

Ātman/Anātman in Buddhism and Its Implication for the Wisdom Tradition

by
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Does Christianity believe in reincarnation? Of course it does not. Yet, students of the Wisdom Tradition may seek to find evidence that early Christians did accept reincarnation. Similarly in Buddhism. Does Buddhism believe in the *ātman*, the permanent self? Certainly the Buddhist religion does not. Yet, there is evidence that the Buddha when teaching his basic doctrine of *anātman*, no-self, only denied the abiding reality of the personal or empirical *ātman*, but not the universal or authentic *ātman*.

The Wisdom Tradition known as Theosophy teaches the existence of “An Omnipresent, Eternal, Boundless, and Immutable PRINCIPLE,”¹ often compared to the Hindu *ātman*, the universal “self,” while Buddhism with its doctrine of *anātman*, “no-self,” is normally understood to deny any such universal principle. In regard to Buddhism, however, there have been several attempts to show that the Buddha did not deny the existence of the authentic *ātman*, the self.² Only one of these attempts seems to have been taken seriously by scholars³; namely, the work of Kamaleswar Bhattacharya. His book on this subject, written in French, *L'Ātman-Brahman dans le Bouddhisme ancien*, was published in Paris in 1973; and an English translation of this work, *The Ātman-Brahman in Ancient Buddhism*, was published in 2015.⁴ It is here that he set forth his arguments for the existence of the Upaniṣadic *ātman* in early Buddhism. This is the work that we will discuss.

How must we understand the Sanskrit term *ātman*, or in Pāli, *attā*? The word *ātman* has been translated into English a number of different ways by writers; sometimes as soul, or self,

or ego.⁵ The consensus among scholars for some time now has been to translate *ātman* as “self,” which we will do here.⁶ And likewise, we will translate Sanskrit *anātman*, or Pāli *anattā*, as “no-self.” Translating *ātman* as “self” also avoids confusion between “soul” and “self” when it distinguishes *ātman*, the eternal and unchanging self, from the reincarnating and evolving soul.

One of the basic teachings of Buddhism is that all existence has three defining characteristics (*tri-lakṣaṇa*): suffering (*duḥkha*), impermanence (*anitya*), and no-self (*anātman*).⁷ If these are the Buddha’s basic teachings, then why question his teaching of *anātman* (no-self)?

In the case of Kamaleswar Bhattacharya, while he was doing research in the Sanskrit inscriptions of ancient Cambodia, he came across an inscription that caused him to question the teaching of *anātman*.⁸ The inscription that caught his attention began with the following stanza. Note that *nairātmya* (non-self, absence of self) is a synonym of *anātman* (no-self). It reads:

Buddho bodhiṃ vidadhyād vo yena nairātmyadarśanam |
*viruddhasyāpi sādḥūktam sādhanam paramātmanah ||*⁹

The concept of *paramātman* [the highest self] is in contradiction (*viruddha*) with the doctrine of *nairātmya* [non-self]; nevertheless, the Buddha taught that same doctrine [of non-self] as a means (*sādhana*) of attaining to *paramātman* [the highest self]!¹⁰

This may be restated as:

The Buddha taught that through the cultivation of non-self (*nairātmya*), one reaches the highest self (*paramātman*). The idea here is that by emptying yourself of your personality, your lower self, you are able to reach or ascend to your highest self, your spiritual essence.

Interestingly enough, Paul Brunton talks about this same inscription in one of his notebooks. He renders it as:

Let the Buddha give you the Bodhi, by Whom has been taught well the philosophy denying the existence of the individual soul

and teaching the cult of the universal soul though [the two teachings seem to be] contradictory.¹¹

When George Cœdès, who was later to become Bhattacharya's mentor, first saw this inscription in 1908, he thought that it had been contaminated by Hindu influence.¹² But after Sylvain Lévi published his edition and translation of the *Mahāyāna-Sūtrālaṅkāra* in 1907 and 1911, it became apparent that no contamination had taken place.¹³

This important Buddhist text supported the idea that *paramātma* (the highest self) and *nairātmya* (non-self), found together in the inscription, were not contradictory:

In utterly pure Emptiness, the Buddhas have attained to the summit of the *ātman*, which consists in Impersonality [*nairātmya*, non-self]. Since they have found, thus, the pure *ātman*, they have reached the heights of *ātman*.

And, in this Plan Without-Outflowing, is indicated the *paramātman* of the Buddhas—How so?—Because their *ātman* consists in the essential Impersonality [*nairātmya*, non-self].—*Mahāyāna-Sūtrālaṅkāra*, 9.23, with beginning of commentary.¹⁴

Note that Lévi has translated *nairātmya* as “Impersonality,” instead of “non-self,” which has been used here.

