

# Between Self and No-Self: Lessons from the *Majjhima Nikaya*

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*Abstract.* This paper explores the teachings of the Buddha regarding Self and No-Self. Because he focused his efforts on the alleviation of suffering rather than metaphysical enlightenment, the Buddha's teachings are often cryptic and subject to misinterpretation. One such misinterpretation is that the Buddha identified the five *skandhas* as the Self. Another is that he taught a nihilistic doctrine of No-Self. Rejecting these as well as other options, this paper argues that the Buddha's teachings openly defy conventional logic. Even so, it is a mistake to conclude that his teachings are *illogical*, that they are without rhyme or reason, or that we not meant to acquire insight or understanding concerning both Self and No-Self. The Buddha devised a logic that empties without annihilating, demanding a conceptual framework that transcends familiar categories of Being, Becoming, and Non-being. Lessons are drawn from the *Majjhima Nikaya*, focusing especially a discourse known as the *Sabbasava-Sutta*.

## 1. *Sabbasava-Sutta*: Overview

In the *Majjhima Nikaya*, in a discourse known as the *Sabbasava-Sutta*, the Buddha addresses a group of monks (*bhikkhus*)<sup>1</sup> concerning the elimination of cares and troubles (*asavas*).<sup>2</sup> He enumerates seven methods, corresponding to different ways in which cares and troubles may originate. The first method is insight (*dassana*).<sup>3</sup>

Insight, it is said, eliminates defilements<sup>4</sup> which arise or are increased by reflecting upon things which should not be reflected upon, or by failing to reflect upon things which should be reflected upon. Specifically, insight is held to eliminate defilements of excessive attachment to sense-pleasure and life, as well as ignorance.<sup>5</sup> Sixteen examples of unwise reflection are provided to clarify the Buddha's point. All concern the Self:<sup>6</sup>

1. What am I?
2. How am I?
3. Am I?
4. Am I not?
5. Did I exist in the past?
6. Did I not exist in the past?

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7. What was I in the past?
8. How was I in the past?
9. Having been what, did I become what in the past?
10. Shall I exist in future?
11. Shall I not exist in future?
12. What shall I be in future?
13. How shall I be in future?
14. Having been what, shall I become what in future?
15. Whence came this person?
16. Whither will he go?

Reflecting on such matters we are led to accept one of several views, all of which are renounced as false:

1. I have a Self.
2. I have no Self.
3. By Self I perceive non-self.
4. By non-self I perceive Self.
5. This my Self, which speaks and feels, which experiences the fruits of good and bad actions now here and now there, this Self is permanent, stable, everlasting, unchanging, remaining the same for ever and ever.<sup>7</sup>

No matter which option we choose, reflecting thus about the Self is called “becoming enmeshed in views, a jungle of views, a wilderness of views; scuffling in views, the agitation (struggle) of views, the fetter of views.”<sup>8</sup> The consequences are dire, for “the uninstructed ordinary man fettered by the fetters of views, does not liberate himself from birth, aging and death, from sorrows, lamentations, pains, griefs, despairs; ...[in short,] he does not liberate himself from *dukkha*.”<sup>9</sup>

Such then is unwise reflection: reflection on the Self - its being, non-being, or coming to be - its past, present, or future. Wise reflection is reflection on the Four Noble Truths: “This is *dukkha*. ... This is the arising of *dukkha*. ... This is the Cessation of *dukkha*. ... This is the Path leading to the Cessation of *dukkha*.”<sup>10</sup> Wise reflection, it is said, frees one from “the three Fetters” (also called “the troubles that should be got rid of by insight”).<sup>11</sup> The three Fetters are: the false idea of self, skeptical doubt, and attachment to observances and rites.<sup>12</sup>

