

A Note on Attā  
in the Alagaddūpama Sutta  
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## A NOTE ON ATTĀ IN THE ALAGADDŪPAMA-SUTTA

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So much has been written<sup>1</sup> about the Buddhist view of *attā* that it may be thought unnecessary for anything further to be written about it. Nevertheless, although a number of scholars have commented upon the *Alagaddūpama-sutta*(=AS)<sup>2</sup>, it seems to have escaped the notice of them that in that sutta the Buddha makes certain comments about *attā* in the context of a refutation of particular non-Buddhist philosophical doctrine. It seems worthwhile discussing these comments in detail, and considering whether they are applicable to the other contexts in which *attā* occurs in the Pāli canon. Such a discussion may be of help to those who still find difficulty with the Buddhist interpretation of *attā*.

In the AS the Buddha states that there are six *diṭṭhi-ṭṭhānāni*. The first of these is when an untrained person says when regarding *rūpa* : *etaṃ mama, eso 'ham asmi, eso me attā*, 'That is mine, I am that, that is my *attā*'.<sup>3</sup> The second is when he says the same thing about *vedanā*; the third, about *saññā*; the fourth, about *saṃkhārā*; the fifth, about whatever is *diṭṭha suta muta viññāta patta pariyesita anuvicarita manasā*; the sixth is when he regards the view *so loko so attā, so pecca bhavissāmi nicco dhuvo sassato avipariṇāmadhammo sassatisamaṃ tath' eva ṭhassāmi*, 'The world and the *attā* are the same; having passed away I shall be eternal, fixed, everlasting, of an unchangeable nature; I shall remain for ever exactly so' as *etaṃ mama, eso 'ham asmi, esa me attā*.

Here then we have six wrong views, this being the usual meaning of *diṭṭhi*. It is wrong to look at material form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, sensory perceptions (elsewhere

this group of five khandhas has the word *viññāṇa* in place of the list of words given above), and the last mentioned view with the thought 'That is mine, I am that, that is my *attā*'.

To take the last view first. The idea that the world and the *ātman* (=brahman) are the same is found in the Upaniṣads, and it is possible to find actual verbal echoes of the Upaniṣads in this passage,<sup>4</sup> e.g. *eṣa ma ātmā* (Chānd. Up. III. 14. 3-4), and *yathākratur asmiml loke puruṣo bhavati tathetaḥ pretya bhavati, sa kratuṃ kurvita.. etam itaḥ pretyābhisambhavitāsmi* (ibid. III. 14. 1 and 4).

In contrast to this false view the Buddha states that someone who is cognisant with the *ariya-dhama* looks at *rūpa* etc. with the thought: *na etaṃ mama n' eso 'ham asmi, na m' eso attā*,<sup>5</sup> 'That is not mine, I am not that, that is not my *attā*'. Consequently he is not anxious about something which does not exist.

The Buddha's audience ask if it is possible to be anxious about something which does not exist externally. The Buddha points out that it would be possible for someone to be anxious about an external object which he once possessed but which now no longer existed. He is then asked whether there might be no anxiety about something which did not exist externally. The answer is 'Yes'. The third question is whether there might be anxiety about something which does not exist internally. The Buddha quotes the case of a man who holds the view that the world and the *attā* are the same, and that after passing away he will become eternal, fixed, etc. He hears the *dhamma* which is taught for the destruction of such wrong views, and thinks, 'I shall surely be annihilated, I shall surely be destroyed I shall surely not be in the future' (*ucchijjissāmi nāma su, vinassissāmi nāma su, na su nāma bhavissāmi*). His grief for this is grief for something which does not exist internally. Someone who does not hold this view does not think that he will be annihilated when he hears the Buddha's doctrine, and therefore does not grieve for something which does not exist internally.

The Buddha then continues: 'You might obtain a possession which, being eternal, fixed, etc., might last for ever. Can you see that possession which, being eternal, fixed, etc., might last for ever?' The audience agree with the Buddha that they cannot see such a possession. He says: 'You might embrace a view of the doctrine of *attā*, for whose embracers grief etc, would not arise. Can you see such a view?' They agree that they cannot. 'You might depend upon a view where grief etc. does not arise for those who depend upon it. Can you see such a view?' Again they agree that they cannot.