Bhattacharya then quoted another Mahāyāna text, the *Ratnagotravibhāga* commentary, to support this idea further:

The Tathāgata [Buddha], on the other hand, by virtue of his absolute knowledge (*yathābhūtajñānena*), has gained perfect intuition of the Impersonality [*nairātmya*] of all separate elements. This Impersonality [*nairātmya*] accords, from every point of view (*yathā-darśanam*), with the characteristics of the *ātman*. It is thus always regarded as *ātman*, because it is Impersonality [*nairātmya*] which is *ātman* (*nairātmyam evāmeti kṛtvā*).¹⁵

From this we can see that the two seemingly contradictory ideas of *paramātman* (the highest self) and *nairātmya* (non-self)

found in the Cambodian inscription are *not* incompatible with Buddhist scriptures. Bhattacharya concludes:

The idea of *paramātman* is thus not contrary to the doctrine of *nairātmya*; the two terms rather designate the same thing from two different points of view.¹⁶

Another scholar, R. Grousset, commenting on the passage quoted above from the *Mahāyāna-Sūtrālamkāra*, says that the *nairātmya* idea is also found in the Upaniṣads, known for their teaching of *ātman*. He writes:

... such a conception recalls, curiously enough, material from some of the Upaniṣads; the *ātman* consisting essentially in *nairātmya*, or, if preferred, the person being resolved in its very depths in impersonality, we there approach the impersonal *ātman* of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* [Upaniṣad].¹⁷

It is Bhattacharya's belief that the Buddha did not deny this impersonal, eternal *ātman* of the Upaniṣads.

Bhattacharya distinguishes two types of *ātman*:

1) the authentic *ātman*, and 2) the empirical *ātman*.¹⁸

The authentic *ātman* is the true spiritual *ātman* of the Upaniṣads, eternal and unchanging. The empirical *ātman* is the psycho-physical individuality,¹⁹ the person, which is ephemeral and changing. This psycho-physical individuality is made up of five components, which are called *skandhas*, or aggregates. These five *skandhas* are:

1. form, or body (*rūpa*),
2. feeling (*vedanā*),
3. perception and conception (*saṃjñā*),
4. karma formations, or karmic seeds (*saṃskāra*),
5. consciousness (*vijñāna*).

In other words, the five *skandhas*, or aggregates, make up what we would call the everyday person. As we saw earlier, just

like everything else in existence, the *skandhas*, too, are characterized by suffering (*duḥkha*), impermanence (*anitya*), and no-self (*anātman*).

Throughout the Buddhist scriptures of the Pāli canon, we find the Buddha repeatedly denying the existence of the *ātman* in the five *skandhas*. The following dialogue is one example, where the Buddha says:

“Now what think you, Soṇa? Is body permanent or impermanent?”

“Impermanent, lord.”

“And what is impermanent, is that woe or weal?”

“Woe, lord.”

“And is it fitting to hold such views as ‘this is mine,’ ‘this am I,’ or ‘this is the self of me,’ about that which is impermanent and unstable?”

“Surely not, lord.”

“Is feeling . . . perception . . . the activities [karma formations] . . . is consciousness permanent or impermanent? (as before). . . .”

“Surely not, lord.”

“Wherefore, Soṇa, whatsoever body there be, whether past, future or present, inward or outward, gross or subtle, low or lofty, far or near . . . every body should thus be regarded as it really is by right insight. Thus ‘this is not mine,’ ‘this am not I,’ ‘this of me is not the self.’”

And so also with regard to feeling, perception, the activities [karma formations] and consciousness (so should they be regarded). —*Samyutta-Nikāya*, 22.49.²⁰

This type of negation is meant to dispel the idea of a permanent, truly existing personality, the *satkāya-dṛṣṭi*.²¹ It is clear that the *skandhas*, the ephemeral person, cannot be the eternal, unchanging *ātman*.

While the Buddha clearly and repeatedly said that there was no *ātman* in the *skandhas*, he did not directly or specifically deny the existence of the eternal *ātman* of the Upaniṣads. As Bhattacharya says:

The Buddha did not say, “There is no *ātman*.” He simply said, in speaking of the *skandhas/khandhas*, ephemeral and painful, which constitute the psycho-physical being of a man: *n’ etaṃ mama, n’ eso ’ham asmī, na m’ eso attā*, “This is not mine, I am not this, this is not my *ātman*.”²²

Ananda Coomaraswamy, in his book, *Hinduism and Buddhism*, agrees: “the repeated expression ‘That is not my Self’ has so often been misinterpreted to mean ‘There is no Self.’”²³

Bhattacharya cites another passage from the Pāli canon to illustrate that the Buddha did not deny the existence of the authentic *ātman*. This passage speaks of an “unborn,” “unproduced,” “uncreated.” This is reminiscent of the immutable principle spoken of in *The Secret Doctrine*.²⁴ The Buddha says in this passage:

There is, monks, an unborn, unproduced, uncreated, unformed. If there were not, monks, an unborn, unproduced, uncreated, unformed, there would be no issue [escape] for the born, the produced, the created, the formed. (*Udāna*, 8.3)²⁵

Bhattacharya elaborates on this passage from the *Udāna*, with scriptural support from the *Samyutta Nikāya*:

Note that the “unborn, unproduced, uncreated, unformed” (*ajāta, abhūta, akata, asaṃkhata*), in a word, the Unconditioned, is not another world, situated beyond the “born, produced, created, formed” (*jāta, bhūta, kata, saṃkhata*). It is in us, is our very selves: it is our essential nature. It must, then, be discovered in the depths of our being, by transcending our phenomenal existence.²⁶

