due to the Buddha's own warnings against annihilationism: nowhere does he state that *Parinibbāna* amounts to the Tathāgata absolute extinction (as above, he deems it beyond words). In the *Yamaka Sutta* of the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (XXII.85) such a view is actually branded an 'evil supposition'. On pain of attributing logical consistency to the Buddha, I take this as preliminary evidence that the Buddha did not advocate the positive doctrine of *anattā*.

### Conditioned *Khandas*: Not Sufficient to Explain *Nibbāna*

The positive doctrine goes with regarding *Nibbāna* solely in those '*neti neti*' terms that were part of the Buddha's teachings on non-attachment, aiming at the complete cessation of craving that is the *kammic* seed of future *khandhas*. However, the cessation of craving does not imply the cessation of all that is real. Authors such as Thanissaro Bhikkhu, Lindtner and Werner have gathered enough canonical evidence to expose the mistake of this austere position: there are also suttas where the Buddha speaks of *Nibbāna*, or the goal of spiritual progress, in affirmative terms [31]. In context of the Buddha's teachings, these suttas are not of course intended as literal descriptions of *Nibbāna*. My guess is that they are there to preserve a middle path, implicitly warning seekers and scholars against the type of error that may veer one into annihilationist camps – home to the positive doctrine of *anattā*. In order to keep their positions secure, residents of this camp would have to ignore, or underplay the affirmative suttas. It is therefore not surprising to see that reference to these suttas is scarce, the positive doctrine being so popular. As it turns out, it is also impossible (I shall argue) to explain the attainment of *Nibbāna* in even the attenuated sense (as cessation of suffering) if we are viewed as no more than a temporary arrangement of the five conditioned *khandhas*.

In his book *The Mind Like Fire Unbound*, Thanissaro Bhikkhu presents a careful, sustained argument, backed by canonical evidence, to the effect that *Nibbāna* (and *Parinibbāna*) is not blank nothingness [32]. Rather than repeating these arguments at length (on which it is best to consult his book) I will present a couple of the suttas that Thanissaro points out in support of his main suggestion. In the *Asaṃkhata-saṃyutta* of the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (XLIII.1–44), Thanissaro notes that the term '*Nibbāna*' is only one word amongst many used by the Buddha to depict the goal of spiritual progress:

The unfashioned, the end,  
 the effluent-less, the true, the beyond,  
 the subtle, the very-hard-to-see,  
 the ageless, permanence, the undecaying,  
 the featureless, non-differentiation,  
 peace, the deathless,

the exquisite, bliss, solace,  
 the exhaustion of craving,  
 the wonderful, the marvellous,  
 the secure, security,  
 nibbāna,  
 the unafflicted, the passionless, the pure,  
 release, non-attachment,  
 the island, shelter, harbor, refuge,  
 the ultimate.

Were this verse to appear in Śaṅkara, most of the terms would be properly regarded as metaphorical depictions of *Ātman* and *Brahman*: similarly, the terms are not, as we have mentioned, to be taken as literal descriptions of the *Nibbānic* state. Yet, their combined impression indicates, as it would in the Upaniṣads, that the goal of spiritual progress is (somehow) actively wonderful, indeed the best possible ‘state’ – and so more than just a passive vacuum left in the absence of craving [33]! This flies in the face of that Theravādin tendency, noted by Werner, to treat the ultimate level of spiritual progress as if it were a coma – a blank state of nothingness [34]. Advocates of the positive doctrine who *do* go so far as to admit that *Nibbāna* involves ‘perfect happiness’, such as Kalupahana, characterise this ‘*parama sukha*’ as the mere cessation of craving, suffering and defilements [35]. But while the cessation of suffering (etc.) necessarily precedes *Nibbānic* ‘happiness’, it does not sufficiently explain the affirmative flavour. Being unconditioned by *khandhas* – no configuration of *khandhas* can affect it – *Nibbānic* ‘happiness’ cannot be solely accounted for in *terms* of the *khandhas*, whether by way of positive description or negative cessation and yet the above sutta compels one to regard *Nibbānic* ‘happiness’ as more than a mere blank. When this is considered alongside the fact that such *parama sukha* is unconditioned, independent of the *khandhas*, and potentially attainable by every person, it becomes very difficult to maintain that our nature – or the nature of an *Arahant* – consists of *only* the conditioned *khandhas*.

