Review: Self or No-Self in Theravada Buddhism

Reviewed Work(s):
> *Selfless Persons: Imagery and Thought in Theravada Buddhism* by Steven Collins
> *Self and Non-Self in Early Buddhism* by Joaquín Pérez-Remón

George D. Bond

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and a staggeringly vast erudition and applies them to the total panorama of humanity's religious history, but how he does so critically, carefully weighing and evaluating not only the facts and the evidence but also previous scholarly work. Reading the *History of Religious Ideas* is a scholarly experience which by its sheer scope and power also becomes a spiritual and even religious experience.

The English version by Willard R. Trask has been done with the consummate skill of an experienced translator and Eliade expert, a number of Gallicisms notwithstanding. Thus the use of the first person plural ("we think") is good French but less felicitous English. And the description of the ancient Israelite royal cult (1:335) is pure French: "The office consists of propitiatory . . . rituals." Clearly the reference is not to the royal office but to (French) *office* in the sense of cultic liturgy.

R. J. Zwi Werblowsky

Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Self or No-Self in Theravada Buddhism

Selfless Persons: Imagery and Thought in Theravada Buddhism. By Steven Collins. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982. Pp. 323.

Self and Non-Self in Early Buddhism. By Joaquín Pérez-Remón. The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1980. Pp. 412.

These two books represent reexaminations of the Theravada Buddhist doctrine of no-self, *anattā*. The similarity of the two works, however, hardly extends past their common topic, for they approach anattā in quite different ways with quite different results.

Of the two, only Collins breaks new ground in his study of anattā, presenting an insightful interpretation of this doctrine and its place at the center of the Theravada tradition. He attempts to understand the doctrine of anattā against the background of Buddhist society and culture, the religious context in which the concept has meaning. He finds this historical context implicit in the text itself, for the text represents "a social fact." Thus anattā should be seen not merely as a philosophical doctrine but as a "soteriological strategy." "The denial of self in fact represents a linguistic taboo; but a taboo which is applied differently by different Buddhists. . . ."

To demonstrate this difference he expands into a threefold system Dumont's analysis of Indian sociology as a dichotomy of man in the world and world renouncer. The Buddhist texts reflect at least three primary religious roles: the ordinary person (*puthujjana*), the monk who is a scholar or learner (*sekha*), and the virtuoso monk or adept (*asekha*). For each of these persons or roles, anattā has a different meaning, and the differences in the texts dealing with *attā* (self) and anattā reflect these applications. For the ordinary person, the technical doctrine of no-self is not a matter of concern. At this level where the

person is more concerned with karma, saṃsāra, and personal continuity, the doctrine of anattā functions only as a symbol distinguishing Buddhism from Brahminism and providing a reference point on the path ahead. For the learner, the monk engaged in scholarship or meditation, anattā has meaning as a philosophical doctrine and a topic for meditation. Here the technical definitions of no-self apply because the learner seeks to develop "right view," which involves the various arguments denying the existence of a permanent, enduring self. The life of meditation leads the monk to increasing introjection of no-self. For the adept, however, even right view regarding no-self is too worldly; at this third stage, the doctrine now must be appropriated without attachment and with "no view." This is the highest point on the path and the entrance to *Nibbāna.*

On this model, the meaning of anattā is not univocal, and although the doctrine represents the highest truth about existence, it is not in opposition to the many texts that speak of self, attā. "It is important for us to realize not only that a very large proportion of Buddhists and Buddhist practice (considered in the most general sense of these words) has nothing to do with the specialist understanding and application of not-self; but also, *that the textual tradition of Buddhism reflects this state of affairs*" (p. 68). Buddhism taught ordinary folk and even learners (*sekha*) about karma, saṃsāra, and continuity. Thus the texts contain many passages using self language in the sense of a religious exhortation ("know thyself") or in a reflexive sense ("restrain yourself").

The later Theravada tradition developed the "meta-linguistic dichotomy" between conventional truth (*sammuti-sacca*) and absolute truth (*paramattha-sacca*) as a way of reconciling these apparently opposing usages of self language and no-self language. This dichotomy, reflecting the social and cultural realities of the Buddhist tradition, allowed Buddhists to distinguish between those texts and contexts where the "linguistic taboo" of anattā applied and those where it did not.

Collins goes on to show that Buddhists also employed other concepts and images to unite the various types of people and outlooks in the tradition. The concepts of *attābhāva* and *puggala* served to systematize conventional thinking about personhood and to mediate between conventional and absolute truth. The major way that Buddhists gave coherence to their conceptualization of self and no-self, however, was by the use of patterns of imagery such as images of home, vegetation, and rivers. These images, having meaning on several levels at once, both conscious and unconscious, unite the tradition in its orientation to the truth of no-self. This last insight he derives from Clifford Geertz's statement that "what a given religion is—its specific content—is embodied in the images and metaphors its adherents use to characterize reality."[1]

Collins's book makes an important contribution to our understanding of the Theravada tradition. Whereas the West tends to approach religions in terms of beliefs, this book shows that for Theravada the path to liberation represents the central feature giving meaning and structure to all else. Collins is right in

[1] Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1968), pp. 2–3; cited by Collins on p. 262.

showing that this path has a social context in which various persons progress in various degrees toward the ultimate goal of liberation and that doctrines such as anattā and *dukkha* take on different shades of meaning for persons at different stages of this path. As he notes, for Theravada, ideas of self and no-self require not so much philosophical refutation or acceptance as a "change of character in those who hold them" (p. 119).