Kamaleswar Bhattacharya’s thesis is that when the Buddha denied the *ātman* in the *skandhas*, he was *indirectly affirming* the existence of the authentic, Upaniṣadic *ātman*.²⁷

To support his position, Bhattacharya cites the Indian logician Uddyotakara of the Hindu Nyāya school, who said that this

type of negation, “This is not mine, I am not this, this is not my *ātman*,” doesn’t make sense logically unless one accepts that the *ātman* exists. This is called a *specific negation*. Uddyotakara says:

This negation is a specific negation (*viśeṣapratīṣedha*), not a universal negation (*sāmānyapratīṣedha*). One who does not accept the *ātman* must employ a universal negation: ‘I am not,’ ‘You are not.’ A specific negation always implies a corresponding affirmation: when, for example, I say, ‘I do not see with my left eye,’ it is understood that I do see with my right eye. . . .”²⁸

In this case, the specific negation of *ātman* in the *skandhas* would have for its corresponding affirmation the existence of the authentic, Upaniṣadic *ātman*.

The eminent Buddhist scholar, La Vallée Poussin, commenting on a passage from the *Majjhima-Nikāya*,²⁹ corroborates Bhattacharya’s thesis when he says:

In the light of this text, which really is quite straightforward, we may understand several sermons, and notably the sermon of Benares, not as the negation of the *ātman* as do the Buddhists—but as the affirmation of an *ātman* distinct from the *skandhas*.³⁰

This brings us back to the teaching of the stanza in the inscription that we began with:

The Buddha taught the doctrine of *nairātmya* [non-self] as the means (*sādhana*) of attaining to *paramātman* [the highest self].³¹

Here, the stanza teaches us to cultivate the specific negation of *nairātmya* [non-self], in order to attain to its corresponding affirmation of *paramātman* [the highest self]. The two Mahāyāna texts we cited earlier to support these ideas (the *Mahāyāna-Sūtrālaṅkāra* and the commentary to the *Ratnagotravibhāga*) treated *nairātmya* and *paramātman* as synonyms.³² In other words, once understood, they become two different sides of the same coin. *Nairātmya*, the negation of the empirical

self, reveals *paramātman*, the highest authentic self, which is inexpressible.

This type of logic can be fruitfully employed when referring to truth or the absolute, such as *ātman* or *paramātman*.³³ Since truth is beyond discursive thought, it can be referred to in negative terms only, such as the *neti neti* “not this, not that” of the Upaniṣads. As Bhattacharya says:

All truths as can be formulated are, in fact, but approximations of Truth, which is inexpressible; none of them can be identified with Truth itself. They aid us in reaching it, they guide our progress towards it; but they must be transcended if it is to be reached.³⁴

It is perhaps for this reason that when the itinerant monk Vatsagotra (Pāli: Vacchagotta) came to the Buddha and asked him if there is an *ātman* or not, the Buddha remained silent. Also, it is there explained that had the Buddha answered either way, Vatsagotra would have misunderstood him due to his pre-conceptions. To have given any answer would have been misleading.³⁵

What are some reasons for possible confusion concerning the *ātman* in Buddhism?

1. The Buddha’s silence on pertinent questions, such as whether the *ātman* exists, as we have just seen in the Vatsagotra story, has been a long-standing source of confusion for readers of the Buddhist scriptures. While the Buddha taught that the *skandhas* are *anātman*, he did not say that “There is no *ātman*.”³⁶ If he had wanted to dispel the *ātman* itself, he could have done so directly, to avoid confusion.³⁷

2. Despite the fact that the Buddha repeatedly taught the doctrine of *anātman* relative to the *skandhas*, there are, nevertheless, numerous occurrences of the word *ātman* throughout the Buddhist scriptures that may not be used only as a pronoun.

Citing the Pāli canon alone, Pérez-Remón says:

In fact the references to *attā* [*ātman*] in the five Nikāyas are as overwhelming, as regards their numbers, as the references to *anattā* [*anātman*], and plenty of those references are extremely significant.³⁸

With all the emphasis the Buddha placed on the teaching of *anātman*, the many references to *ātman* can be confusing.

3. Although both positive and negative formulations of *ātman* are found in the Buddhist scriptures, it is the negative formulations that predominate. Bhattacharya says:

There certainly are positive expressions, relative to the *ātman*, in the Pāli Canon. . . . But these positive expressions—often moreover wrongly interpreted—are almost drowned in the mass of negative expressions. . . . It is this predilection for negative expression which would seem to have been responsible for the pernicious theory of the “negation of the *ātman*.”³⁹

4. Another source of confusion in the Buddhist scriptures is the fact that the word *ātman* can be used in more than one sense. Not only can *ātman* have the meaning of the authentic, Upaniṣadic *ātman*, but it can and often is used simply as a reflexive personal pronoun. As Steven Collins says:

Attā [*Ātman*] is the regular reflexive pronoun in Pali, used in the masculine singular for all numbers and genders.⁴⁰

Thus, as a reflexive pronoun, the word *attā* [*ātman*] can be used for “myself,” “yourself,” “himself,” “herself,” “ourselves,” etc.

