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Self-reflexivity in Early Buddhism

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Abstract

This study explores the roots of *sva-saṃvedana* (“the self observing the self”) in the Mahāsāṃghika sect which broke away from the Theravādins about one hundred years after the Buddha’s *parinibbāna*. It was one of the many doctrines in which they differed from the Theravādins and an important support to their understanding of the nature of the Buddha’s omniscience. Along with many of the other Mahāsāṃghika tenets, the doctrine was rejected by the Theravādin community, who characterized the highest meditative states of absorption as non-dual and unified, without self-awareness, reflexivity or reflectivity.

§1. Introduction

One of the enduring controversies in Buddhist epistemology is the conventional or ultimate existence of the phenomenon known as *sva-samvedana*, or reflexive self-consciousness, defined as the self observing the self, or the simultaneous awareness of the act of cognition along with the cognized sensory object. This debate was an important subject of debate among the Madhyamakas and Yogācāras in medieval times, in India and later in Tibet; the Yogācāras argued for self-reflexivity's existence, the Madhyamakas arguing against it. For a good summary of the issues, see Williams 1998,¹ Yao 2005,² and Garfield 2006.³ At issue, is the Madhyamaka contention that the self-reflexivity or reflexive awareness thesis is tantamount to accepting the inherent existence of cognitive states, that is, to accepting the reality of the *atta/ātman* or self. In other words, it is contrary to orthodox Buddhist doctrine.

The word *sva-samvedana* is Sanskrit and usually translated as “self cognition,” “self-awareness” or “reflexive awareness;”⁴ in Tibetan it is usually translated as *rang gi rig pas* or “awareness of itself.”⁵ In Sanskrit it is an accusative *tatpuruṣa* compound consisting of the noun *svam* (“one-self”) and the verbal noun *saṃvedana*, “the act of perceiving, perception, sensation” < *saṃ* + *vid*, “to know thoroughly, to perceive, to recognize.” The compound does not exist in Pāli nor is the verb *vedeti* with the prefix *saṃ-* attested in the Pāli canon, although the verb *vedeti* is quite common and does occur with the prefixes *paṭi* + *saṃ*, e.g. *paṭisaṃvidita*, “apperceived, known, recognised” and is believed to have influenced the word

¹ Paul Williams, *The Reflexive Nature of Awareness: A Tibetan Madhyamaka Defence*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 1998).

² Zhihua Yao, *The Buddhist Theory of Self-Cognition* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

³ Jay Garfield, “The Conventional Status of Reflexive Awareness: What’s at Stake in a Tibetan Debate?,” *Philosophy East & West* 56, no. 2 (April 2006): 201–28.

⁴ Yao, *The Buddhist Theory of Self-Cognition*, 1.

⁵ Williams, *The Reflexive Nature of Awareness*, xi.

paṭisaṃbhidā, “analysis, analytic insight, discriminating knowledge,” (PED, s.v. *paṭisaṃbhidā*), also the title of one of the Theravādin canonical books. The fact that the word *sva-saṃvedana* does not occur in Pāli is quite informative: it suggests that the concept of reflexive awareness was unknown in early Buddhism. By “early Buddhism” I am referring to the earliest Buddhist transmission, as preserved orally through the *bhāṇaka* (reciter) tradition and committed to writing in the 1st century BCE in a dialect which has come to be known as “Pāli,” although originally *pāli* simply refers to a line in the sacred text.⁶ Most, if not all scholars agree, that alongside the dialects of the Asokan inscriptions, Pāli is the oldest surviving Middle Indic dialect,⁷ dating from perhaps the third century BCE. In fact, the earliest reference to *sva-saṃvedana* in the technical sense of reflexive self-awareness is quite late, found in the works of Dignāga (480–540 CE),⁸ but the concept itself—or rather its refutation—can be traced back to the earliest levels of Buddhism, the *Nikāyas* or records of the discourses of the Buddha.

Although they did not use the words *sva-saṃvedana*, the history of the concept goes back to the Mahāsāṃghika sect, who broke off from the Theravādins sometime after the Second Council, or about 100 years or so

⁶ K.R. Norman, *Pāli Literature: Including the Canonical Literature in Prakrit and Sanskrit of all the Hīnayāna Schools* (Wiesbaden, Germany: Otto Harrassowitz, 1983), 1; the *sutta* transmissions included in “early Buddhism” are usually the four *Nikāyas* (*Dīgha*-, *Majjhima*-, *Saṃyutta*- and *Aṅguttara*-), the *Sutta Nipāta* (Group of Discourses), *Dhammpada* (The Word of the Doctrine), *Theragāthā* (The Poems of the Elders) and *Therīgāthā* (The Poems of the Nuns), *Itivuttaka* (Thus Said) and *Udāna* (Inspired Sayings). The *Vinaya* (The Discipline, Monks’ Rules), the *Pāṭimokkha* (Precepts for Recitation) and parts of the *Khandhaka* (part of the *Vinaya*) are also considered to be quite early. See Bhikkhu Sujato and Bhikkhu Brahmāli, *The Authenticity of Early Buddhist Texts* (Charleston: Charleston Buddhist Fellowship, 2014), §0.1, p. 9–10.

⁷ Oskar von Hinüber, *Das Ältere Mittellindisch Im Überblick* (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2001), §71.

⁸ Yao, *The Buddhist Theory of Self-Cognition*, 6.

after the *parinibbāna* of the Buddha.⁹ The Mahāsāṃghikas are believed by some to be one of the precursors of the Mahāyāna sects,¹⁰ and introduced several ideas which were antipathetic to Theravādin beliefs. Two important ones were the nature of the Buddha and whether he was omniscient or not. According to the Mahāsāṃghikas the Buddha was supramundane and omniscient; supramundane because his material body was limitless, not physical and the body in which he taught was immaterial and magically emanated;¹¹ omniscient because “by a mind of a single instant (*eka-kṣaṇika*), they (Buddhas) understand all things,” and “by means of the wisdom associated with the mind of a single moment they cognize all things;”¹² which means that the mind of a Buddha not only knows all phenomena, but also knows itself. According to some authorities, an ordinary mind can also know all phenomena, but only in their universal characteristics, not in their specifics, as a Buddha can. The Mahāsāṃghikas single out the *śrota-āpanna* (Pāli *sota-āpanna*) or “stream-enterer” as one who can cognize their self-nature in a single instant.¹³ To illustrate this ability, exegetes often use the simile of the lamp which illuminates objects and also illuminates itself because of its innate *svabhāva* (self-nature) of luminosity; there are two minds functioning simultaneously, one looking outward to phenomena and one looking inward on itself.¹⁴ The Pāli *Nikāyas* deal

⁹ Yao, *The Buddhist Theory of Self-Cognition*, 8.

¹⁰ Damien Keown, “Mahāsāṃghika,” in *Oxford Dictionary of Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

¹¹ André Bareau, *The Buddhist Sects of the Lesser Vehicle (Les Sectes Bouddhiques Du Petit Véhicule)*, trans. Gelongma Migme Chodron (1955; repr., Saïgon: École française d’Extrême-Orient, 2005), 44–46.

¹² Bareau, *The Buddhist Sects of the Lesser Vehicle*, 48.

¹³ Bareau, *The Buddhist Sects of the Lesser Vehicle* 52; Yao, *The Buddhist Theory of Self-Cognition*, 15.

¹⁴ Yao, *The Buddhist Theory of Self-Cognition*, 14–15.

with each of these issues (the supramundane nature of the Buddha and his putative omniscience), both directly and peripherally.¹⁵

§2. Refutation in the Pāli Nikāyas

§2.1 Omniscience

In the *Kaṇṇakatthalasutta* (MN 90, The Discourse at Kaṇṇakatthala), the Buddha is asked by King Pasenadi about omniscience. He replies “There is no recluse or brahmin who is omniscient and all-seeing, who can claim to have complete knowledge and vision; that is not possible.”¹⁶ The Theravādin tradition did ascribe omniscience to the Buddha, but not of this kind. When asked by Vacchagotta whether he had the kind of omniscience which Mahāvīra, the Jain leader claimed (“Whether I am walking or standing or sleeping or awake, knowledge and vision are continuously and uninterruptedly present to me”),¹⁷ the Buddha says that this misrepresents him and is contrary to fact; he possess the three knowledges—knowledge

¹⁵ We are here principally concerned with the second, the assertion of omniscience. For arguments against the supramundane nature of the Buddha, see the translation of the *Kathāvatthu*, Shwe Zan Aung and Caroline Augusta Foley Rhys Davids, trans., *Points of Controversy or Subjects of Discourse. A Translation of the Kathā-Vatthu from the Abhidhamma-Piṭaka* (London: The Pali Text Society, 1915), 134; 323.

¹⁶ Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, a Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 735. MN 2, 127^{29–30}: *Na-atthi so samaṇo vā brāhmaṇo vā yo sakid eva sabbañ ñassati sabbaṃ dakkhī ti, n’ etaṃ thānaṃ vijjatī ti*. All Pāli quotes are from the PTS edition.

¹⁷ Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, 587. *Tevijjavacchagottasutta* (The Three Knowledges, to Vacchagotta, MN 71: MN 1, 482^{5–7}): *carato ca me tiṭṭhato ca suttassa ca jāgarassa ca satataṃ samitaṃ ñāṇa-dassanaṃ paccupaṭṭhitaṃ*. This statement is also made about the Jain leader in the *Cūḷadukkhakkhandhasutta* (The Short Discourse on the Mass of Suffering, MN 14, 92^{37–93}). See Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, 187.

of past lives, knowledge of the divine eye and knowledge of the destruction of the taints. The commentary further clarifies: “The statement ‘he is omniscient and all-seeing and claims complete knowledge and vision’ may be permissible (to say about the Buddha), but the second statement (‘whether I am walking or standing, knowledge and vision are continuously and uninterruptedly present to me’) is not permissible; for with his omniscience, he knows after adverting (to that object); therefore, taking his stand in what is permissible, rejecting what is not permissible, he speaks thus.”¹⁸ A Buddha does not know everything simultaneously.