Breaking the three fetters is a mile-stone event, called *conversion*, and one who does so is called a *sotapanno* (one who has entered upon the stream). Having entered upon the stream the *sotapanno* cannot turn back, but his progress may be impeded by seven remaining fetters: attachment to sense-pleasure, ill-will toward others, desire for earthly existence, desire for heavenly existence, pride, self-righteousness, and ignorance.<sup>13</sup> Each, it should be noted, relates clearly to the preceding discussion concerning wise and unwise reflection: attachment to sense-pleasure and ignorance (the first and last of the remaining fetters) were specifically mentioned as defilements which arise or are increased through unwise reflection. The implications for the others (ill-will

toward others, desire for earthly or heavenly existence, pride, and self-righteousness) are only slightly less obvious.

## 2. *Avyakrtas* and the Fire Sermon: On Not-Explaining

There are interesting similarities to what are termed *avyakrtas* (inexpressibles), but important differences as well. In the *Majjhima Nikaya*, Sutta 63, Malunkyaputta complained that the Buddha had not instructed him regarding four things: whether the world is eternal, whether it is spatially finite, whether an *arahat* (saint) exists after death, and whether body and soul are identical. Unless the Buddha complied with his request, Malunkyaputta threatened, he would “abandon religious training and return to the lower life of a layman.”<sup>14</sup> In response Buddha replied: First, I never promised to instruct you in such matters. Second, you did not demand such instruction as a condition for leading the religious life under me. But third, and most important, these things would distract from the true mission at hand. He explained:

It is as if ... a man had been wounded by an arrow thickly smeared with poison, and his friends and companions, his relatives and kinsfolk, were to procure for him a physician or surgeon; and the sick man were to say, “I will not have this arrow taken out until I have learnt whether the man who wounded me belonged to the warrior caste, or to the Brahmin caste, or to the agricultural caste, or to the menial caste. ... until I have learnt the name of the man who wounded me, and to what clan he belongs. ... until I have learnt whether the man who wounded me was tall, or short, or of the middle height.

There are numerous additional possibilities and concerns: the color of the man’s skin, the village from whence he comes, and so on. This man, the Buddha explains, would die from the poison before having learned all which he desires to know. In like manner, he continues:

... any one who should say, “I will not lead the religious life under the Blessed One until the Blessed One shall explain to me either that the world is eternal, or that the world is not eternal ... or that the saint neither exists nor does not exist after death”; - that person would die ... before the Tathagata had ever explained this to him.

The religious life ... does not depend on the dogma that the world is eternal; nor ... on the dogma that the world is not eternal. Whether ... the world is eternal, or ... the world is not eternal, there still remain birth, old age, death, sorrow, lamentation, misery, grief, and despair ...

The Buddha reminds Malunkyaputta to always bear in mind the things which he has, and has not explained:

I have not explained ... that the world is eternal; I have not explained that the world is not eternal; I have not explained that the world is finite; I have not explained that the world is infinite; I have not explained that the soul and the body are identical; I have not explained that the soul is one thing and the body another; I have not explained that the saint exists after death; I have not explained that the saint does not exist after death; I have not explained that the saint both exists and does not exist after death; I have not explained that the saint neither exists nor does not exist after death.

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Why has the Buddha not explained these things? The rationale is neither epistemic nor metaphysical - neither in terms of what he knows, nor in terms of what is. Rather it is a refusal based on pragmatic considerations - in terms of fruits and consequences. One does not need to know. Explanation of such things:

... profits not, nor has to do with the fundamentals of religion, nor tends to aversion, absence of passion, cessation, quiescence, the supernatural faculties, supreme wisdom, and Nirvana.<sup>15</sup>

The *avyakrtas* recur in several different *nikayas*, including the famous one about the blind men and the elephant.<sup>16</sup> On each occasion the Buddha refuses to affirm or deny any of the possibilities expressed by the *catuskoti* (tetralemma).<sup>17</sup> In each case he explains that theorizing about such issues entwines one in a thicket of opinion, is inconducive to the attainment of true wisdom, and fails to alleviate even the smallest measure of human suffering.