The Buddha has therefore suggested, and his audience has agreed, that there is no possession which would last for ever, nor is there any doctrine of *attā* nor dependence upon a view which does not bring grief to those who hold it. No proof of this is offered, and the statement seems to be purely empirical. Neither the Buddha nor his audience have seen anything which is eternal, nor they have seen a doctrine which frees an adherent from grief. They have, therefore, agreed that everything is *anicca* and *dukkha*, and nothing is *nicca* and *sukha*. We shall see the importance of this below.

The Buddha then goes on to consider *attā*. He states: 'If *attā* existed, could there be the view "I possess something belonging to *attā*" (*attani vā sati, attaniyam me ti assa*)?' They agree. He continues: 'If something belonging to *attā* existed, would it be possible to have the view "I possess *attā*" (*attaniye sati, attā me ti assa*)?' They agree. He asks: 'If *attā* and something belonging to *attā* really and truly cannot be found, then is not the view that the world and the *attā* are the same, and that after passing away one will be eternal..., entirely the view of a fool?' 'How can it be otherwise?'

The Buddha then proceeds with his proof. He asks: 'Is material form eternal or non-eternal?' His audience state that it is non-eternal, presumably basing their answer on their experience of life, where material form all around them decays. 'But', says the Buddha, 'is what is non-eternal *dukkha* or *sukha*?' The answer is *dukkha*, again presumably based

upon experience of life. The Buddha concludes : ' What is impermanent and *dukkha* and subject to change, is it right to look at that and say, 'That is mine, I am that, that is my *attā*?' The answer is 'No.'

It is important to note that this answer can only be given by those who know, in advance, that the term *attā* is by definition *nicca* and *sukha*, and therefore anything which is *anicca* and *dukkha* cannot be *attā*. This gives us a clear indication of the type of *attā* which is being discussed. It is the Upaniṣadic idea of an *ātman* which is *nitya* and *sukha*, and this is in complete agreement with the fact, noted above, that some of the phraseology of the non-Buddhist view which is being rejected has Upaniṣadic echoes. It seems undeniable that the Buddha's audience were aware of the Upaniṣadic view, and realised that it could be refuted simply by pointing out that the world around us, which consists of material form, etc., is obviously non-eternal and *dukkha*, and not eternal and *sukha*, as would be essential if the doctrine that the world and the *attā* are the same were correct.

The Buddha then asks his audience the same question about being *anicca* or *nicca*, and *sukha* or *dukkha*, of *vedanā*, *saññā*, *saṃkhārā*, and finally *viññāṇa* (which here replaces the list of sense impressions given above), i.e. the five khandhas. He sums up by stating that the khandhas are properly to be regarded as 'that is not mine, I am not that, that is not my *attā*.' He tells his audience that an *ariya-sāvaka* who sees this is freed, and becomes *vimutta-citta*, i.e. he is a Tathāgata.

The Buddha then exhorts his audience to abandon what is 'not yours' (*yaṃ na tumhākaṃ taṃ pajahatha*) In answer to his own question 'what is not yours?', he explains that those things which he had already spoken of as being 'not mine', i.e. the five khandhas, were not theirs. That is to say that he is rephrasing his earlier statement that *rūpa*, etc., were (from their point of view) not 'mine'.

As a final proof of the fact that the khandhas are not their *attā*, i. e. a final refutation of the view that the external world and the khandhas and the *attā* are the same around thing, he points to the wood being collected and burned them in the Jetavana, where the discussion is taking place, and he asks his audience if they think, when people do this, that they are carrying them (his audience) away and burning them. The answer is 'No', and the reason is that they do not have *attā* or anything belonging to *attā* in them. The Buddha closes by saying that they are to abandon everything which is not theirs, and what is not theirs is *rūpa*, etc.

We are now in a position to assess the basis of the Buddha's refutation. The doctrine that the world and the *attā* are the same (*so loko so attā*) also affirms the oneness of the individual *attā* and the world-*attā*. The phrase *eso 'ham asmi* 'I am that' is the *tat tvam asi* 'Thou art that' of the Upaniṣada looked at from the point of view of the first person instead of the second person. Since *loko=attā*, then the Buddha's argument is : 'If there is world-*attā*, then there is something belonging to world-*attā* in me. If there is something belonging to world-*attā* in me, i.e. if there is a world-*attā*, then I (and all other things) would have *attā* which is part of the world-*attā*, and I would have all the "things" that go to make up world-*attā*. Material form (*rūpa*), etc., would be "mine". If, however, each individual *attā* were part of the world-*attā*, then each painful sensation felt by one part of the world-*attā* would be felt by every other part of the world-*attā*, i.e. when wood is burned the *attā* in us would feel the pain suffered by the *attā* in it. We do not feel any such pain because there is no world-*attā*'.

