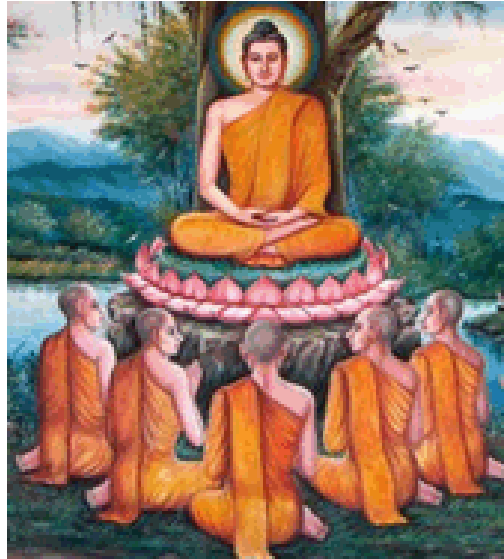


Buddhism and the No-soul Doctrine

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An Esoteric Perspective

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There are many who do not identify specifically with the Buddhist religion, but nonetheless hold Gautama Buddha and his world mission, in the highest regard. His teachings, specifically the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, his effect for good upon the human consciousness - all these elevate Gautama Buddha to the status of being one of the greatest spiritual Messengers the world has ever known.

Having said that, many people whose understandings are based on Deity and soul, are confused by the Buddhist "no-soul" and "no-God" doctrines. What is it that the great Teacher said exactly? Can these concepts be reconciled with the esoteric teachings promulgated by such writers as Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (HPB) and Alice Bailey?¹ This investigation is the reason for this article, in which Buddhist and esoteric doctrine have been compared and an opinion added.

Gautama was born Hindu, and received esoteric training in the old Brahmanical secret Schools - whose roots are founded in pre-Vedic Wisdom. From these Indian Sages he learned the truths of emptiness, the impermanence of material life, and spiritual development techniques. All students of these schools vow not to reveal the Esoteric Doctrines imparted to them, but in his compassion for man and in order to help him, Buddha violated this.

"In His immense pity for the ignorance—and as its consequence the sufferings—of mankind, desirous though He was to keep inviolate His sacred vows, He failed to keep within the prescribed limits. While constructing His Exoteric Philosophy (the "Eye-Doctrine") on the foundations of eternal Truth, He failed to conceal certain dogmas, and trespassing beyond the lawful lines, caused those dogmas to be misunderstood. In His anxiety to make away with the false Gods, He revealed in the Seven Paths to 'Nirvana'² some of the mysteries of the Seven Lights of the Arupa (formless) World".³

It appears that Gautama was so anxious to help man free himself from corrupt religious teachings; he gave out certain truths about the formless world of Monadic existence - a level of pure spiritual awareness (the first level down from God-consciousness or Brahman) that lies way above human existence. He released these truths to his

1 Helena Blavatsky (1831-1891), Alice Bailey (1880-1949). HB founded the Theosophical Society. The writings of Blavatsky and Bailey are called "The Trans-Himalayan Wisdom" and are said to originate from ancient Buddhist and Vedanta writings.

2 Nirvana: G. de Purucker. "Nirvana is a state of utter bliss and complete, untrammelled consciousness, a state of absorption in pure cosmic Being, and is the wondrous destiny of those who have reached superhuman knowledge and purity and spiritual illumination". <http://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/ocglos/og-nop.htm>

3 Helena Blavatsky, *Collected Writings*, vol XIV, p389

disciples whose minds and hearts he had prepared to assimilate these great esoteric truths. In order to reach this level, all attachments and trappings pertaining to human life must be stripped away. Occurring naturally through the course of evolution, this stripping away or emptying is accelerated through certain spiritual practices. But they are way above the level of the average student in esoteric training who is being instructed in methods that raise consciousness from lower mind to higher soul wisdom - which is the half-way point to this lofty level.

Students were given a vision of the formless Monadic world, before they could build the equipment to reach it. The whole process of the *Soul journey - the continuous expansion of consciousness across lives until enlightenment is reached*, was omitted. This situation can be likened to an astronaut told he has to fly directly to the heart of the universe when the technology of his spaceship barely allows him to break free of the Earth's atmosphere. The consequence is that Buddha's teaching in this area, has been misunderstood and thus the no-soul, no-creator belief has arisen.