§2.2 Self Perceiving a Self

The individual is composed of ever-changing aggregates and is not a permanent “self,” as the Buddha continually teaches (*n’etaṃ mama, n’eso ’ham asmi, na me so attā*, “this is not mine, I am not this, this is not my self”).¹⁹ The idea that a self can perceive a self is specifically refuted in the *suttas*. For example, in the *Sabbāsavaṣutta* (MN 2, All the Afflictions Discourse), the Buddha lists six wrong views:

When he attends unwisely in this way, one of six views arises in him. The view “self exists for me” arises in him as true and established; or the view “no self exists for me” arises in him as true and established; or the view “I perceive self with self” arises in him as true and established; or the view “I perceive not-self with self” arises in him as true and established; or the view “I perceive self with not-self” arises in him as true and established; or else he has

¹⁸ Ps 3, 195^{20–25}: *Sabbaññū sabba-dassāvī, aparisesaṃ ñāṇa-dassanaṃ paṭijānāti*” ti hi idaṃ anujānitabbaṃ siyā. Carato ca me ... pe ... Paccupaṭṭhitan ti idaṃ pana na-anujānitabbaṃ sabba-ññuta-ññāṇena hi āvajjitvā va jānāti. Tasmā ananuññāya ṭhatvā anuññam pi paṭikhipanto evaṃ āha. The ellipsis in the Pāli has been written out (in brackets) in the above translation.

¹⁹ This phrase is repeated almost 100 times in the Vinaya and *suttas*. “That” refers to the aggregates and/or the perceptions, and/or the faculties.

some such view as this: “It is this self of mine that speaks and feels and experiences here and there the result of good and bad actions; but this self of mine is permanent, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change, and it will endure as long as eternity.”²⁰

The “self” may be considered a conventional truth (see discussion below §2.3), but a self observing a self does not have even conventional validity; it is simply an example of “the thicket of views, the wilderness of views, the contortion of views, the vacillation of views, the fetter of views.”²¹ Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi have the following explanatory note:

Of these six views, the first two represent the simple antinomy of eternalism and annihilationism; the view that “no self exists for me” is *not* the non-self doctrine of the Buddha but the materialist view that identifies the individual with the body and thus holds that there is no personal continuity beyond death. The next three views may be understood to arise out of the philosophically more sophisticated observation that experience has a built-in reflexive structure that allows for self-consciousness, the capacity of the mind to become cognizant of itself, its contents, and the body with which it is inter-connected. Engaged in a search for his “true nature,” the untaught ordinary person will identify self either with

²⁰ Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, 92–93. From MN 1, 8^{15–}

²⁷: *Tassa evaṃ ayoniso manasikaroto channaṃ diṭṭhīnaṃ aññatarā diṭṭhi uppajjati: Atthi me attā ti vā 'ssa saccato thetato diṭṭhi uppajjati, na atthi me attā ti vā 'ssa saccato thetato diṭṭhi uppajjati, attanā va attānaṃ sañjānāmi ti vā 'ssa saccato thetato diṭṭhi uppajjati, attanā va anat-tānaṃ sañjānāmi ti vā, 'ssa saccato thetato diṭṭhi uppajjati, anattanā va attānaṃ sañjānāmi ti vā 'ssa saccato thetato diṭṭhi uppajjati. Atha vā pana assa evaṃ diṭṭhi hoti: Yo me ayaṃ attā vado vedeyyo tatra tatra kalyāṇa-pāpakānaṃ kammānaṃ vipākaṃ paṭisaṃvedeti, so kho pana me ayaṃ attā nicco dhuvo sassato avipariṇāma-dhammo sassati-samaṃ tath' eva ṭhassati ti.*

²¹ Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, 93. MN 1, 8^{28–29}: *diṭṭhi-gataṃ diṭṭhi-gahanaṃ diṭṭhi-kantāraṃ diṭṭhi-visūkaṃ diṭṭhi-vipphanditaṃ diṭṭhi-saṃyojanaṃ.*

both aspects of the experience (view 3), or with the observer alone (view 4), or with the observed alone (view 5). The last view is a full-blown version of eternalism in which all reservations have been discarded.²²

In the *Mahāpuṇṇamasutta* (MN 109, The Great Full Moon Night Discourse), the Buddha teaches the monks the four wrong ways of regarding self (one of the aggregates as self, the self as possessed of one of the aggregates, one of the aggregates as in the self or the self as in one of the aggregate)²³ and once again teaches that each and all of the aggregates must be rejected as “not-self.” A monk, confused about this duality of self and not-self, thinks “What self, then, will actions done by the not-self affect?”²⁴ To correct him, the Buddha then repeats his teaching on not-self; when the disciple understands that the aggregates are not-self, he becomes disenchanted with them, dispassionate towards them and is liberated from them. The

²² Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, 1170.

²³ “Venerable sir, how does personality view come to be? Here, bhikkhu, an untaught ordinary person, who has no regard for noble ones and is unskilled and undisciplined in their Dhamma, who has no regard for true men and is unskilled and undisciplined in their Dhamma, regards material form as self, or self as possessed of material form, or material form as in self, or self as in material form. He regards feeling as self... perception as self... formations as self... consciousness as self, or self as possessed of consciousness, or consciousness as in self, or self as in consciousness. That is how personality view comes to be,” from Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, 889; MN 3, 17²²–18²: “*kathaṃ pana, bhante, sakkāya-diṭṭhi hotī*”ti? “*idha, bhikkhu, assutavā puthujjano ariyānaṃ adassāvī ariya-dhammassa akovido ariya-dhamme avinīto sappurisānaṃ adassāvī sappurisa-dhammassa akovido sappurisa-dhamme avinīto rūpaṃ attato samanupassati rūpavantaṃ vā attānaṃ attani vā rūpaṃ rūpasmim vā attānaṃ; vedanaṃ attato samanupassati vedanāvantaṃ vā attānaṃ attani vā vedanaṃ vedanāya vā attānaṃ; saññaṃ attato samanupassati saññāvantaṃ vā attānaṃ attani vā saññaṃ saññāya vā attānaṃ; saṅkhāre attato samanupassati saṅkhāravantaṃ vā attānaṃ attani vā saṅkhāre saṅkhāresu vā attānaṃ; viññānaṃ attato samanupassati viññānavantaṃ vā attānaṃ attani vā viññānaṃ viññānasmim vā attānaṃ. evaṃ kho, bhikkhu, sakkāya-diṭṭhi hotī*”ti.

²⁴ Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, 890. From MN 3, 1920: *anatta-katāni kammāni kam attānaṃ phusissanti*.

whole idea of “self” is misguided; how much more so a self acting on a “not-self” or another self. Nevertheless the word “self” (Pāli *atta*) is used throughout the *suttas*; how does one explain this?

§2.3 Conventional vs. ultimate teachings

All the Buddhist schools agreed on the *sine qua non* of Buddhist teachings, *anatta* or no-self: in ultimate reality—*nibbāna*—there was no self. The concept of *sva-saṃvedana*, the self experiencing the self, was justified by the Mahāsaṃghikas and other sects that espoused it, as a relative, not an ultimate truth. Although not systematized until the time of Buddhaghosa, this notion of relative vs. ultimate truth was present in the earliest teachings of the Buddha. In the *Samyutta Nikāya Arahantasutta* (The Arahāt Discourse), a divinity asks the Buddha whether an arahant, who has destroyed his taints, would use the term “I.” The Buddha answers that he might say “I speak” or “They speak to me” because “skillful, knowing the world's parlance, he uses such terms as mere expressions (*vohāra-mattena*).”²⁵ The commentary points out that it would be very awkward for an arahāt to say “The aggregates eat, the aggregates sit, the bowl of the aggregates, etc;” in other words, a conventional expression is appropriate in such a situation. In the *Poṭṭhapādasutta* (DN 9, The Discourse with Poṭṭhapāda) the Buddha teaches Citta about the different types of identities that exist (material, mind-made and formless *atta-paṭilābho* or “acquisitions of self”), pointing out that “these are just designations of the world (*loka-samaññā*), worldly expressions (*loka-niruttiyo*), worldly terms (*loka-vohārā*) and concepts (*loka-paññattiyo*), which the Tathāgata uses, but (without craving, conceit or views per the commentary), he does not

²⁵ Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Samyutta Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 102. From SN 1, 14¹⁸⁻¹⁹: *loke samaññaṃ kusalo viditvā vohāra-mattena so vohareyya*.

adhere to them.”²⁶ Here the commentary explicitly introduces the concept of the two truths (*dve kathā*, two ways of talking), conventional talk (*Se sammati-kathā*, “agreed upon”; *Be*, *Ce* and *Ee sammuti*- “covered, concealed”)²⁷ and ultimate talk (*parama-attha kathā*). The commentary explains that concepts like “being, man, god, Brahma,” etc., are “conventional talk” in that they have no real existence, whereas concepts like “impermanence, suffering, selflessness, the aggregates, the elements, the spheres,” etc., are “ultimate talk.”²⁸ So while the use of *atta* as “I” or “self” may have a useful conventional validity in social interaction, at least in the Theravādin tradition, expressions that purport to have conventional

²⁶ DN 1, 202⁸⁻⁹: *imā kho Citta loka-samaññā loka-niruttiyo loka-vohārā loka-paññattiyo yāhi Tathāgato voharati aparāmasaṃ*. Sv 2, 383²⁷: “He speaks, not adhering (to the designations) because of the absence of adhering to craving, conceit and views,” *taṇhā-māna-ditṭhi-parāmāsānaṃ abhāvā aparāmasanto voharati*.

²⁷ There are two different derivations given for these terms < *sam* + *man*, “to agree” with the change of -*a*- > -*u*- after a labial consonant (Ardha Māgadhī *sammui*); and < *OI sam* + *vr*, “to cover up, hide, conceal” with assimilation of -*mv*- > -*mm*- and change of -*r*- > -*u*-; conventional because of agreement and common consent, and conventional in the sense of covering, concealing, dissimulation, i.e., causing us to misperceive what is out there, the four *vipallāsas* (“inversions”) of seeing something that is impermanent and thinking it permanent, seeing something painful as pleasurable, seeing what is selfless as having a self, seeing what is impure as pure. See Bhikkhu Nyanatiloka, “*Vipallāsa*,” in *Buddhist Dictionary, Manual of Buddhist Terms and Doctrines*, 4th ed. (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1980). For details on *sammuti/sammati*, see Bryan Levman, “Linguistic Ambiguities, the Transmissional Process, and the Earliest Recoverable Language of Buddhism” (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2014), 343–50.

²⁸ Commentary Sv 2, 382²⁹⁻³³: “In this respect, ‘being, man, god, Brahma,’ etc., are called ‘conventional talk.’ ‘Impermanence, suffering, selflessness, the aggregates, the elements, the spheres, the establishments of mindfulness, the right exertions,’ etc., are called ‘ultimate talk.’” *Tattha: Satto poso devo Brahmā ti, ādikā sammati-kathā nāma. Aniccaṃ dukkham anattā khandhā dhātuyo āyatanāni sati-paṭṭhānā samma-ppadhānā ti, ādikā parama-attha-kathā nāma*. For the full commentary and translation see Bryan Levman, “Language Theory, Phonology and Etymology in Buddhism,” *Buddhist Studies Review* 34.1 (2017): 39.

truth like “the self observing the self” are just wrong views and do not even have conventional truth value.