E. J. Thomas seems to have overlooked this reference to the world-*attā* when he wrote : 'The Vedic religion had developed on the philosophical side into the doctrine of the soul (*ātman*) as an ultimate reality, either as the one universal soul, or as an infinity of souls involved in matter. Buddhism appears to know only this second form...., and this it denied by

asserting that there was nothing behind the physical and mental elements that constitute the empirical individual'. Richard Gombrich, in his review of Bhattacharya's book *L'Ātman-Brahman dans le Bouddhisme Ancien*, states<sup>7</sup> that 'in his voluminous sermons [the Buddha] never mentions the world soul, either under one of its Upaniṣadic names or under any other', but as Choudhury stated, 'The meaning [in AS] is not clear if the word is not used as universal Self'.<sup>8</sup>

It is interesting at this point to indicate a close parallel to the rejection of the Upaniṣadic view in a Jain text. We find in *Sūyagaḍaṃga* I.I.I. the following pair of verses :

- (9) *jahā ya puḍhavi-thūbhe ege nāṇāhi dīsai*  
*evam bho kaṣiṇe loe vinnū nāṇāhi dīsai.*  
 (10) *evam ege tti jappanti mandā ārambha-nissiyā*  
*ege kiccā sayam tivvaṃ dukkhaṃ niyacchai.*

'And as the mass of earth, with all its manifold nature, is seen as one, so the whole world, with all its manifold nature, is seen as the intelligent principle. Some fools, intent upon their (bad) activities, say that it is so with the individual. (But) the individual who does an evil deed goes himself to a harsh misery'.

The Cties upon *Sūyagaḍaṃga* call this view *ekātmādvaita* and *ātmādvaitavāda*<sup>9</sup>, and Jacobi explains<sup>10</sup> : 'If there were but one *ātman* common to all men, the fruit of works done by one man might accrue to another. For the *ātman* is the substratum of merit and demerit'. Although it is expressed somewhat succinctly, it is clear that the last line is intended as a refutation of the idea set out in the first verse - that there is a world-*ātman* (*vinṇū=ātman*) which appears in different forms. The refutation follows the line that if this were so then every one who partook of the world-*ātman* would be jointly responsible for any evil committed by any other portion of the world-*ātman*, i.e. any other 'individual'. Our experience of the world, in which we see individuals being punished or rewarded for demerit or merit performed earlier, proves that this is not so.

Not only is it of interest to find Buddhist and Jain text giving a similar argument when rejecting the *ātman* theory, but it is also helpful as a means of assessing exactly what sort of *ātman* the Buddha was rejecting in the the AS. The Jains differ from the Buddhists in that they do believe in a personal *ātman*, although not an unchanging one. The *ātman* being rejected in the *Sūyagaḍaṃga* is therefore the world-*ātman*. The close similarity of the two arguments makes it clear that the Buddha in the AS is not merely refuting the individual *ātman*, but also the concept of the world-*ātman*.

It is noteworthy that the argument used by the Buddha in the AS to refute the idea of a world-*attā* form part of the proof put forward in the *Anattalakkhaṇasutta*,<sup>12</sup> traditionally the second sermon he preached after the enlightenment, to show that the five khandhas are *anattā* 'non-*attā*'.<sup>13</sup> In that sermon he states : 'Material form (*rūpa*) is non-*attā*, for if it were *attā* then it would not be conducive to disease and we should have complete mastery over it'. Similarly for the other khandhas. He continues : 'Is *rūpa* eternal or non-eternal ? Is something which is non-eternal pleasant or unpleasant ? Is it right to regard something which is non-eternal, unpleasant and subject to change as " That is mine, I am that, that is my *attā* " ?'

As in the AS, the Buddha's ability to reject the idea that the khandhas are *attā* depends upon his audience knowing that *attā* is, by definition, *nicca* and *sukha*. If it were, then we should not suffer disease (which is *dukkha*), and if the *rūpa*, etc., were *attā* then it would be 'ours' and we should have full control over it. All this proves that the khandhas are not *attā*, they are *anattā* 'non-*attā*'.

