


The Buddha's No-Self Argument: A Drastic Emendation

Ferenc RUZSA

Abstract: The first part of the Buddha's second sermon, "The Characteristic of No Self", is extremely problematic. It does not fit the cultural context, philosophically it is silly, it does not agree with the Buddha's central doctrines, and it contradicts the second part of the same short text. Moving a single word ("not") up a sentence we get a clear and coherent argument; this must have been the original text. The Chinese version corroborates this. This particular type of corruption shows that here we have something exceptionally rare: a demonstrably verbatim quotation from the Buddha himself.

Keywords: *Anātma-lakṣaṇa-sūtra*, philosophical analysis, early misunderstanding, authenticity, Chinese version correct

Ferenc Ruzsa, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary; ruzsa.ferenc@btk.elte.hu;

 0000-0001-5893-9748



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The Buddha seems to have been a learned, sharp, deep and consistent thinker. Obviously, not all his disciples were equally well equipped. They did not always fully grasp his more unusual arguments. Over the generations of oral transmission much must have been lost, and much came to be distorted. Most Buddhist texts were committed to writing only some three centuries after the master's passing away around 400 BCE. Still, by comparing different accounts in the Pali Canon and in other traditions and languages (Sanskrit and Chinese being the most important), we can reasonably reconstruct quite a lot for the age of emperor Aśoka, the middle of the 3rd century BCE.

Beyond that point we can reach only tentatively through philological and philosophical analysis. This is shaky, but because the original comes from an intelligent and systematic teacher, we can often credibly correct the traditional text into something more meaningful and consistent with the rest of the old doctrine. Unfortunately, this is not the case with the argument analysed here: it is basically isolated in the Pali Canon, so no consistency check is possible. I can only say that it seems to be more meaningful after the emendation suggested.

This emendation is, however, unusually brutal – it reverses the flow of the argument. In the text, we have: “If it were A, then it would be B; but since it is not A, it is *not* B.” After the suggested relocation of the negative particle, the argument will be: “If it were A, then it would *not* be B; but since it is not A, it is B”.

The sermon on no self

The argument analysed is “the first *anātman* teaching”¹ in the *Anātma-lakṣaṇa-sūtra* (Discourse on the Characteristic of Nonself), the Buddha's second sermon, on hearing which his first five disciples became enlightened. It is considered an extremely important *sūtra*, surpassed only by the first sermon, *Dharma-cakra-pravartana-sūtra* (The Turning of the Wheel of Law). In Bhikkhu BODHI's translation (2000: 901–903), the whole text runs as follows:

[T]he Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus² of the group of five thus: [...]

“Bhikkhus, form is nonself. For if, bhikkhus, 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.’”

¹ In the terminology of WYNNE (2009b) *An-ātman* is usually rendered as “no-self” or “nonself”. In this paper, although most texts analysed are in Pali, I will use the “non-sectarian” Sanskrit terms.

² Pali *bhikkhu*, Sanskrit *bhikṣu*, “mendicant” is a Buddhist monk.

“Feeling is nonself... Perception is nonself... Volitional formations are nonself... Consciousness is nonself. For if, bhikkhus, consciousness were self, this consciousness would not lead to affliction, and it would be possible to have it of consciousness: ‘Let my consciousness be thus; let my consciousness not be thus.’ But because consciousness is nonself, consciousness leads to affliction, and it is not possible to have it of consciousness: ‘Let my consciousness be thus; let my consciousness not be thus.’

“What do you think, bhikkhus, is form permanent or impermanent?” – “Impermanent, venerable sir.” – “Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?” – “Suffering, venerable sir.” – “Is what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine, this I am, this is my self’?” – “No, venerable sir.”

“Is feeling permanent or impermanent?... Is perception permanent or impermanent?... Are volitional formations permanent or impermanent?... Is consciousness permanent or impermanent?” – “Impermanent, venerable sir.” – “Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?” – “Suffering, venerable sir.” – “Is what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine, this I am, this is my self’?” – “No, venerable sir.”

“Therefore, bhikkhus, any kind of form whatsoever, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, all form should be seen as it really is with correct wisdom thus: ‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’

“Any kind of feeling whatsoever... Any kind of perception whatsoever... Any kind of volitional formations whatsoever... Any kind of consciousness whatsoever, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, all consciousness should be seen as it really is with correct wisdom thus: ‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’

“Seeing thus, bhikkhus, the instructed noble disciple experiences revulsion towards form, revulsion towards feeling, revulsion towards perception, revulsion towards volitional formations, revulsion towards consciousness. Experiencing revulsion, he becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion [his mind] is liberated. When it is liberated there comes the knowledge: ‘It’s liberated.’ He understands: ‘Destroyed is birth, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more for this state of being.’”

Here, as in most texts discussing the no-self theory, the conceptual framework is the standard Buddhist anthropology. According to this, a person is made up

of five constituents, *skandhas*.³ These are *rūpa*, *vedanā*, *saṃjñā*, *saṃskāras* and *viññāna*, roughly corresponding to body, sensation, percept, imprints and cognition. In the above translation they were given as form, feeling, perception, volitional formations and consciousness.

