

Impermanence, Suffering and No-Self

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1. Introduction

The significance of the existence of the Self may be strongly connected to or sometimes be defined by its relationship with others and the community. If we examine what the Self is from a religious point of view, the possible way of arriving at the definition of the Self is to look at textual passages that describe the actual method of observing oneself.

In India, since ancient times, the idea of the Self has been captured by the Sanskrit word *ātman* (Pāli: *attan*), and the search for the *ātman* was the biggest aim for many Indian thinkers. In general, the *ātman* has two different meanings: (i) oneself that refers to the reflexive pronoun and (ii) intrinsic or internal Self, which is the metaphysical principle behind the individuality. In particular, the old Upaniṣads (treatises compiled between around 5th century BCE and 1st century BCE) aimed at understanding the idea of the latter philosophical meaning of *ātman*. Buddhism, on the other hand, regarded the pursuit of the metaphysical Self as an affair useless for its practice. The Buddha discovered that one should abandon suffering (*duḥkha*, 苦) and he aimed at the cessation of it. It is often said that early Buddhism accepted the teaching of *anātman* (Pāli: *anattan*), literally no-Self. Although the exact ontological position of the Self in early Buddhism remains intricate among previous studies,¹ at least in the period of the so-called Abhidharma, when the teachings of the Buddha were organized systematically, the teaching of *anātman* as “no-Self” (the absence of the Self) was accepted unanimously.²

Buddhism, which aims at the cessation of suffering (*duḥkha*, 苦), declares that everything in this world is suffering and it is generated by the fact that everything is impermanent (*anitya*, 無常). Furthermore, it states that that which is impermanent and suffering is also no-Self (*anātman*, 無我). Therefore, the fundamental base of the view of no-Self can be regarded as impermanence.

This paper attempts to shed light on the Buddhist understating of no-Self in connection with the spiritual practice, particularly the observation of impermanence. It focuses on the *Śrāvakabhūmi* of the *Yogācārabhūmi*, the main text of the Yogācāra school of the Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism.³ This school developed under the influence of Abhidharma.⁴ Originally, the word *yogācāra* seems to have referred to a person whose way of life (*ācāra*) consists primarily of meditative practice (*yoga*). The *Śrāvakabhūmi* describes the traditional Buddhist way of practice that leads to liberation (*parinirvāṇa*), in accordance with the teaching of “the Vehicle of Listeners” (*śrāvakayāna*, 聲聞乘), the so-called *hīnayāna* (小乘). In this paper, I will demonstrate that the observation of impermanence plays an

important role in understanding the concept of no-Self. Furthermore, I will investigate what self is to the Buddhists by considering the meaning of no-Self.

2. The Three marks of things: Impermanence, Suffering and No-Self

Since early Buddhism, the *anātman* / *anattan* doctrine has been often taught in relation to impermanence and suffering. Let us take a look at one of the most frequent examples found in the Pāli canon, which is taken from *Anattalakkhaṇasuttanta* (The dialogue over the mark of not-Self):

Vin (Pāli) vol. 1, 14.5–11:

taṃ kim maññatha bhikkhave, rūpaṃ niccaṃ vā aniccaṃ vā 'ti. aniccaṃ bhante. yaṃ panāniccaṃ, dukkhaṃ vā taṃ sukhaṃ vā 'ti. dukkhaṃ bhante. yaṃ panāniccaṃ dukkhaṃ vipariṇāmadhammaṃ, kallaṃ nu taṃ samanupassituṃ etaṃ mama, eso 'ham asmi, eso me attā 'ti. no h' etaṃ bhante. vedanā [...] saññā [...] saṃkhārā [...] viññāṇam [...]

“Bhikkhus, do you think form (*rūpa*) is permanent or impermanent?” “It is impermanent, venerable Sir.” “Then, that which is impermanent is suffering or happiness?” “It is suffering, venerable Sir.” “Then, concerning that which is impermanent, suffering, and is subject to change, is it appropriate to observe that this is mine, this am I, this is my Self.” “No, venerable Sir.” “Feeling [is permanent or impermanent?” “It is impermanent, venerable Sir.” ...] “Perception [is...] “Volitional activities [are ...] “Cognition [is ...]

