Acta Asiatica Varsoviensia 38 (2025): 55–83
https://doi.org/10.60018/AcAsVa.ddou4623

The Unfolding Logic of the Pali *Anatta-Lakkhaṇa Sutta*, and the Issue of Control

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Abstract: This article explores how the phases of the *Anatta-lakkhaṇa Sutta* relate to each other and to those it is said to have been taught to – ascetics who had just become stream-enterers after being taught the *Dhamma-cakka-ppavattana Sutta.* It is shown not to be about explicitly teaching that "there is no Self" but about inducing a radical letting go of all things taken as "mine", "what I am" and "my Self". As its hearers become arahats, the overcoming of the ingrained but vague "I am" conceit is a key aim of the sutta. The article critiques certain points in Ferenc Ruzsa's analysis of the sutta, especially his argument that the Pali version of it must be inauthentic due to its claim that the *khandha*s are non-Self because they cannot be controlled at will, while what is Self could be controlled at will.

Keywords: *anattā* meaning, *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, the "I am" conceit, Self, asceticism, *dukkha*, "inner controller", the nature of control, *Dhamma-cakka-ppavattana Sutta*, *Khemaka Sutta*, *Cūḷa-saccaka Sutta*

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An earlier issue of this journal contained an article by Ferenc Ruzsa, "The Buddha's no-self argument: A drastic emendation" (Ruzsa 2024). Ruzsa's article develops a careful, interesting and in-itself logical analysis. However, it includes some questionable assumptions, in terms of how the *anattā* teaching operates within the Pali suttas and related texts, and on the type of control and its lack that are relevant to the *anattā* teaching. Hence I wish, in this article, to develop a contrasting interpretation that I see as making better sense of the material discussed in Ruzsa's article.

The teachings in the Pali *Anatta-lakkhaṇa Sutta* (SN 22.59/SN III 66–68) are said in the Vinaya (Vin I 13–14) to have been given by the Buddha to five ascetics after they heard and practised according to his first teaching, the *Dhamma-cakka-ppavattana Sutta*.[1] On hearing the *Anatta-lakkhaṇa* teachings, all five then became arahats.

The key ingredients of these teachings are:[2]

1. "Form, bhikkhus, is non-self (*rūpam bhikkhave anattā*). Now were this form self, it would not tend to affliction (*rūpañ ca bhikkhave attā abhavissa nayidaṃ rūpaṃ ābādhāya saṃvatteyya*). It would be possible to have it of form, 'Let my form be thus; let my form not be thus (*labbhetha ca rūpe Evaṃ me rūpaṃ hotu evaṃ me rūpaṃ mā ahosīti*)'. But inasmuch as form is non-self, therefore it tends to affliction (*Yasmā ca kho bhikkhave rūpam anattā tasmā rūpam ābādhāya saṃvattati*), and it is not possible to have it of form (*na ca labbhati rūpe*): 'Let my form be thus; let my form not be thus.'" After saying this of form (*rūpa*): material form, particularly of one's body, the same is then repeated for the other four *khandha*s, "aggregates" or, perhaps better "bundles", of which a person is comprised: feeling, perception, volitional activities and consciousness.
2. Then it is said for each of the *khandha*s, in turn, "x", "What do you think, bhikkhus, is x permanent or impermanent?" – "Impermanent, venerable sir." – "Is what is impermanent painful or pleasant?" – "Painful, venerable sir." – "Is what is impermanent, painful, and of a nature to change (*Yam panāniccaṃ dukkham vipariṇāmadhammaṃ*) fit to be regarded thus: 'This is mine, this I am, this is my self (*Etam mama eso ham asmi eso me attā ti*)'?" – "No, venerable sir." – "Therefore, bhikkhus, any kind of x whatsoever, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, all x should be seen as it really is with correct wisdom thus: 'This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self (*netam mama neso ham asmi na me so attā ti*).'"

1 SN 56.11/SN V 420–424, Vin I 10–12.

2 Mostly following the translation of Bodhi (2000: 901–903), but with small changes.

3. "Seeing thus, bhikkhus, the instructed noble disciple experiences weary disenchantment (*nibbindati*) with form... feeling … perception … volitional activities … consciousness. Wearily disenchanted, he becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion he is liberated. In the liberated there comes the knowledge: 'Liberated' (*Nibbindaṃ virajjati virāgā vimuccati vimuttasmiṃ vimuttam iti ñāṇaṃ hoti*). 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.'"
4. That is what the Blessed One said. Elated, those bhikkhus delighted in the Blessed One's statement. And while this discourse was being spoken, the minds of the bhikkhus of the group of five were liberated from the intoxicating inclinations by non-clinging (*anupādāya āsavehi cittāni vimucciṃsū ti*).

Here we see that the elements of this teaching are:

1. Anything that is "self" (in some sense) would not involve affliction/ illness – in effect, *dukkha*[3] – and it would always be controllable so as be just as one wants it to be. But none of the five *khandha*s is "self", so each of them does involve affliction and is not controllable so as be just as one wants it to be; that is, as the *khandha*s each involve affliction etc., they cannot be "self".
2. Each *khandha* is impermanent, hence *dukkha*, painful; what is impermanent, *dukkha* and of a nature to change is not fit to be regarded as: "This is mine, this I am, this is my self." Moreover, *all* instances of them should be seen as: "This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self."
3. and 4. Hence there should be *nibbidā*, a weary disenchantment with them all – Bodhi (2000: 902) translates it as a "revulsion" towards them – and non-attached dispassion towards them, hence attainment of liberation from all deep-seated defilements.[4]

So here we see the Buddha teaching the five people he had previously practised harsh asceticism with, and as a result of hearing this teaching these five all become arahats. In the suttas, people only become arahats if they have previously become at least stream-enterers, as the Vinaya version of the passage describes them as having done in saying that they attained the dhamma-eye (Vin I 12–13), for one who attains the dhamma-eye is said to end the first three of the ten spiritual fetters (AN I 243), just as it is said that a stream-enterer does.[5]

[3] AN V 110 talks of afflictions (*ābādhā*) of the body as various kinds of disease, and even hunger and thirst. Ud 4 describes Mahākassapa as "afflicted, subjected to *dukkha*, severely sick (*ābādhiko hoti dukkhito bāḷagilāno*)".

[4] One of the *āsava*s being the intoxicating inclination to *bhava*: *being* something, having a certain identity.

[5] MN I 34, MN I 141, DN I 156, DN II 200.

The first argument in the *Anatta-lakkhaṇa Sutta* (from now on: ALS) includes a focus on "affliction", i.e., *dukkha*, which is the key focus of the previous *Dhamma-cakka-ppavattana Sutta* (from now on: DCPS). The second argument focusses on the impermanence, then *dukkha* and changeable nature of each *khandha*, then their being not mine/I/self, leading on to weary disenchantment with all kinds of each of the *khandha*s, and arahatship. The DCPS focused on various aspects of life, summarised as the five "bundles of grasping-fuel" (*upādāna-kkhandha*s) being what is *dukkha*, painful, and how this arises conditioned by craving. The ALS begins with the affliction/*dukkha* that comes from not being able to fully control the five naturally changing *khandha*s, which is linked to them being non-self. As the DCPS says, an aspect of what is *dukkha* is "not to get what one wants" (SN V 421).

The *anattā* teachings is not as such a direct denial of Self

While Ruzsa's article uses both "no-self" and "nonself" as the meaning of the term *anattā*, the first is wrong, and the second needs analysing as to its connotations. *Anattā* is a noun, applied in apposition to a broad range of things that are non-self. It is not, as such, a doctrine that there is "no self", though when it is said *sabbe dhammā anattā*, "everything is non-self",[6] this clearly *implies* that there is no such thing as "self" in a certain sense (permanent, essential, which one may render as "Self").