The texts keep on repeating that the *skandhas* are not the self. The wording is slightly ambiguous; on first reading it seems that five different views are rejected, like “the body is the self” (a materialist position) or “cognition is the self” (Descartes’ approach). This is not very probable: who would ever hold that “the self is the percept” (e.g. my internal image of the computer I am working on right now)? And there are cases where the same person affirms all five at the same time.⁴ Therefore the real meaning must be that none of the five *skandhas*, nor any combination of them is (or is part of) the self.

Keeping this in mind, we can summarise the *sūtra* as follows, marking the first *anātmāna* teaching as (1) and the second as (2):

The *skandhas* are not the Self.

(1) For if the *skandhas* were the Self, they would not lead to affliction, and it would be possible to have it of them: “Let them be thus; let them not be thus.” But because the *skandhas* are not the Self, they lead to affliction, and it is not possible to have it of them: “Let them be thus; let them not be thus”.

(2) The *skandhas* are impermanent and therefore they are suffering. They are subject to change. So they are not fit to be regarded thus: “This is mine, this I am, this is my Self.”

All *skandhas* (whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near) should be seen as they really are with correct wisdom thus: “This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my Self.”

Seeing thus, the instructed noble disciple gets disenchanted with the *skandhas*, and so he becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion he gets liberated.

³ *Skandha*, lit. “trunk” is regularly translated as “aggregate”, although this seems to be a later understanding. The original meaning was perhaps something like “major part”. Although the term is early and universally used, the Buddha himself probably did not use this word in this meaning; it may have been Śāriputra who first did so.

⁴ E.g. Saccaka Aggivessana in the *Cūḷa-saccaka-sutta* (MN 35) discussed below: *Ahañ hi, bho Gotama, evaṃ vadāmi – ‘rūpaṃ me attā, vedanā me attā, saññā me attā, saṅkhārā me attā, viññāṇaṃ me attā’ ti.* “Gotama, I do say so: ‘Body is my self, sensation is my self, percept is my self, imprints are my self, cognition is my self.’” (Unless explicitly stated otherwise, translations are by the author.)

The first *anātman* teaching

It is apparent that the first *anātman* teaching contains two arguments:

The *skandhas* are not the Self, because:

(1a) If the *skandhas* were the Self, they would not lead to affliction. But because the *skandhas* are not the Self, they lead to affliction.

(1b) If the *skandhas* were the Self, it would be possible to have it of them: “Let them be thus; let them not be thus.” But because the *skandhas* are not the Self, it is not possible to have it of them: “Let them be thus; let them not be thus.”

The first argument seems fairly clear at first. The self must be selfish: I do what I like, what is good to me; I do not harm myself. This seems logical, although somewhat naive – especially in the Indian ascetic tradition, where torturing oneself is what the best and wisest people do.

In fact, as we can see from the second *anātman* teaching, the Buddha is not arguing against a psychological concept of self – he is rejecting a very specific metaphysical idea. “Is what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine, this I am, this is my Self’?” The idea attacked is that there is an eternal Self in us and it is essentially joyful. As in the Vedānta tradition, where the unchanging Self is called *sac-cid-ānanda*, “existent, consciousness and happiness”. This kind of Self I am spelling with a capital “S”. Of this Self it is analytically true (true by definition) that

- it is eternal, undecaying and unchanging;
- it is blissful: it is not a source of pain or suffering.

In all his no-self arguments the Buddha (in contrast to some later Buddhists) never addresses the question of whether the common-sense or psychological notion of “I” or “self” is useful, realistic and correct or not. What he says is only that there is no eternal, unchanging and inherently blissful substance in us that could somehow correspond to our subjectivity and personal identity.

On this understanding, the first argument is solid. The *skandhas* can be sources of various kinds of suffering – your body, when you have a toothache; sensation, when you hear extremely loud music; percept, when you see something horrible in a film; imprints, when a childhood trauma prevents you from being happy in a particular way; and cognition (mind, thinking) when you think of your bleak future. So the *skandhas* cannot be the essentially blissful Self.

The argument from control

Argument (1b) is, however, quite problematic. It is often called the “argument from lack of control”. As Bhikkhu BODHI (2000: 1066–1067) summarised it in his note to the translation given above, it

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. For a fuller presentation of this argument, see MN I 230–33.⁵

Now both parts of the argument are unconvincing. The factual premise that I cannot control my *skandhas* is not true, and the supposed rule that my self must be under my control is anything but evident.

As for the first, I can control my body – stand up, take a walk etc.; my sensations – closing my eye; my percepts – looking away; the activity of my imprints – voluntarily recalling a pleasant memory; and my cognition by thinking of something else. This is obvious, so probably the idea is that I cannot change my *skandhas*, I can only control their activity. But even that is not true. I can modify my body through diet or exercise, my imprints in therapy or through meditation, my cognition by learning.