Before moving on, we need to learn about another important Buddhist concept, the concept of the five aggregates (Skt.: *pañcaskandha* / Pāli: *pañcakkhandha*), according to which, “a person” is nothing more than five aggregates: form, feeling, perception, volitional activities and consciousness. In general, form stands for material or physical components (i.e., the body) and the other four stand for mental elements. The above passage shows that the Buddha makes sure that each of the five aggregates is impermanent, suffering and not-Self. These characteristics are called the three marks (*tilakkhana*). In most cases, the teaching on impermanence is put before the other two teachings. These three characteristics are applied not only to the five aggregates that make up a person, but also to the features of all phenomena, which are known as “all conditioned things are impermanent” (*sarvasaṃskārā anityāḥ*, 諸行無常), “all conditioned things are suffering” (*sarvasaṃskārā duḥkhāḥ*, 一切皆苦) and “all phenomena are devoid of Self” (*sarvadharmā anātmānaḥ*, 諸法無我). Thus, impermanence, suffering and no-Self are associated with each other.

3. The Path of Practice in the *Śrāvakabhūmi*

3-1. Four True Realities

The *Śrāvakahūmi* section, as its title suggests, describes the traditional Buddhist path of a so-called “Hīnayāna” follower. It consists of four chapters, and the last two chapters give a detailed description of the *śrāvaka* path of practice beginning from initiation into the Buddhist community and culminating in the attainment of liberation. This journey can be divided into three parts: (a) the preparatory path (instruction by a teacher), (b) the mundane path and (c) the supramundane path. After completion of (a) the preparatory path, a practitioner has two options to choose from: (b) the mundane path, which is realized by eight stages of absorption (*dhyāna*) for the sake of rebirth in celestial realms, or (c) the supramundane path, which is based on the realization of four true realities for the noble ones (*catvāry āryasatyāni*)⁵ for the sake of acquiring arhatship, which is the state free from all the afflictions and all causes for future rebirths.⁶

For Buddhist practitioners, the supramundane path is regarded to be more important than the mundane path, since its goal, liberation, is the final state to be aimed at and attained by Śrāvakayāna Buddhists. Four true realities for the noble ones, i.e. (i) the true reality of suffering (*duḥkhasatya*), (ii) the true reality of the origin [of suffering] (*samudayasatya*), (iii) the true reality of the cessation [of suffering] (*nirodhasatya*) and (iv) the true reality of the path [leading to cessation of suffering] (*mārgasatya*), that represent the basic principles of this world discovered by the Buddha’s and other noble ones’ direct insight, play a crucial role in the supramundane path. By the direct perception of the four true realities, one can attain liberation. The four true realities are often compared to a medical treatment: (i) Suffering is equivalent to a disease, (ii) the origin of suffering is equivalent to the cause of the disease, (iii) the cessation of suffering is equivalent to the state of being cured and (iv) the path for the cessation is equivalent to the method of curing the disease. Again it should be stressed here that the purpose for Buddhists to practice the supramundane path is to conquer suffering.

Each of the four true realities is subdivided into four aspects (*ākāra*)⁷ respectively. (i) The true reality of suffering is observed according to (1) impermanence (*anitya*), (2) suffering (*duḥkha*), (3) emptiness (*śūnya*) and (4) no-Self (*anātman*) in due order. The enumeration is believed to be derived from the three marks of things that have been introduced in the previous section.⁸ The idea of emptiness (*śūnya*, 空) is considered to have been added in a later stage of the development of Buddhist thought.⁹ Since the idea of emptiness is closely connected to the no-Self doctrine, as we will see in the fourth section, its addition is understandable. I would now like to present a rough sketch of the meditation on impermanence.