Ruzsa, though, sees that in the "second *anātman* teaching" of the ALS, the Buddha is "not arguing against a psychological concept of self – he is rejecting a very specific metaphysical idea […] The idea attacked is that there is an eternal Self in us and it is essentially joyful" (Ruzsa 2024: 219), and "the *anātman* doctrine, is central to the Buddha's teaching. This is basically the only clear metaphysical tenet he had" (Ruzsa 2024: 223). *Anattā* as a teaching that "there is no Self" may have become a "metaphysical tenet" in later Buddhism, but that is not how it functions in the suttas. The ALS does not work by refuting a religio-philosophical teaching of a Self, but is a practical strategy to induce a letting go of clinging to anything as supposedly what one truly and essentially is (or has – see below). This can be seen by what the conclusion of the sutta is: any example of any of the five *khandha*s should be seen as "This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my Self." This wise seeing then leads a person to experience *nibbidā* – a weary, disenchanted revulsion with each *khandha*, so as to become liberated. The conclusion is not "So you see, there is no Self."[7]

6 E.g. Dhp 279, MN I 228, AN I 287.

7 Cf. Wynne (2010: 112) says that the ALS "appears more like an enquiry into phenomenal identity rather than a direct negation of the Upaniṣadic *ātman*".

Indeed at SN IV 400–401, the Buddha does not accept either that "s/Self exists" or "s/Self does not exist".[8] MN I 8 sees the wrong views "there is for me a s/Self" and "there is not for me a s/Self" as *both* arising from unmethodical speculation on whether or what one was in the past, whether or what one will be in the future, or thinking, as to the present, "Now am I? Now what am I?" That is, preoccupation with "I" even leads to the idea that "I" do not exist. Thus, if the Buddha had said "s/Self does not exist", he would have been legitimising such preoccupation. He thus did not see it as a true statement, or choose to say that "s/Self exists" is *false*.[9]

As I put it in Harvey (1995: 43–45):[10]

> (2.2) The "tone" of the not-Self teaching is seen in numerous passages, indicating that anything subject to the "three marks" (being impermanent, *dukkha* and not-Self) should not be grasped at, but be dropped like hot bricks. […]
>
> (2.3) […] Given that a Self is not asserted, nor explicitly denied, and that seeing things as not-Self is so important, it becomes apparent that the concept of "Self", and the associated deep-rooted feeling of "I am", are being utilized for a spiritual end. The not-Self teaching can in fact be seen as a brilliant device – a skilful means – which uses a deep-seated human aspiration, ultimately *illusory*, to overcome the negative products of such an illusion. Identification, whether conscious or unconscious, with something as "what I truly and permanently am" is a source of attachment; such attachment leads to frustration and a sense of loss when what one identifies with changes and becomes other than one desires. The deep-rooted idea of "Self," though, is not to be attacked, but used as a measuring-rod against which all phenomena should be compared: so as to see them as falling short of the perfections implied in the idea of Self. This is to be done through a rigorous experiential examination: as each possible candidate is examined, but is seen to be not-Self, falling short of the ideal, the intended result is that one should let go of any attachment for such a thing. The aim of seeing things as not-Self, then, is to make one see that this, this, this... *everything* one grasps at, due to identifying it as "Self" or "I", is *not* Self, such that one should *let go* of it, which letting go brings *nibbāna*. Contemplation of phenomena as impermanent,

[8] As discussed at Harvey (1995: 38–40).

[9] Wynne (2010: 139–142) argues that the reason the suttas do not deny the existence of "the self" is that existence (and hence its opposite, non-existence) are problematised in these texts, being the products of conceptualisation. A passage relevant here, not cited by Wynne, is from the *Kaccāyanagotta Sutta* (SN12.15, at SN II 17): in the flow of conditions, there is neither "existence" (*atthitā*), as things constantly cease, nor "non-existence" (*natthitā*), as new but related things constantly arise.

[10] Though I then used "not-Self" instead of "non-Self" as the translation for *anattā*, and used "personality-factor" as the loose translation for *khandha*.

> *dukkha* and not-Self is a way of undermining craving for and clinging to such phenomena. By seeing things "as they really are", attachment and its attendant suffering will be undermined.
>
> (2.4) One uses "not-Self", then, as a reason to let go of things, not to "prove" that there is no Self. There is no need to give some philosophical denial of "Self"; the idea simply withers away, or evaporates in the light of knowledge, when it is seen that the concept does not [validly] apply to *anything* at all […]. A philosophical denial is just a view, a theory, which may be agreed with or not. It does not get one actually to examine all the things that one really *does* identify with, consciously or unconsciously, as Self or I. This examination, in a calm, meditative context, is what the "not-Self" teaching aims at. It is not so much a thing to be thought about as to be *done*, applied to actual experience, so that the meditator actually *sees* that "*all dhamma*s are not-Self", "Self is not being apprehended" [MN I 138]. A mere philosophical denial does not encourage this, and may actually mean that a person sees no need for it.[11] One can, then, perhaps see the Self idea as fulfilling a role akin to a rocket which boosts a payload into space, against the force of gravity. It provides the force to drive the mind out of the "gravity field" of attachment to the personality-factors. Having done so, it then "falls away and is burnt up", as itself a baseless concept, which arises as part of the unsatisfactory personality-factors.

What I refer to as the "deep-seated human aspiration, ultimately *illusory*" of Self has various expressions: not just in the Upaniṣadic idea of *Ātman* and the Jain and Ājīvaka ideas of *Jīva* (Life-principle), but also an idea implicit in more everyday ideas of self/I/me, and it is seen to be gradually shed along the path to enlightenment.

Ruzsa (2024: 219) says that "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." In fact, the suttas often talk of developing a more wholesome self (see Harvey 1995: 54–63), while seeing self, in the sense of "oneself" as containing no Self-essence, albeit recognising that the idea of such an essence was explicitly part of several religious systems at that time, and also implicitly there in all unenlightened people.

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[11] This can be seen as a kind of pragmatic reason for not denying Self. Wynne (2010: 140) questions whether this is enough of a reason if many passages indicate that such a denial is appropriate. He thus argues that the reason is that the texts see "existence" and "non-existence" as problematic concepts (see note 9 above). Be that as it may, asserting such a denial would move people's attention away from critically examining the process of, and focusses of, taking things as I/me/mine.

Anattā is not just about Self, but also about anything related to or possessed by "it"

As regards the five ascetics that the Buddha taught, it is unclear what their religious orientation was. The five were Koṇḍañña (Aññā-Koṇḍañña), Bhaddiya, Vappa, Mahānāma and Assaji (Vin I 12–13). Koṇḍañña was the first to attain the dhamma-eye, and Assaji was the last of the five (Vin I 13). The commentaries report that Koṇḍañña

> was the youngest of eight brahmins who read the signs on Gotama's body on the day of the name-giving festival. The four others were children of four of the other brahmins. They had been advised by their fathers to watch Gotama's career and to join him should he renounce the world. This they did, and all five joined in the austerities of Gotama at Uruvelā.[12]

That they came from brahmin backgrounds does not mean that they still adhered to Brahmanical ideas. Their harsh asceticism could be a sign of their being influenced by Jain and/or Ājīvaka (Skt. Ājīvikas) ideas. In any case, once they had attained the dhamma-eye, they would have ended the first three of the spiritual fetters (*saṃyojana*) of the ten that an arahat is finally without. One of the first three fetters, overcome at stream-entry, is *sakkāya-diṭṭhi* (Skt. *satkāya-dṛṣṭi*), "personal-existence view" or "Self-identity view", which is to mistakenly take any of the five *khandha*s[13] as being Self, Self as possessing it, as being within Self, or having Self within it (e.g. *rūpaṃ attato samanupassati. rūpavantaṃ vā attānaṃ, attani vā rūpaṃ, rūpasmiṃ vā attānaṃ*).[14] This clearly implies that seeing something as non-Self negates all of these views.

The first three fetters, including *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*,[15] are said to be intoxicating inclinations (*āsava*s) "abandoned by seeing" by wise attention to the four realities for the noble ones (*ariya-sacca*s), i.e. by seeing "This is *dukkha*", "This is the origin of *dukkha*", "This is the cessation of *dukkha*", and "This is the way leading to the cessation of *dukkha*" (MN I 9). One can see this as accomplished by experiential "right view" (MN I 48). This implies that the five ascetics, after hearing the DCPS and being transformed by it, had shed any *views* about any of the *khandha*s being Self or related to Self, i.e. any conscious or implicit beliefs on this. But they still had some residual attachment to the *khandha*s and anything that might be related to them, and needed to become disenchanted with all this. They did not still need to be persuaded of some *view* about Self.

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12 DPPN II 104, based on Ja I 57, 67, 81, 82; Dhp-a I 87.