Thus one of the most striking features of the *Sabbasava-Sutta* is that it rejects certain propositions concerning the Self as false, not simply as inconducive to the attainment of Nirvana.<sup>18</sup> With that in mind, let us return to the examination of those propositions.

### 3. *Sabbasava-Sutta*: Analysis

There are two matched sets and a complicated “other”. The first set, “I have a Self” and “I have no Self”, is distinctive for a couple of reasons. First, the form is possessive rather than existential: the propositions concern what I *have* rather than what I *am*. As such their rejection is compatible with numerous existential propositions such as “I am a Self.” The implicit emphasis on the unacceptability of a possessive attitude toward the Self is not only consistent with the other teachings of the Buddha, but exactly what we might expect from one who has identified possessive desire (*tanha*) as the principal cause of human misery (*dukkha*).

The second item of note concerns the relation of the propositions one to the other. If we read “I have no Self” as logically equivalent to “It is not the case that I have a Self”, that is if the second proposition is simply intended as the negation of the first, rejecting *both* as false entails substantial challenge to traditional western concepts (such as the Law of Excluded Middle). The Buddha cared little for such concepts and willfully challenged them whenever it suited his purposes. But relatively little is gained by crying, “It is deliberately illogical!” or “It is a mystery!” Moreover, such an approach is unwarranted in the present context. The Buddha’s other teachings, as well as the structure of the passage, suggest that the second proposition is presented and rejected to deny possession of an *anatta* (a negatively reified Self: a no-Self or non-Self). Having in effect said, “I do not have a Self”, the Buddha was quick to silence those who might thereby conclude, “I have a non-Self.” In short, the Buddha’s rejection of both propositions, “I have a Self” and “I have no Self”, is logically equivalent to acceptance of the proposition, “I have neither Self nor non-Self (neither *atman* nor *anatta*).”

The second set of propositions, “By Self I perceive non-self” and “By non-self I perceive Self”, is somewhat more difficult to interpret. At one level the two may be taken as asserting the

identity of Self and non-Self (*atman* and *anatta*). If so their rejection may be interpreted as rejection of that identity. Such a reading is probably correct, but a bit too simplistic. The language is not so much that of metaphysical identity as it is perceptual connectedness: that perception (consciousness) of the Self involves or entails perception (consciousness) of the non-Self, and vice-versa. Thus rejection of the two propositions is more thorough-going than simple rejection of metaphysical identity. There is no commitment to either the existence or non-existence of Self and/or non-Self, and no commitment as to whether either or both constitute possible objects of human consciousness, but there is commitment that there is no guaranteed perceptual connectedness between the two. It is an intriguing set of propositions, the rejection of which is even more so.<sup>19</sup>

The final proposition is complex and challenging, but may help shed additional light on the preceding set. First, there is a problem with respect to counting. The text speaks of six false views into which one may fall. Unless that simply constitutes an error, or a section of the text has somehow been lost, this final complex entity must have been intended as two views, paired together much as were the first four.

The translation which I presented previously is a contemporary one by Walpola Rahula (1974). On the whole it seems an excellent translation: clear, easy to read, yet sensitive to both form and content of what are sometimes difficult and potentially abstruse passages. In this case however the following alternative translation of T. W. Rhys Davids, originally published in 1881, has the advantage of distinguishing somewhat more clearly the two sections of this composite claim:

This soul of mine can be perceived, it has experienced the result of good and evil actions committed here and there: now this soul of mine is permanent, lasting, eternal, has the inherent quality of never changing, and will continue for ever and ever!<sup>20</sup>

Obviously there are a lot of claims in that passage, but the primary two seem to be as follows:

1. My Self can be perceived and has experienced the result of good and evil actions committed here and there.
2. My Self is permanent, lasting, eternal, has the inherent quality of never changing, and will continue for ever and ever.

