

Rethinking Non-self:

A New Perspective from the *Ekottarika Āgama*

1. Introduction

According to the Buddhist tradition, the Buddha is said to have denied the existence of the “self” (*attā* in Pali, *ātman* in Sanskrit), which refers to what we would call the “soul” or the essence of the individual that is eternal and equivalent to the essence of the universe.¹ A standard formulation of this doctrine in the Buddhist texts is as follows:

Material form is impermanent. What is impermanent is unsatisfactory. What is unsatisfactory is not self. Feeling is impermanent... Perception is impermanent... Volitional formations are impermanent... Consciousness is impermanent. What is impermanent is unsatisfactory. What is unsatisfactory is not self.²

Material form, feeling, perception, volitional formations and consciousness are called the “five aggregates (*khandha/skandha*)”, which according to the Buddha are the five categories of things that constitute sentient beings and the world. The Buddha considers each of these five aggregates to be impermanent. Because each of them is impermanent, each of them is unsatisfactory. Because each of them is unsatisfactory, each of them is not the “self”. As K.R. Norman (1991: 206) points out, the Buddha’s ability to reject the idea that the five aggregates are the “self” (*attā*) depends upon his audience knowing that *attā* is, by definition, permanent (*nicca*) and happy (*sukha*).

Who gave such a definition of the “self” (*attā*)? The answer lies in the *Upaniṣads* of

¹ Cf. Gombrich 1988: 43, 63.

² E.g. S III 22, M I 138.

Brahmanism. J.L. Brockington (1996: 78) says:

[E]arly Buddhism denied other basic tenets of the Upaniṣads with its theories of impermanence and non-self which ... can be viewed as a deliberate antithesis to the understanding gradually developed in the Upaniṣads of a permanent, blissful self.”

A number of passages in the early *Upaniṣads* depict the “self” (*ātman*) as permanent³ and happy⁴. In the Buddha’s view, however, none of the five aggregates that constitute sentient beings and the world is permanent or happy, and therefore they are not the “self” and the “self” cannot be found anywhere. Verses 277, 278 and 279 of the *Dhammapada* make this idea even more explicit and comprehensive:

All conditioned things are impermanent. (*sabbe saṃkhārā aniccā*)

All conditioned things are unsatisfactory. (*sabbe saṃkhārā dukkhā*)

All *dhammas* are without self. (*sabbe dhammā anattā*)

Resorting to these three verses, Walpola Sri Rahula (2000: 57–58) states:

The Buddha denied ... the existence of *Ātman*, Soul, Self, or Ego within man or without, or anywhere else in the universe. ... The term *saṃkhārā* denotes the Five Aggregates, all conditioned, interdependent, relative things and states, both physical and mental. ... The term *dhammā* ... includes not only the conditioned things and states, but also the non-conditioned, the Absolute, Nirvāṇa. ... Therefore, ... according to this statement: ‘All *dhammas* are without self’, there is no Self, no *Ātman*, not only in the Five Aggregates, but nowhere else too outside them or apart from them.

The argument for the non-existence of “self” as corollary of all things and states

³ E.g. KaU 2.18: *nityaḥ śāśvato*. Cf. Olivelle (1998: 385, 606).

⁴ E.g. TU 2.5: *ātmānandamayāḥ*.

being impermanent and unsatisfactory is obviously meant to refute the idea of the “self” in the *Upaniṣads*. According to a research by B.G. Gokhale (1980: 74–75), the elite in the early Buddhist monastic order mainly came from the Brahmin caste. It is therefore understandable that the Buddha’s teaching had to respond to the challenges from the prevailing thought of the *Upaniṣads*. The Buddha’s denial of the “self”, however, was not only pointed at Brahmanism, but also confronted various *śramaṇic* trends of thought against Brahmanism. This paper investigates the extant three versions (one in Pali and the other two in Chinese) of a Buddhist text which records a debate between the Buddha and Saccaka, an adherent of a certain *śramaṇic* sect, over the relationship of the self and the five aggregates (*khandha*). There exist divergences among the three versions with regard to the account of this debate. The above-mentioned argument against the Upaniṣadic idea of the self is found in all the three versions, which represents the Buddha’s attitude towards Brahmanism scattered throughout the early Buddhist scriptures. In this paper I will clarify Saccaka’s religious identity and the issue over which he debates with the Buddha.

2. Comparison of the accounts of the debate in the three versions

The account in *sutta* 35 of the *Majjhima Nikāya* in the Pali Canon is largely consistent with that in *sūtra* 110 of the *Samyukta Āgama* (雜阿含經 *Za Ahan Jing*⁵) preserved in Chinese translation, whereas *sūtra* 10 of Chapter 37 of the *Ekottarika Āgama* (增壹阿含經 *Zengyi Ahan Jing*) extant in Chinese translation tells a very different story. The main points of this debate found in the three versions of the text are summed up in the following table.

⁵ Pinyin system is used for transliteration.

<p>Col p a r</p>	<p><i>Sutta</i> 35 of the Majjhima Nikāya (M I 230–233, translation based on Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 2001: 324ff.)</p>	<p><i>Sūtra</i> 110 of the Samyukta Āgama (T II 35c–36a)</p>	<p><i>Sūtra</i> 10 of Chapter 37 of the Ekottarika Āgama (T II 715c–716c)</p>
<p>1</p>	<p>“... this is how my instruction is usually presented to my disciples: ‘Bhikkhus, material form is impermanent, feeling is impermanent, perception is impermanent, volitional formations are impermanent, consciousness is impermanent. Bhikkhus, material form is not self, feeling is not self, perception is not self, volitional formations are not self, consciousness is not self. All conditioned things are impermanent; all things are not self.’ ...”</p>	<p>The Buddha told Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha’s son: “Indeed I present my instruction to my disciples in this way, indeed I always teach my disciples to follow my instructions and see material form as without self, feeling, perception, volitional formations and consciousness as without self, and to contemplate these five aggregates as disease, carbuncle, pricking and killing; [they are] impermanent, unsatisfactory, empty and not self.”</p>	<p>The Buddha told the Nigaṇṭha’s son: “My instruction is thus: Material form is impermanent. What is impermanent is unsatisfactory. What is unsatisfactory is without self. What is without self is empty. What is empty does not belong to self. Self does not belong to it. [The same for] feeling, perception, volitional formations and consciousness. [That is,] the five aggregates are all impermanent. What are impermanent are unsatisfactory. What are unsatisfactory are without self.</p>

