

Concept of Non- Substantiality (Anatta)

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The negative predicate *anattā*, used to convey the idea that certain things are not the self, i.e. are the non-self, is used not as an adjective but as a noun. The proof is in the fact that it stays unchanged whatever be the subject's gender and number: *rūpam anattā*, *vedanā anattā*, *saṅkhārā anattā*, *viññāṇam anattā*.¹ The practical consequence of this is important. What is affirmed by means of the predicate *anattā* is not an abstract idea, but a concrete existing reality. Therefore, if it is said that material form (*rūpam*) is *anattā*, and not merely said that material form exhibits the characteristic of non-selfhood, but that material form is part of the totality of things constituting the non-self (*anattā*) a totality of things opposed and contradictory to the self (*attā*). This confirms the polarity existing in the nikāyas between the self and non-self, implying the reality of two positive entities, possessed of antithetical natures. In this ideological set up the reality of *anattā*, of which no one doubts, implies the reality of *attā*, there being a continual existential conflict between the two, until *attā* succeeds in asserting its absolute independence from the former.

When the texts speak of *anattā* as embracing the whole of its denotation, the translation of the them *anattā* will be 'the non-self, referring to the totality of things that constitute the non-self as opposed to the self. But even Though *attā* may always be translated as 'the self, inasmuch as it is an homogeneous entity, not allowing any divisions, the same is not the case with *anattā*. There are many disparate things that come in under the category of *anattā*. Therefore when it is asserted of some of those things, not of all, that they are *anattā*, we shall not be able to translate this *anattā* as 'the non-self' but as 'not-self'. Thus if I am told, '*rūpam anattā*' we shall not be able to translate it as bodily form is the non-self, there being many other things besides bodily form falling under the denotation of non-self. A case, for instance, where *anattā* will allow itself to be translated as the non-self is the following.

See the world together with its devas full of conceit for the self (*attamānim*) in what is the non-self (*anattani*)

Established on name-and-form, it thinks ‘this is true’....²

This chapter does not introduce a new topic. The wording of the formulas to be examined may be different from those of the preceding chapter, but their purport is substantially the same. This implies that if the *anattā* taught through the denial of positive terms was only relative one, as it has been shown, the *anattā* taught in the formulas to be analysed in the present chapter will be also a relative one. This will be confirmed after showing that the scope of the formulations studied in this chapter is not broader or narrower than the scope of the formulations investigated in preceding chapter, but coincident with it.

We find in this connection series of texts that yield the following statement of equality, viz. *anattā = n’etam mama, n’eso ‘ham’ asmi, na me’ so attā*.

The eye, bhikkhus, is impermanent, what is impermanent is painful, what is painful is non-self (*anattā*). What is non-self, ‘That is not mine, that I am not, that is not my self. Thus is how this should be regarded by means of superior knowledge....

The same is asserted of the other senses and their respective objects, every one of the suttas ending with the well know passage:

Thus discerning bhikkhus, the learned ariyan disciple feels disgust for the eye... etc. Feeling disgust he is detached. Being detached he is liberated....etc.³

The *Udāyisutta* of *Salāyatanaṣaṇṇyutta* yields the statement of equality, *anattā =* neither *attā* nor *attaniya*. Ānanda is questioned by Udāyin, whether just as the body has been presented in many ways by the Blessed one as being non-self (*anattā*), one can do the same regarding consciousness. Ānanda replies indicating now consciousness depends for its existence on the activity of the senses and ceases with it. The idea behind this is doubtless that consciousness is *anattā*, because it is impermanent and depends for its existence on what is *anattā*. Then the simile is given of a man searching for heart of wood where it is not found, namely in a plantain trunk:

Even so friend, a bhikkhu does not see in the sixfold sphere of sense neither the self (*attā*) nor what belongs to the self (*attaniya*). Thus discerning he is not attached to anything in the world. Not being attached he is not troubled. Not being

troubled he attains *nibbāna* as regards the very self (*paccattaññeva*). He knows, destroyed is birth...⁴

This is one of the several cases where we see now reluctant some people where to accept the *anattā* of *viññāṇa*.

We find the equivalence between *suññam* and *anattā* in the following: Regard thoroughly with perfect wisdom what is impermanent as painful. (Regarding) the void (*suññam*) as non-self (*anattā*) people destroy grief...⁵

The equivalence of *suññato* and *anattato* is shown in texts to be studied presently.