‘Consciousness’ or ‘awareness’ are terms used to convey *Ātman* in the Upaniṣadic tradition. In Buddhist literature, the word ‘consciousness’ is associated with those impermanent, object-oriented types of consciousness which form part of the *khandhas*. Advocates of the positive doctrine insist that these are the only types of consciousness the Buddha would admit to. However, Thanissaro has drawn attention to a number of suttas which spell trouble for this view [36]. Among them is the *Bāhuna Sutta* of the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (X.81) which speaks of an ‘awareness’ (or ‘mind’, in another translation) that is ‘released’ from the cycle of conditioned existence – thereby connecting with the Tathāgata’s supreme wisdom (*paññā*) that understands conditioned existence. This ‘awareness’ or ‘mind’ (which knows *dukkha*) is clearly not afflicted with *dukkha* – unlike consciousness of the conditioned *khandhas*:

Freed, dissociated, & released from ten things, the Tathāgata dwells with unrestricted awareness, Bāhuna. Which ten? Freed, dissociated, & released from form ... feeling ... perception ... processes ... consciousness ... birth ... aging ... death ... stress ... defilement, he dwells with unrestricted awareness. Just as a red, blue, or white lotus born in the water and growing in the water, rises up above the water and stands with no water adhering to it, in the same way the Tathāgata – freed, dissociated, & released from these ten things – dwells with unrestricted awareness [37].

Lindtner has already noted, in a bracketed aside, that '[knowing what's true or false] is not something any of the *skhandhas* can do!'<sup>[38]</sup> His observation, although simple, strikes through the heart of the positive doctrine. For how can that aspect of mind which completely knows *dukkha*, and is thus beyond *dukkha*, still be *dukkha*? In short, the status of the *Tathāgata* or *Arahant*, as Werner urges, should not continue to be ignored in the Theravadin tradition [39]. By transcendental necessity, we are compelled to accept that there is more to their reality than the conditioned *khandhas*, whose nature is *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā*. A further principle is needed to account for what words must inadequately depict as the *Arahant's* 'supreme wisdom', 'unrestricted awareness' and 'perfect happiness'. That further principle, Lindtner has suggested, is *Ātman* [40].

### Conditioned *Khandhas*: Not Sufficient to Attain *Nibbāna*

Even before considering the affirmative suttas, we cannot supply a satisfactory explanation of how one can attain *Nibbāna*, *qua* cessation of suffering, if that person is exhaustively analysed as five conditioned *khandhas* within *saṃsāra*, the cycle of dependent origination. There is a point in the cycle, between *kammically* neutral sensations and *kammically* active craving, where despite the influence of past *kamma*, there is always the option to lessen that craving. This raises the natural question: from where does this impetus arise; the urge for wholesome (*kusala*) acts over unwholesome (*akusala*) acts? From what source do the powerful states of mindfulness, joy and wisdom spring, when the Noble Eightfold Path is followed to the end of suffering? Advocates of the positive doctrine, such as Gethin and Rahula, will insist that this all comes from within the cycle itself [41]. Just as the *khandhas* arise, says Rahula, they contain the seed for their own cessation. Thus *dukkha* contains the seed for its own cessation, and hence, so too does the entire wheel of dependent origination. 'Thirst' [which leads to arising of *dukkha*] and wisdom [which leads to cessation of *dukkha*] are both within the Five Aggregates' states Rahula [42].

Rahula's approach appears to confuse levels of explanation. The capacity for the cessation of each individual *khandha* is not by itself enough to explain the cessation of higher-level patterns, importantly, the cycle of *saṃsāra*. The Buddha has stated that as long as ignorance and craving are present, the cycle of suffering will never cease, but will continue on indefinitely. It is the reversal of this overall pattern – conditioned by countless lifetimes of defilement – that begs to be explained. Just as the perpetuation of suffering is explained by the forces of ignorance and craving, the cessation of ignorance and craving must be explained with reference to counter-forces that are yet more powerful. These counter-forces are expressed through virtuous conduct (*sīla*), concentrated, sustained awareness (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*), which Gethin attributes to a 'wholesome ... current' within the mind [43]. It will not do, however, to characterise the potency of this 'current' as the mere diminishing of ignorance and craving, any more than it will do to explain *Nibbānic* 'happiness' as the mere absence of suffering. Nor will it do to locate its sole origin within the conditioned *khandhas*, even if such qualities are played out through the *khandhas*, along the Eightfold Path. For when *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā* are cultivated to their purest form, we see there is a perfect understanding of *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā*, hence a permanent end to the whole cycle of suffering. The *raison d'être* of such qualities cannot therefore issue from that which merely is *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā*, subject to the law of dependent arising.