3-2. The Observation of Impermanence as a Basis for the Practice in the Supramundane Path¹⁰

The *Śrāvakahūmi* gives a far more detailed description on the impermanence compared to the other three aspects that are described in a few paragraphs or a few sentences only. From this fact it is evident that the contemplation of impermanence is important as the very first step taken on the supramundane path. First of all, the observation of the true reality of suffering through the four aspects

is accomplished in three successive ways—that is, (I) true scripture (the Buddha’s speech), (II) direct perception and (III) inference. Impermanence, for instance, is analyzed in the following way: (I) A practitioner understands that all conditioned things are impermanent based on the teaching of the Buddha and acquires the confidence in it. Then, (II) when one sees with one’s own eyes that all the objects observed continuously change, one can conclude that what the Buddha taught (impermanence) is correct. Lastly, (III) based on this experience, one infers that all conditioned things exist only momentarily. This order is important because the practice gets more sophisticated as one starts one’s own practice by relying on the words of a reliable person, confirms this through one’s experience and then extends the understanding to the arising and perishing of all objects in every moment.

By observing impermanence, the adept divides all conditioned things into internal objects and external objects. They are composed of fifteen and sixteen kinds, respectively. For example, in the case of internal objects, one can see changes in skin or aging of one’s body within a certain period of time. As for external objects, on the other hand, one can see buildings being constructed and destroyed or plants growing and withering. Taking the classification of the objects into account, what is meant by “all” conditioned things is supposed to be limited to “everything in the realm of desire (*kāmadhātu*, 欲界)”, which denotes the material world where we live, but not everything in the realm of subtle materiality (*rūpadhātu*, 色界) and of immateriality (*ārūpyadhātu*, 無色界).

I would like to draw attention to the fact that the yoga practitioner observes that “all” (*sarva*) conditioned things, not only a part of them, are impermanent, and one can also observe that these conditioned things are suffering, empty and no-Self. In fact, the *Śrāvaka bhūmi* does not mention “all” in the description of suffering, emptiness and no-Self, but mentions conditioned things only in the plural form (*saṃskārāḥ*). However, considering the deep connection of the characteristic of impermanence to that of suffering and no-Self that has been shown in the second section, it is plausible to assume that the adept’s examination of the latter three aspects is also directed to “all” conditioned things. As a result, the observation of impermanence, which is carried out in all possible cases, provides a basis not only for that of suffering and emptiness but also for that of no-Self. Considering the descriptions in the Pāli canon and the order of the three marks, it seems quite natural to conclude that the doctrine of no-Self presupposes the idea of impermanence, but it is also important to note that this understanding is confirmed by the content of practice found in this later Buddhist text.

4. The Practice of No-Self

In this section, let us examine how no-Self doctrine is presented in the *Śrāvaka bhūmi*. The observation of no-Self follows that of emptiness in the following way:

ŚrBh (Skt.) 490.21–492.6, Ms 124a5–b1, (Tib.) D 186b7–187a5, P 225b5–226a4, (Ch.) Vol. 34, T [30] 474a07–19:

tasyaivaṃ bhavatīndriyamātram mayehopalabhyate,¹⁾ viṣayamātram tajjam anubhavamātram cittamātram ahaṃ mameti²⁾ nāmamātram darśanamātram upacāramātram, nāta uttari nāto bhūyaḥ. tad evaṃ sati skandhamātram etad, nāsty eṣu skandheṣu nityo dhruvaḥ śāśvataḥ svāmibhūtaḥ³⁾ kaścīd ātmā vā sattvo vā yo 'sau jāyeta vā jīryeta⁴⁾ vā mriyeta⁵⁾ vā tatra vā tatra kṛtakṛtānām karmaṇām phalavipākam pratisaṃvedayeta. iti hi śūnyā ete saṃskārāḥ, ātmavirahitā ity evaṃ anupalambhākāreṇa śūnyākāram avatarati.

tasyaivaṃ bhavati ye punar ete saṃskārāḥ svalakṣaṇenānityalakṣaṇena duḥkhalakṣaṇena saṃyuktāḥ⁶⁾ te 'pi pratītyasamutpannatayāsvatantrāḥ. ye 'svatantrās te 'nātmāna ity evaṃ asvatantrākāreṇānātmākāram avatarati.

¹⁾ °traṃ mayehopalabhyate em., °tra saha upalabhate Ms, °traṃ saḥ upalabhate Sh, °tram iha upalabhe (?) SCHMITHAUSEN [1987: 297 n.221].

²⁾ °tram ahaṃ mameti SCHMITHAUSEN [1987: 297 n.221] (Cf. 我我所法 Ch., *bdag dan bdag gi* Tib.), °tra hatā ātmeti Ms, °traṃ hatātmeti Sh.

