

The Buddha's Teaching of Egolessness

Anattaa

by

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An Essay with Extracts from the Sa.myutta-Nikaya

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Egolessness: Anattaa

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

Therefore, it is said: There are three teachers in the world. The first teacher teaches the existence of an eternal ego-entity outlasting death: that is the eternalist, as for example the Christian. The second teacher teaches a temporary ego-entity which becomes annihilated at death: that is the annihilationist, or materialist. The third teacher teaches neither an eternal, nor a temporary ego-entity: this is the Buddha.

The Buddha teaches that, what we call ego, self, soul, personality etc., are merely conventional terms not referring to any real independent entity. And he teaches that there is only to be found this psycho-physical process of existence changing from moment to moment.

Without understanding the egolessness of existence, it is not possible to gain a real understanding of the Buddha-word; and it is not possible without it, to realize that goal of emancipation and that deliverance of mind proclaimed by the Buddha. This doctrine of egolessness of existence forms the essence of the

Buddha's doctrine of emancipation. Thus, with this doctrine of egolessness, or *anatta*, stands and falls the entire Buddhist structure.

Indeed, for anyone who wishes to engage in the study of the Buddhist scriptures, the best thing would be, from the very start, to get himself acquainted with the two methods in which the Buddha taught the Dhamma to the world.

The first method is the teaching in conventional language.

The second method is the teaching in philosophically correct language.

The first one relates to conventional truth, *vohaara-sacca*, the second, to truth in the ultimate sense, *paramattha-sacca*.

Thus, whenever the Buddha uses such terms as I, person, living being, etc., this is to be understood as conventional speech (*vohaara-vacana*), and hence not correct in the highest sense (*paramattha-vacana*). It is just like speaking of

the "rising" and "setting" of the sun, though we know thoroughly well that this does not correspond to reality. Thus, the Buddha teaches that, in the ultimate sense, amongst all these psycho-physical phenomena of existence, there cannot be found any eternal or even temporary ego-entity, and hence that all existence of whatever kind is something impersonal, or anattaa.

In this connection, I would like to emphasize the fact that this fundamental doctrine of Egolessness and Emptiness is not, as some misinformed Western Buddhists assert, only taught in the southern school of Buddhism, but that even in the so-called Mahayana-schools it forms a most essential part.

Without this teaching of anattaa, or Egolessness, there is no Buddhism; and without having realized the truth of egolessness no real progress is possible on the path to deliverance.

The Buddha is, in every respect, a teacher of the golden mean, both ethically as well as

philosophically. From the ethical standpoint, for example, the Buddha rejects two extremes: the way of sensual pleasures, and the way of self-torture.

From the philosophical standpoint, he rejects eternity, as well as the temporariness of an ego-entity.

Just so, he rejects belief in an absolute identity and an absolute otherness of the various stages of the process of existence.

He rejects the rigid determinism, as well as the belief in chance.

He rejects the belief in absolute existence and absolute non-existence; likewise in freedom of will, as well as in unfreedom of will.

All these things will become clear to one who understands about the egolessness and about the conditioned nature of all phenomena of existence. On the understanding of these two

truths depends the understanding of the underlying and central doctrine of the Buddha.

Hence, the understanding and final penetration of the egolessness and the conditionedness of all phenomena of existence are the necessary foundation to the realization of the noble eightfold path leading to deliverance from all vanity and misery, namely: right understanding, right thought, right speech, right bodily action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration of mind.

And only this golden middle path, based on these two kinds of right understanding, namely of "egolessness and conditionedness," can alleviate and destroy these vain illusions of "Self" and craving, which are the root-causes of all war and bloodshed in the world. But without these two kinds of understanding there is no realization of the holy and peaceful goal pointed out by the Buddha.

There are, however, to be found various would-be Buddhists in the West who are attached to an

imaginary Great Self, and who uphold that the Buddha did in no way reject the view of an "eternal Atma," or soul, behind and independent of the phenomena of existence, and who believe that the Mahayana texts teach such a doctrine. Such assertions, however, do not in the least prove correct, for neither do the Pali texts, nor the later Mahayana texts proclaim an eternal self.

Any reader, who is unbiased in mind and free from prejudices, can never from a study of the Buddhist scriptures come to the conclusion that the Buddha ever taught any such ego-entity within or outside the corporeal, mental and spiritual phenomena of existence. Nowhere in the world can there be found such an entity, as was clearly pointed out by the Buddha.

Regarding the questions whether the Holy One will continue after death, or not continue etc., the Buddha says that all such questions are wrongly put. And why? Because what is called the "Holy One" is here only a conventional term and refers to no real entity while in reality there

is only to be found a process of corporeal, mental and spiritual phenomena.

In another text, therefore, the Buddha asks a monk, whether he considered corporeality as the Holy One, or the feelings, or the perceptions, or the mental formations, or consciousness. Or, whether he believed the Holy One to exist within these five groups of phenomena, or outside thereof. Or whether all the phenomena heaped together were the Holy One. And denying all these questions, the Buddha further said that, even during life-time, the Holy One could not be discovered in reality, and that, therefore, it would be wrong to ask, whether the Holy One will continue or not continue after death, etc.