§2.4 *Kathāvatthu*

This orthodox Theravādin position is further adumbrated in the *Kathāvatthu* where a Sakavādin (“own view,” that is, a Theravādin) is in conversation with an Andhakan, Dravidian speaking Buddhists from south India who held to the Mahāsāṃghika doctrine.²⁹ The work is traditionally dated from the third to second centuries BCE. The Andhakas assert that one can have knowledge about the present and at the same time one can know that knowledge with the same knowledge, and even further, that one can know the knowledge of that knowledge with the same knowledge. This looks like an infinite regress, but they are not so criticized by the Theravādin interlocutor; instead the Andhakan is asked a variety of questions, all based on the idea of illustrating the absurdity of a self acting on a self, the most famous example being, “can one cut a knife with the same knife?” The Andhakan tries to wriggle his way out of this impasse by answering that knowledge of all things observed in the present as impermanent, is itself (the knowledge) impermanent, to which the Theravādin must agree; thus the self can, in a manner, observe itself, as all is impermanent. The commentary points out that the method is sound, but the knowing itself can still not be a simultaneous object of knowledge, as the Andhakan maintains. The only explanation for the knowledge of knowledge is to invoke the concept of *santati* or continuity. As Shwe Zan Aung and Caroline Augusta Foley Rhys Davids say, “In other words, self-consciousness is really an act of retrospection, and its object is not present, but past.”³⁰ The mind can know itself, but only as an act of advertent

²⁹ Yao, *The Buddhist Theory of Self-Cognition*, 23–24.

³⁰ Aung and Rhys Davids, *Points of Controversy*, 183.

(as per §2.1 above), not through simultaneous cognition with other known phenomena.³¹

Yao provides a useful summary of all the arguments for and against *sva-saṃvedana* as a conventional truth, following Dignāga's formalization of the concept. Williams details the arguments in the Tibetan tradition and especially Tsong Kha-Pa's refutation of the concept both conventionally and ultimately. This article is about the roots of the concept in the early Buddhist tradition. Above (§2) I have argued that the *Nikāyas* present the concept as a wrong view, neither conventionally nor ultimately valid. The roots of the concept lie with the Mahāsāṃghikas, who invented it to bolster and confirm their assertion of the omniscience of the Buddha; if the Buddha knows everything, everywhere in a single instant, then he also knows his own mind in that same instant. But the mind in Pāli Buddhism and the mind of Mahāyāna are quite different: in the early *Nikāyas* the mind is something to be controlled and ultimately eliminated (or at least its afflictions and tendency towards such); in Mahāyāna the mind (with a capital M-) becomes associated with ultimate reality itself in the different Buddhist schools like Dzog chen, Yogācāra (Vijñānavāda) and Chan. *Sva-saṃvedana* is one of the catalysts for this evolution of the concept of the mind, where its nature is characterized by reflexivity, purity and luminosity, and imagined as a primordial substratum very much like *nibbāna* itself.³²

³¹ See Appendix for the translation of the *Kathāvatthu mūla* text and commentary.

³² Williams, *The Reflexive Nature of Awareness*, xii. The idea of the mind's innate luminosity found in Dzog chen and other Buddhist schools is foreign to Pāli Buddhism. There is only one reference in the entire canon to a luminosity as an intrinsic quality of the mind, and Bhikkhu Anālayo has shown this to be a late addition. See Bhikkhu Anālayo, "The Luminous Mind in Theravāda and Dharmaguptaka Discourses," *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies* 13 (2017): 10-51. See also Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda, *Concept and Reality in Early Buddhist Thought* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1971; repr., Sri

Below (§3) I present the positive side of this argument: excerpts from the *suttas* which demonstrate that in the highest stages of meditative absorption, there is no dualism of self and object, nor is there ever found such a concept of a “self observing a self” in a positive way. The Mahāsāṃghikas also might argue that their view of *sva-saṃvedana* implies no dualism, and that the notion of “self” in *sva-saṃvedana* operates on a “higher spiritual plane” than the self of the aggregates or sense spheres; nevertheless, nothing of this notion is found in the early Pāli scriptures, and any percept which takes an object is by definition dualistic.³³

The following will examine some early Buddhist *suttas* that discuss the nature of consciousness (*viññāṇa*, “discriminative consciousness”), percipience or awareness (*saññā*, “perception”/*saññi*, “to be aware of, to be conscious of”) and the self (*ahaṃ* “I”/*atta* “self”), in order to demonstrate how they preclude reflexivity in the highest liberative state.

§3. The nature of meditative absorption in the Pāli teachings

§3.1 *Locus classicus*

The *Mahāparinibbānasutta* (DN 16, The Great Discourse on the Buddha’s Final Extinction) the story of the Buddha’s last three months before his death, contains the best-known story which confirms that self-awareness was not an early Buddhist value. Here, in the section known as the

Lanka: Dharma Grantha Mudrana Bhāraya, 2012), 125, who notes “in the Pali Canon there is no suggestion of an absolute mind as the Ultimate Reality as in the case of the Vijñānavāda. Even the *viññāṇa* finally ceases at the death of the emancipated one since it is just one of the five aggregates.”

³³ Consider, for example one of the Buddha’s definitions of *nibbāna* in the *Udāna* 80^{14–15}: *appatiṭṭhaṃ appavattaṃ anārammaṇaṃ eva taṃ, es’ ev’ anto dukkhassa*, “without support, without occurrence, without an object is that; this is the very end of suffering.”

Pukkusamallaputtavatthu (“Story of Pukkusa the Malla”), Pukkusa, a follower of Ālāra Kālāma (one of the Buddha’s former teachers) brags to the Buddha about his teacher who while meditating, although conscious and awake, did not hear five hundred carts that passed close by him, though they spattered his robe with dust. The Buddha responds with his own caping story of being absorbed in deep meditation, while not seeing or hearing a thunderstorm raging around him which was so severe that two farmers and four oxen were killed. Yet the Buddha was fully “awake and conscious” (*saññī samāno jāgaro*, DN 2, 131⁹). This total absorption in a meditative state transcending subject-object awareness, was a common phenomenon; it does not even merit exegesis from Buddhaghosa in his commentary on the *sutta* or in the *ṭīkā* (sub-commentary). Instead they talk about the nine different kinds of lightning.

In the same *sutta*, the Buddha talks about how at eighty years old, his body is falling apart, likening it to an old cart which is only kept going by being held together with straps. His body only experiences some comfort when he enters into the signless concentration of mind (*animittaṃ ceto-samādhiṃ*). By not paying any attention to all signs, defined by the commentary as the signs of form, certain worldly feelings disappear, giving him comfort.³⁴ This meditative state is also discussed in the *Mahavedalla sutta* and commentary which describes it as the non attention to all signs, including the sign of the self, and equates it with the absorption in *nibbāna* in which all signs of conditioned things are absent. The commentary explains:

What is called the signless liberation of mind (*animittā ceto-vimutti*) has thirteen elements: insight meditation, the four formless states,

³⁴ DN 2, 100¹⁶⁻¹⁹: *Yasmiṃ Ānanda samaye Tathāgato sabba-nimittānaṃ amanasi-kārā ekaccānaṃ vedanānaṃ nirodhā animittaṃ ceto-samādhiṃ upasampajja viharati, phāsu-kato Ānanda tasmīṃ samaye Tathāgatassa kāyo hoti*. Commentary: *sabba-nimittānaṃ ti rūpa-nimitt’ ādīnaṃ. Ekaccānaṃ vedanānaṃ ti lokiyānaṃ vedanānaṃ*. Sv 2, 548²⁵⁻²⁷.

the four paths, and the four fruits. In this respect, “Insight meditation (*vipassanā*) which abolishes the sign of permanence, the sign of pleasure, the sign of the self,” is called signless. The four formless states are called signless because of the absence of the signs of form. The fruits of the path are signless because of the absence of afflictions which are caused by signs. Nibbāna also is just signless.³⁵

There are four other deliverances of mind mentioned in this *sutta*, the deliverance of mind through voidness (*suññatā ceto-vimutti*), where the meditator has insight into the voidness of selfhood in person and things; the deliverance of mind through nothingness (*ākāṅkhaññā ceto-vimutti*), which is the same as the third formless meditation with the insight that “There is nothing;” the immeasurable deliverance of mind (*appamāṇā ceto-vimutti*), and the unshakeable deliverance of mind (*akuppā ceto-vimutti*), which is called the best. These first four all have one meaning (*ekaṭṭhā*) on account of taking the same object, *nibbāna*: immeasurable, nothingness, emptiness, signlessness are all names for *nibbāna*;³⁶ but *nibbāna* is itself *anārammaṇa*,³⁷ objectless, baseless, so in these meditative states there can be no such state as reflexive self-awareness, as all subjectivity has been completely eliminated.

§3.2 *Aṅguttara Nikāya*

In the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, there are three *suttas* which deal with the subject of the lack of an object in the highest meditative states. These *suttas* are

³⁵ Ps 2, 355⁶⁻¹⁵: *Animittā ceto-vimuttiyo nāma terasa dhammā: vipassanā, cattāro āruppā, cattāro maggā, cattāri phalāni ti. Tattha vipassanā nicca-nimittaṃ sukha-nimittaṃ attanimittaṃ ugghāṭeti ti animittā nāma. Cattāro āruppā rūpa-nimittassa abhāvā animittā nāma. Magga-phalāni nimitta-karaṇānaṃ kilesānaṃ abhāvena animittāni. Nibbānaṃ pi animittam eva.*

³⁶ Ps 2, 355¹⁶⁻¹⁸: *Ekaṭṭhā ti ārammaṇa-vasena ekaṭṭhā. Appamāṇaṃ, ākāṅkhaññaṃ, suññataṃ, animittan ti hi sabbān’ etāni nibbānass’ eva nāmāni.*

³⁷ See fn. 33.

particularly illuminating for negating the sometime misconception that *nibbāna* represents some sort of unconsciousness; for although *nibbāna* involves the cessation of all six spheres or experience, there is still a positive, non-dual awareness that remains.³⁸ In the *Sandhasutta* (The Discourse with Sandha), the Buddha talks about a thoroughbred meditator; this is someone who does not meditate in dependence on any external sense-object, formless objects or mental objects, and yet he still meditates (*jhāyati ca pana*).