The same argument that something is *anattā* because it is non-eternal is also seen in the *Chachakka-sutta*,<sup>15</sup> where the Buddha states : ' If anyone should say that eye, etc., is *attā*, then that is not fitting, for the coming into existence of eye, and its passing away, is seen. Since it is not fitting

to say of something whose coming into existence and passing away is seen "My *attā* comes into existence and passes away", therefore eye is non-*attā*'.

Buddhaghosa points out<sup>14</sup> that the Buddha proves the fact of non-*attā* in three ways: sometimes by showing that something is non-eternal; sometimes by showing that it is *dukkha*; and sometimes by both. So in the *Anattalakkhaṇa sutta* he shows that *rūpa* etc. are *dukkha*; in the *Chachakka sutta* by showing that eye, etc., are *anicca*; in the *Arahanta-sutta*<sup>15</sup> he shows that *rūpa*, etc., are both: *rūpaṃ, bhikkhave, aniccaṃ; yad aniccaṃ taṃ dukkham; yaṃ dukkham tad anattā. yad anattā, taṃ n' etaṃ mama n' eso 'ham asmi na m' eso attā* The same argument is set out in its simplest form in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*: *yaṃ aniccaṃ, taṃ dukkham: yaṃ aniccaṃ ca dukkhaṃ ca, taṃ anattā*.<sup>16</sup>

As is well known, the three terms *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā* also occur in the *ti-lakkhaṇa* formula:<sup>17</sup>

*sabbe saṃkhārā aniccā,  
sabbe saṃkhārā dukkhā,  
sabbe dhammā anattā.*

'All compounded things are non-eternal, all compounded things are unpleasant, all things are non-*attā*'. In a truncated form this occurs as *sabbe saṃkhārā aniccā, sabbe dhammā anattā*.<sup>18</sup>

Our previous conclusions enable us to see that the third phrase of the formula is a conclusion which arises from the first two phrases: 'Because all compounded things are non-eternal and unpleasant, therefore all things are non-*attā*'. The difference between *saṃkhārā* and *dhammā* in this context has been well explained by Nyanatiloka:<sup>19</sup> [*saṅkhāra*] in the sense of anything formed (= *saṅkhata*), or created, includes all things whatever in the world, all phenomena of existence. It is, however subordinate to the still wider and all-embracing term '*dhamma*' (thing), for *dhamma* includes even the Unoriginated ('*Nibbāna*'). So *dhamma* includes all the *saṅkhata* things (= *saṅkhārā*) which are *anicca* and *dukkha*, and also the

*asaṅkhata* thing (= *nibbāna*) which is *nicca* and *sukha*. All these are non-*attā*. The distinction between the two is made in the Vinaya : *aniccā sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhānattā ca saṅkhatā, nibbānañ c' eva paññatti anattā iti nicchayā*,<sup>20</sup> 'Impermanent are all constructs painful, not self, and constructed, and certainly *nibbāna* is a description meaning not-self'.<sup>21</sup>

The *saṅkhārā* are, of course, *anattā* as is made clear from such statements as *sabba-saṅkhāresu aniccaṃ anattā ti tilakkhaṇam āropetvā*,<sup>22</sup> but the possibility of adding the *asaṅkhata nibbāna* to the *saṅkhatā saṅkhārā* arises because although *nibbāna* is neither *anicca* nor *dukkha*, it is nevertheless *anattā*.<sup>23</sup>

If there had been any other reference in the Pāli canon to the world-*attā* besides the one in the AS, we might have expected it to be with reference to the *saṅkhārā*, but even when referring to these the Buddha's followers seem to have regarded their *anattā* nature from the ego-centric point of view, i.e. from the point of view of the individual *attā*. So we find the Buddha stating *ayaṃ kūyo aniccato dukkhato . . parato . . anattato samanupassitabbo*,<sup>24</sup> 'This body is to be regarded as non-eternal, as unpleasant, ... as other .. as non-self'. The Thera Mahāmoggallāna stated—

*ye pañca khandhe passanti parato no ca attato;  
ye ca passanti saṅkhāre parato no ca attato.*<sup>25</sup>

'Who see the five khandhas as other not as self; and who see compounded things as other not as self'.