We could try to understand “control” in the sense of “absolute and unlimited control”, and then the statement would be true: I cannot fly and I cannot change my body into a squirrel. However, the wording of the text makes it extremely improbable. “It is not possible to have it of the *skandhas*: ‘Let them be thus; let them not be thus’.” It is categorical denial, the sentence cannot mean that “It is not always possible”.

It seems that we are left with only one possible interpretation: “I cannot change my *skandhas* by mere volition, by simply wishing it.” Although this is not explicit in the text, at least it does not contradict the text. And it is a true statement.

Self and control

The second part of argument (1b), the underlying assumption that my self is under my control, at first sight may appear quite reasonable. I am that part of the world which is under my direct, immediate control. However, in this sense I do control the *skandhas*, and of course we would say that they are parts of me.

⁵ The reference is to the *Cūḷa-saccaka-sutta* (MN 35) discussed below.

If, on the other hand, we understand “control” as deduced above, we get the improbable idea that “my self is what I can change by mere volition”. I think that no philosopher and no religion ever shared this concept. Many would choose the opposite view: the self is not what can be controlled – the self is the controller. The self is what gives us our identity; it is the stable, unchanging core. Not something that could be changed by a mere wish.⁶

More importantly, this “control” requirement presupposes that the self can be changed, therefore it is not an unchanging entity. And it directly contradicts the analytical truth reconstructed above from the second *anātman* teaching that the Self is eternal, undecaying and unchanging.

Perhaps we have made a mistake in this lengthy and complicated analysis? No. Let us have another look directly at the text itself. There is only one line omitted here between the two paragraphs quoted:

“But because consciousness is nonself [...] it is not possible to have it of consciousness: ‘Let my consciousness be thus; let my consciousness not be thus.’ [...]”

“Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?” – “Suffering, venerable sir.” – “Is what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine, this I am, this is my self’?” – “No, venerable sir.”

(BODHI 2000: 902)

The contradiction is there. Something is nonself, because I cannot change it – what is subject to change is not my self. The self must be unchanging and at the same time changeable by me.

If, however, we look at the original, we may resolve the contradiction. “Subject to change” is in Pali *vipariṇāma-dhamma*,⁷ “by nature changing to the worse”, “necessarily decaying”. This makes it theoretically possible that the Buddha is here arguing against a Self that is

- eternal, undecaying (and, perhaps, nothing else can change it);
- blissful, not a source of pain or suffering;
- can change itself by willing it.

⁶ This was clearly elaborated in KUAN (2009: 162–163).

⁷ In the Sanskrit versions, *vipariṇāma-dharmin* (*Saṅgha-bheda-vastu* and *Catuṣ-pariṣat-sūtra*) meaning the same, and *vipariṇāma-virāga-nirodhatā*, “changing to the worse, fading and ceasing” (*Mahā-vastu*); see WYNNE (2009a: 64–65). In the Chinese SĀ 33 and 34, it is *biànyì fǎ* 變易法, translated as “a changing dhamma” (SMITH 2001) or “dharma, easily subject to change” (PIERQUET 2010–2016); but in fact, it is just a literal rendering of the Pali expression, *biànyì* “change” + *fǎ* “dharma”. “Easily changing dharmas” would be *yìbiàn fǎ* 易變法; I thank Gábor Kósa for the last remark.

This is a coherent idea, corresponding to an eternal and free soul. Many people believe in an immortal soul and many believe in the possibility of change: I can decide to be a better person, and if I truly want it, I will make it.

Can the Buddha be denying the “self changing self” position?

The solution reached above is still unconvincing, for several reasons. First, we know of no Indian tradition that held this view. It seems that in Indian philosophy it came to be generally accepted that a changing entity is perishable, so all eternal things must be essentially unchangeable. In any case, we never hear of the position that “the Self is eternal, but it can change itself by willing it”. Why would the Buddha argue against a position that no-one held? – We could, however, think that he is just attacking a popular concept, the belief in an immortal and free soul.

The second, fairly interesting problem is that the position here rejected is exactly that of standard Buddhism. Of course, no Buddhist calls this undecaying, blissful, free entity “Self” – that would be heresy. But most Buddhists hold that we all have the Buddha-nature in us (although different traditions use different names for it), and once we reach *nirvāṇa*, it becomes manifest. A person in *nirvāṇa*, an *arhat* or *buddha*, is free from suffering and he is practically omnipotent: he can fly, take whatever form he pleases, can go anywhere in the blink of an eye, even to the highest heaven. So, he can actually change all his *skandhas*. This is not a fatal objection, if somebody thinks (as the present author firmly believes) that all the wondrous aspects of Buddhism are later additions, not the teaching of the master himself.