As we have seen, the word *ātman* can be used to indicate either the empirical self designated by the personal pronoun, or the authentic, Upaniṣadic self. Hence the possible confusion that can arise in translation in certain contexts. Bhattacharya

cites a verse from the *Dhammapada* illustrating the different usages of the word *ātman* within a single verse (emphasis added):

attā hi attano nātho ko hi nātho paro siyā |
attanā hi sudantena nāthaṃ labhati dullabhaṃ ||

The *ātman* is the refuge of the self.

What other refuge can there be?

When the (phenomenal) *ātman* is properly subdued,
a refuge, difficult to find, is obtained.

(*Dhammapada*, 160)⁴¹

Walpola Rahula, the distinguished Sinhalese monk and Buddhist scholar, interprets this verse differently. Here is his translation (emphasis added):

Oneself is one's own protector (refuge);

what other protector (refuge) can there be?

With oneself fully controlled,

one obtains a protection (refuge) which is hard to gain.

(*Dhammapada*, 160)⁴²

Note that Rahula translates each occurrence of “*ātman*” as the reflexive pronoun (“oneself”), while Bhattacharya translates the first occurrence of “*ātman*” as the authentic *ātman*, followed by the empirical *ātman*.

Bhattacharya also cited some verses from the *Bhagavadgītā* (6.5-7) to show a precedent for this alternating translation of “*ātman*” as the empirical and the authentic *ātman*. Here is verse 6.5 (emphasis added):

uddhared ātmanātmānaṃ nātmānam avasādayet |
ātmaiva hy ātmano bandhur ātmaiva ripur ātmanaḥ ||

May one be saved by himself,
may one not let himself perish.
The (phenomenal) ātman is the friend of the (true) ātman,
and it is also its enemy.
(*Bhagavadgītā*, 6.5)⁴³

This example from the *Bhagavadgītā* clearly shows the juxtaposition of *ātman* in its two meanings within a single verse. Some of the confusion in interpreting the *ātman* in Buddhism could be avoided by distinguishing between the two. As Bhattacharya says:

The Buddha certainly denied the *ātman*. That *ātman*, however, is not the Upaniṣadic *ātman*.⁴⁴

And elsewhere:

Before stating that Buddhism has denied the *ātman*, modern authors should, therefore, have been precise as to which *ātman* is meant.⁴⁵

Bhattacharya cites a statement from the great Buddhist master Vasubandhu, “which perfectly elucidates the so-called ‘negation of *ātman*’ in Buddhism”:⁴⁶

It is by virtue of that nature of things, consisting in subject and object, which the ignorant imagine, that the things are devoid of self, not by virtue of that ineffable Self which is the domain of the Enlightened Ones. (*Viṃśatikā-vṛtti*, verse 10)

Kamaleswar Bhattacharya has a panoramic view of Buddhism within the larger Indian context. He believes that it didn’t come out of a vacuum, but that in fact the Buddha “was continuing the Upaniṣadic tradition.”⁴⁷ Comparing the teachings of the Pāli canon with those of the Upaniṣads, Bhattacharya writes:

The existence of similarities between two traditions does not imply total identity. But the difference between the teachings of the Pali Canon and those of the Upaniṣad[s] has too often been exaggerated. The Buddha's Absolute appears to be the same as that of the Upaniṣads.⁴⁸

And in another place he repeats this same statement, concluding in an even stronger manner:

... The Buddha's Absolute is the same as that of [the] Upaniṣads; the gulf was created later, by the scholastic interpretations.⁴⁹

Bhattacharya sees the difference between the Upaniṣads and Buddhism as "simply a difference in emphasis."⁵⁰ He says that "Buddhism is, first and foremost, a doctrine of salvation."⁵¹ Whereas the authors of the Upaniṣads were more philosophers than saviors, the Buddha was more a savior than a philosopher. While the Upaniṣadic authors spoke "much more of the Infinite than of the finite, much more of the Goal than of the Way," the Buddha spoke "more of the finite than of the Infinite, more of the Way than of the Goal." But he says that the goal of the philosopher and the savior are the same, and that goal is "Knowledge which is Deliverance."⁵²

Bhattacharya has said that deliverance, or liberation, is "rediscovering our true being by transcending our phenomenal existence."⁵³ But he notes that deliverance isn't complete for a Bodhisattva until the entire world is delivered, "since he and the world are identical."⁵⁴ The Buddha shows "the way which leads from the ephemeral to the Eternal, from the mortal to the Immortal, from the sorrow of the finite to the Bliss of the Infinite."⁵⁵

Transcending our phenomenal existence to realize the authentic *ātman* leads us from the ephemeral to the eternal. Realizing the *anātman* (or *nairātmya*), the no-self of the person, leads us to the realization of the *ātman* (or *paramātman*), the true spiritual self. When understood correctly, we can see that there is no contradiction between them. As Bhattacharya says:

There is no contradiction between *ātman* and *anātman*. The *ātman*, which is denied, and that which is affirmed, through that negation itself, pertains to two different levels. It is only when we have not succeeded in distinguishing between them, that the terms *ātman* and *anātman* seem to us to be opposed.⁵⁶

When Kamaleswar Bhattacharya found the Cambodian inscription that spoke of *nairātmya* and *paramātman*, it led him to make a thorough investigation of the question of *ātman* in Buddhism. He concluded:

Does not Buddhism deny the *ātman*? . . . I have but one answer which I have tried to formulate in various ways in this book, on the basis, invariably, of a study of the Pāli canon and of the Nikāyas in particular,⁵⁷ that is: the Buddha does not deny the Upaniṣadic *ātman*; on the contrary, he indirectly affirms it, *in denying that which is falsely believed to be the ātman*.⁵⁸

The implication of this for the Wisdom Tradition is clear. Bhattacharya in his book has provided substantial evidence, from exoteric Buddhist sources, that the Buddha did not deny the Upaniṣadic *ātman* or self, a universal principle comparable to that taught in the Wisdom Tradition. Blavatsky has provided us with an esoteric Buddhist source that states this outright. She calls this “An Unpublished Discourse of Buddha.” It says:

Said the All-Merciful: Blessed are ye, O Bhikshus, happy are ye who have understood the mystery of Being and *Non-Being* explained in Bas-pa [(secret)⁵⁹ Dharma, Doctrine], and have given preference to the latter, for ye are verily my Arhats. . . . The elephant, who sees his form mirrored in the lake, looks at it, and then goes away, taking it for the real body of another elephant, is wiser than the man who beholds his face in the stream, and looking at it, says, “Here am I . . . I am I”—for the “I,” his Self, is not in the world of the twelve Nidānas and mutability, but in that of Non-Being, the only world beyond the snares of Māyā. . . .

That alone, which has neither cause nor author, which is self-existing, eternal, far beyond the reach of mutability, is the true "I" [Ego], the Self of the Universe. . . . He who listens to my secret law, preached to my select Arhats, will arrive with its help at the knowledge of Self, and thence at perfection.⁶⁰

Thus, esoteric Buddhism does accept the true spiritual self or *ātman*, as shown in this unpublished discourse of the Buddha. This is the position of the Wisdom Tradition. In a similar way, Bhattacharya describes the Upaniṣadic *ātman* (the self) that is not denied by the Buddha, even using the same terms, being and non-being:

It is the Being in itself, one, all-encompassing, absolute. From the objective standpoint, as we have seen, it is a non-being. But it is this non-being which is the authentic Being, the ground of all beings.⁶¹

The great value of Bhattacharya's work for students of the Wisdom Tradition is that it shows the acceptance of the true spiritual self or *ātman* from extant exoteric Buddhist sources. The Buddha's fundamental doctrine of *anātman* or no-self is a denial of only the personal self, thereby leading one to the realization of the universal self. This universal *ātman* is a principle that is in full agreement with the omnipresent, eternal, boundless, and immutable principle of *The Secret Doctrine*, described in the words of the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* as inconceivable and inexpressible.⁶² It is no wonder that the Buddha couldn't speak about the true, spiritual *ātman*.

Notes

1. “An Omnipresent, Eternal, Boundless, and Immutable PRINCIPLE on which all speculation is impossible, since it transcends the power of human conception and could only be dwarfed by any human expression or similitude. It is beyond the range and reach of thought—in the words of *Māṇḍūkya Upanishad*, ‘unthinkable and unspeakable.’” In H. P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, ed. Boris de Zirkoff (pagination unchanged), 1st ed., 1888 (Adyar, Madras: Theosophical Publishing House, 1978), vol. 1, p. 14.

2. There are quite a number of scholars over the years who have been more or less sympathetic to this idea, including: A. Coomaraswamy, Erich Frauwallner, Sue Hamilton, I. B. Horner, Christmas Humphries, Joaquín Pérez-Remón, S. Radhakrishnan, and Carolyn Rhys Davids.

3. See for example: J. W. de Jong, “Lamotte and the Doctrine of Non-Self,” p. 152; and *A Brief History of Buddhist Studies in Europe and America* (Tokyo: Kōsei Publishing Co., 1997), p. 98.

David Seyfort Ruegg, *Buddha-nature, Mind and the Problem of Gradualism in a Comparative Perspective: On the Transmission and Reception of Buddhism in India and Tibet*, Jordan Lectures in Comparative Religion, 13 (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1989), p. 54.

4. Kamaleswar Bhattacharya, *L'Ātman-Brahman dans le Bouddhisme ancien*, Publications de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient, vol. 90 (Paris: École française d'Extrême-Orient, 1973); *The Ātman-Brahman in Ancient Buddhism* (Cotopaxi, Colo.: Canon Publications, 2015).

5. Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, Second and Enlarged Edition (New York: Grove Press, 1974), p. 51.

6. “There seems to be no other way of translating *parato* than ‘as other’, and we must therefore translate *attato* as ‘as self’, since English recognises the opposition between ‘self’ and ‘other’, but not between ‘soul’ and ‘other’. If we have to translate *attā* as ‘self’ in these contexts, then for the sake of consistency we must do the same elsewhere.” (K. R. Norman, “A Note on Attā in the Alagaddūpama-sutta,” pp. 27-28.)

7. Pāli: *ti-lakkhaṇa*. Here is the *ti-lakkhaṇa* formula as found in the *Dhammapada* of the Pāli canon, verses 277-279:

“*sabbe saṃkhārā aniccā*” . . .