			What are without self are empty. What are empty do not belong to self. Self does not belong to them. Such is the doctrine of my instruction.”
2	<p>“A simile occurs to me, Master Gotama.” “Explain how it occurs to you, Aggivessana,” the Blessed One said. “Just as when seeds and plants, whatever their kind, reach growth, increase, and maturation, all do so in dependence upon the earth, based upon the earth; and just as when strenuous works, whatever their kind, are done, all are done in dependence upon the earth, based upon the earth—so too, Master Gotama, <i>a person has material form as self</i>, and based upon material form he produces merit or demerit. <i>A person has feeling ... perception ... volitional formations ... consciousness as self</i>, and based</p>	<p>Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha’s son told the Buddha: “Gotama, I now shall give a simile” The Buddha told Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha’s son: “You should know that this is the right time.” “Just as all that is done in the world depends on the earth, so material form is self-person, from which arise good and evil; ... feeling ... perception ... volitional formations ... consciousness is self-person, from which arise good and evil. Again, just as the human realm, divine realm, medical herbs and trees all grow in dependence upon the earth, so <i>material form is self-person, feeling ...</i></p>	<p>The Nigaṇṭha’s son replied: “I dislike hearing this doctrine. Why? According to the doctrine that I understand, <i>material form is permanent.</i>”</p>

	upon consciousness he produces merit or demerit.”	<i>perception ... volitional formations ... consciousness is self-person.”</i>	
3	“Aggivessana, are you not asserting thus: ‘Material form is my self, feeling ... perception ... volitional formations ... consciousness is my self?’” “I assert thus, Master Gotama: ‘ <i>Material form is my self, feeling ... perception ... volitional formations ... consciousness is my self.</i> ’ ⁶ ...”	The Buddha told Aggivessana: “Are you saying: ‘Material form is self-person, feeling ... perception ... volitional formations ... consciousness is self-person?’ ” “Yes, Gotama. <i>Material form is self-person, feeling ... perception ... volitional formations ... consciousness is self-person.</i> ”	The Blessed One said: “You should now pay attention, and ponder upon the subtle principle before you express it. ... ” ... The Nigaṇṭha’s son replied: “I now proclaim that <i>material form is permanent.</i> What proposition do you, a śramaṇa, want to express?”
4			The Blessed One said: “I now proclaim: ‘Material form is impermanent and also without self. Through provisional synthesis, material form comes into being, is not real, nor firm or solid, just like a snow-lump, is subject to extinction, and subject to change.’
5	“In that case, Aggivessana, I shall ask you a question in return.	The Buddha told Aggivessana: “I shall ask you a question.	Just now you said that <i>material form is permanent.</i> I shall ask

⁶ All italics in this table are mine.

<p>Answer it as you choose. What do you think, Aggivessana?</p> <p>Would a head-anointed noble king—for example, King Pasenadi of Kosala or King Ajatasattu Vedehiputta of Magadha—exercise the power in his own realm to execute those who should be executed, to fine those who should be fined, and to banish those who should be banished?” “Master Gotama, a head-anointed noble king ... would exercise the power in his own realm to execute those who should be executed ... For even these [oligarchic] communities and societies such as the Vajjians and the Mallians exercise the power in their own realm to execute those who should be executed ...; so all the more so should a head-anointed noble king such as King Pasenadi of Kosala ...”</p>	<p>Answer it as you choose.</p> <p>Suppose a king would kill, bind, banish or whip the criminals in his kingdom, or cut off their hands and feet, and would reward the contributors with elephants, horses, chariots, towns and treasures. Could he do all that?” He replied: “Yes, he could, Gotama.” The Buddha told Aggivessana: “Can whatever/whoever is a lord act according to its/his own free will?” He replied: “Yes, Gotama.”</p>	<p>you a question. Answer it as you choose. What do you think, Nigaṇṭha’s son? Can a wheel-turning king act according to his own free will in his kingdom? Can this king release whoever should not be released and bind whoever should not be bound?” The Nigaṇṭha’s son replied: “A wheel-turning king has the ability to act according to his own free will, to kill whoever should not be killed and bind whoever should not be bound.”</p>
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6	<p>“What do you think, Aggivessana? When you say thus: ‘Material form is my self,’ do you exercise any such power over that material form as to say: ‘Let my form be thus; let my form not be thus?’” When this was said, Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha’s son was silent.</p>	<p>The Buddha told Aggivessana: “As you say: ‘material form is self, feeling ... perception ... volitional formations ... consciousness is self’, can you make them to be thus or make them not to be thus according to your own free will?” Then Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha’s son was silent. ...</p>	<p>The Blessed One said: “What do you think, Nigaṇṭha’s son? Will a wheel-turning king become old with white hair, wrinkled face and dirty clothes?” Then the Nigaṇṭha’s son was silent without replying. The Blessed One asked him a second and a third time, but he remained silent without replying a second and a third time.</p>
7	<p>Now on that occasion a thunderbolt-wielding spirit ... Then Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha’s son was frightened, alarmed, and terrified. Seeking his shelter, asylum, and refuge in the Blessed One, he said: “Ask me, Master Gotama, I will answer.”</p>	<p>On that occasion a vajra warrior spirit was holding a vajra-mallet ...</p>	<p>On that occasion a hidden-track vajra warrior was holding a vajra-mallet ... On seeing him, [the Nigaṇṭha’s son] was frightened and his hair stood up. He said to the Blessed One: “May Gotama rescue me! Now I will answer when you ask me again.”</p>
8	<p>“What do you think, Aggivessana? When you say thus: ‘Material form is my self,’ do you exercise any such power</p>	<p>Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha’s son was greatly frightened, and said to the Buddha: “No, Gotama.”</p>	<p>The Blessed One said: “What do you think, Nigaṇṭha’s son? Will a wheel-turning king become old? Will his hair</p>