## An Unconditioned Element in Human Nature

The *Bāhuma* sutta (above) hints at a transcendental, but underlying source for *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā*; that ‘unrestricted awareness’ or ‘mind’ with no barriers, which is ‘freed, dissociated and released from these ten things’, the ten things pertaining to dependent origination. The idea that the mind is ‘released’ suggests that the element of *Nibbāna* is not confined to that beyond conditioned existence, as a sheer end-point, but is inherent to our nature. This would properly explain one’s impetus to follow the Noble Eightfold Path, with its culmination in *Nibbāna*. For even while covered by ignorance and *kammic* contaminants, a bedrock of the unconditioned would account for insight over ignorance, the ability to stay constantly mindful, and the abundant joy. When freed from fetters of ignorance and craving, this Pathfinding, ultimately indescribable part of our nature will be what is liberated – in accordance with the above sutta. If on the other hand we consider our nature (when unenlightened) to be only the conditioned *khandhas*, arising and passing away, then it is difficult to explain our capacity to attain *Nibbāna* – not only for reasons cited above. Since the element of *Nibbāna* is not subject to arising or passing away, it cannot be a new condition that arises upon the cessation of ignorance. It seems that the dissolution of ignorance must uncover that which is ever-present to our nature. In Advaita Vedānta, it is the ultimate source to the *sattvic* qualities.

### What if *Samsāra* is *Nibbāna*?

Lindtner has suggested (in line with some Mahāyāna teachings) that the Buddha implied an ultimate identity between *Nibbāna* and *samsāra* [44]. It might be objected that if we accept this Buddhist equivalent to the *Ātman-Brahman* identity (if it is indeed an equivalent), then we will be forced to accept also that *samsāra* and the *khandhas* are after all the whole of human reality. Could it be that by a curious twist of irony, the positive doctrine of *anattā* is supported by a parallel with Advaita Vedānta? If so, it is a very different doctrine to that which has so far been presented. The central line of the no-*Ātman* version is that the conditioned *khandhas*, *qua dukkha*, *anicca*, *anattā*, exhaust the scope of human reality. But if the *khandhas* are ultimately identical with the principle of *Nibbāna*, then, for reasons that have been outlined, we will be compelled to say that there is more to human reality than the *khandhas*, *qua anicca*, *anattā*, *dukkha*. The *khandhas qua* differentiated, will not be the end of the story, just as the psycho-physical sheaths of *māyā*, *qua* differentiated, are not the end of the Vedāntic story. In either tradition, the end of the story is understood only through the direct experience of Enlightenment.

### Rejecting no-*Ātman* Theories of *Anattā*

Enough has been said to provide solid evidence against the positive doctrine of *anattā*. Through underplaying those ‘affirmative’ suttas which stand Buddhism uncomfortably close to Vedānta, and, in keeping with their theory, advocates of this doctrine are unable to account for the reality of the *Arahant*, or the possibility of attaining *Nibbāna*. In the previous section it was argued that the grounds for holding a negative doctrine of *anatta* are likewise untenable. The rejection of these no-*Ātman* theories of *anattā* greatly undermines the quest to draw an easy metaphysical contrast between Buddhism and Hinduism.

### **Anattā as a Practical Strategy**

Having rejected no-Ātman theories of *anattā*, it would be imprudent to finish before indicating how we *are* to best understand the Buddha's teachings on *anattā*. Once again, Thanissaro Bhikkhu proves insightful. He has suggested that the Buddha did not teach *anattā* as a metaphysical assertion, but as a 'strategy for gaining release from suffering' [45]. Regarding *anattā* as a practical strategy immediately harmonises with the Buddha's disinclination to dwell upon matters metaphysical. It also, as we shall see, preserves the centrality of *anattā* to the heart of the Buddha's teachings:

Both formerly and now, Anurādhā, it is only stress (suffering) that I describe, and the stopping of stress. (*Samyutta Nikāya*, XXII.86)

What follows is a brief interpretation of the Buddha's central teachings, by which it seems natural to construe *anattā* as a practical strategy. After presenting this, it shall be seen how such a reading fits with some of the well-known early suttas.