Here, Sandha, for an excellent thoroughbred person, the perception of earth has disappeared in relation to earth, the perception of water has disappeared in relation to water, the perception of fire has disappeared in relation to fire, the perception of air has disappeared in relation to air, the perception of the base of the infinity of space has disappeared in relation to the base of the infinity of space, the perception of the base of the infinity of consciousness has disappeared in relation to the base of the infinity of consciousness, the perception of the base of nothingness has disappeared in relation to the base of nothingness, the perception of the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception has disappeared in relation to the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, the perception of this world has disappeared in relation to this world, the perception of the other world has disappeared in relation to the other world; perception has disappeared in relation to whatever is seen, heard, sensed, cognized, reached, sought after, and examined by the mind.

“Meditating in such a way, Sandha, an excellent thoroughbred person does not meditate in dependence on earth, in dependence

³⁸ On this point see also Bhikkhu Anālayo, *The Signless and the Deathless, On the Realization of Nirvana* (New York: Wisdom Publications, 2023), 127–28, who discusses *nibbāna* as a form of happiness.

on water, in dependence on fire, in dependence on air, in dependence on the base of the infinity of space, in dependence on the base of the infinity of consciousness, in dependence on the base of nothingness, in dependence on the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, in dependence on this world, in dependence on the other world; in dependence on what is seen, heard, sensed, cognized, reached, sought after, or examined by the mind, and yet he meditates.³⁹

According to the commentary, this *samādhi* is the fruit which arises from the meditator having gone through the successive stages of *vipassanā* or insight meditation. *Vipassanā* is the meditative insight into *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anatta*; that is, the insight that all conditioned things are impermanent and lead to suffering and all phenomena are selfless, possessing no intrinsic existence. The *sutta* in question specifically notes that all the mental faculties have disappeared—whatever is seen, heard, sensed, cognized, reached, sought after, and examined by the mind (*yam p’idaṃ diṭṭhaṃ suttaṃ mutaṃ viññātaṃ pattaṃ pariyesitaṃ anuvicaritaṃ manasā*)—so there could certainly not be any “awareness of self” present.

In the *Manasikārasuttaṃ* (The Discourse on Being Attentive) the Buddha tells Ānanda that the meditator can obtain a state of

³⁹ Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha, a Translation of the Aṅguttara Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2012), 1562–63. From AN 5 325²⁴–326¹⁵: *Idha Sandha bhadraṃ purisa-ājāṇiassa pathaviyā pathavi-saññā vibhūtā hoti, āpasmiṃ āpo-saññā vibhūtā hoti, tejasmiṃ tejo-saññā vibhūtā hoti, vāyasmim vāyo-saññā vibhūtā hoti, ākāsa-ānañca-āyatane ākāsa-ānañca-āyatana-saññā vibhūtā hoti, viññāṇa-ānañca-āyatane viññāṇa-ānañca-āyatana-saññā vibhūtā hoti, ākiñcañña-āyatane ākiñcañña-āyatana-saññā vibhūtā hoti, n’ eva saññā na asaññā-āyatane n’ eva saññā na asaññā-āyatana-saññā vibhūtā hoti, idha-loke idha-loka-saññā vibhūtā hoti, para-loke para-loka-saññā vibhūtā hoti, yam p’idaṃ diṭṭhaṃ suttaṃ mutaṃ viññātaṃ pattaṃ pariyesitaṃ anuvicaritaṃ manasā, tatrā pi saññā vibhūtā hoti. Evaṃ jhāyī kho Sandha bhadro purisa-ājāṇiyo n’ eva pathaviṃ nissāya jhāyati ... pe ... yam p’idaṃ diṭṭhaṃ suttaṃ mutaṃ viññātaṃ pattaṃ pariyesitaṃ anuvicaritaṃ manasā, tam pi nissāya na jhāyati, jhāyati ca pana.*

concentration where he would not attend to any of the senses and their sense-object, to any of the elements, to any of the formless meditation bases, to this world or the other world, nor to any mental objects, but yet he would still be attentive (*manasi ca pana kareyya*). This occurs in the *samādhi* which stills all mental formations (*saṅkhāra*), relinquishes all acquisitions and destroys all cravings; in other words it occurs when the meditator harmonizes with *nibbāna*:

“Here, Ānanda, a bhikkhu would attend thus: ‘This is peaceful, this is sublime, that is, the stilling of all activities, the relinquishing of all acquisitions, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, *nibbāna*.’ It is in this way, Ānanda, that a bhikkhu could obtain such a state of concentration that he would not attend to the eye and forms, the ear and sounds, the nose and odours, the tongue and tastes, the body and tactile objects; that he would not attend to earth, water, fire, or air; he would not attend to the base of the infinity of space, the base of the infinity of consciousness, the base of nothingness, or the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception; he would not attend to this world; he would not attend to the other world; he would not attend to anything seen, heard, sensed, cognized, reached, sought after and examined by the mind but he would still be attentive.”⁴⁰

In the *Saṅgāyana* (The Discourse on Awareness) the Buddha and his disciple Sāriputta both give a similar answer to Ānanda’s question about the possibility of attaining a meditative state of mind which transcends the subject-object duality, while still remaining fully aware and

⁴⁰ Bodhi, *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, 1560. From AN 5, 322¹⁵⁻³¹: *Idh’ Ānanda bhikkhu evaṃ manasi-karoti ‘etaṃ santaṃ, etaṃ paṇītaṃ, yad idaṃ sabba-saṅkhāra-samatho sabb’-ūpadhi-paṭinissaggo taṇhā-kkhayo virāgo nirodho nibbāna’ ti. Evaṃ kho Ānanda siyā bhikkhuno tathārūpo samādhi-paṭilābho, yathā na cakkhuṃ manasi-kareyya, na rūpaṃ manasi kareyya ... pe ... yam p’idaṃ diṭṭhaṃ suttaṃ mutaṃ viññātaṃ pattaṃ pariyesitaṃ anuvicaritaṃ manasā, tam pi na manasi-kareyya; manasi ca pana kareyyā ti.*

percipient (AN 5, 318-19). In the *Ānandasutta* (The Discourse with Ānanda) this peaceful and sublime state associated with the calming of all mental formations is for the purpose of eliminating *ahaṅkāra-mamaṅkāra-mānānusayā* (AN 1, 133²⁶⁻²⁷) “I-making, mine-making and the underlying proclivity to conceit.”⁴¹ In this state, with the stilling of all mental activities, there would certainly be no cognizance of an experiencing self, as there is simply no experience. Another *Ānandasutta* (AN 4, 426-428) also discusses a meditative state where the subject does not experience anything, but is still percipient:

(1) The eye itself as well as those forms will actually be present, and yet one will not experience that base. (2) The ear itself as well as those sounds will actually be present, and yet one will not experience that base. (3) The nose itself as well as those odours will actually be present, and yet one will not experience that base. (4) The tongue itself as well as those tastes will actually be present, and yet one will not experience that base. (5) The body itself as well as those tactile objects will actually be present, and yet one will not experience that base.⁴²

The meditator is fully percipient (*saññi-m-eva*), but he/she does not experience that base (*evaṃ saññi pi kho, āvuso, tad āyatanaṃ no paṭisaṃvedetī*, AN 4, 428¹³⁻¹⁴). This lack of an experiencing subject appears to be a special kind of concentration that “does not lean forward and does not bend back, and

⁴¹ Here the Buddha repeats the same trope as occurs in the above *Saññāsuttaṃ*, viz., AN 1, 133¹⁻³: *etaṃ santaṃ etaṃ paṇītaṃ yad idaṃ sabba-saṅkhāra-samatho sabb’-ūpadhi-paṭinissaggo taṇhā-kkhayo virāgo nirodho nibbānaṃ ti*.

⁴² Bodhi, *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, 1301. From AN 4, 426²⁶-427⁷: *Ānandasutta: tad eva nāma cakkhuṃ bhavissati, te rūpā tañ c’ āyatanaṃ no paṭisaṃvedissati; tad eva nāma sotaṃ bhavissati, te saddā tañ c’ āyatanaṃ no paṭisaṃvedissati; tad eva nāma ghānaṃ bhavissati, te gandhā tañ c’ āyatanaṃ no paṭisaṃvedissati; sā ca nāma jivhā bhavissati, te rasā tañ c’ āyatanaṃ no paṭisaṃvedissati; so ca nāma kāyo bhavissati, te phoṭṭhabbā tañ c’ āyatanaṃ no paṭisaṃvedissati ti*.

that is not reined in and checked by forcefully suppressing [the defilements],”⁴³ (*yāyaṃ... samādhi na ca abhinato na ca apanato na ca sasaṅkhāra-niggayha-vārita-vato*). This concentration has liberation as its fruit (*samādhi aññā-phalo*, AN 4, 428⁸⁻¹²).

In the highest meditative states all five aggregates and senses spheres disappear.⁴⁴ Form (*rūpa*) ceases as does perception (*saññā*), feeling (*vedanā*), all mental formations (*saṅkhāra*), and discriminative consciousness itself (*viññāṇa*), which requires a sense object (*ārammaṇa*) for its existence; as will be seen below, the consciousness of an external sense-object or of a meditating “I” is a major hindrance to liberation.

§3.3 Buddhist psychology of consciousness.

In the early *Nikāyas* discriminative consciousness (*viññāṇaṃ/vijñāṇaṃ*) is almost always something to be rejected and abandoned. So it is not surprising that when one enters the *jhāna* meditative states, there is no self-consciousness or reflexive awareness that one has done so. In the *Sāriputtasamyutta* (SN 3, 235-38), Sāriputta enters into all the *jhānic* states from the first *jhāna* all the way up to the ninth *jhāna* of cessation. Yet it never occurs to him that “I am entering the first *jhāna*,” “I have attained the first *jhāna*” or “I have emerged from the first *jhāna*,” or the same with any of the other *jhānas*.⁴⁵ Ānanda comments that “it must be because I-making, mine-making, and the underlying tendency to conceit have been thoroughly uprooted in Venerable Sāriputta for a long time that such thoughts did not occur to him.”⁴⁶ This explanation is certainly one reason; the other is the taming of thought and consciousness. Applied and

⁴³ Bodhi, *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, 1302.

⁴⁴ Bhikkhu Anālayo, *The Signless and the Deathless*, 139; 142.

⁴⁵ SN 3, 235²⁸⁻³⁰: *na evaṃ hoti Ahaṃ pathama-jhānaṃ samāpajjāmi ti vā Ahaṃ pathama-jhānaṃ samāpanno ti vā Ahaṃ pathama-jhānā vuṭṭhito ti vā ti*.