The third objection is serious. No-one believes in a self that is free to change itself into anything by merely wishing it. Even God cannot change himself into a non-god: he cannot simply resign. If the Buddha is attacking here a position worth attacking, a position that at least some people accept, then this freedom is not absolute. Realistically it can mean only that I can change myself within limits, and often it needs willpower, much effort and practice.

But the Buddha cannot be denying this – for it is not only true, but, more importantly, this is the central tenet of Buddhism. Suffering is universal, but you can get rid of it. By practicing Buddhism, you can reach liberation. Our text actually ends by saying that understanding this doctrine leads to liberation – and that is quite a significant change. So, if we accepted this interpretation, the Buddha would say: “Understanding that you have no power to change yourself, you can change yourself.” This is mystical, perhaps it could nicely fit into the *prajñā-pāramitā-sūtras* or a Zen *kōan*, but it is not like the Buddha.

The emendation

We have tried all we could do to produce a coherent and reasonable interpretation that fits the Buddha's teaching, and failed. Once we got to this point, there are few possibilities left.

The Buddha, of course, may be mistaken: to err is human. However, this is an extremely important sermon and the topic, the *anātman* doctrine, is central to the Buddha's teaching. This is basically the only clear metaphysical tenet he had. He talked about it quite often, so he must have thought it over really carefully. This is where we would least expect a silly mistake.

It is also possible that our text is composite, which is quite frequently the case with the old *sūtras*. Then the first and the second *anātman* teachings do not belong together, they had originally entirely different contexts, so they cannot be interpreted together, as we have done. This is again improbable, for two reasons. The first *anātman* teaching never occurs in other contexts; and even without any context it is quite implausible. Why would anyone accept that "the self (if it existed) could be changed in a way the *skandhas* cannot"?

It seems we are left only with the weird option, an emendation not supported by any text in the whole Pali canon. What I am proposing is that we emend the argument by moving a single "not" from the second sentence to the first. The argument in the texts:

(1b) If the *skandhas* were the Self, it would be possible to have it of them: "Let them be thus; let them not be thus". But because the *skandhas* are not the Self, it is NOT possible to have it of them: "Let them be thus; let them not be thus".

is now changed to:

(1b') If the *skandhas* were the Self, it would NOT be possible to have it of them: "Let them be thus; let them not be thus". But because the *skandhas* are not the Self, it is possible to have it of them: "Let them be thus; let them not be thus".

The emended version says just the opposite to what our texts say. And, unsurprisingly, because (1b) seemed untenable, its opposite, (1b') is convincing, even can be understood as an analytical truth.

The straightforward meaning of (1b') fits the context perfectly. "An eternal Self would be unchanging. But you can control and change the *skandhas*, so they cannot be the Self, and they cannot be parts of it." This fits the Indian scenery also. Not only classical Vedānta, but already the earliest Upaniṣads clearly formulate the idea of the unchanging self. "It is always the same [...] That is

Ātman,”⁸ says Uddālaka Āruṇi. Similarly in the Sāṃkhya philosophy, change (*pariṇāma*) is the characteristic of matter only, contrasting with soul (*puruṣa*). And it can be shown that both Āruṇi and Sāṃkhya are earlier than the Buddha, who, in fact, knew both teachings (RUZSA 2017: 169–170).

But even without the present context of the second *anātman* teaching that stipulates that the Self must be unchanging, (1b') is meaningful and seems to suggest a philosophically interesting insight: “the essence or self of something is that part of it that remains the same when the thing changes.” This seems to agree well with our intuition. On this definition, it becomes a logical truth that the self cannot change. It is meaningless to say, let my self be this or that. It is meaningless to say, “I want to be Einstein”. I may want to have his genius, his career or his looks, but I cannot want to be him. If God tried to fulfil this wish, somebody looking on may superficially say: “He has turned into Einstein”, but that would be false. That would not be *me*. What happened is that God annihilated me and created a replica of Einstein in the same place.

Then it seems advisable to modify the translation as well:

(1b'') If the *skandhas* were the Self, it would not be possible to wish with respect to them: “Let them be thus; let them not be thus”. But because the *skandhas* are not the Self, it is possible to wish with respect to them: “Let them be thus; let them not be thus”.

This translation is actually more literal than Bhikkhu Bodhi's, who tried to translate in a way that fits the “lack of control” interpretation. The Pali is *labbhetha ca rūpe – “evaṃ me rūpaṃ hotu, evaṃ me rūpaṃ mā ahoṣī” ti*. Such quotations without a verb defining their role in the context (or preceded by the copula + Genitive of person) with the particle *ti* normally mean that the person thinks, knows, wishes or decides it – and not, that he performs it. When he does perform it, it is regularly repeated in the next sentence without the *ti*-construction. Since the English idiom requires a verb, I added above “to wish”, according to the content of the quoted sentence, “let it be so”. But instead of “to wish”, we could also understand here “to think or to say”.