'If one uses the concept of not-self [rather than *no*-self] to dis-identify oneself from all phenomena, one goes beyond the reach of all suffering and stress', writes Thanissaro [46]. That beyond suffering is not, as we have seen, the Buddha's emphasis of teaching (although we have managed to glean that it is far from annihilation). The emphasis is rather upon what we, as non-liberated beings, can begin to know right here and now – the nature of conditioned existence. Our plight, on this reading, is that we perceive the conditioned world with a deeply rooted bias. We falsely project, both emotionally and intellectually, ideas of a 'self' *qua* I-permanent-non-suffering, upon what is inherently *not*-self, the *khandhas*. This does not mean that we always perceive things as indestructible: rather we view them as having more permanence and substantiality and selfhood than they actually have – or rather, don't have. Misperceiving the true nature of conditioned things generates false expectations and desires as to how they will behave, and on those inevitable occasions when desires are frustrated, there is suffering.

This false projection is manifested through one's identifying with and becoming attached to elements of conditioned existence. From here spring all notions of 'I-the-doer', 'I am this', 'me' and 'mine', and with this, a distorted view of reality. For example, behind identifying with this body as 'me' lurks a vested interest that 'I' shall always remain healthy; a desire that betrays a deep non-acceptance of the body's impermanent state. Physical suffering cannot be avoided, and a non-acceptance of its inevitability will generate a greater degree of mental suffering when illness strikes. By contrast it is reported that the Arahant, having thoroughly accepted the body's nature as *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā*, suffers no mental pain, even when racked with physical pain.

The Buddha urges one to end suffering by removing those aforementioned biases from the mind. In this context, the suttas on *anattā* function as practical imperatives, discouraging the mind from projecting ideas of selfhood, permanence and non-suffering onto what is inherently non-self, impermanent and suffering, *viz.* the *khandhas*. This amounts to discouraging all tendencies to grasp and identify with the *khandhas*, hence all tendencies towards: 'I am this', 'this is me' and 'this is mine'. Do the Buddhist texts support such an interpretation? It will be instructive to begin with a passage from the *Anattā-lakkhana sutta* (of the *Samyutta Nikāya*, XXII.59) that has been cited by Gethin as an argument for the denial of Ātman, and hence, an argument for the negative doctrine of *anattā*: [47]

'What do you think, monks? Are body ... feeling ... recognition ... volitions ... conscious awareness permanent or impermanent?'

‘Impermanent, lord.’

‘But is something that is impermanent painful or unpainful?’

‘Painful, lord.’

‘But is it fitting to regard something that is painful, whose nature it is to change as “this is mine, I am this, this is my self”?’

‘Certainly not, lord.’

‘Therefore, monks, all body ... feeling ... recognitions ... volitions ... conscious awareness whatsoever, whether past, present or future, whether gross or subtle, inferior or refined, far or near, should be seen by means of clear understanding as it really is, as ‘this is not mine, I am not this, this is not my self’.’

*Contra* Gethin (and Steven Collins, to whom he attributes the argument), the above sutta holds no implications for the denial of a self (unless the positive anatta doctrine is already pre-supposed!). The Buddha is not aiming to draw an ontological conclusion. The Buddha is only urging that the *khandhas*, by virtue of their impermanent, painful nature are not worthy of being regarded as a self, and are hence unworthy of attitudes pertaining to ‘I’ and ‘mine’. Through such reflections, he encourages his seekers to regard the *khandhas* in their true light. This sounds very much like an application of the practical strategy, the imperative tone implying that the *khandhas* are (mis)judged by non-arahants to be less painful and impermanent than they really are. Gethin has correctly observed that the above exchange ‘occurs frequently in the earliest Buddhist texts’ [48]. Contrary to his desired conclusion, this provides strong canonical evidence for viewing *anattā* as primarily a practical strategy rather than a metaphysical doctrine.