⁴⁶ Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, 1015–16.

examined thought (*vitakka-vicāra*) for example, cease after the first *jhāna*; self-awareness that “I have attained...” or “I have emerged...” from a *jhānic* state or “I am at peace” would indeed be the creation of an I (*ahaṃ-kāra*). In the *Pañcattayasutta* (MN 102, The Five and Three Discourse), the Buddha specifically addresses this last point as a cause preventing a monk from attaining liberation:

“Here, bhikkhus, some recluse or brahmin, with the relinquishing of views about the past and future, through complete lack of resolve upon the fetters of sensual pleasure, and with the surmounting of the rapture of seclusion, unworldly pleasure, and neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling, regards himself thus: *I* am at peace, *I* have attained Nibbāna, *I* am without clinging.

“The Tathāgata, bhikkhus, understands this thus: ‘This good recluse or brahmin, with the relinquishing of views about the past and the future ... regards himself thus: ‘*I* am at peace, *I* have attained Nibbāna, *I* am without clinging.’ Certainly this venerable one asserts the way directed to Nibbāna. Yet this good recluse or brahmin still clings, clinging either to a view about the past or to a view about the future or to a fetter of sensual pleasure or to the rapture of seclusion or to unworldly pleasure or to neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling. And when this venerable one regards himself thus: ‘*I* am at peace, *I* have attained Nibbāna, *I* am without clinging,’ that too is declared to be clinging on the part of this good recluse or brahmin.”⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, 846; italics and underlines in original. From MN 2, 237⁸⁻²⁵: *Idha pana, bhikkhave, ekacco samaṇo vā brāhmaṇo vā pubbanta-anuditṭhinaṇ ca paṭinissaggā aparanta-anuditṭhinaṇ ca paṭinissaggā, sabbaso kāmāsaṃyojanānaṃ anadhiṭṭhānā, pavivekāya pītiyā samatikkamā, nirāmisassa sukhassa samatikkamā, adukkham-asukhāya vedanāya samatikkamā, santo ’ham asmi, nibbuto ’ham asmi,*

Such introspective reflexivity creates a concept of the self; all vestiges of the I must be abandoned in order for liberation to unfold. In Ch'an practice this freedom from turning inwards and examining one's own feelings is described in terms of a three-fold process: non-attachment to sound and form, non-abiding in the detachment, and not making an intellectual understanding of the non-abiding.⁴⁸ This state of non-reflexive detachment is the "ordinary mind" of Chan, when one has eliminated the impulse to subjective introspection.

A similar point is made by the *bhikkhunī* Dhammadinnā in the *Cūḷavedallasutta* (MN 44, The Shorter Question and Answer Discourse), where, talking about the attainment of cessation, she says,

"Friend Visākha, when a bhikkhu is attaining the cessation of perception and feeling, it does not occur to him: 'I shall attain the cessation of perception and feeling,' or 'I am attaining the cessation of perception and feeling,' or 'I have attained the cessation of perception and feeling:' but rather his mind has previously been developed in such a way that it leads him to that state."⁴⁹

anupādāno 'ham asmī ti samanupassati. tayidaṃ, bhikkhave, Tathāgato pajānati: ayaṃ kho bhavaṃ samaṇo vā brāhmaṇo vā . . . asmī ti samanupassati; addhā ayam āyasmā nibbānaṃ sappāyam eva paṭipadaṃ abhivadati. atha ca pana-ayaṃ bhavaṃ samaṇo vā brāhmaṇo vā pubbanta-anuditṭhiṃ vā upādiyamāno upādiyati, aparanta-anuditṭhiṃ vā upādiyamāno upādiyati, kāma-saṃyojanaṃ vā upādiyamāno upādiyati, pavivekaṃ vā pītiṃ upādiyamāno upādiyati, nirāmisam vā sukhaṃ upādiyamāno upādiyati, adukkham-asukhaṃ vā vedanaṃ upādiyamāno upādiyati. yañ ca kho ayam āyasmā: santo 'ham asmi, nibbuto 'ham asmi, anupādāno 'ham asmī ti samanupassati, tad ap' imassa bhoṭo samaṇa-brāhmaṇassa upādānam akkhāyati.

⁴⁸ Andrew Ferguson, *Zen's Chinese Heritage, The Masters and Their Teachings* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 80, translating Baizhang Huaihai: "But to be separate from all sound and form, though not abiding in the separateness, and not abiding in intellectual comprehension, this is the true practice of reading sutras and observing the teachings."

⁴⁹ Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, 399. From MN 1, 301³¹⁻

³⁶: *Na kho āvuso Visākha saññā-vedayita-nirodhaṃ samāpajjantassa bhikkhuno evaṃ hoti:*

The resolution to attain something is a conditioned, formed mental state (*saṅkhata*) and conditioned states always lead to clinging, craving and suffering. In the *Dhātuvibhangasutta* (MN 140, The Analysis of the Elements), the Buddha gives the monk Pukkusāti detailed training in meditation practice and points out that once one achieves the equanimity fruit of the fourth *jhāna*, directing this equanimity to the attainment of the formless *jhānas* is a deliberate, volitional (and karmic) mental act, and thus potentially afflictive. So, he instructs Pukkusāti, the monk, as follows:

“He does not form any condition or generate any volition tending towards either being or non-being. Since he does not form any condition or generate any volition tending towards either being or non-being, he does not cling to anything in this world. When he does not cling he is not agitated. When he is not agitated, he personally attains Nibbāna. He understands thus: ‘Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more coming to any state of being.’”⁵⁰

When there is no deliberate mental act (*saṅkhāra*; the second *nidāna* of the dependent arising chain), then there is also no resulting consciousness (the third *nidāna*), and no thought as well. A very similar point is made in the *Poṭṭhapādasutta* where the monk reaches the limit of perception in the formless spheres and in order to proceed further must give up all mental activity:

ahaṃ saññā-vedayita-nirodhaṃ samāpajjissan - ti vā, ahaṃ saññā-vedayita-nirodhaṃ samāpajjāmi ti vā, ahaṃ saññā-vedayita-nirodhaṃ samāpanno ti vā, atha khvāssa pubbe va tathā cittaṃ bhāvitam hoti yaṃ taṃ tathattāya upaneti ti.

⁵⁰ Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, a Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*, 1092–93. From MN 3, 244¹⁹⁻²⁵: *So n’ eva abhisamkharoti na abhisamcetayati bhavāya vā vibhavāya vā. So anabhisamkharonto anabhisamcetayanto bhavāya vā vibhavāya vā na kiñci loke upādiyati anupādiyaṃ na paritassati aparitassaṃ paccattaṃ yeva parinibbāyati: Khīṇā jāti vusitaṃ brahmacariyaṃ kataṃ karaṇiyaṃ na-aparaṃ itthattāyā ti pajānāti.*

“Poṭṭhapāda, when a bhikkhu here sees himself fulfilling the teaching (*saka-saññī hoti*), he gradually step by step touches the peak of perception. Steady in the peak of perception he thinks, ‘Thinking is bad for me, not thinking would be better. If I think or generate an intention, these perceptions of mine will cease and other, coarse perceptions will arise. What if I were to neither think nor intend anything; for one who does not think nor intend, those perceptions cease and other coarser perceptions do not arise.’ He touches cessation. In this way, Poṭṭhapāda, gradually, there is the attainment of complete understanding and the cessation of perception.”⁵¹

⁵¹ Bryan G. Levman, *Dīgha Nikāya, a New Translation*. (Bangkok: Government of Thailand, 2025), 197. *anupubba-abhisaññā-nirodha-sampajāna-samāpatti*. There seems to be some confusion on how to translate this compound. Bhikkhu Sujato, *Long Discourses. A faithful translation of the Dīgha Nikāya*. Volume I, DN 1–13 (Eastwood, Australia: SuttaCentral, 2018), 185, translates “how the progressive cessation of perception is attained with awareness;” Bhikkhu Thanissaro, trans., “*Potthapada Sutta: About Potthapada*,” Access to Insight, accessed October 22, 2024, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipi-taka/dn/dn.09.0.than.html>, renders “alert step-by-step attainment of the ultimate cessation of perception;” Thomas William Rhys Davids, *Dialogues of the Buddha, Buddhist Suttas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899), 251, translates “the attainment of the cessation of conscious ideas;” Maurice Walshe, trans., *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 163, translates “the way in which the cessation of perception is brought about by successive steps.” The commentary clarifies: “Gradual-perception-cessation-complete understanding-attainment.’ Here ‘*abhi*’ is merely a prefix. The word *sampajāna* has been placed next to the word *nirodha*, viz., ‘gradually there is the attainment of complete understanding and the cessation of perception,’ this is the meaning here. In this case this compound (*sampajāna-saññā-nirodha-samāpatti*) = ‘the attainment of the cessation of perception at the end of complete understanding’ or ‘The attainment of the cessation of perception by a wise bhikkhu who completely understands’—this is the distinctive meaning.” Sv 2, 374^{13–20}; *Anupubba-abhisaññā-nirodha-sampajāna-samāpatti ti ettha abhī ti upasagga-mattaṃ. Sampajāna-padaṃ nirodha-padena antarikaṃ katvā vuttaṃ. Anupaṭipāṭiyā sampajāna-saññā-nirodha-samāpatti ti, ayaṃ pan’ ettha-attho. Tatra-api: Sampajāna-saññā-nirodha-samāpatti ti*

“What do you think Poṭṭhapāda, before this have you ever heard previously of such a gradual attainment of complete understanding and cessation of perception?”⁵²

The compound *saka-saññī*, means literally “perceptive of one’s own” or “percipient of self;” the commentary reads “Here ‘*saka-saññī* (one is perceptive of one’s own)’ means ‘one is percipient of self in the teaching here,’ or this is the reading: ‘One is percipient of oneself with the perception of the first *jhāna*’ is the meaning.”⁵³ The *ṭīkā* also confirms that the compound refers to practised mastery of the *jhānas*. There are various interpretations of this *saka-saññī* compound. In the Vinaya it occurs in the sense of “I thought it was mine,” re: a monk picking up another’s robe. Bhikkhu Sujato translates “from the time a mendicant takes responsibility for their own perception,”⁵⁴ while Maurice Walshe writes “when a monk has gained this controlled perception” with a footnote “lit. ‘becomes own-perceiving.’”⁵⁵ DPD has “self-aware; in control of perception” (DPD, s.v. *saka-saññī*). From the first *jhāna* on one has some control over one’s

sampajāna-antassa ante saññā-nirodha-samāpatti. Sampajāna-antassa vā paṇḍitassa bhikkhuno saññā-nirodha-samāpatti ti ayam visesa-attho.