Breaking the claims apart in this way clarifies the two concepts of Self contained therein: one immediate and subject to the perceptions and experiences of a changing world, the other permanent and forever removed from processes of change and corruption. If this divisionary approach and interpretation is correct, the discourse denies the legitimacy of both types of claims, saying in effect, "I have neither a perceptible changing Self nor an eternal changeless Self." Such is, I believe, consistent with the general teachings of the Buddha. In fact, it is a logical consequence of his rejection of the very first proposition, "I have a Self."

Thus breaking the claims apart makes a fair measure of sense. Unfortunately, it may also entail a significant reduction in content. For conjoined, no matter which translation we use, there

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is clearly a suggestion of identity which evaporates when we uncouple them in the manner just demonstrated. Conjoined, the claim is not simply that the Self is this way or that, but that an unchanging eternal Self can be the subject of perception and the recipient of karmic consequence. It is a substantially different, and in some ways philosophically more interesting claim than its two components taken separately. It is also, I believe, a claim which the Buddha sought to refute. Thus the puzzle remains.

But having examined all five, six, or if you will, seven propositions, we can now see that they were not randomly chosen possibilities, but a carefully matched set presented according to a deliberate, determinant order. The first two were relatively simplistic unsophisticated claims concerning whether I have a Self (or non-Self). The next two introduced the complication of human experience: “I certainly *seem* to have a Self. Do you mean to suggest that what appear to be perceptions of a Self are really perceptions of a non-Self?” (Answer: no.) The final claim(s) expand and extend this concern with the apparent perception and experiences of the Self, directly confronting and rejecting a philosophically sophisticated position regarding the relationship of human experience to a presumably unchanging eternal reality.

### 4. Why the *Skandhas* are not the Self

It is instructive in this context to consider a somewhat different teaching, believed to be one of the earliest provided by the Buddha to his first five disciples:

Body, brethren, is without the Self. If body, brethren, were the Self, body would not be involved in sickness, and one would be able to say of body: “Thus let my body be: thus let my body not be.”

But brethren, inasmuch as body is not the Self, that is why body is involved in sickness, and one cannot say of body: “Thus let my body be: thus let my body not be.”

Not only does the passage state plainly, “Body is not the Self”, but provides an explanation based on two general standards: whatever is involved in sickness and cannot be controlled by simple volition cannot be the Self. The Buddha continues, applying those same standards to the remaining *panca-kkhandha* (the five aggregates associated with the *attabhavo*, or person):<sup>21</sup>

So also with regard to feelings, perception, the activities and consciousness ... they are not the Self.

For if consciousness, brethren, were the Self, then consciousness could not be involved in sickness, and one could say of consciousness: “Thus let my consciousness be: thus let my consciousness not be.” But inasmuch as consciousness is not the Self, that is why consciousness is involved in sickness. That is why one cannot say of this consciousness: “Thus let my consciousness be: thus let my consciousness not be.”

The Buddha pauses to examine the nature of the body. Is it permanent or impermanent? “Impermanent, Lord,” respond the disciples. And what of the impermanent, asked the Buddha. Is it weal or woe? “Woe, Lord,” respond the disciples. The Buddha continues:

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Then what is impermanent, woeful, unstable by nature, is it fitting to regard it thus: “This is mine: I am this: this is the Self of me”?

Surely not, Lord.

So also it is with feeling, perception, the activities and consciousness. Therefore, brethren, every body whatever, be it past, future, or present: be it inward or outward, gross or subtle, low or high, far or near - every body should be thus regarded, as it really is, by right insight, - “This is not mine: this am not I: this is not the Self of me.”

Every feeling whatever, every perception whatever, all activities whatsoever (must be so regarded).

Every consciousness whatever, be it past, future or present, gross or subtle, low or high, far or near, - every consciousness, I say, must be thus regarded, as it really is, by right insight: “This is not mine: this am not I: this is not the Self of me.”