Philological considerations

The *Anātma-lakṣaṇa-sūtra* has two copies in the Pali Canon: an isolated text in the *Samyutta-nikāya*, the *Anatta-lakkhaṇa-sutta* (SN 22.59), and a discourse embedded into the narrative of the Buddha's acts after his enlightenment in the *Mahā-vagga* part of the *Vinaya*, the collection of books on the monastic

⁸ *tac chaśvat saṃvartate. [...] sa ātmā. Chāndogya-Upaniṣad* 6, 13, 2–3 (OLIVELLE 1998: 254). Translation by HUME (1921: 248).

order (Vin. I.13–14). It also has a lengthy elaboration in a different setting, in a discourse with the non-Buddhist Saccaka; that will be discussed in the next section.

As could be expected with such an important topic, the second *anātman* teaching recurs extremely frequently in the Canon. The characteristic expression “This is mine, this I am, this is my self” and its negation occur 347 times.⁹ In contrast, the first *anātman* teaching is found only in the texts mentioned in the previous paragraph and in a direct quotation from the *Anatta-lakkhaṇa-sutta* in the *Cūḷa-niddesa*.¹⁰ This rare occurrence cannot be accidental – it seems that the transmitters of the tradition were not comfortable with the argument, and, as we have seen, they had reason to be so.

Also in Sanskrit we find the first *anātman* teaching only in the *Vinaya* accounts of the Buddha's life.¹¹ In all these versions the logic of argument (1b) is that of the Pali, although most try to rectify somewhat the awkward sentence suggesting the falsehood “it is not possible to wish with respect to the body ‘let my body be thus, let my body not be thus’.”¹² Already the *Cūḷa-niddesa* clarifies that it is not the wish that is impossible but to realise it, introducing the argument with “Mastery over form is not possible”.¹³ The *Sanḅha-bheda-vastu* and the *Catuṣ-pariṣat-sūtra* simply change the grammatical case of *rūpa* “body” from Locative to Genitive, resulting in a sentence plausibly meaning “it is not possible for the body that it should be thus, it should not be thus”.¹⁴ The *Mahāvastu* keeps the Locative, but changes the expression to “fulfilling one's wish does not succeed here – let my body be thus, let my body be not thus.”¹⁵

⁹ *Etaṃ mama, eso 'ham asmi, eso me attā* 156 times, and *N'etaṃ mama, n' eso ham asmi, na m' eso attā* 191 times.

¹⁰ Nidd II p. 278, commenting upon “*Suññato lokaṃ avekkhassu*” (“Regard the world as empty”) in the *Mogharāja-māṇava-pucchā*. This is the only place where we find the first *anātman* teaching without the second. – The *Cūḷa-niddesa* is in fact a commentary (that somehow came to be regarded as canonical) on two chapters of the canonical *Sutta-nipāta*.

¹¹ These have been conveniently collected and partially translated in WYNNE (2009a: 64–66 and 2009b: 85–86); I will quote these texts from him. There are some unpublished Sanskrit fragments and a Gāndhārī version of the *Anātma-lakṣaṇa-sūtra* (ALLON 2007: 15; 2014: 23, mentioning several Chinese parallels as well). ALLON (2020) published the Gāndhārī version (Senior collection RS 22 no. 2) with careful comparison of the parallels. It matches exactly the Pali text in all the relevant details.

¹² *Na ca labbhati rūpe – “evaṃ me rūpaṃ hotu, evaṃ me rūpaṃ mā ahoṣī” ti* (*Anatta-lakkhaṇa-sutta*).

¹³ BODHI (2017: 1310). *Rūpe vāso na labbhati, [...] (Nidd II p. 278).*

¹⁴ *Na ca labhyate rūpasya “evaṃ me (rūpaṃ) bhavatu, evaṃ mā bhūd” iti* (WYNNE 2009b: 86).

¹⁵ *Na cātra ṛdhyatī kāma-kārikatā: evaṃ me rūpaṃ bhavatu, evaṃ mā bhavatu* (WYNNE 2009b: 85). (In the parallel previous sentence, we find *rūpe* in place of *atra*.)

The Pali commentaries, as well as modern translators and interpreters all follow this approach and read (1b) as an argument from lack of control. The sole exception is Tse-fu KUAN (2009: 169–170), who notices that the Chinese parallels differ significantly.

There are two Chinese versions of the *Anātma-lakṣaṇa-sūtra*, both in the *Samyukta-āgama*: no. 33 entitled “No self”, and no. 34, “The five monks”.¹⁶ The two variants are very close to each other, differing in a single character in the sentences we are interested in.¹⁷ In these texts, argument (1b) reads thus:

If material form were Self, [...] it should not [be possible to] intend with regard to material form thus: “Let it be thus; let it not be thus”. Because material form is without Self, [...] it is possible to intend with regard to material form thus: “Let it be thus; let it not be thus”.¹⁸

This agrees exactly with our final emendation, (1b’). The whole argument seems to match word by word the Pali text, except for the transposition of the word “not”. Therefore, we can assume that there were two traditions of the argument, (1b) found in more versions, (1b’) surviving only in these two Chinese

¹⁶ SĀ 33 (Taishō vol. II no. 99 pp. 7b–7c) *Fēi wǒ* 非我, and SĀ 34 (Taishō vol. II no. 99 pp. 7c–8a) *Wú bǐqū* 五比丘. There are two other, somewhat more distant parallels (SĀ 86, “Impermanence” and SĀ 87, “Suffering”). Although they would further corroborate our findings, at the same time they would make the flow of argument even more complicated, therefore they will not be analysed here.