The pragmatic interpretation finds further support in this following extract from the *Gaddula Sutta* (*Saṃyutta Nikāya*, XXII99) whose theme has also frequented early Buddhist texts. Once again it is emphasised that the end to suffering is through dis-identifying with the *khandhas*:

But a well-instructed, disciple of the noble ones – is well-versed & disciplined in their Dhamma – doesn’t assume [*khandhas* (form, feeling, perception, mental formations, consciousness)] to be the self, or the self as possessing [*khandhas*], or [*khandhas*] as in the self, or the self as in [*khandhas*].

He doesn’t run around or circle around that very form ... that very feeling ... that very perception ... those very fabrications ... that very consciousness. He is set loose from form, set loose from feeling ... from perception ... from fabrications ... set loose from consciousness. He is set loose from birth, aging, & death; from sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses, & despairs. He is set loose, I tell you, from suffering & stress.

Consider, finally, the conclusion of this *sutta* (*Saṃyutta Nikāya*, XXXV.205):

In the same way, a monk investigates form, however far form may go. He surveys feeling ... perception ... fabrications ... consciousness, however far consciousness may go. As he is investigating form ... feeling ... perception ... fabrications ... consciousness, however far consciousness may go, any thoughts of ‘me’ or ‘mine’ or ‘I am’ do not occur to him.

In none of these Buddhist suttas is there support for no-*Ātman* theories of *anattā*. The message is simply to cease regarding the *khandhas* in those terms by which the notion of *Ātman* has, itself, been so easily misconstrued. As we have seen, detaching oneself

from the phenomenal entrails of psycho-physical existence was also a central part of Śāṅkara's strategy. There is hence nothing in these suttas that Śāṅkara, the chief proponent of Advaita Vedānta, would have disagreed with.<sup>49</sup>

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## NOTES

- [1] LINDTNER, CHRISTIAN (1999) From *Brahmanism* to Buddhism, *Asian Philosophy*, 9(1), pp. 5–37.
- WERNER, KAREL (1996) Indian conceptions of human personality, *Asian Philosophy*, 6(2), p. 104.
- [2] THANISSARO, BHIKKHU (1993) The Not-Self Strategy, on website <http://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/modern/thanissaro/notself.html>, pp. 1–8. Unless stated otherwise, all citations from Buddhist suttas that appear in this paper are translated by Thanissaro, Bhikkhu.
- [3] PRASAD, H.S. (2000) Dreamless sleep and soul: a controversy between Vedānta and Buddhism, *Asian Philosophy*, 10(1), pp. 61–73.
- [4] KALUPAHANA, DAVID J. (1976) *Buddhist Philosophy: A Historical Analysis* (Hawaii, University of Hawaii Press), pp. 10 and 38–39.
- [5] PRASAD, op. cit., note 3, pp. 68 and 69. For a very strong expression of the negative doctrine, see RAHULA, SRI WALPOLA (1958) *What the Buddha Taught* (Hong Kong, Buddhist Library of China), p. 51.
- [6] OSBORNE, RICHARD & VAN LOON, BORIN (1997) *Introducing Eastern Philosophy* (Cambridge, Icon Books), p. 83.
- [7] LINDTNER, op. cit., note 1, p. 17, points out that the term 'Brahman' was much abused at the time of the Buddha.
- [8] ŚĀṅKARA (1968) in PRABHAVANANDA, SWAMI & ISHERWOOD, CHRISTOPHER (Trans.) *Śāṅkara's Crest-Jewel of Discrimination* (California, Vedanta Press). DEUTSCH, ELIOT (1969) *Advaita Vedānta: A Philosophical Reconstruction* (Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press).
- [9] WERNER, op. cit., note 1, pp. 94 and 104.
- [10] ŚĀṅKARA, op. cit., note 8, pp. 76, 77 and 70.
- [11] From DEUTSCH, op. cit., note 8, pp. 27–65.
- [12] SĀṅKARA, op. cit., note 8, pp. 90–91.
- [13] *ibid.*, p. 75.
- [14] *ibid.*, p. 96.
- [15] *ibid.*, p. 87.
- [16] DEUTSCH, op. cit., note 8, p. 47. Śāṅkara's passage, cited in DEUTSCH, op. cit., p. 47, is from Śāṅkara's *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya*, III, 2, 17.
- [17] See DEUTSCH op. cit., note 8, pp. 15–26, chapter on subration.
- [18] LINDTNER, op. cit., note 1, p. 27.
- [19] WERNER, op. cit., note 1, p. 96.
- [20] In the *Majjhima Nikāya* 2, translated by THANISSARO, BHIKKHU, op. cit., note 2, p. 5.
- [21] DEUTSCH, op. cit., note 1, p. 11.
- [22] LINDTNER, op. cit., note 1, p. 17.
- [23] In support of this point, LINDTNER, *ibid.*, p. 19, maintains that the Buddha denied an *Ātman* only in connection with the *khandhas*, and not in the sense of *Brahman*.
- [24] ŚĀṅKARA, op. cit., note 8, pp. 94, 98 and 92.
- [25] ŚĀṅKARA, op. cit., note 8 pp. 96 and 99.
- [26] PRASAD, op. cit., note 3, p. 69.
- [27] GETHIN, RUPERT (1998) *The Foundations of Buddhism* (Oxford, Oxford University Press), p. 136.
- [28] RAHULA, SRI WALPOLA, op. cit., note 5, pp. 25 and 26.
- [29] KALUPAHANA, op. cit., note 4, p. 39. For another recent expression of the positive *anattā* doctrine, see SIDERITS, MARK (1997) Buddhist reductionism, *Philosophy East and West*, p. 466.
- [30] RAHULA, op. cit., note 5, p. 41.
- [31] Although excerpts shall be mainly drawn from THANISSARO, BHIKKHU (1993) *The Mind Like Fire Unbound*, located on the website <http://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/modern/likefire/index.html>.
- [32] *ibid.*