	<p>over that material form as to say:</p> <p>‘Let my form be thus; let my form not be thus?’ - “No, Master Gotama.”</p>		<p>become white, his teeth fall off, his skin become loose, and his face wrinkle?” The Nigaṇṭha’s son replied: “Although śramaṇa Gotama says so, as what I proclaim, <i>material form is permanent.</i>”</p>
9	<p>“Pay attention, Aggivessana, pay attention how you reply! What you said before does not agree with what you said afterwards ...</p> <p>What do you think, Aggivessana?</p> <p>When you say thus: ‘Feeling is my self,’ do you exercise any power over that feeling ... perception ... volitional formations ... consciousness ...</p>	<p>The Buddha told Aggivessana:</p> <p>“Ponder slowly before you explain. You originally said in the crowd: ‘material form is self, feeling ... perception ... volitional formations ... consciousness is self’, but now you say [each of them is] not [self]. What you said before does not agree with what you said afterwards. ...</p>	<p>The Blessed One said: “Ponder carefully before you reply.</p> <p>What you meant before does not agree with what you meant afterwards. But just answer whether the king will become old or not, and whether or not his hair will become white, his teeth will fall off, his skin will become loose, and his face will wrinkle.</p>

10		<p>The Nigaṇṭha’s son replied: “A wheel-turning king may become old.” The Blessed One said: “A <i>wheel-turning king can always act according to his own free will in his kingdom. Why is he unable to get rid of ageing, illness and death? The “self” is not subject to ageing, illness or death. The “self” is permanent, and should be the way that it wishes to be.</i> Is this doctrine correct?” On that occasion the Nigaṇṭha’s son was silent without replying. ... The Blessed One said: “What do you think, Nigaṇṭha’s son? <i>If a wheel-turning king wished to avoid ageing, illness and death , could he succeed? Would this great king fulfill his wish?”</i> The Nigaṇṭha’s son replied: “He would not fulfill his wish.”</p> <p>“If he wished this material</p>
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			<p>form to exist or not to exist, would this wish be fulfilled?"</p> <p>The Nigaṇṭha's son replied:</p> <p>"No, Gotama."</p>
11	<p>"... What do you think, Aggivessana, is material form permanent or impermanent?" -</p> <p>"Impermanent, Master Gotama."</p> <p>"Is what is impermanent unsatisfactory or happy?"</p> <p>"Unsatisfactory, Master Gotama." "Is what is impermanent, unsatisfactory, and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: 'This is mine, this I am, this is my self'?" "No, Master Gotama." "... Is feeling permanent or impermanent? ... perception ... volitional</p>	<p>"Aggivessana, I shall ask you. Is material form permanent or impermanent?" He replied:</p> <p>"Impermanent, Gotama." [The Buddha] further asked: "Is what is impermanent unsatisfactory?" He replied:</p> <p>"Unsatisfactory, Gotama." [The Buddha] further asked: "Is what is impermanent, unsatisfactory, and subject to change fit to be regarded by learned noble disciples as self, mine or existing in [self or self] existing therein?"</p>	<p>The Blessed One said: "What do you think, Nigaṇṭha's son? Is material form permanent or impermanent?" The Nigaṇṭha's son replied: "Material form is impermanent" "If it is impermanent, subject to change, will you still see it as self or admit that self belongs to it?" He replied: "No, Gotama." "Are feeling, perception, volitional formations and consciousness permanent or impermanent?" He replied: "Impermanent." "If</p>

	formations ... consciousness ...” “No, Master Gotama.”	He replied: “No, Gotama. The same applies to feeling, perception, volitional formations and consciousness.”	they are impermanent, subject to change, will you still see their [real] existence?” He replied: “No.”
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3. “Self” is “what comes under control”—a fallacy resulting from the two versions of the text

First let us focus on *sutta* 35 of the *Majjhima Nikāya* and *sūtra* 110 of the *Samyukta Āgama (Za Ahan Jing)*, which are quite similar to each other in terms of their accounts of the debate. In these two versions of the text, Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha’s son maintains that each of the five aggregates—material form, feeling, perception, volitional formations and consciousness—is the “self”. This assertion is rejected by the Buddha using the following simile (see col. 1 and 2, par. 5–8 in the above table). If each of the five aggregates is the “self”, one should be able to control one’s five aggregates at will just as a king can exercise power over his people at will. The argument is based on the comparison of the “self” to the people who are under their king’s control. Since each of the five aggregates is not under control, each of the five aggregates is not “self”. (col. 1, par. 8: “When you say thus: ‘Material form is my self,’ do you exercise any such power over that material form as to say: ‘Let my form be thus; let my form not be thus’?” - “No, Master Gotama.”) Commenting on this text, Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi (Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 2001: 1227, note 374) says:

The Buddha is here suggesting that the aggregates are not self because they lack one of the essential characteristics of selfhood—being susceptible to the exercise of mastery. What cannot come under my mastery or perfect control cannot be identified as “my self.”