His new doctrine, which represented the outward dead body of the Esoteric Teaching without its vivifying Soul, had disastrous effects: it was never correctly understood... Immense philanthropy, a boundless love and charity for all creatures, were at the bottom of His unintentional mistake... If the "Good Law," as preached, resulted in the most sublime code of ethics and the unparalleled philosophy of things external in the visible Kosmos, it biased and misguided immature minds into believing there was nothing more under the outward mantle of the system, and its dead-letter only was accepted.¹

The Brahmin's jealously reserved occult knowledge as the right of their caste. To his credit, Buddha broke this rule, admitting all castes to the path of adeptship, based on merit. It earned him great hostility however, and he was driven out of India. On the positive side, when one looks at religious intolerance in the world today, caused through immature minds misinterpreting the scriptures, perhaps Buddha's lack of emphasis upon God was one of his greatest gift to man. With one sweeping stroke, he stripped away the roots of religious superstition and taught students to commune directly with God rather than to go through intermediaries (priests) who were so often corrupt. The Renaissance period which broke the hold of religious superstition in the west occurred two thousand years later.



1. Buddhist Laws and their Esoteric Equivalents

Most of the principles upon which Buddhism is based are also fundamentals of Occult Lore. In the following list, five of the six principles are held as truths in both schools of thought.

- 1. Buddhist Principle: The Law of Change or Impermanence.** All that exists, lives and dies. Infinite numbers of universes, emerge, endure, and die, only to be reborn.
Esoteric Principle: The Law of Periodicity. For every period of activity, there is a consequent interval of rest, observable in nature as day and night, the flow and ebb of tides, waking and sleeping, birth and death.² This law applies to all life on earth as well to the birth and death of universes.
- 2. Buddhist Principle: The Law of Dependent Origination.** All phenomena depend upon a number of causal and connected factors. Nothing can exist by itself and be its own cause. This is the natural law of nature. Life alone is continuous, and he who clings to any form, will suffer by resisting the flow.
Esoteric Principle: The Law of Periodicity. The Secret Doctrine³ teaches the progressive development of everything, worlds as well as atoms; this stupendous development has neither conceivable beginning nor imaginable end. Our "Universe" is only one of an infinite number of Universes [all] links in the great cosmic chain of universes, each one standing in the relation of an effect as regards its predecessor, and being a cause as regards its successor.⁴

1 Helena Blavatsky, *Collected Writings*, vol XIV, p388

2 Barborka, Geoffrey: *The Divine Plan* p3

3 The Secret Doctrine is an occult cosmological thesis written by Helena Blavatsky.

4 Barborka, Geoffrey: *The Divine Plan* p3

3. **Buddhist Principle: The Doctrine of Emptiness.** All forms and Reality itself are empty - void, but this state holds within itself, emptiness (or unknown potential. Hodgson)

Esoteric Principle: Absolute Consciousness. Blavatsky said that in the rest period between universes (pralaya), there are no bodies or forms available to give Absolute Consciousness form, so it is described as being empty. There seems to be a relation between this Absolute Consciousness and Buddhist's Buddha-Mind or Dharmakaya (Mahayana) the "original clear light of mind" wisdom and emptiness.

".. during Pralaya.. there is nothing to receive and reflect the ideation of the Absolute Mind (Consciousness); therefore, it is not.. destroy the vessel, and—to our perceptions.. nothing exists."¹

4. **Buddhist Principle: Ultimate Reality is Absolute Truth or Nirvana.** When the mind is freed from material world defilements it "becomes free, radiant and joyful and at death one is no longer subject to rebirth. Nirvana is the ultimate happiness"². Simplistically, little mind merges with parent-mind or Dharmakaya.

Esoteric Principle: The Law of Essential Unity. A direct parallel is made between Nirvana and Monadic consciousness in occultism - see this quote from the Occult Glossary, Dr. de Purucker.

The nirvanic state or condition may be attained by great.. sages, such as Gautama the Buddha .. all the lower personal part of him is become thoroughly impersonalized, the personal has put on the garment of impersonality, and such a man thereafter lives in the nirvanic condition of the spiritual monad.³

All earthly attributes have been cut away and such a one (a Buddha), resides in this higher state.

5. **Buddhist Principle: The Law of Karma.** It governs rebirth. According to one's thoughts and actions, people are reborn in one of six different realms.

Esoteric Principle: The Law of Cause and Effect or Karma. This is a fundamental aspect of Divine Law. If universal harmony is disturbed, then the "disturber" is required to restore harmony.