“*sabbe saṃkhārā dukkhā*” . . .

“*sabbe dhammā anattā*” . . .

—*Dhammapada*, ed. O. von Hinüber and K. R. Norman (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1995), p. 78.

“All conditioned things are impermanent.” . . .

“All conditioned things are suffering.” . . .

“All phenomena are non-self.” . . .

—*The Word of the Doctrine (Dhammapada)*, trans. by K. R. Norman (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1997), p. 41.

8. Professor Kamaleswar Bhattacharya, who retired from the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris as Director of Research in 1996, was one of the leading experts in the field of the Khmer civilization of ancient Cambodia, specializing in Sanskrit epigraphy.

9. Inscription B from Bāt Cūṃ during the reign of Rājendra-varman, 944-968 A.D. In K. Bhattacharya, *Ātman-Brahman*, p. 1.

10. K. Bhattacharya, *Ātman-Brahman*, p. 1 (brackets mine).

11. Paul Brunton, *The Notebooks of Paul Brunton*, vol. 10, The Orient: Its Legacy to the West (Burdett, NY: Larson Publications, 1987), p. 206.

12. K. Bhattacharya, *Ātman-Brahman*, p. 1.

13. Ibid. *Mahāyāna-Sūtrālamkāra*, 2 vols., Sylvain Lévi, ed. and trans., Bibliothèque de l'École des Hautes Études, Sciences historiques et philologiques (Paris: Librairie Honoré Champion, 1907 and 1911), fascs. 159 and 190.

14. S. Lévi's translation, slightly modified by K. Bhattacharya in *Ātman-Brahman*, p. 2. The text has been quoted on p. 1:

śūnyatāyāṃ viśuddhāyāṃ nairātmyātmāgralābhataḥ |

buddhāḥ suddhātmalābhītōd gatā ātmamahātmatām ||

tatra cānāsrave dhātau buddhānāṃ paramātmā nirdeśyate.—kiṃ kāraṇam?—agnairātmyātmakatvāt.—Mahāyāna-Sūtrālamkāra, 9.23, with beginning of *vyākhyā*.

15. K. Bhattacharya, *Ātman-Brahman*, pp. 4-5. *The Ratnagotravibhāga Mahāyānottaratantraśāstra*, E. H. Johnston, ed. (Patna: Bihar Research Society, 1950), p. 31:

Tathāgataḥ punar yathābhūtajñānena sarvadharmairātmyaḥparapārami-

*prāptaḥ. tac cāsyā nairātmyam anātmalakṣaṇena yathā-darśanam avisaṃ-
vāditatvāt sarvakālam ātmābhīpretāḥ, nairātmyam evātmēti kṛtvā.* (1.36)

Bhattacharya notes corrections to the text on p. 40, nn. 8, 9, and 10.

16. K. Bhattacharya, *Ātman-Brahman*, p. 5.

17. René Grousset, *Les philosophies indiennes*, vol. 2 (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1931), p. 28. Cited in K. Bhattacharya, *Ātman-Brahman*, p. 5.

18. K. Bhattacharya, *Ātman-Brahman*, p. 207.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

20. *The Book of the Kindred Sayings (Saṃyutta-Nikāya) or Grouped Suttas*, Part 3, trans. F. L. Woodward (London: Pali Text Society, 1925), p. 43.

21. K. Bhattacharya, *Ātman-Brahman*, p. 31.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 6. This teaching occurs many times in the Pāli scriptures. See, for example, *The Book of the Kindred Sayings (Saṃyutta-Nikāya) or Grouped Suttas*, Part 3, trans. F. L. Woodward, 22.76 (pp. 68-69):

“ . . . What is impermanent, that is suffering. What is suffering, that is not the Self.

“What is not the Self, ‘that is not mine, that am not I, that is not the Self of me.’ This is the way one should regard things as they really are, by right insight.”

(*Saṃyutta-Nikāya*, Pali Text Society edition, vol. 3, p. 76):

*yad aniccaṃ taṃ dukkhaṃ; yaṃ dukkhaṃ tad anattā; yad anattā taṃ
n’ etaṃ mama, n’ eso ’ham asmi, na m’ eso attā ti evaṃ etaṃ yathābhūtaṃ
sammappaññāya dattḥhabbaṃ.*

23. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Hinduism and Buddhism* (New York: Philosophical Library, [n.d.]), p. 72.

24. *The Secret Doctrine*, vol. 1, p. 14: “An Omnipresent, Eternal, Boundless, and Immutable PRINCIPLE on which all speculation is impossible, since it transcends the power of human conception.”

25. K. Bhattacharya, *Ātman-Brahman*, p. 33. I have modified the translation slightly: “non-born” has been changed to “unborn,” “non-produced” has been changed to “unproduced,” etc.