Joaquín Pérez-Remón's book, *Self and Non-Self in Early Buddhism*, adopts a very different approach to anattā. The author takes up where C. A. F. Rhys Davids and others left off a generation ago postulating the existence of a soul or self doctrine in the Pali texts. He argues that the many passages in the Pali *Nikāyas* that refer to attā demonstrated early Buddhism's (his unhappy term is Nikāyan Buddhism) acceptance of the idea of self.

As an interpretation of these texts, the author rejects the traditional view that attā represents conventional truth while anattā represents ultimate truth. Instead attā should be seen to be as real as anattā. In fact, the two concepts are inextricably linked. The doctrine of anattā does not deny the existence of a self but only denies that the mental and physical aggregates constitute the self. The doctrine that the *khandhas* are not the attā actually asserts the existence of an attā that has been wrongly identified with the *khandhas*. "We fail to see how this [anattā] denies the reality of attā in an absolute way, on the contrary, it asserts attā as free in reality from any ontological admixture with the peripheral factors of samsaric existence" (p. 174).

The self, therefore, should be seen as a reality for early Buddhism. Attā represents the "inner reality that gives man all the value he has, not a mere conventional idea" (p. 26). The self is an objective reality, a "homogeneous entity." The Buddha would not have advised his followers to take refuge in the self if it did not exist. Without a permanent self to serve as the moral agent, "a life of renunciation and spiritual endeavour becomes senseless and even absurd" (p. 51).

Like Collins, Pérez-Remón attempts to see the context of Buddhism; he argues that early Buddhism should be viewed as a "shramanic" system akin to Jainism and Sāṁkhya-yoga, which were "radically founded on an irreducible dualism between self and non-self." Thus attā serves as the necessary complement to anattā, just as the Jainas linked *jīva* and *ajīva*. This basic dualism of spirit and matter or of spiritual and empirical being was obscured by the later Theravadins who produced the commentaries to the *Tipiṭaka*. The early Buddhists, however, accepted the self as the highest reality in man. Because the self is transcendental ("the *nirguṇa* self"), though, the Buddhists never gave an explanation of what the self is but only explained what the self is not.

Although the author has done an admirable job of citing and discussing all the relevant texts on this matter, his interpretation of these texts and his thesis concerning attā are neither compelling nor necessary. The textual passages he cites simply do not support his interpretation that anattā represents only a relative negation and that anattā, properly understood, actually requires attā. Although he is right in attempting to understand early Buddhism in its historical context, it simply will not do to assume that, since the other shramanic schools were dualistic, early Buddhism must have been dualistic in the same way. To be

sure, the distinctions between conventional and absolute teachings may not be well developed in the Pāli *Nikāyas*, but as Collins has shown they are certainly implicit.

Although Pérez-Remón cites text after text attempting to buttress his argument, it lacks cogency, and the texts he cites seem to point in the opposite direction. His argument cannot compare to that of Collins. For example, he refers to the *Mahāvagga* story about the young men searching for a prostitute and the Buddha's asking them what is more important: searching for the woman or "searching for yourselves." Pérez-Remón argues that in this passage the Buddha clearly instructs the men to "seek the self." Collins, however, notes that the term "self" in this text simply has a reflexive sense and should not be translated with the definite article. The Buddhist texts make frequent reference to attā because of the Buddhist emphasis on self-striving, not because they held a belief in an objective self.

We cannot, however, dismiss Pérez-Remón's arguments lightly because the anattā doctrine does have a somewhat counterintuitive nature. Again and again in the history of the Buddhist tradition, from the Puggalavadins to the Anglo-Germans, interpreters have attempted to read a self into Buddhism. Undoubtedly, to be able to posit a permanent, enduring self would solve a lot of problems in Buddhist thought. But Buddhist philosophy from the outset was more subtle than this and neither required nor permitted an attā. Since this book was written originally as a doctoral thesis for the University of Bombay, it might be both possible and interesting to see it as a reflection of modern Indian interpretations of the anattā doctrine. A definite Vedantic flavor runs through the book, appearing in references to the "Self" and comparisons with the Upanishads. The author, however, leans too far toward Hindu philosophical systems in trying to comprehend early Buddhism. Steven Collins's interpretation of anattā as a "social, intellectual and soteriological strategy," by contrast, provides a much more useful approach to understanding the meaning and intention of both this doctrine and the Theravada Buddhist tradition.

GEORGE D. BOND

Northwestern University

SCHOLARS, AMERICAN INDIANS, AND DREAM GUESSING

Der Traum als religiöse Erfahrung untersucht und dargestellt am Beispiel der Irokesen. By IRIS ANNA OTTO. Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1982. Pp. 288, 14 illustrations in the text.

The title of the present work gives the reader the impression that its subject matter is the interpretation of Iroquois dreams, and this holds good for the first 175 pages. However, the second part of the book is a review of different dream theories from the days of Tylor, and it is difficult to see what bearing it has on the first part. Indeed, the author's short conclusion, "Summary and