6. **Buddhist Principle: The no-God, no-Soul, Doctrine.** Mainstream Buddhism repudiates the God and Soul concepts. These are the major differences between Esoteric and Buddhist thought. Buddhists do not believe in "God", but they do believe that the universe is governed by the laws of nature. Buddhists view the God concept as introducing an arbitrary element into an otherwise orderly universe, as an interference or aberration in nature.

Esoteric Principle: "Divine Breath" or "God". The Buddhist repudiation is related moreso to God as presented by fundamentalist religions, whose perceptions of God are based on the Bible's Old Testament "Jehovah" - an interfering and angry deity. But please note, this is not the esoteric view of "God", an example of which follows:

The Divine Breath has many names. The most common is "God"... Here is an esoteric description of this force. That sumtotal of manifestation which can be called Nature, or God, and which is the aggregate of all the states of consciousness... This interpretation does not look upon it as the result of an outside Deity pouring His energy and wisdom upon a waiting world, but rather as something which is latent within that world itself, that lies hidden at the heart of the atom, within the heart of man himself, within the planet, and within the solar system. It is that something which drives all on toward the goal, and is the force which is gradually bringing order out of chaos; ultimate perfection out of temporary imperfection; good out of seeming evil.⁴

In Section 3, the no-soul, no-God theories are examined.



1 Helena Blavatsky: *Secret Doctrine, vol I*, p43;

2 Dr. Ruwan M. Jayatunge MD, *The concept of Nirvana from a psychological point of view*

3 Dr. de Purucker: *Occult Glossary*, p118-119;

4 Alice Bailey, *The Consciousness of the Atom*, p21-22

2. Defining Terms

An important Buddhist sutra that has given rise to the "no-soul" belief is the *Samyutta Nikaya 3.196*

At one time in Savatthi, the venerable Radha seated himself and asked of the Blessed Lord Buddha: "Anatta, anatta I hear said venerable. What pray tell does Anatta mean?" "Just this Radha, form is not the Soul (anatta), sensations are not the Soul (anatta), perceptions are not the Soul (anatta), assemblages are not the Soul (anatta), consciousness is not the Soul (anatta)..."¹

In Buddhism, the term *anatta* (Pali) or *anatman* (Sanskrit) refers to the notion of "not-self" or the illusion of "self".² The word used for soul or self is "atta", "atman" in Sanskrit. In Buddhism today, "atta" is usually interpreted as that "self or soul" used by certain religious denominations to describe a (spiritual) aspect of man that exists over and above the everyday lower self. Mainstream Buddhists reject this notion, denying that anything enduring else exists between lower self and Pure Ultimate Consciousness. Esoterically, the words "soul" and "atman" are often used to refer to different levels of consciousness. For example:

Brahman, the power which presents itself to us materialized in all existing things, which creates, sustains, preserves, and receives back into itself again all worlds, this eternal infinite divine power is identical with the *atman*, with that which, after stripping off everything external, we discover in ourselves as our real most essential being, our individual self, the *soul*. This identity of the *Brahman* and the *atman*, of God and the *soul*, is the fundamental thought of the entire doctrine of the Upanishads.³

However, for the purposes of this article, we refer to that spiritual aspect that is embedded in human beings while they are in incarnation. Here are some quotes for "soul".

[Soul] is called by many names in the New Testament, and in the other religions it is called by a terminology suited to the time and temperament of the aspirant. Where the Christian disciple speaks of "Christ in you, the hope of glory," the Oriental disciple may speak of the Self or the Atman.⁴

Soul signifies "vehicle", any vehicle in which the Monad (Atman), in any sphere of manifestation, is working out its destiny. A soul is an entity which is evolved by experiences; it is not a spirit, but it is a vehicle of a spirit.⁵

[Soul].. is a fragment of the Oversoul, a spark of the one Flame imprisoned in the body. It is that life aspect which gives to.. all forms in manifestation.. being and consciousness. It is that integrating coherent something which makes the human being a thinking, feeling and aspiring entity.⁶

Buddhist and esoteric teachings are virtually identical if the interim period of the evolution of the soul is omitted. The beginning and the end are the same. Man starts his journey ignorant, and he ends it enlightened and supernal.