The commentary upon Mahāmoggallāna's verses makes it clear that there is no effective difference between *parato* and *anattato*: *parato ti anattato, tassa attaggāha-paṭikkhepa-dassanaṃ h' etaṃ*.<sup>26</sup> These passages which include the word *parato* offer us help in the problem of deciding how best to translate the word *attā*. There seems to be no other way of translating *parato* than 'as other', and we must therefore translate *attato* as 'as self', since English recognises the opposition between 'self' and 'other', but not between 'soul'

and 'other'. If we have to translate *attā* as 'self' in these contexts, then for the sake of consistency we must do the same elsewhere. To distinguish it from the normal reflexive use of 'self' for *attā*, which is, of course, widely used in *Pāli*, we should rather adopt the translation 'permanent self' for the individual *attā* whose existence the Buddha rejected.

As E. J. Thomas states,<sup>27</sup> in the *Anattalakkhaṇa-sutta* the Buddha does not specifically deny the existence of the *attā*. The sutta is merely a denial that the khandhas were *ātman*, whatever that term means. It may be true to say that the Buddha does not specifically deny the existence of the *attā* anywhere in the Pāli canon, in the sense that he does not state explicitly 'The *attā* does not exist'. As stated above, however, in the AS he does speak of the men who grieves over the loss of his *attā* as grieving about something which does not exist internally. He also draws attention to the folly of someone who holds the view that the world and the *attā* are the same if it can be shown that *attā* and some thing belonging to *attā* are not to be found, and he then goes on to prove to the satisfaction of his audience that they are not to be found.

I think it is correct to conclude that by implication, if not explicitly, the Buddha denied the existence of the permanent individual self-

#### Notes

- 1 Abbreviations of Pāli texts are those adopted by the *Critical Pāli Dictionary* (=CPD). Editions quoted are those of the Pali Text Society. Cties=commentaries.
- 2 M I 130-42.
- 3 The Pāli word *attā* is usually translated as either 'self' or 'soul'. I leave it untranslated here, but try to decide between the two at the end of this article.
- 4 I think E. J. Thomas is too cautious when he states: 'There may be here some reference to upanishadic doctrine, though it is still not the identity of self and Brahma' (*History of Buddhist Thought*, London 1933, p. 103).

- 5 Some editors, e.g. at Vin I 14, 19, read *na me so attā*. This is shown to be incorrect by the positive *eso me attā*, and by the Sanskrit version : *naitan mama, naiṣo' ham asmi, naiṣa me ātmeti* (JRBS 1907, p. 376)
- 6 E. J. Thomas, *Life of the Buddha*, London 1927, p. 35.
- 7 *Archives Internationales d'Histoire des Sciences*, 1978, pp. 128-29.
- 8 R. P. Choudhury, 'Interpretation of the "Anatta" doctrine of Buddhism: a new approach', *IHQ* XXXI (1955), p. 58, n. 23.
- 9 Referred to by W. B. Bollee, *Studien zum Sūyagada*, Wiesbaden 1977, p. 63
- 10 H. Jacobi, *Jaina Sūtras Part II*, Oxford 1895, p. 237. n. 2.
- 11 Vin I 13-14.
- 12 *Pali-English Dictionary* takes *anattā* to be both a noun and an adjective. *CPD* takes it as a noun, but points out that the *Cities* alternatively take it as a *Bahuvrīni* compound. Choudhury (op. cit., p. 53) emphasises that it is a *Karmadhāraya* compound in which the word remains as a noun, although (grammatically speaking) when it is in agreement with a plural subject it could be an adjective.
- 13 M III 280-87
- 14 Ps II 114, 24-25.
- 15 S III 82-83.
- 16 Paṭis II 106, 13-15.
- 17 e.g. at Dhp 277-79=Th 676-78.
- 18 e.g. at M I 228, 13-15=S III 133, 1-2.
- 19 Nyanatiloka, *Buddhist Dictionary*, Colombo 1950, s.v. saṅkhāra(4).
- 20 Vin 86, 3-4.
- 21 I. B. Horner, *Book of the Discipline*, VI, London 1966, p. 123.
- 22 Ja I 275, 22<sup>o</sup>-23<sup>o</sup>
- 23 See also I. B. Horner, *Middle Length Sayings*, I, London 1954, p. 281, n. 2.
- 24 M. 500, 1 foll.
- 25 Th 1160-61. Cf. *saṅkhāre parato nātvā dukkhaṭo no ca attato*, A II 18, 10.
- 26 Th-a III 168, 30-31.
- 27 E. J. Thomas, *History of Buddhist Thought*, London, 1933, p. 101, n. 2.