³⁾ svāmibhūtaḥ SCHMITHAUSEN [1987: 297 n.221] (Cf. 主宰 Ch., *bdag por gyur pa* Tib.), svābhūtaḥ Ms, Sh.

⁴⁾ jīryeta Ms (Cf. *rga bar 'gyur ba* Tib. (P)), hīryeta Sh.

⁵⁾ mriyeta em. (Cf. *'chi bar 'gyur ba* Tib.), mriyate Ms, Sh.

⁶⁾ saṃyuktāḥ em., sa(?)yuktāḥ Ms, yuktāḥ Sh.

It occurs to the [practitioner]: “Here, I recognize¹¹ only the sensory faculty, only the object [of cognition], only the perception resulting from them (the sensory faculty and the object of cognition), only the mind [resulting from them], only the name of “[This] am I (*aham*), [this] is mine (*mama*)”,¹² only the view [of “This am I, this is mine”] or only the designation [of “This am I, this is mine”]. It is not more than this and does not exceed this. Thus, if so, this, i.e. what is recognized by me, consists only of the aggregates, and in this aggregates there is not any Self (*ātman*) or being (*sattva*) that is permanent, eternal, perpetual and an owner, that could be born, get older¹³ or die, or could experience the fruits of the results of actions (*karman*) made [variously] here and there. Therefore, these conditioned things are empty and devoid of Self (*ātman*).” In doing so, [the practitioner] enters into (i.e., understands thoroughly) the aspect (*ākāra*) of being empty (*śūnya*) by means of the aspect of non-recognition.

It occurs to the [practitioner]: “In addition, these conditioned things which are connected to [their own] inherent characteristic[s], the characteristic of being impermanent (*anitya*) and the characteristic of being painful (*duḥkha*), are also not self-independent (*asvatantra*), because they have originated dependently (*pratītyasamutpannatā*). [These conditioned things which are] not independent are no-Self.” In this way, [the practitioner] enters into the aspect of no-Self by means of the aspect of no-independence.

It is very clear that the observation of emptiness give rise to the knowledge that there is no permanent Self in the five aggregates. In this context, the practitioner denies the existence of *ātman*, which means the Self that exists permanently without birth or death and that is not affected by the results of its own actions at all.

Let us look at the account of no-Self. I would like to discuss the meaning of *asvatantra*, which qualifies conditioned things in the description of *anātman*. This term consists of the negative prefix *a* and the compound term *svatantra*. According to the Monier Williams Sanskrit dictionary, *svatantra* means self-independence. Therefore, *asvatantra* means no-self-independence or dependence on others. The *Śrāvakabhūmi* explains that it is because the conditioned things have originated dependently (*pratītyasamutpannatā*) that they are not independent. The technical term *pratītyasamutpannatā* refers to one of the most fundamental Buddhist concepts and is deeply connected to the idea of “conditioned” things. Dependence implies that the existence of all beings is controlled by the law of causality. Buddhism states that everything is constantly changing while being subject to various causes and conditions. Therefore, *asvatantra*, i.e. depending on others, refers to the aspect of being impermanent and being generated by other infinite number of causes.

It is often said that Buddhism views *ātman* as something that is permanent, single and that is able to do as one desires.¹⁴ Judging from this interpretation, no-Self could imply that an individual is impermanent, not a single entity and it cannot realize what it wants. In the same way, it may be possible to consider that *svatantra* (self-dependence) stands for the *ātman*'s nature of being able to do anything without any other assistance and, as a result, *asvatantra* denotes the opposite, that is to say, the aspect of not being able to control everything in the way that is desired. However, this does not seem plausible. Buddhists do not pursue the inner Self in their practices like it was done in the old Upaniṣads, but attempt to achieve the state in which one is free from suffering by means of practice such as the previously mentioned observations. Consequently, it is not right to approach the meaning of *asvatantra* in comparison with the meaning of *svatantra*. It is better to understand the meaning of the term from the context, as was shown in the previous paragraph. Lastly, I would like to note that the reason why the characteristics of impermanence and suffering are mentioned in the explanation of the idea of no-Self is probably their origination from the doctrine of the three marks.