13 Which is what the term *sakkāya* refers to (MN I 299).

14 MN I 300. SN III 3 adds, "He lives obsessed by the notions, 'I am form, form is mine (*Ahaṃ rūpam mama rūpan ti pariyuṭṭhaṭṭhāyī hoti*).'"

15 The other two being vacillating doubt (*vicikicchā*), and clinging to rules and vows (*sīlabbata-parāmāsa*) (e.g. DN III 216).

Ruzsa assumes that if something is non-Self, this just means it is not-Self, not a Self. However, it means more than this, as is clear from "This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my Self." While the term *anattā* only occurs in the first part of the argument in the ALS, not the second, it does occur in parallels to this, such as at SN III 22: "form is *dukkha*. What is *dukkha* is non-Self. What is non-Self should be seen as it really is with correct wisdom thus: 'This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my Self.'" So what is *anattā* is not just not Self but also not mine. This is in line with the non-acceptance of the types of *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*. Indeed, some passages emphasise that each of the *khandha*s is "not yours" (*na tumhākaṃ*, SN III 33–34, MN I 140–141).

SN IV 82 and 129 also say that the senses (including mind), their objects and related forms of consciousness (i.e. the eighteen sensory *dhātu*s) are "not yours" as they are "neither Self nor what belongs to Self (*attā vā attaniyaṃ vā*)". So what is *anattā* is neither of these.[16] At MN I 138, it is accepted that Self and what belongs to Self are a pair: if there were one, there would be the other (*Attani vā bhikkhave sati attaniyam-me ti assāti … Attaniye vā bhikkhave sati attā me ti assāti*). But as neither "are apprehended as true and established (*saccato thetato anupalabbhamāne*), then this standpoint for views, namely, 'That which is the Self is the world; after death I shall be permanent, everlasting, eternal, not of a nature to change; I shall endure as long as eternity' – would it not be an utterly and completely foolish teaching?"

We also see at SN IV 54: "'The world is empty, the world is empty (*suñño loko, suñño loko*)' is the saying, revered sir, how far does this saying go?" – "Since, Ānanda, the world is empty of Self or what belongs to Self (*suññam attena vā attaniyena vā*), therefore is it said that the world is empty", this being explained in terms of the eighteen sensory *dhātu*s being empty of these. And at Sn 1119, Mogharāja is taught that to see the world as empty is to uproot *attānudiṭṭhi*, the view of Self, which sounds like *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, and indeed it is treated in a parallel way to it at SN III 185–186: each arises by clinging to the *khandha*s.

This all aligns with *anattā* not just being about things not being Self; and by implication, when ALS says "Now were this form Self", "Self" can be seen to implicitly include what "belongs" to it (on which issue, see further below, pp. 67–68). Of course this kind of blurring is often found in how people speak about themselves, e.g. "You hurt my feelings, you hurt me." And of course the suttas see Self-views as only concerning the *khandha*s: all who "consider Self in various ways consider it as all these five *khandha*s, or as a certain one of these

[16] In a series of suttas, it is said that one should abandon desire (*chanda*) for whatever is impermanent, or *dukkha*, or non-Self, or what does not belong to Self (*anattaniya*, SN III 76–78). While this distinguishes not-Self from what does not belong to Self, it is done in separate suttas, and can be seen as a way of ensuring complete coverage. Of course what is impermanent is also *dukkha.*

(*pañcupādānakkhandhe samanupassanti etesaṃ vā aññataraṃ*)" (SN III 46). So, all the *khandha*s are seen as Self or, for example consciousness is regarded as Self and the other *khandhas* as belonging to it.

The "I am" conceit[17]

Now let us focus more on the second of the arguments in the ALS. The ALS was given to stream-enterers who had overcome *views* about Self, so what further change in them was it aimed at inducing? Beyond the first three fetters, including Self-identity view, the next two fetters are desire for sense-pleasures (*kāmacchanda*) and ill-will (*vyāpāda*). With the first three fetters, these make up the five lower fetters,[18] which are ended by the non-returner.[19] Further, there are the five higher fetters, which are then ended by the arahat: attachment to the "form" aspect of the jhānic level (*rūpa-rāga*), attachment to phenomena of the formless level, restlessness, conceit (*māna*), and ignorance.[20] Of these last seven fetters, 1–4 relate to either attachment or aversion, restlessness is an example of the hard-to-control-ness of the mind, and ignorance is ingrained delusion, a lack of full direct knowing of *dukkha*, its origin, its cessation, and the way to this (SN II 4).

"Conceit" is "the 'I am' conceit" (*asmi-māna*) (MN I 139, DN III 273), which is said to be eliminated by a developed perception of impermanence by contemplating, for each *khandha*, what it is, its origin (*samudaya*) and its passing away (*atthagama*) (SN III 155–157). The "I am" conceit is sometimes expressed in terms of thinking "I am superior (*Seyyoham asmī ti*)" or "I am equal (*Sadiso ham asmī ti*)" or "I am inferior (*Hīnohamasmī ti*)" (SN IV 88). These three conceits, in the form of self-centred comparisons, come from not understanding the *khandha*s as impermanent, *dukkha*, of a nature to change, and not mine, I or Self; seeing them thus leads to weary disenchantment with them (SN III 48–49). The second part of the ALS, with its parallel wording, is clearly concerned with this.

It is also said that to have true understanding of any type of any of the five *khandha*s is to see it as:

> "This is not mine, I am not this, this is not my Self." That's how to know and see so that there's no I-making, mine-making, or underlying tendency to conceit for this consciousness endowed body and all external stimuli

[17] Wynne (2010: 114) sees this as "self-consciousness", in the sense of "a person's awareness of his own 'identity,' 'acts' and 'thoughts'", which "reflexive awareness" has affective and cognitive aspects.

[18] DN III 234, AN IV 459, SN V 61.

[19] MN I 34, MN I 141–143, DN I 156, DN II 200.

[20] DN III 234, AN IV 460, SN V 61.

> (*saviññāṇake kāye bahiddhā ca sabba-nimittesu ahaṃ-kāra-mamaṃ-kāra-mānānusayā na hontīti*).[21]

Conceit is said to come from *clinging* (*upādāya*) to the *khandha*s (SN III 105), and it is due to clinging that one considers "This is mine, this I am, this is my Self" (SN III 181–182). A person who is beyond vacillating doubt (*vicikicchā*) (i.e. a stream-enterer) sees all examples of the *khandha*s as "This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my Self"; the arahat sees this too, but more fully, and so overcomes all clinging (MN I 234–235). It is also said that one escapes each *khandha* (and hence its *dukkha*) by abandoning desire and attachment (*chanda-rāga*) for it (MN III 18); indeed to go beyond the state of a non-returner, one must abandon attachment (*rāga*) for any of the *khandha*s (SN III 56–58).

The "I am" conceit is more deep-seated and lingering than *views* about what is "Self" or related to it. This is made clear in the *Khemaka Sutta* (SN 22.89/ SN III 126–132). In this, the ill monk Khemaka, when asked by other monks if he "regards anything as Self or as belonging to Self among the five bundles of grasping-fuel (*Imesu āyasmā Khemako pañcasu upādāna-kkhandhesu kiñci attānaṃ vā attaniyaṃ vā samanupassasīti*)" (SN III 127,27–29), says that he does not. The other monks then think he must be an arahat, but he says that he is not. He explains:

> Friends, "I am" has not yet vanished in me as regards these five bundles of grasping-fuel, but I do not regard (any of them) as "This I am" (*Api ca me āvuso pañcasu upādāna-kkhandhesu asmīti avigataṃ*[22] *ayam aham asmīti ca na samanupassāmīti*).
>
> (SN III 128,33–35)

Khemaka is then asked "when you speak of this 'I am' – what is it that you speak of as 'I am'? (*Yam etam āvuso Khemaka asmīti vadesi kim etam asmī ti vadesi*). Do you speak of form as 'I am', do you speak of 'I am' as apart from form? (*Rūpam asmīti vadesi aññatra rūpā asmīti vadesi*)", and the same as regards feeling, perception, volitional activities and consciousness (SN III 129,21–23). That is, whether, as regards this "I am", he speaks of it as *being* form, or as *apart from* it. Khemaka explains that he did not see "I am" as being any of the *khandha*s or as apart from them, and repeats, "Friends, 'I am' has not yet vanished in me as regards these five bundles of grasping-fuel, but I do not regard (any of them) as 'This I am.'" He then gives a simile: one would not say

[21] MN III 19, SN III 80.