¹⁷ SĀ 33 has *bù yīng yú sè yù* 不應於色欲 “should not wish about form”, while in SĀ 34 we read *bù dé yú sè yù* 不得於色欲 “not possible to wish about form”, both clearly corresponding to the (emended) Pali: [*na*] *labbhettha rūpe* – “...” *ti*, “it would not be possible to wish about form”.

¹⁸ KUAN (2009: 169), translating SĀ 33. The original is: *Ruò sè shì wǒ zhě, [...] bù yīng yú sè yù lìng rú shì, bù lìng rú shì. Yǐ sè wú wǒ gù, [...] dé yú sè yù lìng rú shì, bù lìng rú shì.* 若色是我者, [...] 不應於色欲令如是、不令如是。以色無我故, [...] 得於色欲令如是、不令如是。ANĀLAYO’s rendering (2014: 4) is very close: “If bodily form were the self, [...] there should not be the wish for bodily form to be in this way and not to be in that way. Because bodily form is not self, [...] one gets the wish for bodily form to be in this way and not to be in that way.” SMITH (2001) also mostly agrees: “If form were self, then [...] it ought not [happen that one would] want form to be like this and it not be like that. Form is not self because, [...] it is the case that, regarding form, one wants it to be like this and it is not like that.” Similarly PATTON (2024): “If form were self, [...] there wouldn’t be these desires about form: ‘Let it be so; let it not be so.’ Because form has no self, [...] these desires become possible: ‘Let it be so; let it not be so.’”

PIERQUET (2010–2016), translating SĀ 34, tries to recreate the logic of the Pali: “If form existed as a self, then [...]. Regarding form, it is also not possible to cause it to be like this, or not like this, because form is not oneself. [...] one also grasps the desire to make form like this, or not like this.” The effort is quite valiant, but the result is impossible for several reasons. E.g. you cannot translate identical phrases (*dé yú sè yù* 得於色欲, first with *bù* 不 “not” prefixed) completely differently – first “Regarding form, it is not possible to cause it to be”, then “one grasps the desire to make form”.

translations. Since we found (1b) very problematic, while (1b'') is quite plausible, we could rest assured that (1b'') is original, while (1b) is an early corruption.¹⁹

The discourse with Saccaka

There is a serious objection to our reconstruction. In a *sūtra* of the *Majjhima-nikāya*, “The Shorter Discourse to Saccaka” (MN 35), argument (1b) is presented in a form and context that makes it impossible to emend it to (1b'').

The Buddha had a public debate with Saccaka Aggivessana,²⁰ a *nirgrantha*.²¹ What follows is a heavily compressed version of their discussion,²² with arguments (1b) and (2) marked; [B] stands for the Buddha, [S] for Saccaka:

[B:] “This is how my instruction is usually presented to my disciples: ‘Bhikkhus, the *skandhas* are impermanent, the *skandhas* are not self.’”

[S:] “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, a person has the *skandhas* as self, and based upon the *skandhas* he produces merit or demerit. I assert thus, Master Gotama: ‘The *skandhas* are my self.’”

[B:] “What do you think, Aggivessana? Would a head-anointed noble king exercise the power in his own realm to execute those who should

¹⁹ Tse-fu Kuan also thought that the Chinese version is closer than the Pali to the Buddha's thinking, but for very different reasons. Although translating as quoted above: “it should not [be possible to] intend”, he interpreted it as Anālayo's rendering suggests: “there should not be the wish”. “[T]he essential characteristic of ‘selfhood’ [is] being an autonomous entity [...] If something is an autonomous entity, it can always be the way that it wishes to be, and therefore it is permanent and happy” (KUAN 2009: 170). This is but a slight variation on the “lack of control” interpretation that says: “the Self is able to change as it wishes”, while Kuan's Chinese would say: “the Self can always be the way that it wishes to be, therefore it is pointless to wish it otherwise”. Kuan does notice the difference between the Chinese and Pali versions, but he does not see that the Chinese is the exact opposite of the Pali. He thinks that “[t]his argument in SĀ 33 is also found in the above sūtra 10 of Chapter 37 of the *Ekottarika-āgama*” (KUAN 2009: 170), but there we find only the argument from lack of control (“even an emperor will grow old”).

On the other hand, the interpretation proposed here understands the self as the source of identity. It is *sensu stricto* meaningless to wish “let the self change”, for “change” is “becoming different”, i.e. “becoming non-identical” – therefore the wish would be “let the identical become non-identical”, a plain self-contradiction.