Steven Collins (1982: 97), after quoting from the above text as well as others, also indicates: “In the commentaries, things are regularly said to be not-self because there is ‘no exercising of mastery’ over them.” In other words, if something is subject to the exercise of mastery, it is counted as “self”, so the “self” can be defined as “what comes under control”. This definition of “self” is just contrary to the idea of “self” (*ātman*) in Brahmanism. According to the *Upaniṣads*, the self is the inner “controller”, which controls from within (*antaro yamayati*) the earth, water, fire, wind, the sun, the moon, stars, all sentient beings, breathing, speech, seeing, hearing, perception, etc. (BU 3.7) Accordingly, Brahmanism regards the “self” as the “controller” rather than “what comes under control”. Is it true that the Buddha’s argument against Saccaka’s proposition is based on the premise that his opponent defines the “self” as “what comes under control”, as the above scholars suggest? If so, the idea of “self” refuted in this text is obviously not that of Brahmanism. Then, which religion’s tenet is the Buddha refuting in this context? And surprisingly this religion turns the Upaniṣadic idea of the self upside down, defining the “self” as “what comes under control”!

The Buddha’s opponent in this debate is Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha’s son (*Nigaṇṭhaputta*). In Buddhist scriptures a follower of Jainism is usually called a *nigaṇṭha*.⁷ According to the Pali commentary, as Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi states, “Saccaka was the son of Nigaṇṭha (Jain) parents who were both skilled in philosophical debate. He had learned a thousand doctrines from his parents and many more philosophical systems from others. ... he is referred to by his clan name, Aggivessana.”⁸ Johannes Bronkhorst (1993: 16) considers Saccaka to be a Jain according to the fact that the term *Nigaṇṭhaputta* simply means *Nigaṇṭha* as the word *putta* is pleonastic.⁹ Judging from Saccaka’s title, Nigaṇṭhaputta, and his background

⁷ PED s.v. *nigaṇṭha*: a member of the Jain order.

⁸ Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 2001: 1227, note 369.

⁹ Bronkhorst gives the following footnote: “On the pleonastic use of *-putta/putra*, see Alsdorf, 1969:

as given in the Pali commentary, he was an adherent of Jainism. It is therefore conceivable that he debates with the Buddha from the standpoint of Jainism. I will examine whether Saccaka's opinion rebutted by the Buddha really represents the doctrine of Jainism. As far as I am aware, the definition of "self" as "what comes under control" implied in the above two versions of the text is not found in Jainism.

In *sutta* 35 of the *Majjhima Nikāya* and *sūtra* 110 of the *Samyukta Āgama*, Saccaka reiterates his argument thus: "A person has material form as self ... A person has feeling ... perception ... volitional formations ... consciousness as self."¹⁰ (col. 1 and 2, par. 2–3) Does this view, which is criticized by the Buddha, belong to Jainism? Below is my discussion of this issue.

Saccaka's argument is obviously opposing the following instruction of the Buddha expressed earlier: "Material form is not self, feeling is not self, perception is not self, volitional formations are not self, consciousness is not self."¹¹ (par. 1) The Jain term equivalent to "self" (*attā/ātman*) is *jīva*, which means 'life-monad' and represents the Jain idea of soul.¹² Jainism believes in the eternal *jīva*, whose essence is pure intelligence.¹³ If Saccaka was really a Jain, when the Buddhist text records that he said: "A person has material form as self ... A person has feeling ... perception ... volitional formations ... consciousness as self", he actually expressed such an idea: "A person has material form as *jīva* ... A person has feeling ... perception ... volitional formations ... consciousness as *jīva*".

As Sue Hamilton (1996: 3ff.) points out, the Buddhist texts either refer to material form (*rūpa*) as the body (S III 86), or analyzes material form (*rūpa*) into the four great elements and the form derived from them. In the second case, material form

18 (375) n. 9, and esp. Alsdorf, 1951: 357-60[587-90]."

¹⁰ M I 230: *rūpattāyaṃ purisapuggalo... vedanattāyaṃ purisapuggalo ... saññattāyaṃ purisapuggalo ... saṅkhārattāyaṃ purisapuggalo ... viññānattāyaṃ purisapuggalo.*

¹¹ M I 230: *rūpaṃ ... anattā, vedanā anattā, saññā anattā, saṅkhārā anattā, viññānaṃ anattā.*

¹² Cf. Dundas 2002: 44.

¹³ Cf. Brockington 1996: 81.

refers to both “internal elements”, namely things belonging to one’s own body such as hair of the head, bile, etc., and “external elements”, namely inanimate things that do not belong to the body (e.g. M I 185–189). Therefore, we have to consider the following two cases:

(1) If material form in our text refers to the body, when Saccaka says: “A person has material form as self”, that is, “A person has material form as *jīva*”, he implies that a person’s body is his *jīva*, but this contradicts the soul doctrine of Jainism. Paul Dundas (2002: 96, 102) elucidates the relationship between the *jīva* and the body understood in Jainism: “Through the accumulation of atoms brought about by karma, the *jīva* forms a body. ... At death, the *jīva* leaves its body and progresses to its next place of birth.” As J.L. Brockington (1996: 82) indicates, the *jīva* is absolutely distinct from the body although it is tied to the body by its karma. If Saccaka was a Jain, he would by no means assert: “A person has material form, or the body, as *jīva*.”

(2) If material form in our text refers to both “internal elements” and “external elements”, that is, substance or material in general, when Saccaka says: “A person has material form as self (i.e. *jīva*)”, he implies that the *jīva* is a substance or material. This also goes against the Jain doctrine of soul. Paul Dundas (2002: 97) points out that the *jīva* is non-substance, formless and pure consciousness. According to the Jain texts, the *jīva* is not *paudgalika* (material) and is *arūpa* (formless).¹⁴

Considering the above fact, if Saccaka had really been a Jain, he could not have proclaimed: “A person has material form as self (i.e. *jīva*).” Then could he have contended thus: “A person has feeling ... perception ... volitional formations ... consciousness as self (i.e. *jīva*)”? The answer is probably negative. As Walther

¹⁴ Cf. Basham 1951: 267. I am grateful to Professor Chi-lin Tsai for lending me this book.