Thus, no entities are existing in the world, but only ever-changing processes. The Buddha further says: Only because man does not understand corporeality, feeling and the other mental and spiritual phenomena as being impermanent, unsatisfactory and impersonal (*anicca, dukkha, anatta*), and does not understand their conditioned origin, their

extinction, and the path leading to their extinction, he will therefore think that the Holy One does continue, or does not continue after death etc. This, therefore, is the reason that the Buddha did not answer such questions.

According to Buddhism, the whole of existence is comprised in the five groups of phenomena mentioned above, or still more briefly expressed in the three groups: corporeality, consciousness and mental factors. And within these three groups are comprised the only and ultimate things given, though also these again are mere fleeting and evanescent phenomena, flashing-up for a moment, in order to disappear immediately thereafter for ever.

Thus, whenever in the Buddhist scriptures mention is made of I, self, living being, etc., even of the Buddha, these expressions accordingly are used merely as conventional terms, without referring to any real entities.

Therefore, the Buddha has said: "It is impossible, it cannot be that a man with real understanding

should ever consider anything as a real entity." He who does not understand the egolessness of existence, and who is still attached to Ego-illusion, such a one cannot comprehend and understand the four Noble Truths of the Buddha in the true light.

These four truths are :

(1) the truth of the impermanency, unsatisfactoriness and impersonality of existence.

(2) the truth that repeated rebirth and misery are rooted in self-illusion and craving for existence.

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

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

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

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

Mere suffering exists, no sufferer is found.
The deeds are, but no doer of deeds is there.
Nibbaana is, but not the man that enters it.
The path is, but no traveler on it is seen.

Further :

No doer of the deeds is found,
No being that may reap their fruits.

Empty phenomena roll on!
This is the only right view.

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

Extracts from the Sa.myutta-Nikaaya

Dealing with Egolessness

S. V. 10¹

When certain things we find combined,
We speak of 'chariot,' speak of 'car.'
Just so when all Five Groups appear,
We use the designation 'man.'

¹ S. = Sa.myutta-Nikaaya, the "Collection of Grouped Discourses." The first figure refers to the number of the Sa.myutta, the second to the Sutta.

‘Tis naught but woe that does arise,
And that exists and passes off.
Nothing but suffering appears,
Nothing but woe that vanishes.

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

It is said in the *Visuddhimagga* : "Whenever different parts, as axle, wheels, frame, pole, etc., are combined in a certain manner, we use the conventional designation `chariot.'

But if we examine one part after the other, we cannot, in the ultimate sense, discover anything that can be called a chariot.

It is likewise with the five Groups of Existence (*khandha*). If they are present, one uses the conventional designation `being' or `personality,' etc. But if we examine each phenomenon in its

ultimate sense, there is nothing that can form a basis for such conceptions as 'I am' and 'I'. Hence, in the ultimate sense, only mental and physical phenomena exist.

S. XII. 12

"Through sense-impression is conditioned feeling -- thus it is said in the formula of Dependent Origination (*pa.ticca-samuppaada*).

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

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

S. XII. 35

But what are Old Age and Death, and to whom do they belong? I do not teach that there is one thing called Old Age and Death, and that there is someone to whom they belong. Verily if one

holds the view that Life (jiiiva), life principle, soul, etc.) is identical with the Body, in that case there can be no holy life. And if one holds the view that Life is one thing but Body another thing, also in that case a holy life is impossible.

Avoiding both these extremes (i.e. complete identity and complete otherness), the Perfect One has taught the doctrine that lies in the middle, namely: `Through Rebirth conditioned are Old Age and Death; ... through the (karmical) Process of Becoming, Rebirth; ... through Clinging the Process of Becoming ... through Craving, Clinging, ... through Feeling, Craving; ... etc... .

The *Visuddhimagga* quotes:

*"From woe and sorrow springs delusive thinking,
No first beginning of existence can be seen.
No doer can be found, nor one that reaps the
fruits.
And twelve fold empty is the cycle of rebirth,
And steadily the wheel of life rolls on and on."*

Better it would be to consider the body as the 'Ego,' rather than the mind. And why? Because this body may last for 10, 20, 30, 40 or 50 years, even for 100 years and more. But that which is called 'mind, consciousness, thinking,' arises continuously, during day and night, as one thing, and as something different again it vanishes.

Now, here the learned and noble disciple considers thoroughly the Dependent Origination: 'If this is, then that becomes. Through the arising of this, that comes to arise; through the extinction of this, that becomes extinguished, namely: Through Ignorance conditioned arise the Karma-formations; through the Karma-formations, Consciousness (in next life); through Consciousness, Corporeality and Mind; ... Through the extinction of Ignorance the Karma-formations become extinguished; through the extinction of the Karma formations, Consciousness... etc.'

S. XXII. 9-11

Corporeality ... feeling ... perception ... mental formations ... and consciousness are impermanent

... woeful . . . egoless, be they of the past or the future, not to mention the present. Understanding thus, the learned and noble disciple does no longer cling to things past, and he enters the path leading to the turning away therefrom, to detachment and extinction.