⁵² DN 1, 184¹⁶⁻²⁹: *yato kho Poṭṭhapāda bhikkhu idha saka-saññī hoti, so tato amutra tato amutra anupubbena saññā-aggam phusati. tassa saññā-agge ṭhitassa evam hoti: cetayamānassa me pāpiyo, acetayamānassa me seyyo. ahañ ce va kho pana ceteyyam abhisamkhareyyam, imā ca me saññā nirujjheyym. aññā ca olārikā saññā uppajjeyym. yan nūna-aham na ceteyyam na abhisamkhareyyan ti. so na c’ eva ceteti na abhisamkharoti. assa acetayato anabhisamkharoto tā c’ eva saññā nirujjhanti, aññā ca olārikā saññā na uppajjanti. so nirodham phusati. evam kho Poṭṭhapāda anupubba-abhisaññā-nirodha-sampajāna-samāpatti hoti. tam kim maññasi, Poṭṭhapāda? Api nu te ito pubbe evarūpā anupubba-abhisaññā-nirodha-sampajāna-samāpatti suta-pubbā ti?*

⁵³ Sv 2, 373²⁻⁴: *Idha saka-saññī hoti ti idha sāsane saka-saññī hoti. Ayam eva vā pāṭho. Attano paṭhama-jjhāna-saññāya saññavā hoti ti attho.*

⁵⁴ Bhikkhu Sujato, *Long Discourses*, 185. In a footnote, Ven. Sujato suggests *saka-saññī* means the meditator “understands that they can evolve their own perceptions through meditation.”

⁵⁵ Maurice Walshe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, 162; footnote on p. 554.

perceptions. Bhikkhu Thanissaro has “when the monk is percipient of himself here.”⁵⁶ I interpret the commentary to mean that one sees oneself fulfilling the teaching by practicing the *jhānas*, which is similar to gaining control over one’s own perceptions. It cannot mean “percipient of one-self” in a *sva-saṃvedana* sense, for all the reasons discussed above (§2). There is also the possibility that it is used in the Vinaya sense of mistakenly thinking it is mine; that is, the meditator is waking up to realizing that the so-called “self” is not “mine,” in which case one would translate the first sentence as “When a bhikkhu now (no longer) mistakenly thinks of what is ‘mine,’ he reaches the pinnacle of perception...”

Since the most fundamental of Buddhist truths is that all *dhammas* (phenomena) lack a self-nature, the perception of a self, whether in meditation or not, is simply a falsehood, created by our own ignorance and inversion of reality. We take the impermanent as permanent, the unwholesome as wholesome, the suffering as pleasure and the lack of self as self (*Vipallāsasutta*, AN 2, 52, The Discourse on Inverted Perception). This delusion always results in suffering by creating a false ego which perceives things outside of itself, craves them and actively pursues them in an endlessly repeated cycle of vain striving.

In the *Madhupiṇḍikasutta* (MN 18, The Honeyball Discourse), the Buddha outlines his theory of perception and consciousness which Mahākaccāna expands upon. Man is beset by *papañca-saññā-saṅkhā*, the proliferation of perception and names.⁵⁷ When he delights in them, welcomes them and is attached to them, unwholesome states will result:

⁵⁶ Bhikkhu Thanissaro, “Potthapada Sutta,” Access to Insight, accessed October 22, 2024, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.09.0.than.html>.

⁵⁷ Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi translate “perceptions and notions [born of] mental proliferation,” *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, 202. The compound is capable of being parsed in several different ways. For various suggestions see Bryan G. Levman, *Pāli, the*

Dependent on the eye and forms, eye-consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as condition there is feeling. What one feels, that one perceives. What one perceives, that one thinks about. What one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates. With what one has mentally proliferated as the source, perceptions and notions [born of] mental proliferation beset a man with respect to past, future, and present forms cognizable through the eye (and so one with ear and sounds, nose and odours, tongue and flavours, body and tangibles, mind and mind-objects).⁵⁸

The cycle goes consciousness > contact (which presupposes *nāma-rūpa*) > feeling > perception > thought > mental proliferation > collapse of past, present and future > suffering. Although the sequence is somewhat different than the more well-known cycle of dependent origination, the result is the same. Consciousness leads to the arising of the mind-body complex, contact, craving and suffering. But if, at the consciousness, contact and perception stage, nothing is found to delight in, one is detached; no craving, ill-will and delusion arise and unwholesome states cease. Implicit in all these mental states is the “I” which rises along with them as an unstated, unexamined assumption. But, like Descartes’ famous dictum, “I think, therefore I am,” it is a *petitio principii*, an unproven—and false—

Language: The Medium and Message (Newcastle upon Tyne, U.K.: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020), 106. See also Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda, *Concept and Reality in Early Buddhist Thought*, 5, who renders it a “concepts, reckonings, designations or linguistic conventions characterised by the prolific conceptualising tendency of the mind.” His entire book is about the meaning of *papañca*, which Ñāṇananda usually renders as “conceptual proliferation” or “prolific conceptualisation.”

⁵⁸ Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, 203. *Cakkhuñ-c’ āvuso paṭicca rūpe ca uppajjati cakkhu-viññāṇaṃ, tiṇṇaṃ saṅgati phasso, phassa-paccayā vedanā, yaṃ vedeti taṃ sañjānāti, yaṃ sañjānāti taṃ vitakketi, yaṃ vitakketi taṃ papañceti, yaṃ papañceti tato-nidānaṃ purisaṃ papañca-saññā-saṅkhā samudācaranti atīta-anāgata-paccuppannesu cakkhu-viññeyyesu rūpesu* (MN 1, 111³⁵⁻³⁷-112¹⁻⁴).

premise taken as a given. Reflexive awareness then, the awareness of a subject experiencing perceptions, feeling, thought, etc., is by definition afflictive, as it is this very assumption of an experiencing subject which creates the ego negated by the Buddha. As long as one gives credence to an I-feeling, or an I-experiencing, one cannot get outside the entrapment of the ego, and see reality as it really is, *yathā-bhūtaṃ*, empty of an inherent self. This is exactly what happens at the higher levels of meditation: the I drops away, perception ceases, and discriminative consciousness disappears. All that is left is some form of bare awareness or non-discriminative consciousness, what the Buddha calls *viññānaṃ anidassanaṃ anantaṃ sabbato-paṇaṃ*:

Non-pointing consciousness,⁵⁹ endless, shining everywhere,⁶⁰
Here water and earth, fire and air find no footing,

⁵⁹ *viññānaṃ anidassanaṃ*, or “non-manifesting consciousness” in Levman, “Linguistic Ambiguities,” 386. *Nidassana* (OI *nidarśana* < *ni* + *drś* “to cause to see, show, point out, introduce, indicate”) is usually transitive, as is “manifest” (“to make evident, disclose, reveal”) so implies the lack of an perceived object. In its intransitive form it means “to appear” (*nidarśana*, “appearance”) which is why CPD defines *anidassana* as “invisible” (CPD, s.v. *anidassana*). However, the sense of it here seems to be transitive, i.e., a discriminative consciousness which does not point out any *ārammaṇa*, or “sense-object.” Others translate “discriminative consciousness which cannot be characterized” (Isaline Blew Horner, trans., *The Collection of Middle Length Sayings Majjhima Nikāya*, Vol. 1 (1954; repr., Lancaster: Pali Text Society, 2007), 392; “non-manifestative consciousness,” Ñāṇananda, *Concept and Reality in Early Buddhist Thought*, 66; “signless” or “invisible,” Walshe, *Long Discourses*, 179; 557; or that “which cannot be characterized” (CPD, s.v. *anidassana*). Buddhaghosa calls it a synonym for *nibbāna*: *Tattha viññātabban ti viññānaṃ, nibbānaṃ taṃ nāmaṃ. Tad etaṃ nidassana-abhāvato anidassanaṃ* (Sv 2, 393¹⁴⁻¹⁵): “Here ‘that which is to be cognized’ means *viññānaṃ*, that is a name for *nibbāna*, that is, an absence of the condition of pointing (manifesting, appearance) = *anidassanaṃ*.” Evidently non-pointing consciousness (*anidassanaṃ viññānaṃ*) is different from ordinary discriminative consciousness (*viññānaṃ*), which, at the end of this *gāthā*, ceases.

⁶⁰ *sabbato pabha* (“shining everywhere”) with variants *paha* (PTS), *papa* (comm., “fording place”), *paha* (= *patha* “accessible from every side,” Rhys Davids, *Dialogues of the Buddha*,

Here long and short, subtle and gross, pleasant and unpleasant,
 Here name and form cease without remainder.
 With the cessation of consciousness, here that all ceases.⁶¹

There is percipience but no perception of anything; attention, but no attending to anything; meditation, but no meditating on anything. This is *nibbāna*, which ensues when the bhikkhu has abandoned lust for the five aggregates, which undermines their basis and leaves no support for the establishment of consciousness:

“Bhikkhu, if a bhikkhu has abandoned lust for the form element, with the abandoning of lust the basis is cut off: there is no support for the establishing of consciousness. If he has abandoned lust for the feeling element [...] for the perception element [...] for the volitional formations element [...] for the consciousness element, with the abandoning of lust the basis is cut off: there is no support for the establishing of consciousness. When that consciousness is unestablished, not coming to growth, nongenerative, it is liberated. By being liberated, it is steady; by being steady, it is content; by being content, he is not agitated. Being unagitated, he personally attains Nibbana. He understands: ‘Destroyed is birth, the holy

283; AMg *paha* = “way, path”), *pr̥thu* (“expansive, extensive” in Chungyang Zhou, “Das Kaivartisūtra Der Neuentdeckten Dīrghāgama-Handschrift, Eine Edition Und Rekonstruktion Des Textes” (Master Thesis, Georg-August-Universität, 2008), 9; all point to an underlying *koiné* transmission as **paha*- which was variously interpreted in the different sources. For a discussion on this term, see Levman, “Linguistic Ambiguities,” 378–87.

⁶¹ Bryan G. Levman, *Dīgha Nikāya, a New Translation*, 271. DN 11, *Kevaddhasutta* (The Discourse with Kevaddha).