[22] *avigataṃ* is Bodhi's correction from *adhigatam* in the Pali Text Society edition (Bodhi 2000: 1083, n. 176). On a parallel passage (SN III 46–47) Bodhi (2000: 1057, n. 61) gives his reason for preferring *avigataṃ* to *adhigataṃ*: at AN III 292, "the affirmative occurs, *asmi ti kho me vigataṃ*". This is in a passage which says that "It is impossible and inconceivable, friend, that when 'I am' has been discarded, and one does not regard [anything as] 'This I am', the dart of doubt and bewilderment could still obsess one's mind."

of a flower that its scent belongs to a specific part of it, petals, stalk or pistils; it belongs to the whole flower (SN III 130). He goes on to explain that, even though a noble disciple has abandoned the five lower fetters (which would make him or her a non-returner),

> in relation to the five bundles of grasping-fuel, there lingers in him a residual conceit "I am", a desire "I am", an underlying tendency "I am" that has not yet been uprooted (*upādāna-kkhandhesu anusahagato Asmīti māno Asmī ti chando Asmīti anusayo asamūhato*). Sometime later he contemplates the rise and fall (*udayabbayānupassī*) in the bundles of grasping-fuel: "Such is form, such is its origin (*samudayo*), such is its passing away (*atthagamo*); … [and likewise for feeling, perception, volitional activities and consciousness]."
>
> (SN III 130–131)

which leads to the uprooting of the "I am" conceit, desire and latent tendency. He likens this to how a laundryman might clean a soiled garment, but leave a residual smell of cleansing agents on it. This would dissipate once the garment's owner put it in a sweet-smelling casket (SN III 131). His hearers delighted in his explanation, and both they and Khemaka became arahats. Presumably, the parallel to getting rid of the residual smell of cleansing agents would be the repeated contemplation of the impermanent rising and falling away of instances of the *khandha*s, which would dissipate the sense of "I am" still lingering around even "This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self (*netam mama neso ham asmi na me so attā ti*)", as in ALS and elsewhere.

So:

- Khemaka is a non-returner, who does not see any of the five *khandha*s as "Self or belonging to Self", so as to not see any of them as "This I am", yet he still has a general sense of "I am" in relation to them.[23]
- He neither sees this "I am" as being any of the *khandha*s, or as apart from them, like a flower's scent is not the scent of any specific part of it, while not being separate from the flower as a whole.

[23] Wynne (2010: 120), in discussing the *Khemaka Sutta*, says: "Khemaka knows that he should be detached from the conditioned experience of the five aggregates… But he is unable to do so because of his automatic tendency to identify with conditioned experience in the form of the notion 'I am.' Although Khemaka knows what he should know, according to Buddhist doctrine, and so does not intentionally identify with the five aggregates, his identification with them runs deeper in the form of a sense of subjectivity (*asmī ti*) that takes them as its locus." But ending the "I am" conceit is not primarily about further cognitive non-identification with the *khandha*s. It is not about transcending any *view* on the *khandha*s – this has already been done – but about an affective change: letting go of a vague, subtle and deeply ingrained sense of I/me/mine, which is like a smell hanging around them while not being about them as such. Its focus is not on "*this* is what I am".

- So while Khemaka lacks the Self-identity view that is abandoned at stream-entry, he still has the fetter that is the conceit "I am", that only an arahat has ended.
- But arahatship comes when there is contemplation of the impermanent origin and passing away, the rise and fall, of the five *khandha*s, which ends the "residual conceit 'I am', desire 'I am', underlying tendency 'I am'".

The arahat is a person with no sense of "I am" (except in a purely conventional sense, e.g. "I am Ānanda"[24]), and sees the *khandha*s as non-Self, but not one who holds the view "there is no Self" (or "there is Self").

Conceit and feeling

There are interesting passages which link the sense of "I am" particularly to feeling (*vedanā*), which is of course the immediate condition for craving and then grasping in the list of the twelve *nidāna*s of conditioned arising. SN III 46–47 says that when the mind is "contacted by a feeling born of ignorance-contact (*avijjā-samphassajena ... vedayitena puṭṭhassa*)", there occurs "I am", "This I am (*Ayam aham asmīti*)", "I will be", "I will not be", "I will consist of form", "I will be formless", "I will be percipient", "I will be non-percipient", "I will be neither…". But these do not occur once ignorance is abandoned.

This link to feeling is explored in detail at DN II 66–68 in the *Mahā-nidāna Sutta* (DN 15). Here, three concepts of Self are discussed:

1. "My Self is feeling (*vedanā*)."
2. "No, my Self is not feeling, my Self is without experience (*appaṭisaṃvedano*)."
3. "No, my Self *is* not feeling, nor is it without experience, my Self *feels*, is of a feeling nature (*attā me vediyati, vedanā-dhammo hi me attā*)."

The first of these is refuted as feeling is changing all the time, between being pleasant, unpleasant and neutral, and Self cannot change, or be a mix of changing things. The second is refuted on the grounds that in the complete absence of feeling, there would be no sense of "I am". The third is refuted on the grounds that if all kinds of feeling came to cease, there would be no sense of "This I am (*Ayam aham asmīti*)"; that is, there would be no feeling as the *this* that an "I am" which feels requires to support it.[25]

[24] "No knots exist for one with conceit abandoned […] Though the wise one has transcended the conceived, he might still say 'I speak', he might say, too, 'they speak to me'. Skilful, knowing the world's parlance, he uses such terms as mere expressions" (SN I 14–15).

[25] Wynne (2010: 134) comments: "the third critique points out the problem of hypostasising the inner perceiver into a transcendent entity, whereas the second critique points out the problem

So the sense of "I am" or "This I am" only arises when feeling exists. As they thus depend on feeling, which is itself non-Self, they are themselves non-Self, from the principle mentioned at SN IV 130: "How will the eye, which is arisen from what is non-Self, be Self? (*anatta-sambhūtā bhikkhave cakkhuṃ kuto attā bhavissati*)." So the sense of "I am", an essential aspect of a supposed Self, turns out to actually be non-Self.

Thus:

1. thinking "This I am" is to have a "Self-identity" view: identifying Self with, or relating it to, a specific *khandha*, especially, but not only, feeling.
2. thinking "I am" is a more deep-rooted conceit, more a vague attitude than a conceptualised view, which can exist even after 1) is destroyed, but not once arahatship is attained.

That is, both Self-identity view and then the sense of "I am" evaporate under the light of (cognitive and emotional) knowledge developed on the path to arahatship. An arahat has feeling, but does not misinterpret this so as to hold the conceit that he or she is a permanent, substantial Self which feels sense-inputs from things that are other than Self. For him, feeling is simply observed to arise as a conditioned process. When he considers "This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my Self", he is not alluding to any real Self or I which is not the *khandha*s (i.e. "apart" from them, p. 64) or owner of the *khandha*s. Any *view* of Self is abandoned at stream-entry, and the vague and ingrained sense of "I am" falls away at arahatship.

The issue of "control"

We now put the spotlight on an aspect of ALS's first argument: "Now were this form Self, it would not tend to affliction. It would be possible to have it of form, 'Let my form be thus; let my form not be thus.'" Above (p. 62), I argue that "Self" here can be seen to implicitly include "what belongs to Self". Tse-fu Kuan, however, disagrees:

> […] the Buddha's non-Self idea is not just about something not being Self, but also it not being "what pertains/belongs to Self" (*attaniya*). […] Even so, *attā* (Self) and *attaniya* (what belongs to Self) could not refer to the same thing. "What comes under control" may refer to *attaniya*, whereas Self (*attā*) is the "inner controller" […]. According to the above

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of individualising the transcendence of conditioned experience. Since notions of a self within conditioned experience or beyond it are both negated, this dual analysis would seem to leave no room for any sort of intrinsic identity."