²⁰ This is the Pali name. In Sanskrit, Sātyaki is found (ANĀLAYO 2011: I.233), while Aggivessana seems to correspond to Āgñiveśyāyana.

²¹ Usually understood as a Jaina, but this is far from clear, see KUAN (2009: 163–166).

²² Compressed from the translation by ÑĀNAMOLI and BODHI (2009: 324–327).

be executed, to fine those who should be fined, and to banish those who should be banished?”

[S:] “Yes. He would exercise it, Master Gotama, and he would be worthy to exercise it.”

(1b) [B:] “What do you think, Aggivessana? When you say thus: ‘The *skandhas* are my self,’ do you exercise any such power over those *skandhas* as to say: ‘Let my *skandhas* be thus; let my *skandhas* not be thus’?”

[S:] “No, Master Gotama.”

[B:] “Pay attention, Aggivessana, pay attention how you reply! What you said afterwards does not agree with what you said before, nor does what you said before agree with what you said afterwards.

(2) What do you think, Aggivessana, are the *skandhas* permanent or impermanent?”

[S:] “Impermanent, Master Gotama.”

[B:] “Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?”

[S:] “Suffering, Master Gotama.”

[B:] “Is what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine, this I am, this is my self’?”

[S:] “No, Master Gotama.”

Here the discussion clearly centres around lack of control: “do you exercise any such power over those *skandhas* as to say...” (*vattati te tasmim rūpe* [etc.] *vaso – [...] ti*). And this is strongly corroborated by the contrasting example of the king, who does have power over his realm.

The text is unambiguous, and it is perfectly resistant to the emendation suggested. However, it can be shown to be unauthentic. First of all, it is bordering on the meaningless. Saccaka, a famous expert debater is shown to be silenced by an altogether irrelevant example: “The *skandhas* are not your self, for you have no power over them like a king has over his realm.” Since a king’s realm is not his self, the example must be about possession: *his* realm, *your* self. But the genitive case has many-many senses,²³ so this argument is as strong as this: “Your grandfather is not *your* grandfather, for you cannot sell him like *your* car.”

Let us suppose that Saccaka overlooked this fault. But the contrast implied simply does not exist: the king has *no* power to make his realm as he wishes;

²³ As it was famously well known in India: *Ṣaṣṭhī śeṣe* (Pāṇini 2.3.50, in SHARMA 2002: 153), “In all other cases the Genitive should be used” (translation mine).

while Saccaka *does* have the power to cut off from his body what needs to be cut off (his nails) and to expel what needs to be expelled (when emptying his bowels).

Philology attests to the simile of the king being interpolated here, for in another *sūtra*²⁴ king Prasenajit uses exactly these words, fully in harmony with the context there: “Being a head-anointed noble king, I am able to have executed those who should be executed, to fine those who should be fined, to banish those who should be banished.” So, this sentence was copied here, changing only “I am able” to “exercises the power in his own realm”, to match the wording of argument (1b).²⁵

There are two Chinese parallels to this text. The *Samyukta-āgama* version²⁶ is quite close to the Pali, a minor addition being that what we deduced above, i.e. that the example of the king must be about possession, is here explicit: “The Buddha said: ‘Aggivessana, whoever is the owner, would he not be totally free to do anything he likes?’ He answered: ‘It is like this, Gotama.’” In the *Ekottarika-āgama* version²⁷ Saccaka starts by asserting that *rūpa* (probably he thinks of “matter”, not “body”) is permanent, and the illustration of the powerful king is meant to refute this: “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?’”

What had happened in the transmission is probably impossible to reconstruct. The simplest story would be that first the corruption from (1b”) to (1b) happened, then somebody trying (unsuccessfully) to make some sense of the implausible (1b) added the simile of the king; then some further effort to make the latter more convincing shows in the two versions preserved in Chinese.

Interestingly, the powers of the kings mentioned differ in the three versions. In the Pali, he has the power to punish justly; in the SĀ, he can punish and reward:

[T]he king of a country [...] in his own country can put to death a man who has committed a crime, or bind him, or expel him, or have him

²⁴ MN 89, *Dhammacetiya-sutta* (Monuments to the Dhamma), translation based on ÑĀNAMOLI and BODHI (2009: 731). – This is not a stock phrase, for it does not occur anywhere else; actually it has some quite unusual forms (*ghātetāya, jāpetāya, pabbājetāya*).

²⁵ The Pali of MN 89 is [A]haṃ [...] rājā khattiyo muddhāvasitto; pahomi ghātetāyaṃ vā ghātetuṃ, jāpetāyaṃ vā jāpetuṃ, pabbājetāyaṃ vā pabbājetuṃ; while our MN 35 reads: Rañño khattiyassa muddhāvasittassa [...] vattati sakasmim vijite vaso ghātetāyaṃ vā ghātetuṃ, jāpetāyaṃ vā jāpetuṃ, pabbājetāyaṃ vā pabbājetuṃ. The change of the wording from pahomi to vattati sakasmim vijite vaso is intended to reflect vattati te tasmim rūpe vaso.