The consequence of dissociating Self from body, feeling, consciousness, etc. is disgust for those entities:

... the well-taught Aryan disciple feels disgust for body, feels disgust for feeling, feels disgust for perception, for the activities, feels disgust for consciousness. So feeling disgust he is repelled: being repelled, he is freed ...

By this teaching, the story concludes, “the hearts of those five brethren were freed from the *asavas*.”<sup>22</sup>

Thus, as in the story with which I begin, right thinking about the Self (which is largely correction of erroneous thinking about the Self) produces liberation from the *asavas*, from the cares and troubles of this life. But this story, unlike the other, makes no mention of *anatta*. It appears the doctrine of *anatta* arose, not as a fundamental teaching of the Buddha, but as a misinterpretation by those who could not accept the indeterminate consequences of the simple *neti neti* (not this, not that) approach to the Self evidenced in this early dialogue. People are attached to the Self, so much so that they will subject it to negative reification before simply letting go.

### 5. Beyond Eternalism and Annihilation

No matter how the Buddha answered, people were apt to misunderstand. Consider his silence, and his reasons for it, in the following, final exchange:

Then Vacchagotta the Wanderer came to the Exalted One and greeted him in friendly wise, and after the exchange of mutual courtesies sat down at one side. So seated he said to the Exalted One:

‘Master Gotama, what have you to say about the existence of the Self?’

At these words the Exalted One was silent.

‘How now, Master Gotama? Is there no such thing as the Self?’

At these words the Exalted One was silent.

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Then Vacchagotta the Wanderer (in disgust) rose up from his seat and went away. Not long after he was gone the venerable Ananda said to the Exalted One:

'How is it, Lord, that the Exalted One made no reply to the question asked by Vacchagotta the Wanderer?'

'If, Ananda, when asked, "Does the Self exist?" I had replied to him, "The Self exists," then, Ananda, that would be to side with all those recluses and brahmins who are eternalists.

But if, Ananda, when asked the question, "Does the Self not exist, then?" I had replied, "No! The Self does not exist," that would be to side with those recluses and brahmins who are annihilationists.

Again, Ananda, if when asked by Vacchagotta the Wanderer "Does the Self exist?" I had replied, "The Self does exist," would that reply be consistent with my knowledge that all things are impermanent?'

'No, Lord, it would not.'

'Again, Ananda, when asked "Then does not the Self exist?" if I had replied "No! It does not exist," it would have added to the bewilderment of Vacchagotta the Wanderer, already bewildered. For he would have said, "Formerly I had a self, but now I have one no more."<sup>23</sup>