> discussion, however, the Theravāda tradition seems to have confused *attā* with *attaniya* in their interpretation of Self […].
>
> (Kuan 2009: 162–163)

Yet Anālayo (2015: 16, n. 22) argues against this point, citing the different Self-related views in Self-identity view: a *khandha* is Self, is possessed by it, is contained in it, or contains it. Further, he cites an interesting passage from a Chinese parallel (SĀ 110[26]) to the *Cūḷa-saccaka Sutta*, a Pali sutta which echoes a section of the ALS (see below pp. 71–72):

> [The Buddha] asked again: "What is impermanent, *dukkha* and of a nature to change, would a learned noble disciple herein see it as a self, as distinct from the self [in the sense of being owned by it],[31] as existing [within the self, or the self] as existing [within it]?"[27]

And a later section of SĀ 110 says,

> Aggivessana, I tell my disciples: "Whatever bodily form, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, sublime or repugnant, far or near, it should all be contemplated as it really is as not-self, not distinct from the self [in the sense of being owned by it], as not existing [within the self, nor a self] as existing [within it]."[28]

Be that as it may, Kuan says:

> According to these canonical passages [from Pali ALS and the *Cūḷa-saccaka Sutta*], the supposed "Self" can be interpreted as "something subject to mastery" or "what comes under control" – if something is to be counted as one's Self, it must be subject to one's volitional control. This interpretation of "Self" […] seems to confuse Self (*attā*) with what belongs to Self (*attaniya*) and is contrary to the Brahmanical idea of "Self" (*ātman*) as the "inner controller".
>
> (Kuan 2009: 169)

> It is not because Self is *under control* that it is called the "inner controller", but it is because Self "*controls*" things (perhaps including Self itself) that it deserves the position as the "inner controller". The nature of "Self" is "controlling" rather than "being controlled".
>
> (Kuan 2009: 163)

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26 SĀ 110 at T II 36a28, Anālayo (2015: 70) at T II 35a17 to 37b25.

27 SĀ 110 at T II 36a28, Anālayo (2015: 70). His note 31 says: "[T]he supplementation of '[in the sense of being owned by it]' suggests itself from SĀ 109 at T II 34b20, where the question 'how is form regarded as "distinct from self"?,' 云何見色異我, receives the reply '[by] regarding form as "this is mine"', 見色是我所."

28 SĀ 110 at T II 36c18, as at Anālayo (2015: 74).

The key source for the "inner controller" idea is *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 3.7.[29] Uddālaka Āruṇi says to Yājñavalkya that he had once asked Patañcala Kāpya: "[...] do you know the inner controller (*antaryāmiṇam*) of this world and the next, as well as of all beings, who controls them from within (*yo'ntaro yamayati*)?" (3.7.1). Kāpya had said he did not. Yājñavalkya then says: "if a man knows […] who that inner controller is – he knows *brahman* […]". He goes on to say (3.7.3): "This self (*ātman*) of yours who is present within but is different from the earth,[30] whom the earth does not know, whose body is the earth, and who controls the earth from within (*pṛthivīm antaro yamayati*) – he is the inner controller, the immortal (*ātmāntaryāmy amṛtaḥ*)." This is then repeated, replacing each reference to "the earth" with each of a list of items, grouped under three categories (3.7.4–23):

- "with respect to the divine sphere": "the waters", "the fire", "the intermediate region", "the wind", "the sky", "the sun", "the quarters", "the moon and stars", "space", "darkness", "light";
- "with respect to beings": "all beings (*-bhūtam*)";
- "with respect to the body (*ātman*)": "the breath", "speech", "sight", "hearing", "mind", "the skin", "perception (*vijñāne*)", "the semen".

Note here that the *ātman* is seen as the "inner controller" of both things within a person and of aspects of the cosmos, though it is not clear in what sense it "controls" them.

Like Kuan, Ruzsa's article also particularly critiques the part of the ALS non-Self argument that says that *if* something were Self, one could control it so as to be "thus" and "not thus", and also that if it were not-Self, one could *not* so control it. He argues for there having been a fault in textual transmission, and an early misunderstanding, as the Self of Brahminical thought is the "inner controller" (*antaryāmin*), not anything controlled by it. If the ascetics were people who drew on this perspective, then it is a relevant issue to raise. Ruzsa's article's Abstract (2024: 215) says:

> 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.

[29] Here from the Olivelle translation (1996: 41–44), with Sanskrit added from Radhakrishnan (1953: 224–230).

[30] Cf. in the *Khemaka Sutta* (above, p. 64), Khemaka does *not* accept an "I am" which is "apart from" the *khandha*s, i.e. different from them.

Ruzsa hence argues that in the ALS, a *na*/not had got moved, and the original text would have said that what is Self can *not* be controlled, and what is non-Self *can* be controlled:

> The factual premise that I cannot control my *skandha*s is not true, and the supposed rule that my self must be under my control is anything but evident. […] I can control my body – stand up, take a walk etc. […] my cognition by thinking of something else. This is obvious, so probably the idea is that I cannot change my *skandha*s, 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.
>
> (Ruzsa 2024: 220)[31]

However, while *some* control can be exercised over the non-Self *khandha*s (Skt. *skandha*s), this is limited. And like the Buddha before his enlightenment, the five ascetics who heard the DCPS, after they had digested its message, knew that the right way was the middle way, which avoids the "painful, ignoble, unbeneficial" extreme of harsh asceticism (SN V 421). They had been trying to rigorously and minutely *control* themselves, body and mind (MN I 242–246), but once they attained stream-entry, they knew that they could not prevent craving and *dukkha* by trying to do this. So they would implicitly know not to accept the view that there was a genuine "inner controller".

In any case, controlling is an action, and any action brings a small change to the actor, which changes could accumulate in undesired ways. To avoid this, the controller would need to also control itself, by making small adjustments to its state. This may not be included in Upaniṣadic teachings, but it surely makes good sense, and the Buddha was certainly happy to make critiques and adjustments to traditional ideas.

In Buddhist practice, even deep states of meditative stillness, such as the fourth *jhāna* and the state of no-thingness are "conditioned (*abhisaṅkhataṃ*) and volitionally produced (*abhisañcetayitaṃ*). But whatever is conditioned and volitionally produced is impermanent, subject to cessation (*nirodha-dhamma*)"[32] – that is, what is conditioned and shaped by volition – itself changing, impermanent – is unstable. These meditative states are very subtle, but still need to depend on subtle volitional support. The Buddha had been taught by Āḷāra Kālāma to attain the state of no-thingness prior to his enlightenment, perhaps as an experience of Self, but he rejected it as it did not lead to "disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace […] to *nibbāna*" (MN I 164–165).

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[31] By "imprints" he means *saññā*s, usually translated as "perceptions", and by "cognition" he means *viññāṇa*, usually translated as "consciousness".

[32] MN I 350–353 and AN V 343–347.

So if there is an "inner controller", seen as "Self", it would still need to ensure it was "thus", in accord with what it wished to be.

The teachings to Saccaka

Ruzsa examines the *Cūḷa-saccaka Sutta* (MN 35, from now on, CSS) as it echoes the "not controllable so not Self" argument of the ALS. He argues that Self as the inner-control*ler*, and not something that is control*led*, means that the text as we have it is a corrupt "inauthentic" one (Ruzsa 2024: 228).

In this sutta, it is said that a person named Saccaka meets the monk Assaji, who was one of those who the Buddha taught his first teaching to, followed by the ALS (Vin I 13–14). Saccaka asks Assaji how the Buddha disciplines (*vineti*) his disciples, and is told that he teaches that each of the *khandha*s is impermanent and is non-Self, and that "all conditioned states are impermanent, everything is non-Self (*sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā sabbe dhammā anattā*)" (MN I 228). Saccaka is displeased with this teaching and resolves to prove the Buddha wrong. So he goes to him and asks him what he teaches. The Buddha repeats what the monk had said. Saccaka then says that both the growth of plants and strenuous works depend on, and are based on the earth. In the same way, a person has form, or any of the other *khandha*s as Self, and based on each of them he produces good or bad karma (*rūpattā 'yaṃ purisapuggalo, rūpe patiṭṭhāya puññaṃ vā apuññaṃ vā pasavati ...*; MN I 230). He then says that for him, as for most people, "Form is my Self (*rūpam-me attā*), feeling is my Self (*vedanā me attā*), perception is my Self, volitional activities are my Self, consciousness is my Self" (MN I 230). The "as for most people" suggests that he is not stating an exact, philosophical view. The Buddha then asks him, if, like a king who can exercise power in his own realm to execute, fine or banish, Saccaka can "exercise power regarding that form (*vattati te tasmiṃ rūpe vaso*), 'Let my form be thus; let my form not be thus'", and similarly for the other *khandha*s. That is, are they in his controlling power (MN I 231)? Saccaka refuses to answer twice until he sees he must, and he then admits he has no such power. The Buddha then says that this contradicts him saying that the *khandha*s are his Self. The Buddha then gets him to agree that each *khandha* is impermanent, hence painful, of a nature to change, and hence not mine/I/Self, exactly as in the ALS (MN I 232). He also gets him to understand that if he resorts to what is *dukkha*, and takes it as mine/I/Self, he will not understand and destroy *dukkha* (p. 233). The Buddha says Saccaka is like one who has been looking for heartwood in a plantain tree, which has none. So this sutta uses exactly the "not controllable so not Self" as the ALS.