DN 1, 223^{12–17}: *viññāṇaṃ anidassanaṃ anantaṃ sabbato-paṇaṃ*.
ettha āpo ca paṭhavī tejo vāyo na gādhati,
ettha dīghaṇ ca rassaṇ ca aṇuṃ thūlaṃ subha-asubhaṃ.
ettha nāmaṇ ca rupaṇ ca asesam uparujjhati,
viññāṇassa nirodhena etth’ etaṃ uparujjhati ti.

life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more for this state of being.”⁶²

So, as the Buddha states in the *Mahāhatthipadopamasutta* (MN 28, The Great Discourse on the Simile of the Elephant’s Foot), though the faculties are intact and external sense-objects may come into its range, if there is no conscious engagement (*samannahāro*) with any of these, then there is no manifestation of the corresponding class of consciousness.⁶³ It is in this way that the Buddha, though fully aware and awake, can meditate through a severe thunderstorm and not even know that it had taken place.

§4. Who is meditating?

Because of its sophisticated psychology of mind, Buddhist teachings have become quite popular today in the field of cognitive studies and phenomenology. Although there are some dissenters, most phenomenologists argue for the existence of an irreducible subjectivity at the core of consciousness. One objection they have to the *anatta* teaching is to question *who* is meditating or experiencing the meditative states? And *who* is

⁶² Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, 894. SN 3, 58¹³⁻²⁶: *Rūpa-dhātuyā ce bhikkhave bhikkhuno rāgo pahīno hoti, rāgassa pahānā vocchijjata-ārammaṇaṃ patiṭṭhā viññāṇassa na hoti. Vedanā-dhātuyā ce bhikkhave bhikkhuno ... Saññā-dhātuyā ce bhikkhave bhikkhuno ... Saṅkhāra-dhātuyā ce bhikkhave bhikkhuno ... Viññāṇa-dhātuyā ce bhikkhave bhikkhuno rāgo pahīno hoti rāgassa pahānā vocchijjata-ārammaṇaṃ patiṭṭhā viññāṇassa na hoti. Tad appatiṭṭhitaṃ viññāṇaṃ avirūḷhaṃ anabhisaṅkhāraṃ ca vimuttaṃ. vimuttattā ṭhitaṃ. ṭhitattā santusitaṃ. santusitattā na paritassati. aparitassaṃ paccattaññ eva parinibbāyati. Khīṇā jāti ... pe ... na-aparaṃ itthattāyā ti pajānāti.*

⁶³ MN 1, 190²⁰⁻²²: *cakkhuṃ aparibhinnaṃ hoti bāhirā ca rūpā āpāthaṃ āgacchanti no ca tajjo samannāhāro hoti, n’eva tāva tajjassa viññāṇa-bhāgassa pātubhāvo hoti*, and so forth with the other aggregates. Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, 283.

liberated on the Buddhist path?⁶⁴ That someone is indeed meditating and liberated, seems like such a self-evident fact, that this question alone proves the reflexivity thesis. But this is the same logical mistake that Descartes made, assuming the existence of an experiencing subject that has not been proven. It is simply an artifact of our dualistic linguistic structure which, in asking a question about an agent, assumes that such must exist, as the word exists to which it presumably refers. But in the Buddha's teaching, this is not a valid question (*no kallo pañho*), as he says to Moliyaphagguna who asks him "Who makes contact?" "Who craves?" "Who feels?" The answer is no one: Contact, feeling, craving and all the other *nidānas* on the dependent origination cycle originate dependently; this is the Middle Way path taught by the Buddha, the doctrine that all phenomena, mental and physical, arise in dependence on causes and conditions and are contingent, lacking in essential being.⁶⁵ The view of a truly

⁶⁴ All Buddhist sects except for the Puggalavādins were in agreement on *anatta*, or the absence of an essential self. The Puggalavādins felt that some kind of "indeterminate self" was required to act as a basis for karma and rebirth, although the Buddha went to great lengths in, for example, the *Nidānasamyutta* of the SN to show that specific conditionality and *paṭicca samuppāda* account for the continuity of existence and that no substantial self is required. See the next footnote from the *Nidānasamyutta*'s *Moliyaphagguna sutta* (The Discourse with Moliyaphagguna) as one example of many. For a thorough discussion of this complicated question see Leonard Priestly, *Puggalavāda Buddhism, The Reality of the Indeterminate Self* (Toronto: Centre for South Asian Studies, University of Toronto, 1999).

⁶⁵ From the *Moliyaphagguna sutta*: To the question "Who craves?" the Buddha answers: "Not a valid question," the Blessed One replied. "I do not say 'One craves.' If I should say, 'One craves,' in that case this would be a valid question: 'Venerable sir, who craves?' But I do not speak thus. Since I don't speak thus, if one should ask me 'Venerable sir, with what as condition does craving [come to be]?' this would be a valid question. To this the valid answer is: 'With feeling as condition, craving [comes to be]; with craving as condition, clinging; with clinging as condition, existence, with existence as condition, etc... Such is the origin of the whole mass of suffering," Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, 542. SN 2, 13³³-14¹⁴: *No kallo pañho ti Bhagavā avoca. tasatī ti ahaṃ na vadāmi. tasatī ti ca-ahaṃ vadeyyaṃ tatra assa kallo pañho. Ko nu kho bhante tasatī ti? Evañ*

existent self manifests the error of extremism, that is, eternalism (the view of the immortal soul) or annihilationism (the view of a truly existent being who completely ceases to exist at death). So why do we always see things in terms of “I” and “thou”? Ultimately because of ignorance and craving which cause us to see objects as external to a self, a propensity which is mirrored and reinforced by a dualistic linguistic structure solidifying that misconception; a further reason is simply pure, bad habit, that is, uncountable lifetimes whereby we are accustomed to see things in this way, whose deep imprint (*vāsanā*) we cannot escape. As it is expressed in the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* (Discourse on the Descent into Laṅka), a later Mahāyāna text which makes explicit some of the implicit teachings of the Pāli:

The Blessed One said this to him: Mahāmati, since the ignorant and the simple-minded, not knowing that the world is what is seen of mind itself, cling to the multitudinousness of external objects, cling to the notions of being and non-being, oneness and otherness, bothness and not-bothness, existence and non-existence, eternity and non-eternity, as being characterised by self-nature which rises from discrimination based on habit-energy, they are addicted to false imaginings.⁶⁶

ca-ahaṃ na vadāmi. evaṃ maṃ avadantaṃ yo evaṃ puccheyya Kiṃ-paccayā nu kho bhante taṇhā ti. esa kallo pañho. Tatra kallaṃ veyyākaraṇaṃ vedanā-paccayā taṇhā taṇhā-paccayā upādānaṃ ti... Evaṃ etassa kevalassa dukkha-kkhandhassa samudayo hoti. Meditation also originates depending on past causes and conditions; it is generally a positive action, but it too can become afflictive if craving for peaceful states arises (as in the sixth and seventh *saṃyojanas* (craving for the form and formless realms). In *nibbāna* even the Dhamma and the whole conceptual structure of the Path must be abandoned or they may become an impediment to liberation (Anālayo, *The Signless and the Deathless*, 140).

⁶⁶ D.T. Suzuki, trans., *The Lankavatara Sutra, A Mahayana Text* (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1932), 79. *svacittadṛśyamātrānavabodhānmahāmate bālaprthagjanā bāhyavicitrabhāvābhiniveśena ca nāstyastitvaikat-vānyatvobhaya-naivāstīnanāstinitya-*

The Buddha explains the psychology of this mental process in the *Mūlapariyāyasutta* (MN 1, The Discourse on the Root Cause), where the ordinary, ignorant person misconceives the world and its constituents as separate from himself, delights in it and craves for them, while a Buddha does not do so, “fully understanding them to the end” (*pariññata-antaṃ*), and therefore does not become attached to the objects or imagine an artificial self to perceive them. As the Buddha teaches Mālukiyaṇṇa and Bāhiya, in a quick summary of the teaching, “In the seen there will be merely the seen; in the heard there will be merely the heard; in the sensed there will be merely the sensed; in the cognized there will be merely the cognized.”⁶⁷ There is no *tena* (“by him,” instrument of the action) who is agent of these activities. The mind is simply a constantly changing process reacting to various stimuli and causing others to arise. It is both “put together” (*saṅkhāra* < Skt. *saṃs* + *kr*) and puts together or creates the appearance of an acting individual; both the effect of contingent processes and the creator of same (in Pāli, *abhisāṅkharoti*).

§5. Conclusion

Most modern scholars of medieval Buddhism and Buddhist epistemology who study Dignāga, Dharmakīrti, and the Tibetan school do not refer to

anityasvabhāvavāsanāhetuvikalpābhīniveśeṇa vikalpayanti. Bunyiu Nanjio, *The Lankavatara Sutra* (Kyoto: Kyoto Otani University Press, 1923), 90¹⁻⁴; Parashuran Lakshman Vaidya, *Saddharmalankavatasutram*, Buddhist Sanskrit Texts, no. 3 (Darbhanga: Mithila Institute of Post-Graduate Studies and Research in Sanskrit Learning, 1963), 38¹⁻³. The *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* was a product of the Yogācāra school which is also named the Vijñānavāda (“way of consciousness”) as the school believed in the reality of consciousness.

⁶⁷ Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, 1175. From SN 4, 73⁵⁻⁷: *diṭṭhe diṭṭha-mattaṃ bhavissati. sūte sūta-mattaṃ bhavissati. mūte muta-mattaṃ bhavissati. viññāte viññāta-mattaṃ bhavissati*. Also found in the *Udāna* (directed to Bāhiya) at Ud 8⁵⁻⁷.

the early Buddhist works in Pāli in their research.⁶⁸ The Tibetan school, for example, translated the Sanskrit canon of the Sarvāstivādin (which is incomplete), and apparently did not have access to many of those Sanskrit *sūtras* which were parallel to the Pāli and derived from a common source. Certainly they are not quoted by Dignāga or Dharmakīrti; most of the *sūtras* cited above have no Sanskrit version and only a few have a Tibetan version, which presumably was a translation of the (now lost) Sanskrit.⁶⁹ Although there is no discussion of self-reflexivity per se in the Pāli, the subject is approached in many *suttas* obliquely and the issue—whether a meditator was aware of the self in advanced meditation practice—occupied quite a bit of attention, for the Buddha and his disciples. The answer to this question was clearly “No,” and presumably if the Buddha had ever been asked this question outright he would have answered in the negative. In the Pāli *suttas* it is difficult to give any positive interpretation to consciousness of anything, including self. Consciousness was a conditioned phenomenon and a conditioning one and always resulted in affliction. As the fifth aggregate, and third link in the chain of dependent arising, it was to be seen as “not I, not mine, not my self” and rejected. It was only through transcending discriminative consciousness and the other aggregates—and all the concomitant thoughts, feelings, proliferations and cravings associated with same—that one can attain liberation. In *nibbāna*, all sense faculties and aggregates cease and only some form of pure, non-dual awareness remains which transcends any linguistic designation.