S. XXII. 18-20

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

S. XXII. 47

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

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

S. XXII. 81

Now, someone holds the view: This is my 'Ego,' this is the world. After death I shall remain permanent, steady, eternal, and not be subject to any change. This eternity view is one Karma-formation (*sa"nkhara*).² But through what is this Karma-formation conditioned?

It is the Craving which has arisen in the ignorant worldling while being impressed by a feeling conditioned through an infatuated sense-impression. It is through this Craving (*tanha*) arisen hereby, that the Karma-formation has arisen. Hence, that Karma formation is impermanent, created, and has conditionally arisen. In one who thus understands, thus sees the

² This is the 2nd link in the formula of the Dependent Origination and signifies here the unwholesome volitional action (Karma: B. Dict.) accompanied by Wrong Views and Ignorance.

immediate Extinction of Biases (*aasava*) takes place. Again, someone holds the view: 'May I not be! May there nothing belong to me! I shall not be! Nothing will belong to me!'

Also this annihilation-view is a Karma-formation ... is impermanent, created and conditionally arisen. In one who thus understands, thus sees, the immediate Extinction of Biases takes place.

S. XXII. 85

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

"Impermanent, Venerable Sir." . . .

"Now, do you consider corporeality etc. as the Perfect One?"

"No, Venerable Sir."

"Or do you consider the Perfect One as contained therein?"

"No, Venerable Sir.

Or do you consider all these groups combined as one"

"No, Venerable Sir,

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

"No, Venerable Sir."

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

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

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

S. XXII. 89

Five Groups of Existence forming the objects of Attachment' (*upadana-kkhandha*) have been taught by the Blessed One: Corporeality, feeling, perception, mental formations, consciousness.

With regard to these 5 groups I do not find any Ego (*atta*), or something `belonging to an Ego' (*attaniya*), but still I am not yet a Holy One, not yet freed from biases.

Also concerning these groups of existence liable to attachment, I am no longer subject to the thoughts of `I am' or `This I am'.

S. XXII. 90

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

S. XXII. 95

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

The body's like a lump of foam,
The feeling like a water-bubble,
Perception like a void mirage,
Formations like a plantain tree,
And consciousness like jugglery.

S. XXII. 96

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

S. XXII. 102

Once the contemplation of impermanency has been developed and has attained full growth, then, it will overcome all craving for sensuous existence, all craving for fine-material existence,

all craving for immaterial existence; it will overcome and uproot all conceit of `I am.'

Only on reaching perfect Holiness, all Conceit of 'I am' (*asmimana*) will forever disappear.

S. XXII. 117

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

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

S. XXII. 122

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

S. XXII. 147f

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

S. XXII. 151

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

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

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

"Impermanent, Venerable Sir."

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

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

"No, Venerable Sir."

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

S. XXXV. 6

The visible *objects* are egoless (*anatta*); sounds, odors, tastes, bodily impressions and mind-objects are egoless. But of that which is egoless, one has, according to reality and true wisdom, to know thus: 'That am I not, that does not belong to me., that is not my Ego'. . .

S. XXXV. 23

What is the totality of things?

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

S. XXXV. 45-49

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

S. XXXV. 85

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

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

Empty of an Ego are eye and visible objects, ear and sounds, nose and odors, tongue and tastes, body and bodily impressions, mind and mind-objects.

S. XXXV. 90

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

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

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

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

The four types of 'imagining' mentioned in the first paragraph of this text, correspond to those contained in the 1st Discourse of the Majjhima-Nikaya (Mula pariyaya-sutta).

S. XXXV. 141

... Consciousness (mind) is egoless. And also the causes and conditions of the arising of consciousness, they, likewise, are egoless. For, how could it be possible that consciousness having arisen through something which is egoless, could ever be an Ego?...

S. XXXV. 163

... Whosoever understands and contemplates the mind as egoless, in him the Ego-view disappears. Whoso understands and contemplates as egoless or (*anattaa*) the mind-objects ... the mind-consciousness ... the mind-impression ... and the agreeable and disagreeable and indifferent feeling conditioned through mind-impression, in him the Ego-view disappears ...

S. XXXV. 193

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

S. XXXV. 197

. . . 'Empty village' is a name for the six sense-organs; Thus, whenever an experienced, learned and wise man examines the six sense-organs, eye, ear, nose, tongue, body or mind-organ, then all

these things appear to him as delusive, empty and deceitful...

S. XXXV. 207

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

S. XLI. 7

... What is the mind-deliverance of Emptiness (*suññata*)?

There the monk repairs to the forest, to the foot of a tree, or to an empty hut. And he contemplates thus: `Empty is all this of an Ego and of anything belonging to an Ego' ...

S. XLVI. 72f

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

S. LVI. 8

Do not think such evil, unwholesome thoughts, as 'Life and Body are identical'; or 'Life is one thing, but another is the Body'; or 'Does the Perfect One live after death?' 'Or not?' ... And why should one not think such thoughts? Because such thoughts are not profitable, do not belong to the genuine holy life, they do not lead to the turning away and detachment, nor to extinction, appeasement, enlightenment, and Nibbaana.