In esoteric teachings, there is an ordered and sequential development to soul (wisdom) consciousness, which is achieved as the soul reincarnates from life to life. Atman works firstly with a soul in the Mineral Kingdom, then in the vegetable, animal and then human. This progression sees the gradual expansion of consciousness - more spirit awareness, less ignorance. This progression continues into superhuman levels, until - with all impurities removed, soul reaches its parent Atman (impersonal Monadic awareness). (Nirvana)

In Buddhism, there is no equivalent progression. On the Wheel of Samsara, "gross" mind is reborn again and again, into a realm which is dependent upon the last thoughts of the previous incarnation. Since there is no storehouse of soul knowledge and wisdom carried over from life to life, it is clear that the leap from ignorance to enlightenment must be achieved in one incarnation.

This seems to be a major flaw in the no-soul argument. Starting from scratch - from gross ignorance (unintelligent, undeveloped, unspiritual), and emptying the vaults of karma accumulated over thousands of lives in one incarnation? In the author's opinion, at humanity's current level of spiritual growth, this is impossible.

1 Psychology Wiki, *Anatta*. <http://psychology.wikia.com/wiki/Anatta>

2 Wikipedia, *Anatta*

3 Alice Bailey, *The Soul and Its Mechanism*, p82

4 Alice Bailey, *From Bethlehem to Calvary*, p41

5 Dr. de Purucker: *Occult Glossary*, p162-3

6 Alice Bailey, *Intellect to Intuition*, p53-4

The doctrine of the evolution of the Soul explains why men are so different, and why some men are monsters and others are saints. But all so-called "monsters" will eventually become saints through the evolutionary process of the soul. It explains also, why some men and women will achieve enlightenment - in one life. They have expanded as souls over lives to the point that they are illumined souls, and this opens the doorway of opportunity to them for enlightenment to take place in one incarnation.

Enlightenment as understood in Buddhism is a vastly higher occurrence than the soul-enlightenment (3rd transfiguration initiation) of esoteric teachings. Three further enlightenment phases must occur to reach the Buddhist equivalent. Enlightenment is achieved with the disappearance of the ego. On attaining Enlightenment, one is freed from the cycle of birth, suffering, death and rebirth (Samsara), and enters into Nirvana - the realization of the true nature of the mind; the ultimate state of impersonal wisdom and compassion.



3. Three Buddhist Views

VIEW #1: "BUDDHA SAID THE SOUL DOES NOT EXIST"

Theravada Buddhism¹ neither affirms nor denies the existence of "self" so this view commonly called "anatta" - the no-soul doctrine, emanates primarily from Mahayana followers. The following examples are typical of this widely held view.

(1). "The Buddha taught that what we conceive as something eternal within us, is merely a combination of physical and mental aggregates (skandhas).. These forces are working together in a flux of momentary change; they are never the same for two consecutive moments.. When the Buddha analyzed the psycho-physical life, he found only these five aggregates. He did not find any eternal soul. However, many people still have the misconception that the soul is the consciousness. The Buddha declared in unequivocal terms that consciousness depends on [skandhas] and that it cannot exist independently of them."²

(2). "Where Buddha departed most radically from Hinduism was in his doctrine of "anatta", the notion that individuals do not possess eternal souls. Instead of eternal souls, individuals consist of a "bundle" of habits, memories, sensations, desires, and so forth, which together delude one into thinking that he or she consists of a stable, lasting self. Despite its transitory nature, this false self hangs together as a unit, and even reincarnates in body after body... the goal is to obtain release. In Buddhism, this means abandoning the false sense of self so that the bundle of memories and impulses disintegrates, leaving nothing to reincarnate and hence nothing to experience pain."³

In the Samyutta Nikaya 3.196 given previously, Gautama states that the five aggregates or skandhas with which the unlearned man identifies, are not the Soul. In itself, the scripture does not negate the Soul, or disqualify the Atman (Soul) principle. But that is exactly what supporters of this argument claim. For example:

"Coomaraswamy and Horner (authors), claim that Buddha was only directing us not to see the real Self in the personal ego - a view identical to the Hindu view... Similarly Buddha often

1 Main Buddhist branches

Theravada (Teaching of the Elders, or the Ancient Teaching) is the oldest surviving Buddhist school. [Around 250 BC]. The ultimate goal is to personally reach enlightenment and Nirvana.

Mahayana (Sk. "Greater Vehicle") Mahayanist's believe their sutras are the more advanced doctrines, reserved for those who follow the bodhisattva path. The ultimate goal is to be reborn in order to help all other sentient beings reach Nirvana.