5. Concluding Remarks

In India, the idea of the Self was approached from different angles. A Buddhist does not strive to reach the stage in which the real Self is attained, but rather aims to achieve the state of liberation (*parinirvāṇa*) that is free from suffering. In order to reach this goal, Buddhists devote themselves to ascetic trainings based on the teachings of the Buddha such as the teachings of impermanence, suffering, emptiness and no-Self. The *Śrāvakabhūmi* argues that the existence of a permanent Self

should be refuted. It is obvious that what is meant by the “Self” in this context is not the empirical self that shows who you are in the universe. If a Buddhist had to explain the nature of the conventional self to others, the most likely explanation would be the following: Self is the five aggregates that are impermanent, subject to destruction and are produced by depending on numerous causes and conditions including the actions that one takes.

Abbreviations

Ch.	Chinese translation
D	sDe dge edition of the Tibetan Tripiṭaka
em.	emended
Ms	Manuscript, CHINA LIBRARY OF NATIONALITIES AND TAISHŌ UNIVERSITY [1994].
om.	omitted in
P	Peking edition of the Tibetan Tripiṭaka
ŚrBh	<i>Śrāvakabhūmi</i> , (Skt. ed.) SHUKLA [1973].
Sh	SHUKLA [1973]. See ŚrBh.
Skt.	Sanskrit
T	<i>Taishō shinshū daizōkyō</i> 大正新脩大藏經
Tib.	Tibetan translation
Vin	<i>Vinayapiṭaka, Mahāvagga</i> , (Pāli. ed.) OLDENBERG [1997].
VinSg	<i>Viniścayasamgrahaṇī</i>

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(Pāli ed.) OLDENBERG [1997].

Yogācārabhūmi

Maulī bhūmi / Maulyo bhūmayah

Śrāvakabhūmi

(Skt. ed.) SHUKLA [1973].

(Tib.) D (4036) dzi 1b1–195a7, P (5537) wi 1a1–236a8.

(Ch.) T [30] (1579) 395c03–477c01, translated by Xuanzang (玄奘).

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Notes

¹ There are considerable amounts of study on *ātman* (*attan*) and *anātman* (*anattan*), particularly based on early Buddhist texts. First of all, it should be noted that, as many scholars (NAKAMURA [1963: esp. 51–60], THANISSARO [1994], SAIGUSA [2004: 94–100] and so on) have pointed out, during the period of early Buddhism, the doctrine of *anattan* was not accepted as a doctrine of no-Self, but that of not-Self. Moreover, opinions are different over what Self is negated in the doctrine of not-Self. For example, IMANISHI [1990] assumes that the doctrine denies the substantial and permanent Self that the old Upaniṣads aimed at as a final goal. NAKAMURA [1963: esp. 51–60] stresses that the Buddha did not deny the existence of the Self and that early Buddhism affirms a mode of Self that should be achieved as a practitioner. The reason that the *anātman* teaching is not understood as “no-Self” is related to the fact that the Buddha kept silent on indeterminate (*avyākṛta* / *avyākāta*) metaphysical issues such as whether Self exists or not. See HIRAKAWA [1963: 412–413], THANISSARO [1994: 21].

² As we will see in the fourth section, the *Śrāvabhūmi*, which I am dealing with in this paper understands that *anātman* means no-Self or selflessness. The understanding is assured from a Sanskrit grammar, *bahuvrīhi* compound. When a noun indicates the quality that a referent possesses, the noun must be the same gender, number and case as the referent. For example, “*sarvadharmā[h]* (m., pl., nom.) *anātmā* (m., sg., nom)” means “all phenomena are not-Self.” In this case, *anātman* functions as a noun. “*Sarvadharmā[h]* (m., pl., nom.) *anātmānaḥ* (m., pl., nom.)” however, means “all phenomena are devoid of self.” In this case, it is reasonable to understand that *anātman* means the nature or quality in which all phenomena are inherent.