The full quotation from the Pāli reads:

*atthi, bhikkhave, ajātaṃ abhūtaṃ akataṃ asaṅkhatāṃ | no cetāṃ,
bhikkhave, abhaviṣṣa ajātaṃ abhūtaṃ akataṃ asaṅkhatāṃ, nayidha jātassa
bhūtassa katassa saṅkhatassa nissaraṇaṃ paññāyetha | yasmā ca kho,
bhikkhave, atthi ajātaṃ abhūtaṃ akataṃ asaṅkhatāṃ, tasmā jātassa bhūtas-
sa katassa saṅkhatassa nissaraṇaṃ paññāyati.—Udāna, 8.3.*

Cited from: *The Khuddakapāṭha-Dhammapada-Udāna-Itivuttaka-Suttanipāta* (*Khuddakanikāya*, vol. 1), ed. Bhikkhu J. Kashyap, Nālandā-Devanāgarī-Pāli-Series ([N.p.]: Pāli Publication Board, 1959), p. 163.

26. K. Bhattacharya, *Ātman-Brahman*, pp. 47-48, n. 38. See *The Book of the Kindred Sayings (Saṃyutta-Nikāya) or Grouped Suttas*, Part 1, trans. Mrs. Rhys Davids (London: Pali Text Society, 1917), 2.3.6 (p. 86):

“ . . . It is in this fathom-long carcase, friend, with its impressions and its ideas that, I declare, lies the world, and the cause of the world, and the cessation of the world, and the course of action that leads to the cessation of the world.”

(*Saṃyutta-Nikāya*, Pali Text Society editions, 1884: vol. i, p. 62; 1998: vol. 1, pp. 144-145): *api ca khvāhaṃ āvuso imasmīññ eva vyāmamatte kaḷevare [sa]saññimhi samanake lokañ ca paññāpemi lokasamudayañ ca lokanirodhañ ca lokanirodhagāminīñ ca paṭipadaṃ.*

27. K. Bhattacharya, *Ātman-Brahman*, p. ix.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 32. Uddyotakara is cited from the *Tattva-saṃgraha-pañjikā* of Kamalāśīla (Embar Krishnamacharya ed., 1926), pp. 130-131 (cf. *Nyāyavārttika*, 3.1.1). Bhattacharya adds that although he agrees with Uddyotakara’s logic “to prove that the Buddha did not deny all *ātman*,” he disagrees with Uddyotakara’s view when he sees in the words of the Buddha “an affirmation of the *ātman* as conceived by the Naiyāyikas, that is: as the individual ego, distinct from the aggregates (pp. 32-33).”

29. “Monks, if someone came into this copse of Jeta where we are, and took for burning, the grass, wood, branches, leaves, could you say that he took you and burned you?—No, Lord, for all that is not us, none of that belongs to us.—In the same way, monks, reject what is not of yourselves. . . .” (*Majjhima-Nikāya*, 1, p. 141, cited in K. Bhattacharya, *Ātman-Brahman*, p. 34.)

30. K. Bhattacharya, *Ātman-Brahman*, p. 109, n. 243, from: Louis de La Vallée Poussin, *Le Dogme et la Philosophie du Bouddhisme*, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1930), p. 101. For a similar statement, see Louis de La Vallée Poussin, “The *Ātman* in the Pāli Canon,” p. 823: “Body and mind are not the *ātman*, not because the *ātman* does not exist (as the later doctors maintain), but because body and mind being transitory and painful, cannot be, cannot have any intimate connection with, the *ātman*: for the *ātman* is by definition eternal and happy. Our text

perhaps postulates a transcendent *ātman*, an individual one. Such an *ātman* is well known in the old Indian speculation: the Puruṣa of the Sāṃkhya school who remains untouched by the biological and psychological activities, who neither acts nor feels.”

31. K. Bhattacharya, *Ātman-Brahman*, p. 207 (brackets mine); see also p. 1.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

33. It should be here noted, however, that the Gelugpa school of Tibetan Buddhism, following Tsong-khapa, uses a different type of logic regarding the ultimate. While they teach that everything in the universe is empty (*śūnya*), that is, empty of inherent existence (*svabhāva*), this does not imply the existence of some transcendent absolute. They call this a non-affirming negation.

In India, the well-known example of the affirming negation is that of Devadatta: The fat Devadatta doesn't eat in the day. This implies that he eats during the night. It is therefore an affirming negation.

So what we have here with the Gelugpas regarding the teaching of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) is a non-affirming negation: in denying one thing it does not affirm another.

34. K. Bhattacharya, *Ātman-Brahman*, p. 9.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 25, cited from *Abhidharmakośa*, Chapter 9. See Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam*, vol. 4, translated into English by Leo M. Pruden from the French of Louis de La Vallée Poussin (Berkeley, Calif.: Asian Humanities Press, 1990), pp. 1333-34.

36. K. Bhattacharya, *Ātman-Brahman*, p. 6. Other scholars, too, have noted that the Buddha did not specifically deny the existence of *attā/ātman* in the Pāli canon. Karel Werner says: “But there is no statement in the Sutta Piṭaka about the ultimate existence or non-existence of *atta*.” (Karel Werner, “Indian Concepts of Human Personality in Relation to the Doctrine of the Soul,” pp. 94-95.)

K. R. Norman: “It may be true to say that the Buddha does not specifically deny the existence of the *attā* anywhere in the Pāli canon, in the sense that he does not state explicitly ‘The *attā* does not exist’.” (K. R. Norman, “A Note on Attā in the Alagaddūpama-sutta,” p. 28.)