Tibetan [Vajrayana/ Tantric/ Esoteric Buddhism] An extension of Mahayana, it differs only in the adoption of additional techniques in order to accelerate the process of awakening. This is the branch which HH the Dalai Lama belongs to.

2 Ven. Sri Dhammananda, *Is there an Eternal Soul*. <http://www.budsas.org/ebud/whatbudbeliev/115.htm>

3 Victor J Zammit, *How different religions view the Afterlife*. <http://www.victorzammit.com/articles/religions3.html>

said, "This is not atta. That is not atta. Nothing here is atta." Does that indicate that Buddha means that there exists somewhere something that can be called atta? No."¹

Conclusion: Buddha never said that the soul or self did *not* exist, pointing out only what it was not. In some people's minds, this has migrated into "Buddha said that self does not exist"; an erroneous assumption not supported by fact.

3-1a. On one occasion Gautama refused to answer metaphysical questions

The *Aggi-Vacchagotta Sutta SN 44.8* is from the Pali Canon and is one of the few recorded occasions that Buddha was asked directly to answer metaphysical questions. In the previous script, Buddha took great pains to point out what the 'self' was not. In this one, he refuses to answer.

*Summary of Thanissaro Bhikku interpretation: Vacchagotta asks Gautama whether he holds particular views on the cosmos and the relationship between soul, mind and body. Gautama's only response to these questions is "no". He refuses to elaborate, explaining that each question leads to an unresolvable thicket of views which will cause suffering and distress if investigated. Because such investigation cannot lead to enlightened understanding and nirvana, the Buddha takes no position on these subjects.*²

On this occasion, Buddha avoided an involved metaphysical discussion saying, "each question leads to an unresolvable thicket of views which will cause suffering and distress if investigated". This is in line with the hypothesis given previously that he wished to eliminate religious superstition and avoid wars that start when religious views conflict. Besides "such investigation cannot lead to enlightened understanding and nirvana." Only spiritual practices of meditation and detachment achieve this. Why clutter the mind with unnecessary thoughts?

Vacchagotta was described as "a wanderer", and there is an opinion that he was not ready, or spiritually developed enough to be able to understand such metaphysical notions. Whether this is true or not, what is apparent is that Buddha did not want Vacchagotta to fill his head with matters which would distract him from the first task which all beginners on the Path of Spiritual Development need to address - dis-identification from the false ego.

3-1b. Rather than no-self, is Buddha teaching a NOT-SELF strategy?

Buddhist scholar Thanissaro Bhikkhu speculates that the real lesson being offered in the previous sutra is a strategy in dealing with the cause of suffering - the false self and its proclivities. In this sense, the *anatta* teaching is not a doctrine of no-self, but a not-self strategy for shedding suffering by letting go of its cause.

Is the central Buddhist teaching of *anatta* (not-self) a statement of metaphysical truth, or is it a strategy for gaining release from suffering? Through a careful study of the key passages from the Pali canon on the subject of *anatta*, the author here demonstrates the latter to be the case.³

This strategy is employed in Hinduism, particularly in Jnana Yoga and Advaita Vedanta. '*Neti neti*' is a chant meaning "not this, not that". It is usually preceded by the question "Who am I?" Then *neti neti* is applied to all that stands between the returning pilgrim (soul), and his source (Atman). It is claimed by some to be a rapid path to enlightenment.

Buddha's "Four Noble Truths", is the ultimate Not-Self strategy. (1) This world is a place of suffering, (2) its cause is desire, (3) release comes through cessation of desire, (4) follow the path which leads to release." The teaching instruction contained in the *Aggi-Vacchagotta Sutta* is clear, focus upon the Four Noble Truths, and leave all metaphysical ponderings and religious arguments behind. Many would benefit from this advice.

Conclusion: the *Aggi-Vacchagotta Sutta* does not state that God or the soul does not exist. Buddha refused to answer such questions and gave instead a strategy for dealing with suffering.

3-1c. In the *Alagaddupama Sutta MN22*, Gautama points out the foolishness of identifying with anything that is impermanent in the cosmic sense.