In some texts analysed in the preceding chapter, *para* stood as the contradictory of *attā*. There are a number of texts where *parato* and *anattato* occur in a series of what we may call intentional synonyms, such texts will yield the statement of equality, *para* = *na attā* = *anattā*, showing again the connection of this chapter with the previous one. Thus we read:

What is the way, Ānanda, what is the method for the rejection of the five lower fetters? Here in Ānanda, a bhikkhu, through detachment from all samsaric adherences, through rejection of evil qualities, through the complete calming down of unchastity, aloof from sensual pleasures, dwells having entered into the first *jhāna*... whatever is found there connected with material form, feeling, perception, inner complexes, or consciousness, he looks at those things as impermanent, painful, a disease, a (festering) boil, a dart, a misfortune, an affliction as something alien (*parato*) as decay, as empty (*suññato*) as non-self (*anattato*). He turns his mind from such things, and having turned his mind from such things he concentrates his mind on the deathless element, to wit the calming down of all activities, the expelling of all samsaric adherences, the destruction of craving, detachment, cessation, *nibbāna*...⁶

A simple form of the series of “intentional” synonyms is found in: Bhikkhus, whatever *samaṇas* and *brāhmaṇas* in the past regarded any pleasant and agreeable material form as permanent. Regarded it as pleasant, regarded it as the self, regarded it as health, regarded it as security, all of them caused attachment to increase. Those who caused attachment to increase made samsaric adherences to grow. Those who made samsaric adherences to grow promoted pain. Those who promoted pain were not freed from birth, old-age, death, suffering, etc.⁷

The same applies to *samaṇas* and *brāhamaṇas* of the future and to the existing ones. The opposite is asserted of those who regarded (will regard, or regard at present) any pleasant and agreeable material form as impermanent, painful, as non-self, as disease, as danger (*aniccato, dukkhato, anattato, rogato, bhayato*), which clearly is an enlargement of the usual triad, *aniccato, dukkhato anattato*, and of which the longer series quoted above may be the final product even though *rogato* has changed its place and *bhayato* has disappeared altogether.

Finally *anattādhīno* is used as a synonym of *parādhīno*, ‘depending on another’ and *attādhīno* is taken as synonymous with *aparādhīno*, in the *majjhimanikāya*.⁸

The quotations just given in this section prove that whether the *anattā* doctrine be taught by the denial of positive terms, as was the case with the texts studied in the preceding chapter, or by the predication of the negative term *anattā*, the meaning is substantially the same. Therefore it is only left to show that the scope of the second set of texts coincides exactly with the scope of the first set, the conclusion being that both sets of texts teach only relative *anattā*. Even in the quotations given in this section to show the connection between the present chapter and the preceding one, one can see that the *anattā* doctrine taught in them is also a relative one and that the soteriological aim of the doctrine is never forgotten.

SCOPE OF THE ANATTĀ STATEMENTS

We are now going to see how the scope of the *anattā* statements is the same as the scope of the statements that denied the self through the negation of positive terms, viz, the *khandhas*; the senses, sensorial objects, etc. the elements.....

1. The *khandhas* are *anattā*

Suttas 12, 13, and 14 of the *khandhasamyutta* apply to the *khandhas* the same reasoning based, in the first case on their impermanence, in the second case on being painful, in third case on being non-self.

Body, *Bhikkhus*, is non-self (*anattā*), feeling is non-self, perception is non-self, the inner complexes are non-self, consciousness is non-self. Discerning thus, a learned *ariyan* disciple is repelled by the body, is also repelled by feeling is also repelled by perception is also repelled by the inner complexes, is also repelled by consciousness. Being repelled he gets rid of all attachment to them, without attachment he is freed. At being freed. He has the knowledge of freedom. He

knows ‘Destroyed is birth, lived is the brahma-life, done is what was to be done, there will be no more living in these condition’.⁹

Let us note once again that the *anattā* doctrine in the nikāyas is no theoretical mental exercise but an exercise in liberation that ought to be attained by discarding those things that are branded as non-self (*anattā*). Also:-

Non-self (*anattā, anattā ti*) thus it is said, Lord, But what precisely is non-self?

Body, Rādhā, is non-self, feeling is non-self, perception is non-self, the inner complexes are non-self, consciousness is non-self. Discerning thus, Rādhā...¹⁰

A *sutta* begins by asserting the reality of the self with the term *pahitatto* in a request addressed by a certain bhikkhu to the Buddha that the dhamma may be explained to him in a nutshell, so that he may abide in solitude, diligent, ardent, with a resolute self. The Buddha says:

You must put away desire, bhikkhus, for whatever is non-self.