This, of course, does not mean that these scholars necessarily hold that the Pāli canon accepts the existence of the *attā/ātman*.

37. Sue Hamilton has remarked: “I have argued elsewhere that

interpreting the Buddha's doctrine of *anattā* as simply stating 'there is no self,' misses the point. I will not rehearse my arguments here (though it is tempting to ask rhetorically why, if this were his meaning, he did not just say so in reply to all the questions he did not answer about the nature of the soul) . . ." In: Sue Hamilton, "The Dependent Nature of the Phenomenal World," p. 282.

38. Joaquín Pérez-Remón, *Self and Non-Self in Early Buddhism*, Religion and Reason, 22 (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1980), p. 4.

39. K. Bhattacharya, *Ātman-Brahman*, p. 38.

40. Steven Collins, *Selfless persons: Imagery and thought in Theravāda Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 71.

41. K. Bhattacharya, *Ātman-Brahman*, p. 31. *Dhammapada*, 160 (or *Dhamma-pada*, 12.4).

42. Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, p. 130.

43. K. Bhattacharya, *Ātman-Brahman*, p. 30.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 207.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

46. Kamaleswar Bhattacharya, "The Anātman Concept in Buddhism," p. 224:

yo bālair dharmāṇaṃ svabhāvo grāhyagrāhakādih parikalpitas tena kalpitēnātmanā teṣāṃ nairātmyaṃ na tv anabhilāpyenātmanā yo buddhānaṃ viśayaḥ (Vasubandhu's auto-commentary on *Viṃśatikā*, verse 10). This statement of Vasubandhu is cited in K. Bhattacharya, *Ātman-Brahman*, p. 33, but in the somewhat different translation by Sylvain Lévi.

47. K. Bhattacharya, *Ātman-Brahman*, p. 190.

48. Kamaleswar Bhattacharya, "Some Thoughts on Ātman-Brahman in Early Buddhism," p. 72.

49. Kamaleswar Bhattacharya, "Brahman in the Pali Canon and in the Pali Commentaries," p. 23.

50. K. Bhattacharya, *Ātman-Brahman*, p. 209.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

52. *Ibid.*, pp. 209-210.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 145.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 6. Here Bhattacharya has used descriptions from the Upaniṣads to describe the state of deliverance.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 207.

57. Bhattacharya here follows what has been acknowledged by Buddhist scholars to be the correct methodology since 1911, namely to rely on the old Pāli Nikāyas, i.e., the Sutta Piṭaka texts, rather than on the later Theravāda interpretations. As Karel Werner writes while commenting on Steven Collins's book (*Selfless persons*):

“In the context of the Sutta Piṭaka texts by themselves, whose analysis Collins neglects, constantly projecting into them later Theravāda interpretations, . . . Collins's interpretations do, of course, reflect quite correctly the Theravāda position from whose point of view he wrote his thesis as expressed by its subtitle. Where he is wrong is when he reads the Sutta Piṭaka in the light of Theravāda orthodoxy as interpreted in the Abhidhamma and commentaries, regarding even the late Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga*, the main compendium of Theravāda orthodoxy, as spelling out explicitly what is contained implicitly in the original Sutta Piṭaka (p. 22), a stance fully embraced in Theravāda circles of learned monks, but untenable on the level of academic scholarship, at least since Karl Seidenstücker published his *Pali-Buddhismus in Übersetzungen* (Breslau 1911) in which he ‘allowed the texts of the Canon themselves to speak without the rather dubious help of later commentaries’ and maintained that ‘we have to tackle the oldest sources’ with our own understanding as best we can, thus ‘avoiding the risk of adopting the position of a particular school by trusting later exegetical interpretations’ (p. X). Which does not, of course, rule out careful consideration and evaluation of later views. Seidenstücker's stance has since been adopted by most scholars of Buddhism as well as Buddhist thinkers.” (Karel Werner, “Indian Concepts of Human Personality in Relation to the Doctrine of the Soul,” p. 90, n. 9.)

This methodology, Werner notes, was followed by Joaquín Pérez-Remón (*Self and Non-Self in Early Buddhism*): “. . . the whole platform from which he undertook his investigations, namely the Sutta Piṭaka with only a limited use of the Vinaya Piṭaka and almost complete rejection of Theravāda interpretations.” (Karel Werner, “Indian Concepts of Human Personality in Relation to the Doctrine of the Soul,” p. 94, n. 14.)

58. K. Bhattacharya, *Ātman-Brahman*, p. ix.

59. The word “secret” is not found in the original quote. It has been added to define “Bas-pa” (Tibetan: *sbas-pa*).

60. “An Unpublished Discourse of Buddha,” *H. P. Blavatsky Collected Writings*, vol. 14 (Wheaton, Ill.: Theosophical Publishing House, 1985), pp. 408-409.

61. Kamaleswar Bhattacharya, “The Anātman Concept in Buddhism,” p. 223.

62. *The Secret Doctrine*, vol. 1, p. 14; *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*, v. 7.

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[The foregoing article was written by Nancy Reigle, and originally presented as part of the program, "Theosophy's Tibetan Connection," at the Annual Meeting of the Texas Federation of the Theosophical Society in America, San Antonio, April 18-20, 2008.]