Schubring (1962: 178–179) elucidates, according to the early Jain texts, feeling (*veyaṇā*, equivalent to *vedanā* in Pali), which can be classified into bodily and spiritual or pleasant and unpleasant just as in Buddhism, is associated to the way how karma works; it characterizes the state of the soul (*jīva*) but is not an integral part of the soul. Walther Schubring (1962: 154) explains that the inward sense, which is rendered as *sannā* in some early text, is connected with animals’ and human beings’ coming into existence by procreation, but the Kevalin, the omniscient one,¹⁵ has gone beyond *sannā*. Some texts deal with ten *sannā* as the primitive emotions or instincts, which are directed towards nourishment, fear, sex, splendour, anger, pride, deceit, greed, worldliness and all carnal desires. Therefore, *sannā* in Jainism may cover the aggregates of perception and volitional formations in Buddhism. It is noteworthy that *sannā* corresponds etymologically to *saṃjñā* in Sanskrit¹⁶ (i.e. *saññā* in Pali), which is the third aggregate (translated as “perception”) among the five aggregates in Buddhism. Walther Schubring (1962: 154) indicates that the ten *sannā* are owned by all beings except for the Kevalin, or the omniscient one, and Siddha, namely liberated *jīva* (soul)¹⁷. This implies that the ten *sannā*, or the above two aggregates in Buddhism, are not inherent in the soul. They are discarded when the soul achieves liberation. In sum, Jainism would not identify the soul (*jīva*) with feeling, perception, or volitional formations.

Similarly, as Padmanabh S. Jaini (1979: 147–148) explicates, according to Jainism, on the path to liberation one will experience a state of awakening called *samyak-darśana*, or “having the correct view”. Before reaching this state of awakening, a person identifies his being with the external signs of life, thus he is in

¹⁵ Cf. Dundas 2002: 37.

¹⁶ According to *An Illustrated Ardha-Magadhi Dictionary* (by Ratnachandrajai) Vol. 4, p. 610. I am grateful to Professor Po-chi Huang for this reference.

¹⁷ Cf. Dundas 2002: 105.

the state known as *bahirātman*, or “[seeing] the self in externals”. When he has attained to the state of awakening, he undergoes a transformation into *antarātman*, or “[seeing] the self within”. Then the soul (*jīva*) comes to focus on nothing but the soul’s own nature (*svabhāva*). The body, the possessions, even the ever-changing psychological states such as passions, anger, pride, self-pity, and so forth are no longer identified with the self. Tilmann Vetter (2000: 38) says that *rāga* (passion) and *dosa* (“anger” or “hatred”) should be counted as *saṅkhārā* (*volitional formations*, the fourth aggregate) according to *sutta* 11 of the *Vedanā Saṃyutta*. In my view, pride and self-pity are recognitions and feelings/emotions that result from comparing oneself with others, and may be reckoned as the aggregates of *perception* and *feeling*.

The above discussions demonstrate that material form, feeling, perception and volitional formations are ultimately not-self according to Jainism. I am not sure about the relation between consciousness (*viññāṇa*) in Buddhism and the *jīva* in Jainism, but the above discussions provide us with sufficient reasons to deny the possibility that the Jains would proclaim: “A person has material form as self ... A person has feeling ... perception ... volitional formations ... consciousness as self”. This proposition, however, is mistakenly attributed to a Jain, Saccaka, in *sutta* 35 of the *Majjhima Nikāya* and *sūtra* 110 of the *Samyukta Āgama*.

In these two versions of the text, the opinion refuted by the Buddha who argues using the simile of “people under their king’s control” certainly does not belong to Jainism, and probably has nothing to do with any other religions or schools of thought, but rather it is apparently an “invention” created by distorting Brahmanical thought, twisting the Upaniṣadic idea of the self as “controller” into a new theory of the self as “what comes under control”. This new theory, then, is ascribed to Jainism by the above two versions of the Buddhist text in question. Concepts similar to this “new theory” are also found in other Buddhist texts, and have had profound influence on

the interpretation of the “non-self” doctrine up till today. This will be discussed later.

4. “Self” or the “Essence” as a “permanent, autonomous entity”—the view refuted in the *Ekottarika Āgama*

We have examined the accounts in the two similar versions of the text. Let us now move on to the third version. In *sūtra* 10 of Chapter 37 of the *Ekottarika Āgama* (*Zengyi Ahan Jing*) extant in Chinese translation, the Buddha says: “My instruction is thus: Material form is impermanent. What is impermanent is unsatisfactory. What is unsatisfactory is without self. [The same is said of feeling, perception, volitional formations and consciousness]” (col. 3, par. 1) The Nigaṇṭha’s son, called Saccaka at the beginning of the text,¹⁸ disagrees with the Buddha and reiterates his argument thus: “Material form is permanent.” (col. 3, par. 2–3) This is significantly different from the accounts of the above two versions, where Saccaka reiterates such a contention: “A person has material form as self ... A person has feeling ... perception ... volitional formations ... consciousness as self.” In the *Ekottarika* version, the Buddha also uses a simile to argue against Saccaka’s view, but the content of the simile and what it compares to are quite distinct from those in the above two versions. (par. 5–10) All the three versions state that a king can exercise power over his people at will. The above two versions compare the “self” to the people who are under their king’s control, and argue that each of the five aggregates is not “self” because each of them is not under one’s mastery or control. In contrast, the *Ekottarika* version suggests that although a wheel-turning king can control his people at will, he cannot avoid his own ageing, illness and death, and it suggests a definition of the “self” thus: a “permanent, autonomous entity” that enjoys absolute freedom and is not

¹⁸ T II 715b: 薩遮尼健子(Saccaka Nigaṇṭha’s son).

subject to ageing, illness or death. This is elucidated in the following passage (col. 3, par. 10):

A wheel-turning king can always act according to his own free will in his kingdom. Why is he unable to get rid of ageing, illness and death? The “self” is not subject to ageing, illness or death. The “self” is permanent, and should be the way that it wishes to be.