The bhikkhu replies that he understands, and directed by the Buddha to explain in full what he has just taught briefly, the bhikkhu continues:

Body, Lord, is non-self, I must put away desire for it, feeling Lord, is non-self, I must put away desire for it etc.¹¹

There is a text worthy to be noted because one of the sentences contained in it, if taken out of the context might be thought to teach the doctrine of absolute *anattā*:

How does he regard the body? He regards it as impermanent, not as permanent; as painful not as pleasant; as non-self, not as self. He is disgusted, not delighted. He detaches himself, not attaches himself. He causes it to cease does not cause it to originate. He renounces it, does not cling to it. Regarding it as impermanent, he abandons the idea permanence. Regarding it as painful, he abandons the idea of happiness. Regarding it as non-self, he abandons the idea of the self. Feeling disgusted, he abandons delight. Detaching himself, he abandons attachment. Making it to cease, he abandons origination. Renouncing it, he abandons clinging.¹²

We have here the sentence, *anattato anupassanto attasaññam pajahati*. From the context it is evident that the idea of the self that is abandoned here is that which identifies the body with the self or sees any kind of ontological relation between

the body and the self. Therefore the sentence will have the following meaning, regarding the body as non-self, he abandons the idea of the self. Regarding the body, Nevertheless, I think that such and similar sentence played an important role in establishing as indisputable the doctrine of absolute *anattā*, specially when they were isolated from their context and given an absolute value.

Regarding the *khandhas* as non-self is the way to arahantship and salvation:

Regarding the *khandhas* as impermanent, as painful, as non-self (*anattato*).

Casting away all the *āsavas*, I attained arahantship. ¹³

We may remind ourselves once more of what we have called the fallacy of absolute *anattā*, if there is nothing else in man but the *khandhas*, who is there to be freed from the body, and from feeling, and from perception, and from the inner complexes, and from consciousness? And if the *khandhas*, which constitute only the empirical man, are called the *non-self*, in man, who else can be left there to be freed from them but the self?

2. The senses, sensorial objects, etc.... are *anattā*

The senses and their objects are non-self and originate from what is non-self:

The eye, *bhikkhus*, is non-self. And whatever is the reason, whatever is the condition for the arising of the eye is also non-self. Being produced from non-self. How can the eye, *bhikkhus*, be the self? [the same applies to the other senses].¹⁴

The *sutta* concludes with the stock passage of one who so considering the senses (or their objects) becomes disgusted with them, detaches himself from them and is ultimately liberated.

Whatever, *bhikkhus*, is non-self, you ought to get rid of desire, of attachment, of desire and attachment for it. And what, *bhikkhus*, is non-self? The eye, *bhikkhus* is non-self, you ought to get rid of desire, of attachment, of desire and attachment for it, etc.¹⁵

Finally we have the most comprehensive texts where the senses, their objects, sensorial consciousness, etc., are declared to be *anattā*:

I shall, *bhikkhus*, teach you a method conducive to *nibbāna*. Listen to it, reflect upon it in your minds, I am going to speak. And, of what kind, *bhikkhus*, is the method conducive to *nibbāna*? Herein, *bhikkhus*, a *bhikkhu* regards the eye as

non-self, regards visual forms as non-self, regards visual consciousness as non-self, regards the eye's sensorial contact as non-self. And whatever feeling, be it either pleasant or unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant arising dependent on this sensorial contact of the eye, that also he regards as non-self.... [The same applies to the rest of the senses.]¹⁶

The consideration of the sense, their objects, etc. as non-self is the way to getting rid of the heretical; view that identifies the self with the senses, etc. (*sakkāyadi~~tti~~hi*)

How knowing, how seeing, Lord is the heretical notion of the self (*attānudi~~tti~~hi*) cast away?

Knowing and seeing the eye, bhikkhus, as non-self, the heretical view of the self (*attānudi~~tti~~hi*) is cast away. The same applies to visible forms, to visual consciousness, to visual contact, to feelings arising from such sensorial contact. All this applies, too, to all the other senses.¹⁷

3. The elements are *anattā*

The elements in this passage are said to be six: earth, water, fire, air, space and viññāṇa. This is the most, comprehensive list of element found in the nikāyas and proof of its lateness, as it has already been indicated.

How knowing, how seeing, the mind of such a man, being detached from these six elements, is freed from the āsavas?