³ SCHMITHAUSEN [2007: 98] renders the text as Treatise on the Levels of Those Who Engage in Spiritual Training (*yoga*). As of now, many scholars agree with the hypothesis that this voluminous Yogācāra’s treatise was compiled in several stages over a few centuries and that it was completed in the 4th century CE. See SCHMITHAUSEN [1987: 14, 817–818], DELEANU [2006: esp. 154–156] etc. The *Śrāvabhūmi* is considered to be one among the chapters belonging to the earliest parts of the *Yogācārabhūmi*.

⁴ As TAKAHASHI [2009] demonstrates, the *abhidharma*, represented by the Sarvāstivāda school, had an impact on the even early Yogācāra school, particularly regarding the interpretation of no-Self.

⁵ The rendering of the technical term which has been often translated as “Four noble truths” is based on the understanding proposed by separately ENOMOTO [2009] and HARVEY [2009] [2013: 50–52].

⁶ For more detailed explanation of practice systematized by the *Śrāvabhūmi*, see SCHMITHAUSEN [1982] [2007: 215–232], MŌRI [1987], DELEANU [2006: 23–34] and so on.

⁷ The meaning of the word “*ākāra*” is very difficult to understand. The term is often interpreted as a mental image of an object but in this context, according to DHAMMAJOTI [2007: 256], it is used in the active sense of the mental function of understanding by knowledge. The English translation “aspect” does not fully reflect the interpretation but I understand the term in the sense suggested by the scholar.

⁸ On the historical incorporation of the three marks into the four true realities, see MORI [1976] [1995: 271–279].

⁹ It is evident that scriptures preserved in the Chinese translation, which is called the Chinese *Āgamas*, have the four-fold form that includes *śūnya* (empty). In the Pāli canon, there are also some cases where *suñña* (empty) is enumerated along with the other three elements. However, other elements such as *roga* (illness), *salla* (arrow), *gaṇḍa* (tumor) are also listed in these cases. This shows that there is no evidence that the Pāli canon preserves the formula that consists only of impermanence, suffering, emptiness and no-Self. Note that as BABA [2004: 244–247] demonstrates, the four set are found in the commentaries on the Pāli canon.

¹⁰ For more detailed explanation, see von ROSPATT [1995] [2004] and SCHMITHAUSEN [2007].

¹¹ I have emended the reading of the manuscript, “*saha upalabhate*” to “*mayehopalabhyate*,” according to the two translations: The Tibetan translation (*bdag gis ... mthoñ bar zad*), which seems to partially support the emendation (*bdag gis* literally means “by me” (**mayā*). But it could indicate the verb (*upa√labh*) is a first person and singular form (*upalabhe*) that SCHMITHAUSEN [1987: 297 n.211] tentatively supposes.) and the Chinese translation (我於今 ... 此中可得), which SCHMITHAUSEN [1987: 297 n.211] is mainly based on and which includes the reading of “*iha*” (於今 / 此中, “here”).

¹² As shown in the footnote 2), I follow the emendation by SCHMITHAUSEN [1987: 297 n.211], which is supported by the Chinese translation and the Tibetan translation, although the emendation is a bit far from the transcription from the manuscript. A different interpretation is found in the *Viniścayasamgrahaṇī* (VinSg), another section of the *Yogācārabhūmi*, which discusses this passage and according to which (Cf. VinSg (Ch.) Vol. 55, T [30] 605a10: 唯有彼所生心, 唯有計我我想..., (Tib.) D zhi 67a6, P zi 70b3: *sems tsam dan / bdag dan bdag ces bya ba'i min...*) it is possible to read “*aham ātmā*” (I am, I am / [This] am I, [this] am I)

¹³ SHUKLA [1973] reads “*hīyeta*” (it could be deficient) but taking into consideration the fact that “*hī*” and “*jī*” look very similar, and “*ye*” and “*rye*” are almost indistinguishable in the manuscript, it is possible to read “*jīryeta*” (it could get older) without emendation. The Chinese translation (老) does not explicitly show the conjugation but clearly suggests the meaning of $\sqrt{j\bar{r}}$ (to get older).

¹⁴ This explanation is derived from the expression “常一主宰” quoted by many scholars when they explain about *ātman* from a Buddhist point of view. However, it appears that the phrase has not been found in extant Sanskrit texts and it was borrowed from a Chinese text.