This apparently compares the “self” to a wheel-turning king, and differs from the above two versions which compare the “self” to a king’s people. This difference in simile leads to two completely different definitions of the “self”. According to the above two versions, the “self” is “what comes under control”, but in the *Ekottarika* version the “self” is permanent, autonomous, not subject to ageing, illness or death, and enjoys absolute freedom. This version of the text ironically says that although a wheel-turning king may control others, he has no full control over himself and is not autonomous, enjoying no absolute freedom. The implication is that just like a wheel-turning king, the five aggregates, which many people mistake for the “self”, each may appear to be able to control other things or people, but after all each of them enjoys no absolute freedom, is “impermanent and subject to change” (col. 3, par. 11), and hence cannot be counted as the “self”, which by definition is not subject to ageing, illness or death, is permanent, and should be the way that it wishes to be (col. 3, par. 10).

According to *sūtra* 10 of Chapter 37 of the *Ekottarika Āgama*, the opinion disproved by the Buddha is as follows: each of the five aggregates is permanent, not subject to ageing, illness or death, and enjoys absolute freedom or independence. Which religion upholds this tenet? According to this text, the Buddha’s interlocutor in the debate is a Nigaṇṭha’s son, that is, a Jain. This tenet, however, does not accord with Jainism, but rather it seems very close to some views of the Ājīvikas (Ājīvakas).

As J.L. Brockington (1996: 85–86) states, at the time of the Buddha the Ājīvikas were led by several important figures, including Makkhali Gosāla and Pakudha Kaccāyana. They were rigid determinists. According to the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya* in the Pali Canon, Makkhali Gosāla maintains that all living beings and all souls (*jīva*) are without mastery, are not dependent on any causes or conditions, but are moulded by destiny (*niyati*) and nature (*bhāva*); they experience pleasure and pain in the six classes of existence and will all make an end of suffering after having experienced certain numbers of rebirths (D I 53). Pakudha Kaccāyana held a form of atomic theory in which there are seven permanent and unchanging elemental categories (*kāya*): earth, water, fire, air, joy, sorrow, and life (*jīva*).¹⁹

The Ājīvika enumeration of the seven elemental categories is very similar to the five aggregates in Buddhism. The earth, water, fire and air belong to the aggregate of material form. Joy and sorrow belong to the aggregate of feeling. A.L. Basham (1951: 263, 265): says:

Thus it is evident that the atom of life is thought to be somewhat different from the four material elements. It is later stated that this element has the special characteristic of *perceiving* all the other four atoms in their combinations. ... Here earth has all sense qualities except sound; ... life, *instructing* and *knowing*. (my italics)

Therefore, life (*jīva*) appears to correspond to the aggregates of perception, volitional formations and consciousness. Furthermore, the term *kāya* (elemental category) used by the Ājīvikas is analogous to the Buddhist terminology *khandha* (*skandha* in Sanskrit), translated as ‘aggregate’. Both terms denote a collection or a group of things that fall under the same class.²⁰ According to the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* of the

¹⁹ Cf. Basham (1951: 262) and Brockington (1996: 86).

²⁰ DOP 670b, 750b.

Dīgha Nikāya, Pakudha Kaccāyana says that the seven elemental categories (*kāya*) are not made, uncreated, without a creator. They do not change or obstruct each other. Even those who cut off someone's head with a sharp sword do not deprive anyone of life; the sword merely passes through the space between the seven elemental categories (D I 56). To Buddhists, this theory sounds like saying that the five aggregates are permanent, unchanging, undestroyed, and not subject to ageing, illness and death. As mentioned above, Makkhali Gosāla maintains that all living beings and all souls (*jīva*) are without mastery, are not dependent on any causes or conditions, but undergo the cycle of rebirths according to their own nature. This Ājīvika view also implies that the five aggregates are not under any control or mastery, and enjoy absolute freedom from any other influences. We can find that it is this theory that the Buddha is refuting in the account of *sūtra* 10 of Chapter 37 of the *Ekottarika Āgama*. Accordingly, Saccaka, the Buddha's opponent in this debate, could be an adherent of the Ājīvikas rather than a follower of Jainism.

In fact, the Buddhist texts frequently confuse the Ājīvikas with the Jains (*Nigaṇṭha*), and seem to use the terms *Ājīvaka /Ājīvika* and *Nigaṇṭha/Nirgrantha* synonymously. This has been demonstrated by A.L. Basham (1951: 96–97), Mansukh Gelabhai Bhagat (1976: 142),²¹ Johannes Bronkhorst (2000) and Nalini Balbir (2000). This reinforces my contention that Saccaka is an adherent of the Ājīvikas despite his title being related to Jainism.

5. Reflections on other canonical passages

The faulty argument for non-self in the first two versions (*sutta* 35 of the *Majjhima Nikāya* and *sūtra* 110 of the *Samyukta Āgama*) is also found at many other

²¹ I am grateful to Ven. Anālayo for this reference.

places in the Buddhist scriptures.²² For example, the well-known *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta* in the *Samyutta Nikāya* (S 22.59) reads (tr. Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi 2000: 901–902):

Form is nonself. For if... form were self, this form would not lead to affliction, and it would be possible to have it of form: ‘Let my form be thus; let my form not be thus.’ But because form is nonself, form leads to affliction, and it is not possible to have it of form: ‘Let my form be thus; let my form not be thus.’²³ [The same is said of the other four aggregates.]

Commenting on this passage, Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi (2000: 1066, note 91) says:

The sutta offers two “arguments” for the *anattā* thesis. The first demonstrates the selfless nature of the five aggregates on the ground that they are insusceptible to the exercise of mastery (*avasavattitā*). If anything is to count as our “self” it must be subject to our volitional control; since, however, we cannot bend the five aggregates to our will, they are all subject to affliction and therefore cannot be our self.