²⁶ SĀ 110 at T II 35a17 to 37b25. For the translation see ANĀLAYO (2015: 58–81).

²⁷ EĀ 37.10 at T II 715c–716c. For the translation of the relevant parts see KUAN (2009: 159–160).

be whipped and his hands and feet cut off; and if someone has done a meritorious deed, [the king can] grant him the gift of an elephant, a horse, a vehicle, a town, or wealth.

(ANĀLAYO 2015: 67)

In the EĀ, the king can punish unjustly: “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” (KUAN 2009: 159).

Let us recall that Saccaka defined the self in karmic terms: “[A] person has the *skandhas* as self, and based upon the *skandhas* he produces merit or demerit” (compressed from ÑĀNAMOLI and BODHI 2009: 325). This is quite parallel to the SĀ king’s giving rewards and punishment. This could suggest that originally the Buddha used the example of the king to show that it is not the *skandhas* that produce karma, for the king does not act personally (with his *skandhas*) but through his subjects. (Also the person receives his due from the king, not from his own *skandhas*). This would also harmonise with the conclusion of the *sūtra* where the Buddha explains that the same physical acts (of giving a gift) have different karmic results according to the person it is given to.

Another karmic interpretation is suggested by the EĀ version – in this case, the Buddha would be denying karmic effectivity:²⁸ you may have done something very meritorious, but the result may be that the tyrannical monarch will have you executed.

So probably it is not the simplest story that comes closest to the truth. Saccaka may have given a (partly) karmic definition of the self, deducing from it that the *skandhas* are the self. The Buddha may have answered with (one or several versions of) the parable of the king, refuting the karmic aspect of the argument, then proceeding with the more general no-self exposition.

Whichever story we prefer, it is clear that the extant versions do not remember very well the logic of the original discourse. Therefore it is quite plausible to suppose that the already standardised (but erroneous) text of the well-known *Anātma-lakṣaṇa-sūtra* was simply inserted here: it is a quotation, not an independently remembered text, so it cannot give more weight to the reading quoted. It shows only what we already know, that the faulty reading (1b) was much more widespread than the probably original (1a”).

²⁸ I have argued elsewhere (RUZSA 2019) that the Buddha – in contrast to most Buddhists – did not accept karmic determination, as it would severely limit human freedom (e.g. to reach *nirvāṇa* in this very life).

Buddha-vacana

Surprisingly, the very error itself proves the unusually high authenticity of the text. For in spite of the corruption making it meaningless, it was so well preserved that with the reposition of a single *na* we got back a meaningful text with a deep philosophical insight. And that is possible only if the text was remembered verbatim. So in all probability in the emended text we have something very rare – the words of the Buddha, *Buddha-vacana*, literally.

Here is a reconstruction of what may have happened. The Buddha after his enlightenment pondered long how to teach; also on his way to Benares he had plenty of time to think over his teaching materials. In a culture without script, the standard method was to use concise memoriter texts with explanations added after the students have learnt the text. This method was used by the Buddha's two teachers, Uddaka Rāmaputta and Āḷāra Kālāma as well.

So the Buddha composed his own summaries to memorize, and they are called now his first two “sermons” or “discourses”: the *Turning of the Wheel of Law* and *The Characteristic of No Self*. For him, the insight that an unchanging self is meaningless was extremely important: this made him leave his masters who tried to show him this self (but he saw nothing).

However, most of his disciples were unable to understand the argument (1b”), so he soon dropped it from the curriculum. That is why the tradition does not remember his explanations on it; but the first few disciples did memorize the text itself, and passed it on, without any exegesis. The complicated logical structure of the counterfactual sentences facilitated the corruption. The original “A – not-B, not-A – B” sequence got smoothed (in a part of the tradition) into “A – B, not-A – not-B”.

The debate with Saccaka happened very early in the Buddha's teaching career. It seems to have been his first attempt to preach in a capital city (Vesālī, capital of the Vajji confederation), and (at least Assaji, one of) his first five disciples were still with him. So it is entirely possible that he still used (1b”).

Later in his life the Buddha perhaps avoided the no-self doctrine altogether, as being really frightening to many in his audiences – while not being necessary for his disciples to reach *nirvāṇa*, true freedom from unhappiness.

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Abbreviations

EĀ	<i>Ekottarika-āgama</i>
MN	<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i>
Nidd II	<i>Cūḷa-niddesa</i>
SĀ	<i>Samyukta-āgama</i>
SN	<i>Samyutta-nikāya</i>
Vin.	<i>Vinaya-piṭaka</i>

Pali texts are quoted from (but numbering and pages given according to the PTS edition): *Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana Tipiṭaka 4.0* (version 4.0.0.15). © 1995 Vipassana Research Institute. Chinese texts are quoted from (but references given according to the Taishō edition): <https://suttacentral.net/>

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