Before discussing this passage, it is worth reflecting on what kind of religious perspective Saccaka may have had. He is addressed in the sutta by his clan name,

Aggivessana,[33] as is Dīghanakha in the *Dīghanakha Sutta* (MN I 497–501). Dīghanakha tells the Buddha that his view is "Nothing is acceptable to me" probably in the sense that no view can satisfy him, so he was perhaps a sceptic and free-thinker.[34] So Saccaka may have also been something of a sceptic, more in tune with what "most people" think rather than a refined philosophical view. In the *Dīghanakha Sutta*, Dīghanakha becomes a stream-enterer, after giving up his sceptical view, and Sāriputta becomes an arahat.[35]

In the CSS and *Mahā-saccaka Sutta* (MN 35 and 36), Saccaka is described as a "Nigaṇṭha's son" (*Nigaṇṭhaputto*, MN I 227 and 237), which might either mean that he was a disciple of Nigaṇṭha Ñātaputta, the Jain leader, or the son of Jain parents.[36] But at the end of MN 36, this keen debater says that he is delighted at the way the Buddha always remained calm even when criticised, unlike others he had debated with: Pūraṇa Kassapa, Makkhali Gosāla, Ajita Kesakambalin, Pakuddha Kaccāyana, Sañjaya Belaṭṭhiputta, and even Nigaṇṭha Ñātaputta (MN I 250). He did not become a disciple of the Buddha, though, perhaps because he was already *sādhusammato*, "highly honoured" (MN I 227), as were the above six *samaṇa* teachers (DN I 48, SN IV 398). He seems to have been a person with his own convictions.

The six teachers and their beliefs are described in the *Sāmañña-phala Sutta* (at DN I 52–59). Kassapa, Gosāla and to some extent Kaccāyana are seen as Ājīvaka teachers (Basham 1951), Kesakambalin as a materialist, Belaṭṭhiputta as a skeptic, and Ñātaputta as the Jain leader. It is possible that Saccaka was familiar with the teachings of all of these, but did not go along fully with any of them. Kuan points out that neither of the Chinese parallels to the *Mahā-saccaka Sutta* (MN 36) mention these six *samaṇa* teachers, and that

> [i]t is rather doubtful that Saccaka could have engaged all the six "heretical" teachers in debate. This could simply have been composed in a mechanical way just as many other passages in the Canon. This does, though, demonstrate an uncertainty as to how to classify Saccaka's views.
>
> (Kuan 2009: 166, n. 24)

Kuan plausibly argues that Saccaka could not have been a Jain, as shown by his assertion that the first four *khandha*s were Self (Kuan 2009: 165, 166, 169). Taking the *khandha*s as permanent entities is close to some teachings of the

33 DPPN I 14, "Probably the name of a brahmin clan."

34 Bodhi (in Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995: 1276, n. 731) argues that he is likely to have been a "radical sceptic of the class satirically characterised at MN 76.30 as 'eel-wrigglers'".

35 Of interest here is that Sāriputta had also been introduced to the dhamma by Assaji (Vin I 39).

36 DPPN II 994–995, on the basis of MN-a. I 450, says that both his parents were Nigaṇṭhas, and skilled debaters. He had four sisters, older than him, who ordained after a discussion with Sāriputta, and became arahats.

Ājīvakas, though (p. 167). The Ājīvaka teacher Gosāla is referred to by Saccaka in MN 36 (MN I 238) as an example of a person who practised fasting and various limitations on modes of eating. He is seen as holding a fatalistic view, regarding beings as being driven by an impersonal destiny through a fixed series of rebirths, with no personal power over this process (DN I 53–54). Kaccāyana believed in seven uncreated, unchanging elements: the "bodies" (*kāya*) of earth, water, fire and wind, plus pleasure, pain and the life-principle (*jīva*), with decapitation just separating some of these elements, not destroying any (DN I 56). Kassapa taught that there are no karmic effects to bad or good actions (DN I 52–53). In the sutta after the ALS (i.e. SN 59.60), Kassapa is said to teach that there is no cause or condition for the defilement or purification of beings (SN III 69), part of the view ascribed to Gosāla (at DN I 53–54). Kuan (2009: 168) points out that taking the seven elements as unchanging would be akin to a claim that the *khandha*s were permanent entities, and "Saccaka is very likely to have been an adherent of the Ājīvikas, despite his title being related to Jainism" (Kuan 2009: 169).

However, Saccaka is unlikely to have been a follower of the ideas of the Ājivaka Gosāla, as the latter taught that one has no power to control anything. If this were so, why would Saccaka be so reluctant to accept that the *khandha*s cannot be controlled to be "thus" and "not thus"?

In any case, Anālayo (2015: 66, n. 22) argues that Saccaka could indeed have been a Jain as, when he says the *khandha*s "are" Self, this is likely to mean that Self is what possesses them (rather than being them, containing them, or being in one of them, as in the other modes of Self-identity view). This is because, argues Anālayo, at MN I 230, Saccaka

> indicates that according to his self-conception a person *rūpe patiṭṭhāya puññaṃ vā apuññaṃ vā pasavati*, "with bodily form as the basis engenders merit and demerit" […]. This suggests Saccaka's view to be that the five aggregates are adjuncts of the self […]. In fact, the use of the expression *patiṭṭhāya* clearly harks back to the simile of the earth, […] so that the aggregates are to the self what the earth is to beings.

Indeed, one of the two Chinese versions of CSS (SĀ 110), says "Aggivessana, whoever is the owner, would he not be totally free to do anything he likes?" (Anālayo 2015: 66). That is, if the *khandha*s belonged to Self, they would be in its full control.

We can now assess the "not controllable so not Self" argument of both the ALS and CSS. There are two Chinese versions of the former sutta, SĀ 33 and SĀ 34.[37] Kuan's translation of part of SĀ 33 (Kuan 2009: 169) is:

[37] SĀ 33 (T II no. 99 pp. 7b–7c) and SĀ 34 (T II no. 99 pp. 7c–8a). Cf. SĀ 86 and 87 and Tsai (2007: 122–123).

> If material form were Self, illness and suffering should not arise in material form, and likewise 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, 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. The italicisation has here been added by me to highlight two significant differences from the Pali version].[38]

Ruzsa (2024: 226–227) points out that

> [t]he 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 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.

Here, 1b is the Pali version of the argument and 1b" is the version which says that what is Self cannot be controlled at will to make it "thus" or "not thus". "An eternal Self would be unchanging. But you can control and change the *skandha*s, so they cannot be the Self, and they cannot be parts of it" (Ruzsa 2024: 223).

Ruzsa (2024: 227 n. 19) sees Kuan's above translation from SĀ 33 as:

> 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.

However, the quoted extract from SĀ 33 does not seem a good argument in its context. If one were able to control form and the other *khandha*s as one wished, *why* would they "tend to affliction"? Surely the affliction of *dukkha* comes from the *inability* to have the *khandh*as be as one wishes, this being in tension with craving. Similarly, why would them being controllable, albeit

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[38] Ruzsa (2024: 226) gives the Chinese: "*Ruò sè shì wǒ zhě, […] bù yìng yú sè yù lìng rú shì, bù lìng rú shì. Yī 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.'"

non-Self, be a reason to be disenchanted with them? The logic of the sutta breaks down. Indeed Tsai's detailed study of Chinese parallels to the Pali ALS (Tsai 2007: 146: English Abstract) says:

> A total of 13 documents are examined on three levels, including 9 versions of the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*, the explanatory passages on the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta* found in the *Yogācāra-bhūmi-śāstra*, as well as 3 versions of the *Cūḷasaccaka Sutta*, since their narrative structure closely resembles that of the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*. The results of this multilevel analysis shows that the Pali version is in fact the original teaching of the Buddha, and that the Chinese version of the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta* in the *Khandhavagga* of the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* is corrupt. The final section is an attempt to determine when and how this corruption came about.