I approached, reverend one, the earth element as non-self. I did not approach the self as founded on the earth element. And whatever obstinacy, prejudice and bias of mind due to clinging and attachment based on the earth element, by their destruction, by detachment from them, by their cessation, by their abandonment by their renunciation, I know that my mind is free, the same is said of the other five elements.¹⁸

This passage contains a remarkable detail which should not be allowed to pass unheeded. The usual way of exposing the *anattā* doctrine in the Nikāyas is reflected in the phrase, I approached, reverend one, the earth element as non-self, (*Pathavīdhātum ahaṃ, āvuso, anattato upagacchim*). The phrase immediately following this one is certainly unusual, I did not approach the self as founded on the earth element (*na ca pathavīdhātunissitam attānam upagacchim*). How can one who speaks in this way be said to be a votary of absolute *anattā*? If it were so he

would equivalently be saying, ‘and I did not approach the self, which is not real, as dependent on the earth element. To put it in a way that became classical in Indian philosophy, this would be equivalent to saying, ‘and I did not approach the horns of a rabbit as dependent on the earth element. What value can have a statement where one emphatically asserts that he does not approach something that is not real as dependent on something real? The correlation established by the contrast of the two phrases demands that if in ‘I approached the earth element as non-self, the earth element so approached is something real, so too in, And I did not approach the self as dependent on the earth element, the self referred to be also real. Our attention is drawn here not only to the elements which are said to be non-self, but also to the self, that ought not be considered in any way dependent on the elements. In short, a man who did not believe in the reality of attā could not have spoken as he speaks here.

There are a number of passages where *anattā* is predicated of many of the things so far mentioned together. Thus:

The Lord taught me *dhamma*, (He taught me) that the *khandhas*, the spheres of sense, the elements, are disgusting, impermanent, painful, non-self (*anattā*).¹⁹

The *Āhuneyyavagga* of the *Aṅguttara* classifies as persons worthy of offerings and gifts and as an unsurpassed field of merit in the world, those who see impermanence, pain, non-self, destruction, decay, cessation, and renunciation in:

- i. The six sense, their objects, their corresponding consciousness, their corresponding contacts.
- ii. Feeling, perception, intentions, craving, reflection (*vitakka*), deliberations (*vicāra*), sprung from every one of the sensorial contacts.
- iii. The aggregates or *khandhas*²⁰

In the texts so far surveyed we see that the scope of the *anattā* statements coincides with the scope of the texts reviewed in this first chapter where the doctrine of *anattā* was propounded through the denial of positive terms. Here as there, the *anattā* doctrine is never exposed as purely mental exercise, as a theory maintained solely on theoretical grounds, but as a necessary condition for detachment and liberation. But the question keeps recurring to the mind every time one reads about detachment and liberation. Whose liberation? One thing is clear, the liberation showed as an ideal in the Nikāyas is ‘liberation from the non-self. Then who else

can be liberated but he self? *Ānattā* comes very often in a series with *anicca* and *dukkha*. And the partisans of absolute *anattā* would make us hold that while one can abhor what is impermanent and painful because he aspires, in the most natural way and without any trace of conceit, what is permanent and brings happiness, one should abhor the non-self, precisely because it is the non-self, without there being reality a counter part to the non-self that can be no other but the self. It has been remarked more than once that there is polarity set forth in the nikāyas between *attā* and *anattā* and the reality of the latter demands the reality of the former otherwise many of the things we read in the sacred texts will make very little sense, if any. The incompatibility between *attā* and *anattā* in every man is an incompatibility between two realities, the conflict between them is a real conflict, and the solution of the conflict by the return of the self to the isolation from the non-self that is due to it by its own nature is also a real one.

References:

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2. Khuddakanikāya, vol I, p. 386
3. Saḷāyatanaśaṃyutta, Saṃyuttanikāya, vol IV, p. 3
4. Ibid, pp.151-152
5. Khuddakanikāya, vol II, p. 380
6. Mahāmālukiyaśutta, Majjhimanikāya, vol II, p. 118
7. Nidānaśaṃyutta, Saṃyuttanikāya, vol II, pp. 94-95
8. Mahātaṇhāsaṅkheyyaśutta, Majjhimanikāya, vol II, p. 338
9. Khandhaśaṃyutta, Saṃyuttanikāya, vol II, pp. 258-259
10. Rādhaśaṃyutta, Saṃyuttanikāya, vol II, p. 409
11. Khandhaśaṃyutta, Saṃyuttanikāya, vol II, p. 305
12. Khuddakanikāya, vol V, p. 206
13. Khuddakanikāya, vol VII, p. 253
14. Saḷāyatanaśaṃyutta, Saṃyuttanikāya, vol IV, p. 119

15. Ibid, p. 136
16. Ibid, p. 122
17. Ibid, p.134
18. Chabbisodhanasutta, Majjhimanikāya, vol II, p. 95
19. Apadāna, Vol. II, p.238