This argument is the same as what Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi says when he comments on *sutta* 35 of the *Majjhima Nikāya* as mentioned above. If something is subject to the exercise of mastery, it is counted as “self”, so the “self” can be defined as “what comes under control”.²⁴ This definition of “self”, as discussed before, is contrary to the idea of “self” (*ātman*) in the Upaniṣads, and is apparently an “invention” created by twisting the Upaniṣadic idea of the self as “controller” into a new theory of the self as “what comes under control”. A more plausible argument is found in several

²² E.g. S 22.59 (III 66-67), SĀ 318 (T II, 91a), T XXIV, 128b.

²³ *Rūpaṃ... anattā. Rūpaṃ ca hi daṃ, bhikkhave, attā abhaviṣṣa, nayidaṃ rūpaṃ ābādhāya saṃvatteyya, labbheṭṭha ca rūpe— ‘evaṃ me rūpaṃ hotu, evaṃ me rūpaṃ mā ahoṣī’ti. Yaṃ ca kho, bhikkhave, rūpaṃ anattā, tasmā rūpaṃ ābādhāya saṃvattati, na ca labbhati rūpe— ‘evaṃ me rūpaṃ hotu, evaṃ me rūpaṃ mā ahoṣī’ti.*

²⁴ Discussing the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*, Steven Collins (1982: 97) also makes a similar conclusion according to the commentaries. Cf. also Rupert Gethin (1998: 136).

passages in the Chinese *Samyukta Āgama* which are parallel to the above passage in the Pali *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*.²⁵ For example, SĀ 33 reads:

If material form were self, illness and suffering should not arise in material form, and likewise [one] should not intend with regard to material form thus: “Let it be thus; let it not be thus.” Because material form is without self, illness and suffering arise in material form, and it is possible to intend with regard to material form thus: “Let it be thus; let it not be thus.” (The same is said of the other four aggregates.)²⁶

According to this passage, if material form were self, material form would be autonomous, free from undesirable states, and would not be susceptible to the exercise of mastery. This implies that “self” is an autonomous entity that enjoys absolute freedom from others’ influence. Because material form lacks the essential characteristic of “selfhood”—an autonomous entity, material form is not free from illness and suffering and is subject to others’ influence. Here we find that the definition of “self” as an autonomous entity correlates with the definition of “self” as something that is permanent and happy. If something is an autonomous entity, it can always be the way that it wishes to be, and therefore it is permanent and happy. Such a thing, however, could not be found anywhere in the universe. This argument for non-self, which has been shown to be coherent, is apparently aimed at refuting the Upaniṣadic idea of the self or similar concepts of the “essence” held by other religions. Such an argument for non-self is more likely to have been put forward by the Buddha than the argument in the Pali *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*. This argument in SĀ 33 is also found in the above *sūtra* 10 of Chapter 37 of the *Ekottarika Āgama*, where the Buddha refutes the following view: the seven elemental categories, or the five

²⁵ SĀ 33, 34, 86, 87. cf. Tsai (2007: 122–123).

²⁶ T II 7b: 色非是我。若色是我者，不應於色病、苦生，亦不應於色欲令如是、不令如是。以色無我故，於色有病、有苦生，亦得於色欲令如是、不令如是。受、想、行、識亦復如是。

aggregates in Buddhist terminology, are permanent, autonomous, and not subject to ageing, illness or death. This Ājīvika view and the Upaniṣadic idea of the self share one thing in common—proposing a permanent and autonomous entity that underlies the individual or the universe and does not come under control. It is this view that the Buddha endeavoured to disprove. In contrast, the argument presented in *sutta* 35 of the *Majjhima Nikāya* and *sūtra* 110 of the *Samyukta Āgama* misses the point of the debate between the Buddha and his non-Buddhist interlocutor.

In the long period of oral transmission of the early Buddhist Canon, there occurred contamination between the Buddhist texts. One significant feature in contamination of the texts is the frequent use in the Canon of what scholars have dubbed “periscopes”, an idea in New Testament criticism applied to the early period of transmission of the Buddhist traditions.²⁷ As Richard Gombrich (1987: 77) explains, they are “passages of scripture which were standardized and used as units to compose longer texts”. If a mistake crept into a pericope, this pericope could have been brought into many texts through contamination. This may explain why the above faulty argument recurs many times throughout the Buddhist scriptures.

6. Conclusion

From the above comparison of the three versions of the same text it can be inferred that the Chinese *Ekottarika Āgama* is, in terms of sectarian affiliation, considerably distant from the Pali *Majjhima Nikāya* and the Chinese *Samyukta Āgama*, which must belong to two closely related schools. This will be discussed later. Although Saccaka’s title, the Nigaṇṭha’s son, denotes a Jain, his view as criticized in

²⁷ Griffiths 1983: 56; Gombrich 1987: 77.

the two similar versions has nothing to do with Jainism, but rather it is probably an “invention” created by distorting Brahmanical thought.

This “invention” as found in the two similar versions of the text in question has led the Pali commentaries and contemporary scholars to interpret the “self” denied by the Buddha as what comes under mastery or control, and to understand the statement “Each of the five aggregates is not self” in the Buddhist texts as denying the idea that each of the five aggregates can be seen as what comes under control. This, however, misses the point. The mainstream thought in India at that time conceived the “self” or the essence of the individual or of the universe as the “controller” or “autonomous entity”, and it is this concept that the Buddha controverted with all his energy. Therefore, the account in those two versions of the text apparently has some mistake. On the other hand, the *Ekottarika Āgama* version seems to make better sense, and may be fairly close to the original account, while the other two versions have considerably deviated from the original during the evolution of the texts alongside the sectarian development of Buddhism. According to the *Ekottarika Āgama* version, Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha’s son is debating with the Buddha from the standpoint of the Ājīvikas, which share a similar opinion with Brahmanism—a permanent and autonomous entity that underlies the individual or the universe and does not come under control. It is a significant fact that according to the Buddhist texts, the Buddha frequently criticizes the “self” (*ātman*) in Brahmanism or the essence/substances of the individual or of the universe held by other religions as a “controller” or “autonomous entity”, rather than criticizes such things as “what comes under control”.