The spectrum of types of control

Ruzsa only considers two parts of the spectrum of things which can be seen as "control" of the body or of aspects of the mind. At the end of the spectrum is absolute control:

> We could try to understand "control" in the sense of "absolute and unlimited control", and then the statement [that what is non-Self cannot be controlled] 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 *skandha*s: 'Let them be thus; let them not be thus'." It is categorical denial, the sentence cannot mean that "It is not always possible".
>
> (Ruzsa 2024: 220)

Ruzsa does not see absolute control as what is relevant, here. Rather, it is what is at the near end of the spectrum of control: control to move and develop one's body, and to think and decide. Ruzsa sees it as making most sense to say: the *khandha*s are non-Self as they *can* be controlled in this way. He sees the Pali ALS as most plausibly saying as a reason for the *khandha*s being non-Self, "I cannot change my *skandha*s by mere volition, by simply wishing it" (Ruzsa 2024: 220), but he does not see the contrasting statement as acceptable: "my self is what I can control by mere volition" (p. 221). Moreover:

> 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? […]
>
> 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.
>
> (Ruzsa 2024: 222)

Ruzsa sees it as highly unlikely that the Buddha would say that one can change oneself by spiritual practice if he had also said you cannot change/control oneself, i.e. "Understanding that you have no power to change yourself, you can change yourself" (Ruzsa 2024: 222). Yet the suttas repeatedly emphasise how all processes of body and mind are conditioned, by various factors, which is the key reason that they are not controllable at will. But the more it is understood how they are conditioned, the better one can develop the ability to work with the conditions to bring about the best change, culminating in experience of *nibbāna*, the unconditioned. Even the Path to the end of *dukkha* is conditioned, being the best of all conditioned states (AN II 34).

Buddhism emphasises that anything subject to conditioned arising (*paṭicca-samuppāda*) depends on various inner and outer conditions. The conditioned nature of the mind means that one can decide to meditate and try to get the mind into a state of gathered concentration and calm … but the mind often does not do what one wants it to do:

> Irrigators lead the waters; fletchers fashion arrow-shafts; carpenters bend the wood; the wise control themselves (*attānaṃ damayanti paṇḍitā*, Dhp 80).

Yet:

> The flickering, fickle mind, *difficult to guard, difficult to control* (*durakkhaṃ dunnivārayaṃ*) – the wise person straightens it as a fletcher an arrow (Dhp 33).
>
> The mind is hard to check, swift, *inclines wherever it wants* – the control of which is good; a controlled mind is conducive to happiness (*Cittassa damatho sādhu, cittaṃ dantaṃ sukhāvahaṃ*, Dhp 35).

And even if a calm, still state is developed by patient practice, it often still fluctuates, is impermanent and can be disrupted; as all mental states are conditioned, they are subject to such changes. One can do things to help oneself be happy, but one cannot just tell the mind to stay happy, such that it then did as it was told. One can influence this flow of conditions, but one cannot just order the mind, or body, to be as one's desires and cravings want it to be. And it is in this mis-match of wants and realities that *dukkha* arises. The conditioned and changing *khandha*s often behave in undesired ways, hence there arise various kinds of "affliction".

One can wisely work at balanced self-control, but one has to work with inner and outer conditioning factors; one cannot just say of any *khandha*s, "Let it be like this, not that." There is no magic wand, and forceful attempts at self-control, in a "control-freak" way, themselves have bad side-effects. Realistic beneficial control is middle way guidance.

Hence the Buddha said to the monk Soṇa, who had been a skilled lute player, that when a lute's "strings are neither too tight nor too loose but adjusted to a balanced pitch", the lute would be "well tuned and easy to play". He then advised that, in a parallel way, "if energy is aroused too forcefully, this leads to restlessness, and if the energy is too lax, it leads to laziness", on hearing which, Soṇa balanced his spiritual faculties and became an arahat (AN III 375). As an example of the importance of not trying too hard, in a controlling way, is Ānanda, when he was trying to become an arahat so that he would be eligible to attend the next day's monastic council after the Buddha had died. He meditated nearly all night but failed to reach his goal, so decided to lay down to sleep; but even before he was lying flat on his bed, arahatship came (Vin II 386). That is, his goal came when he stopped trying too hard. The Buddha's pre-enlightenment ascetic period, as described in the *Mahā-saccaka Sutta* was an attempt at rigid control, "Suppose, with my teeth clenched and my tongue pressed against the roof of my mouth, I beat down, constrain, and crush my mind with mind" (MN I 243), yet at the end, he thought "But by this racking practice of austerities, I have not attained any superhuman states, any distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones" (MN I 246). So, the idea that the *khandha*s cannot be controlled at will is very relevant to spiritual practice, even though one can work at making them less uncontrollable.

Admittedly at MN I 120, one of the five ways of dealing with unwholesome thoughts is "with his teeth clenched and his tongue pressed against the roof of his mouth, he should beat down, constrain and crush mind with mind". However, this forceful way is only a last resort – as it can trigger restlessness, as described above – when four more analytical or diversionary ways have been tried in turn but failed, and the mind is clinging with determination to a negative state like a dog gnawing at a bone.

So there is some control over body and mind, but it is limited. As regards the spectrum of control referred to above, while one can move one's arm, this control is constrained if the arm is strained or injured, or old and weak, and while one can do things to support one's health, one cannot prevent oneself ageing or at some point dying.

Indeed, while a king has control over the punishment of law-breakers in his realm, he, like everyone else, does not have full control over his own body and mind, so he cannot prevent himself ageing, getting ill, and dying, these being

key concerns in the suttas.[39] The CSS and one of its Chinese parallels, SĀ 110, say that the *khandha*s are non-Self as one cannot exercise control over them in a way that parallels how a king has power over those in his kingdom. But this is a simile with a comparison. What of an actual king and his *khandha*s? The *Ekottarika-āgama* parallel to CSS[40] refers to such a king's power, but rather than next going direct to saying the *khandha*s are non-Self, it first says that an actual king still cannot stop himself becoming aged. The *khandha*s of both him and everyone else are impermanent, non-Self (Kuan 2009: 159–160). Most explicitly (with italicisation from Kuan):

> The Blessed One said: "*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.* Is this doctrine correct?" On that occasion the Niganṭha's son was silent without replying. …
>
> (Kuan 2009: 161)

While the *Ekottarika-āgama* version lacks the statement that one cannot make any of the *khandha*s "thus" or "not thus", this passage makes the same point, and is very clear about the relevant kind of thus-making: the non-existent control that would make any of the *khandha*s be free of ageing, illness and death.

Kuan comments on the above quote:

> […] 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, as even a powerful wheel-turning king has insufficient control over his aggregates to be able to stop them ageing and dying, how much more so does that apply to everyone else. For such a king or anyone else, the aggregates are not a self-controlling unageing Self, nor the possessions of a Self. There is no absolute freedom within them, and they are "impermanent and subject to change" (par. 11c), and

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[39] In the *Ariya-pariyesanā Sutta* (MN 26), it is said that the Buddha's spiritual quest had been to find what was beyond the limitations of things subject to birth, ageing, sickness, death, sorrow, and defilement: the "unborn, unageing, unailing, deathless, sorrowless, undefiled security from bondage, *nibbāna*" (MN I 163). The final link in the sequence of Conditioned Arising is "ageing-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, unhappiness and distress […] such is the origin of this whole bundle of *dukkha*" (SN II 1). And in the DCPS, the *ariya-sacca* of *dukkha* is these painful (*dukkha*) phenomena: "birth […] aging […] illness […] death […] union with what is displeasing […] separation from what is pleasing […] not to get what one wants […] the five bundles of grasping fuel" (SN V 421).

[40] *Sūtra* 10 of chapter 37, at T II 715c–716c.