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### Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Literally, “beggars” (Davids [1881] p. 5, fn. 1).
- <sup>2</sup> Literally, “a running or flowing - a leak” (Davids [1881] pp. 294-295). Cf. Woodward p. 22, fn. 3.
- <sup>3</sup> The other six methods are subjugation, right use, endurance, avoidance, removal, and cultivation. Davids [1881] pp. 291-307. Cf. Koller (Rahula) pp. 200-204.
- <sup>4</sup> *Asavas*.
- <sup>5</sup> The *asava* which I have rendered “excessive attachment to sense-pleasure”, Davids translates simply as “Lust”. My rendering of the second *asava*, “excessive attachment to life”, borrows from both Rahula (“(the desire for) existence and for becoming”) and Davids (“Life”). Rahula’s phrase is intriguing if a bit cumbersome; we might do well to regard the second *asava* as “excessive attachment to Being and Becoming”.
- <sup>6</sup> Koller (Rahula) p. 201. Reordered for presentation purposes. The original order, in terms of the numbers presented here, is 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 1, 2, 3, 4, 15, 16. Davids’ translation is as follows:  
Have I existed during the ages that are past, or have I not? What was I during the ages that are past? How was I during the ages that are past? Having been what, what did I become in the ages that are past? Shall I exist during the ages of the future, or shall I not? What shall I be during the ages of the future? How shall I be during the ages of the future? Having been what, what shall I become during the ages of the future? ... Do I after all exist, or am I not? How am I? This is a being; whence now did it come, and whither will it go? (pp. 298-299)
- <sup>7</sup> Following Koller (Rahula) pp. 201-202. Davids translates the passage as follows:  
I have a self! ... I have not a self! ... By my self, I am conscious of my self! ... By myself I am conscious of my non-self! ... This soul of mine can be perceived, it has experienced the result of good and evil actions committed here and there: now this soul of mine is permanent, lasting, eternal, has the inherent quality of never changing, and will continue for ever and ever!
- <sup>8</sup> Koller (Rahula) p. 202 top. Cf. Davids (p. 299 bottom):  
This, brethren, is called the walking in delusion, the jungle of delusion, the wilderness of delusion, the puppet show of delusion, the writhing of delusion, the fetter of delusion.
- <sup>9</sup> Koller (Rahula) p. 202 top.
- <sup>10</sup> Koller (Rahula) p. 202 bottom.
- <sup>11</sup> Koller (Rahula) p. 202 bottom.
- <sup>12</sup> Koller (Rahula) p. 202 bottom. Cf. Davids (p. 301 bottom):  
the delusion of self, hesitation, and the dependence on rites and ceremonies.
- <sup>13</sup> Davids [1896] pp. 92-98. Cf. Coomaraswamy p. 103, Woodward pp. 71, 144-149 (*D.N. ii.* 81, *D.N. i.* 155, *Dhp. v.* 369, *M.N. i.* ch. 64).
- <sup>14</sup> Burtt p. 33.
- <sup>15</sup> Burtt pp. 32 - 36.
- <sup>16</sup> Woodward pp. 190-192 (*Udana vi.4*). See also pp. 195-196 (*S.N. iii.* 86), Burtt p. 116 (*Samyutta Nikaya*), and Herman pp. 294-297.
- <sup>17</sup> For any proposition A, the four possibilities of the *catuskoti* are:
- (i) A
  - (ii) Not-A
  - (iii) Both A and not-A
  - (iv) Neither A nor not-A.
- For additional discussion of the *catuskoti*, the *avyakrtas*, and the Buddha’s silence, see Shrader pp. 96-97.
- <sup>18</sup> Having proffered such a bold claim, I must immediately confess a measure of uneasiness and lack of complete certitude concerning the proper translation of the text. The translation of Rahula (Koller p. 201) does indeed

clearly identify the propositions as “six false views”. But Davids was more restrained, opting for “six (absurd) notions” (p. 299). The difference is potentially significant.

<sup>19</sup> Davids’ translation only complicates the matter further:

“By my self, I am conscious of my self!”

“By myself, I am conscious of my non-self!”

This apparently reverses the order of the two propositions, differs significantly regarding the final term of the first one listed here, reintroduces possessiveness, and connotes individual unaided effort.

<sup>20</sup> Davids [1881] p. 299.

<sup>21</sup> See Woodward pp. 31-32 (*D.N. i.* 194-202) re getting rid of the physical-body self, the mind-made (perceptual) self, and the formless (consciousness) self. Also of interest, especially given the title of this paper, is the following exchange from the *Samyutta Nikaya*:

Ananda inquires of the Buddha: What is meant, lord, by the phrase, “The world is empty”?

The Buddha replies: That it is empty, Ananda, of a self, or of anything of the nature of a self. And what is it that is thus empty? The five seats of the five senses, and the mind, and the feeling that is related to mind: all these are void of a self or of anything that is self-like. (vi. 54, Coomaraswamy p. 98)

<sup>22</sup> Woodward pp. 20-22 (*Vinaya Pitaka i.6*, repeated at *S.N. iii.* 66, etc.).

<sup>23</sup> Woodward pp. 149-150 (*S.N. iv.* 400).