⁶⁸ Including the most recent study by Yao (2005) who only refers to the later *Kathāvatthu*, but to none of the earlier works mentioned in this study.

⁶⁹ The DN *suttas* are an exception: the *Mahāparinibbānasutta* has a Tibetan and a Sanskrit version, the *Poṭṭhapādasutta* has a partial Skt. fragment as does the *Kevaddhasutta* (The Discourse with Kevaddha) which also has a Tibetan version. The AN *suttas* are only preserved in Pāli, as are the MN and SN *suttas* except for the *Dhātuvibhaṅga* in MN which has a Tibetan parallel.

Appendix I

Translation of the *Kathāvatthu* (Points of Controversy)

Ee Kv 314¹³–315¹⁸:

[Theravādin (Sakavādin) speaks]:

Is there knowledge about the present?

Yes.

Does one know that knowledge with that same knowledge?

That cannot be said.

Is there knowledge about the present?

Yes.

Does one know that knowledge with that same knowledge?

Yes.

Does one know the knowledge of that knowledge with the same knowledge?

That cannot be said.

Does one know the knowledge of that knowledge with the same knowledge?

Yes.

Is knowing the object of that knowledge?

That cannot be said.

Is knowing the object of that knowledge?

Yes.

One touches contact with that (same) contact. One experiences feeling with that (same) feeling. One perceives perception with that (same) perception. One thinks a thought with that (same) thought. One thinks an initial or sustained thought with that (same) initial or (same) sustained thought. One is devoted to joy with that (same) joy. One remembers mindfulness with that (same) mindfulness. One knows knowledge with that

(same) knowledge. One cuts a sword with that (same) sword. One chops a hatchet with that (same) hatchet, a machete with that (same) machete, a knife with that (same) knife. One sows a needle with that (same) needle. One touches a finger-tip with that (same) finger-tip, the tip of one's nose with that (same) tip of one's nose, a head with (that) same head, washes faeces with those (same) faeces, urine with that (same) urine, saliva with that (same) saliva, pus with that (same) pus, blood with that (same) blood.

That cannot be said.

[The Andhaka speaks:]

One cannot say, "There is knowledge of the present?" (that is, knowledge of present phenomena along with knowledge of knowledge).

Yes.

When all conditioned things are seen as impermanent, is not that knowledge also seen as impermanent?

Yes.

Then if that is the case, then one can say there is knowledge of the present.

1. *Paccuppanne ñāṇaṃ atthī ti?*

Āmantā.

Tena ñāṇena taṃ ñāṇaṃ jānāti ti?

Na h' evaṃ vattabbe --pe--

Tena ñāṇena taṃ ñāṇaṃ jānāti ti?

Āmantā.

Tena ñāṇena taṃ ñāṇaṃ ñāṇan ti jānāti ti?

Na h' evaṃ vattabbe --pe--

Tena ñāṇena taṃ ñāṇaṃ ñāṇan ti jānāti ti?

Āmantā.

Taṃ ñāṇaṃ tassa ñāṇassa ārammaṇaṃ ti?

Na h' evaṃ vattabbe --pe--

Taṃ ñāṇaṃ tassa ñāṇassa ārammaṇaṃ ti?

Āmantā.

Tena phassena taṃ phassaṃ phusati, tāya vedanāya taṃ vedanaṃ vedeti, tāya saññāya taṃ saññaṃ sañjānāti, tāya cetanāya taṃ cetanaṃ ceteti, tena cittena taṃ cittaṃ cinteti, tena vitakkena taṃ vitakkaṃ vitakketi, tena vicārena taṃ vicāraṃ vicāreti, tāya pītiyā taṃ pītiṃ piyāyati, tāya satiyā taṃ satiṃ sarati, tāya paññāya taṃ paññaṃ pajānāti, tena khaggena taṃ khaggaṃ chindati, tena pharasaṇā taṃ pharusāṃ tacchati, tāya kuṭṭhāriyā taṃ kuṭṭhāriṃ tacchati, tāya vāsiyā taṃ vāsiṃ tacchati, tāya sūciyā taṃ sūciṃ sibbeti, tena aṅgula-aggena taṃ aṅgula-aggaṃ parāmasati, tena nāsika-aggena taṃ nāsika-aggaṃ parāmasati, tena matthakena taṃ matthakaṃ parāmasati, tena gūthena taṃ gūthaṃ dhovati, tena muttena taṃ muttaṃ dhovati, tena kheḷena taṃ kheḷaṃ dhovati, tena pubbena taṃ pubbaṃ dhovati, tena lohitenā taṃ lohitaṃ dhovatīti?

Na h' evaṃ vattabbe --pe--

2. Na vattabbaṃ “Paccuppanne ñāṇaṃ atthī ti”?

Āmantā.

Nanu sabbe saṃkhāre aniccato diṭṭhe taṃ pi ñāṇaṃ aniccato diṭṭhaṃ hotī ti?

Āmantā.

Hañci sabbe saṃkhāre aniccato diṭṭhe taṃ pi ñāṇaṃ aniccato diṭṭhaṃ hoti, tena vata re vattabbe “Paccuppanne ñāṇaṃ atthī ti.”

Paccuppanna-ñāṇa-kathā.

Appendix II

Translation of the Commentary to *Kathāvatthu*, *Paccuppanna-kathā* (Discourse About the Present)

Ee Kv-a 86¹²–87⁵:

This is called the discourse on knowledge of the present. In this regard, depending on the words of those who say, “When all conditioned things are seen as impermanent is not that knowledge also seen as impermanent?” some like the Andhakas say “There is knowledge of the entire present without difference (from the knowledge of that knowledge).” Regarding them, they agree with the Theravādins about knowledge of the present, but if there is knowledge of the present without difference (from the knowledge of that knowledge) it must take place in the present instant by itself (simultaneously). That being the case, because there is no two-fold simultaneous knowledge (knowledge about the present and knowledge of that knowledge), the Theravādin reproof is “the knowledge will have to be known (simultaneously) by that same knowledge” (which is not the case).

In this regard, regarding the first point the opponent denies that (Theravādin assertion), “One is not able to know that knowledge with the very same knowledge.”

In regard to the second point the opponent maintains his position on the basis of continuity. Seeing constant dissolution he sees knowledge of insight into dissolution by means of that very insight into dissolution. This is the method when he asserts “one knows that knowledge of the present by that same knowledge” (since they both involved impermanence). So the Theravādin says “One touches contact with that same contact, etc” (as one of several nonsensical example in the *mūla* text) in order to prevent an opportunity for the Andhaka to assert his (wrong) view. In order to

establish his position the Andhaka says, “When all conditioned things are seen as impermanent is not that knowledge also seen as impermanent?” (as per the *mūla* text). By that method (*nayato*) the Theravādins agree that knowledge of impermanence is seen (to be true), but not as a (simultaneous) object of knowing the present and knowing itself; therefore the proposition of establishing it in this way (viz., that knowing knows itself) has no footing.

Idāni PACCUPPANNA-ÑĀṆA-KATHĀ-VANṆANĀ nāma hoti. Tattha yesaṃ sabba-saṅkhāresu aniccato diṭṭhesu tam pi ñāṇaṃ aniccato diṭṭhaṃ hoti ti vacanaṃ nissāya, avisesena sabbasmiṃ paccuppanne ñāṇaṃ atthi ti laddhi, seyyathā pi Andhakānaṃ, te sandhāya paccuppanne ti pucchā saka-vādissa, paṭiññā itarassa. Atha naṃ yadi avisesena paccuppanne ñāṇaṃ atthi, khaṇa-paccuppanne pi tena bhavitabbaṃ. Evaṃ sante dvinnā ñāṇānaṃ ekato abhāvā ten’ eva ñāṇena taṃ jānitabbaṃ hoti ti codana-atthaṃ tenā ti anuyogo saka-vādissa. Tattha paṭhama-pañhe ten’ eva taṃ jānitum na sakkā ti paṭikkhepo itarassa. Duttiya-pañhe santatiṃ sandhāya paṭiññā tass’ eva. Paṭipāṭito bhaṅgaṃ passanto bhaṅga-anupassa-nāñāṇen’ eva (Be bhaṅga-anupassanen’ eva) bhaṅga-anupassanā-ñāṇaṃ passati ti adhippāyo. Tena ñāṇena ñāṇaṃ taṃ jānāti ti ādisu pi es’ eva nayo. Tena phassena taṃ phassan ti ādini ’ssa lesa-kāsa-nivāraṇa-atthaṃ vuttāni. Yam pan’ etena laddhi-paṭiṭṭhāpana-atthaṃ nanu sabba-saṅkhāre ti ādi vuttaṃ, tattha nayato taṃ ñāṇaṃ diṭṭhaṃ hoti, na ārammaṇato ti adhippāyena paṭiññā saka-vādissa. Tasmā evaṃ paṭiṭṭhāpitā p’ assa (Be var. paṭiṭṭhitā pi ’ssa) laddhi appaṭiṭṭhitā va hoti.

For another translation of the commentary, see Bimala Churn Law.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Bimala Churn Law, trans., *The Debates Commentary (Kathāvatthupparakaraṇā-Atṭhakathā)* (London: Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1940), 107–08.

List of Abbreviations

AMg = ArdhaMāgadhī

AN = Aṅguttara Nikāya

Be = Burmese recension of Pāli canon (Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana Tipiṭaka, Burmese Sixth Council)

CPD = Critical Pāli Dictionary ([Index - Critical Pali Dictionary](#))

DN = Dīgha Nikāya

DPD = Digital Pali Dictionary ([Home - Digital Pāli Dictionary](#))

Ee = European recension of Pāli canon (PTS edition)

Kv = Kathāvatthu

Kv-a = Kathāvatthu-aṭṭhakathā

MN = Majjhima Nikāya

Ps = Papañcasūdanī (Majjhima Nikāya aṭṭhakathā)

PTS = Pali Text Society

SN = Saṃyutta Nikāya

Sv = Sumaṅgalavilāsinī (Dīghanikāya-aṭṭhakathā)

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Notes on the Contributor

Bryan G. Levman studies the languages of early Buddhism, the languages that the Buddha and his early disciples spoke and the oral transmission of the teachings. The most complete record of the Buddha's teachings is in Pāli, a language which has been called, along with Ardha-Māgadhī, "the most ancient normalization of a Gangetic koiné" prevalent in the north of India during the time of the historical Buddha. Levman holds a PhD from the University of Toronto and is currently a Visiting Scholar at the University of Toronto's Department for the Study of Religion.

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