> hence cannot be counted as "Self", which by definition is not subject to ageing, illness or death, is permanent, and should be the way that it wishes to be (par. 10c).
>
> (Kuan 2009: 166–167)

One may express this by saying that a supposed Self would be "inner controller" of aspects of body and mind, but as regards itself, it would not age and die. One could explain this situation by saying either:

1. It is naturally free of ageing and death, so has no need to wish itself to be "thus" and not "thus", or
2. Its controlling activities would bring small changes to itself, so to prevent these accumulating to lead to ageing and eventually death, these would need to be controlled, so that it remained "thus" rather than "not thus". An "inner-controller" has work to do on what it controls, but also on itself; and both take effort.

Hence, some of the differences between some versions of the texts, as regards whether a Self does not, or does need to control itself. Either way, though, one cannot stop the ageing, sickness and death of the constantly changing conditioned *khandha*s; one cannot prevent the small changes that lead to this, only slow them.

The differences between the Pali ALS and CSS and some of their Chinese parallels may also be because of the ambiguity in what kind of control, "Let it be thus, let not be thus" means. The spectrum of possible types of control are:

1. One can move an arm or think of something. These are normal abilities, though even these can be limited by injury or physical or mental illness.
2. One can become physically stronger, or develop a skill. These take some persistent practice, rather than something which happens just because one wishes it; and even the wish for it to be so may vary between being strong, weak or absent.
3. One can work on developing calm mental stillness by meditation. However, it is difficult to prevent stray thoughts intruding, and even when these are absent, there can still be small fluctuations in the calm. The process of meditative training certainly makes it evident that the mind is restless, a bunch of conditioned and hard-to-guide processes. Attempts at wilful control rarely have beneficial effects, and restlessness – fed by too much energy – is one of the five higher fetters that only an arahat transcends.

4. Absolute control over what one is – one could change oneself into anything, just by wishing it. This is not possible, though some arahats develop psychic powers of, for example, having multiple forms, and appearing and disappearing. The karma of non-arahats influences what they are reborn as, but many different karmas may be the dominant influence on what a being is in any one life.
5. The *khandha*s being made to be beyond ageing, illness and death. At arahatship, a person experiences *nibbāna*, that which is beyond ageing, illness and death. If both deep calm and incisive insight are developed, and arahatship is attained, while the body and other conditioned states still die, there comes to be entry to that which is beyond ageing, sickness and death. Yet the *khandha*s remain subject to these.

Of these types of control, it is generally the case that the *khandha*s can be controlled in type 1 way, so as to be "thus" and "not thus" by wishing it. This is also applies, in a slower and faltering way, to type 2. Type 3 control – relevant issue for Buddhist meditation – works in a limited and spasmodic way, with lack of control being common, and *complete* type 3 control being impossible. Type 4 is not possible: psychic powers only influence how one *appears*, and karma and wishes can only make a certain kind of rebirth *more likely*. Type 5 is impossible, as the *khandha*s are themselves never beyond ageing, sickness and death, though the mental ones can know *nibbāna*, which is beyond ageing, sickness and death.

It remains interesting that the only places in the Pali suttas and Vinaya that one gets the argument that the *khandha*s are non-Self as they cannot be controlled is the ALS, Vin. I 13–14, CSS, and an early commentary included in the fifth *Nikāya*, the *Culla-niddesa*. On "regard the world as empty" at Sn 1119, it cites the section of ALS about it not being possible to make the *khandha*s "thus" and "not thus", and then says (Nidd II 279):

> Moreover, in ten ways does he regard the world as empty (*suññato*). He considers material form [and the other *khandha*s] as devoid, as hollow, as empty, as non-Self, as without an overlord (*anissariyato*), as incapable of being made as one wants (*akāmakāriyato*), as incapable of being had (as one wishes) (*alabbhaniyato*), as insusceptible to the exercise of power (*avasavattanato*), as other (*parato*), as variegated.
>
> (As translated in Kuan 2009: 162, n. 8)

By comparison, "the characteristic expression 'This is mine, this I am, this is my self' and its negation occur 347 times" (Ruzsa 2024: 225). This may, again, be due to the ambiguity of what kind of control "let it be thus […] not thus" refers to.

Conclusion

So, the *Anatta-lakkhaṇa Sutta* was a teaching given to five people who had been performing harsh asceticism, seeking to master and control the body and thus the mind. After the Buddha taught them the *Dhamma-cakka-ppavattana Sutta*, they came to see that a more balanced "middle way" was what was really needed. They also gained insight into the *khandha*s as *dukkha/*painful/unsatisfactory, demanding desire as what caused this, and the way beyond this. Hence they attained the dhamma-eye and became stream-enterers, so as to no longer view any of the *khandha*s as an essential, permanent Self, a possession of such a Self, contained in Self, or containing Self; they no-longer had *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, Self-identity-view.

The *Anatta-lakkhaṇa Sutta* then got them to see that the *khandha*s also were *dukkha* because they are impermanent, and as impermanent, *dukkha*, and of a nature to change, no aspect of them, however subtle, can rightly be seen as "This is mine, this I am, this is my Self". This led them to experience a weary, disenchanted revulsion with the *khandha*s, hence a complete end to attachment to or craving for them, so as to become arahats. They had already abandoned any *view* linking any *khandha* to a supposed Self, but now also abandoned the deeper and vaguer conceit of "I am". This was not about gaining a *view* "There is no Self", but about not taking *anything* as *mine*, what *I am*, or *my Self*. They abandoned Self-ing, whether cognitively or emotionally. The *Anatta-lakkhaṇa Sutta* is about this, not the exposition of a "metaphysical tenet", that "There is no Self", as Ferenc Ruzsa presumes.

Furthermore, Ruzsa argues that the most authentic form of the sutta would not have said: "But inasmuch as form is non-Self, therefore it tends to affliction, and it is *not possible* to have it of form: 'Let my form be thus; let my form not be thus.'" He argues that it would have said the opposite: "But inasmuch as form is non-Self, therefore it tends to affliction, and it *is possible* to have it of form: 'Let my form be thus; let my form not be thus.'" This is because he says one *does* have control over what one's body and mind do. But this does not explain why the processes of body and mind, the *khandha*s, "tend to affliction", i.e. are *dukkha*, nor why there should be weary disenchantment with them. He overlooks the range of limitations on one's degree of control over body and mind. Yes, this can be increased, as within Buddhist practice, but the conditioned, "changing by nature" *khandha*s often arise in ways that are in tension with one's desires, preferences and craving; a key reason why they are *dukkha*. Ruzsa's related argument is that it is odd for the sutta, as we have it in Pali, to say that for something that was genuinely Self, such as bodily form, there could be the wish "Let my form be thus; let my form not be thus."

This is because the most influential idea of Self in the Buddha's day was that found in the *Upaniṣad*s, and this saw Self as the "inner-controller" of all aspects of a person and the world. Hence the Self was seen as control*er*, not as something control*ed*, by making it "thus" and "not thus". However, controlling is an action, and actions bring small changes to the agent of the action; so a controller would change, and to remain as it was, stable and eternal, it would need to control itself, not just what belonged to it. And in any case, seeing a *khandha* "as Self" could have included taking it as "belonging to Self", within its sphere of immediate control.

So the Pali form of the *Anatta-lakkhaṇa Sutta* makes good sense within the context of the suttas as a whole. Nevertheless, the fact that its aspect of "what is not controllable is non-Self" is found only four times in the Pali suttas and Vinaya may be because there is a range of senses and types of "control": it is a somewhat ambiguous concept. Yet it includes aspects very pertinent to meditative practice.

Abbreviations

ALS	*Anatta-lakkhaṇa Sutta.*
AN	*Aṅguttara Nikāya.*
CSS	*Cūḷa-saccaka Sutta.*
DCPS	*Dhamma-cakka-ppavattana Sutta.*
Dhp	*Dhammapada.*
Dhp-a	*Dhammapada* commentary.
DN	*Dīgha Nikāya.*
DPPN	*Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names*, G. P. Malalasekera, 2 vols, 1937, Pali Text Society.
Ja	*Jātaka* and its commentary.
MN	*Majjhima Nikāya.*
MN-a	*Majjhima Nikāya aṭṭhakathā*/commentary.
Nidd II	*Culla-niddesa.*
SĀ	*Saṃyukta Āgama*, in Chinese translation.
Skt.	Sanskrit.
Sn	*Sutta-nipāta.*
SN	*Saṃyutta Nikāya.*
T	*Taishō* canon of Chinese Buddhist texts.
Ud	*Udāna.*
Vin	*Vinaya.*

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