- [33] In a footnote, RAHULA op. cit., note 5, p. 36, also acknowledges the ‘positive’ flavour of these ‘32 synonyms for *Nibbāna*’, some of which he lists (e.g. ‘Auspicious’, ‘Good’, ‘Purity’, ‘Peace’ ‘Refuge’). He does not, however, acknowledge the trouble that this may cause for consistency of his positive anatta doctrine.
- [34] WERNER, op. cit., note 1, p. 104, maintains that the notion of the Tathāgata should be construed as having the ‘positive’ status of that which is unexplored and unfathomable, thus befitting to the Buddha’s analogy: ‘*deep, immeasurable, hard to fathom like the great ocean*’ (*Majjhima Nikāya*, 72).
- [35] KALUPAHANA, op. cit., note 4, pp. 81–82.
- [36] Other affirmative suttas on *Nibbana* or the liberation of ‘awareness’ can be found in THANISSARO, op. cit., note 31, and LINDTNER, op. cit., note 1.
- [37] A translation that offers this variant (but is otherwise very similar): ‘the Tathāgata dwells with a mind whose barriers are broken down’ is in WOODWARD, F.L. (1972) *The Book of the Gradual Sayings (Āṅguttara-Nikāya)*, Vol. V (London, Luza), p. 103, issued by the Pāli Text Society.
- [38] LINDTNER, op. cit., note 1, p. 28.
- [39] WERNER, op. cit., note 1, p. 104.
- [40] LINDTNER, op. cit., note 1, p. 28, bases this supposition upon verses from the *Āṅguttara-Nikāya* I, including: ‘*attā te purisa jānāti saccam vā yadi vā musā*’.
- [41] GETHIN, op. cit., note 27, pp. 156–159; RAHULA, op. cit., note 5, pp. 31–32, 42 and 53–54.
- [42] RAHULA, op. cit., note 5, p. 42.
- [43] GETHIN, op. cit., note 27, pp. 157–158.
- [44] LINDTNER, op. cit., note 1, pp. 20–26.
- [45] THANISSARO, op. cit., note 2, p. 1.
- [46] *ibid.*
- [47] GETHIN, op. cit., note 27, pp. 136–137. The sutta is cited as it appears in Gethin (not translated by Thanissaro).
- [48] *ibid.*, p. 137. Similar themes are repeated in suttas throughout the *Khandha Vagga (Samyuttas, XXII–XXXIV)*.
- [49] The author would like to thank Sonia Albahari, Michael Levine, John Baker and Speranza Dolgetta who, in various ways, helped this paper to be written.