Widespread agreement has been reached in attributing the *Madhyama Āgama* in Chinese translation to the Sarvāstivāda school.²⁸ The Chinese *Samyukta Āgama* is

²⁸ Lü, 1963: 242; Kumoi, 1963: 248; Ui, 1965: 136; Enomoto, 1984; Thich Minh Chau, 1991: 18–27.

also widely ascribed to the Sarvāstivāda²⁹ or Mūla-sarvāstivāda tradition.³⁰ According to the **Samayabhedoparacanacakra* (異部宗輪論; T 49, 15a–b) by Vasumitra of the Sarvāstivādins, the original Buddhist Order first split into two sects, the Mahāsāṅghika and the Sthavira (or Sthaviravāda in Sanskrit, Theravāda in Pali); later on the Sarvāstivāda school split off from the Sthaviras. As to the Pali source, the commentary on the *Kathāvatthu* (Kv-a 2–3) states that after the first schism between the Mahāsāṅghikas and the Theravādins,³¹ the Mahimsāsakas and the Vajjiputtakas further seceded from the Theravādins; then the Sarvāstivādins split off from the Mahimsāsakas. According to Étienne Lamotte (1988: 529–536), several other sources from different schools agree with the Sarvāstivāda account. In any case, both the Theravādins and the Sarvāstivādins were descended from the original Sthavira sect, which was opposed to the Mahāsāṅghika sect at the first schism. Therefore, it is conceivable that the Pali *Nikāyas* (Theravāda) are closely related to the Chinese *Samyukta Āgama* and *Madhyama Āgama* (both belonging to the Sarvāstivāda), and actually there are plenty of parallels between the texts of the two schools.

On the other hand, the sectarian affiliation of the *Ekottarika Āgama* is controversial. It is ascribed to the Mahāsāṅghikas by Bureau (1955: 55 and 57), Lü (1963: 242), Kumoi (1963: 248), Ui (1965: 137–138), Akanuma (1981: 38), Bronkhorst (1985: 312–314) and Pāsādika (2008: 147–148), but to the Dharmaguptakas by Matsumoto (1914: 349). On the other hand, both Hirakawa (1960: 48–49) and Nakamura (1980: 39) maintain that the sectarian affiliation of the *Ekottarika Āgama* is not clear. It is obvious that more scholars are in favor of attributing the *Ekottarika Āgama* to the Mahāsāṅghikas. If this attribution is correct,

²⁹ Kumoi, 1963: 248; Ui, 1965: 136; Hiraoka, 2000: 501.

³⁰ Lü, 1963: 242; Enomoto, 1984.

³¹ Some scholars doubt that the Theravāda school of today is directly related to the original Theravāda (Sthavira[vāda]) school. Ven. Yinshun (1994: preface & 36–38) identifies the extant Theravāda school with the Tāmraśāṭṭya school, an offshoot from the Vibhāgyavādins. Choong (2000: 3) holds a similar opinion.

we can easily explain why the *Ekottarika* version of the debate discussed in this paper is so different from the debate as presented in the Pali (Theravāda) and the *Samyukta* (Sarvāstivāda) versions, which are closely related in terms of sectarian affiliation (both from the Sthavira sect). Even if the *Ekottarika Āgama* does not belong to the Mahāsāṅghikas, some evidence shows that the *Ekottarika Āgama* is significantly distant from the Theravāda and the Sarvāstivāda. For instance, Paul Harrison (1997: 262–280) found that the *Fo shuo qi chu san guan jing* (佛說七處三觀經) contains a collection of texts which belong to the Sarvāstivādin *Ekottarika Āgama*, and that this collection has much more in common with the Pali *Anguttara Nikāya* than it does with the complete Chinese version of the *Ekottarika Āgama* (T no. 125). This finding indicates that the complete Chinese version of the *Ekottarika Āgama* belongs to a school that is significantly distant from the Theravāda and the Sarvāstivāda.

The *Ekottarika Āgama* (T no. 125), as some scholars have pointed out, is a rather late compilation of *sūtras* and is profoundly influenced by the Mahāyāna,³² but it nevertheless contains very old sources, some of which may be more original than their parallels in other recensions. When we come to a dead end while studying the Theravāda *Nikāyas* and the Sarvāstivāda *Āgamas*, we may find a solution by resort to the *Ekottarika Āgama* in Chinese translation.

Abbreviations

(References to Pali texts are to the Pali Text Society editions.)

BU *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (References are to Patrick Olivelle, 1998)

D *Dīgha Nikāya*

DOP *A Dictionary of Pāli*, ed. Margaret Cone, Oxford: Pali Text Society, 2001.

³² Cf. Lamotte (1995: 29), Bronkhorst (1993: 14).

KaU *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* (References are to Patrick Olivelle, 1998)

M *Majjhima Nikāya*

PED *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary*, ed. T.W. Rhys Davids and William Stede, London: Pali Text Society, reprinted 1986. (First published 1921–1925)

S *Saṃyutta Nikāya*

SĀ *Saṃyukta Āgama*

T *Taishō Shinshu Daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經 (Cited from *CBETA Chinese Electronic Tripitaka Collection* Version 2008, Taipei: Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association.)

TU *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* (References are to Patrick Olivelle, 1998)

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Saṃyukta Āgama 《雜阿含經》 (*Za Ahan Jing*)

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