The relevant sections (15 - 23) follow Buddha's discourse about an "uninstructed worldling" who clings to wrong views such as:

1 Sayadaw Silananda, *Anatta*. www.experiencefestival.com

2 Thanissaro Bhikkhu, *Aggi-Vacchagotta Sutta*, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.072.than.html>

3 Thanissaro Bhikkhu, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/index.html#bmc1>

(about form) 'This is mine, this I am, this is my self'..
(on feeling, perception, fabrications) 'This is mine, this I am, this is my self'
(what is seen, heard, sensed, and thought) 'This is mine, this I am, this is my self';
(on the cosmos) This cosmos is the self.
(on death) That I shall be after death; permanent, stable, eternal, immutable; eternally the same'

Buddha summarises:

Very good, monks. I, too, do not envision a possession, the possession of which would be constant, permanent, eternal, not subject to change, that would stay just like that for an eternity [and] the view 'This cosmos is the self. After death this I will be constant, permanent, eternal, not subject to change. I will stay just like that for an eternity' — Isn't it utterly and completely a fool's teaching?"¹

Conclusion: Gautama's view coincides with that of esotericism - nothing in the manifested world is permanent. At some point in time, the Monadic Spark (Atman) returns to the Parent Brahman, this then withdraws from the universe. When the term "immortal" is used with Atman, this is because of its relation to Brahman – pure consciousness, and in comparison to the quick changing nature of the physical form.

VIEW #2: BUDDHA SAID "THERE IS NO REINCARNATING SOUL"

This is the position taken by most Buddhists, based on their interpretation of the teachings. Some Buddhism say that it is the mind aspect of the skandhas which rebirths time and again. Here are examples of this point of view:

(1). Reincarnation normally is understood to be the transmigration of a soul to another body after death. There is no such teaching in Buddhism. One of the most fundamental doctrines of Buddhism is *anatta*, or *anatman* - *no soul* or *no self*. There is no permanent essence of an individual self that survives death.²

(2). There is a kind of continuum of consciousness... However.. there is no eternal, unchanging, abiding, permanent self called "soul." That is what is being denied in Buddhism.³

These two quotes simply emphasise the mainstream Buddhist view that a transmigrating "permanent" soul does not exist. Something persists, but it is not the soul as presented by Vedanta or esotericism. "Permanent" seems to be a major sticking point. But as previously stated, the esoteric view coincides with Buddhism that nothing is permanent in the universe. There is an evolving and changing consciousness, which is called "soul"; it being an off-shoot of Atman, which is an off-shoot of Brahman, which exits the universe at its appointed time.

In the following quote Lama Jigme Rinpoche tells us what does persist.

(3). The Buddha told us that it is the mind that reincarnates... When one dies, the mind does not stay with the body. The mind actually separates from the physical form. Reincarnation in the Buddhist context means that my mind continues while my body changes into another form. My mind continues into another form of being. The Buddha explained that there are six "form" realms of beings as well as some formless states of beings... Which form you end up with depends on your own knowledge and ability which is your karma.⁴

Esotericism agrees with the first part of quote (3) "When one dies, the mind does not stay with the body. The mind actually separates from the physical form", but not with the rest of the quote. Rather, in the next incarnation the soul changes its body, but to another human form and so on until enlightenment is achieved. This all takes place in the Human Kingdom. It is interesting, but some modern Buddhists (nuns at Chenrezic, Brisbane in 2013) refer to the after-life realms as psychological states of a human being.

In the *Anattalakkhana Sutta*, Buddha talks about a continuing existence

This sutra is very interesting, because in it Buddha affirms that something does persist after "death", although in this case he is referring to the end of the rebirth process. He also gives a brief description of the enlightenment process which is a gradual release from each vehicle.

1 Thanissaro Bhikkhu, *Alagaddupama Sutta*, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.022.than.html>

2 Barbara O'Brien, *About.com Buddhism*, <http://buddhism.about.com/od/karmaandrebirth/a/reincarnation.htm>

3 Dalai Lama, 1997, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mindstream>

4 Lama Jigme Rinpoche, *Working with Karma*. <http://www.jigmela.org/words/wwk2.htm>

[When] the well-instructed disciple of the noble ones grows disenchanted with form, disenchanted with feeling, disenchanted with perception, disenchanted with fabrications, disenchanted with consciousness [Hodgson - thus disenchanted with the skandhas]. Disenchanted, he becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion, he is fully released. With full release, there is the knowledge, 'Fully released.' He discerns that 'Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.'" ¹

The sutra tells us that when "full release" occurs, the disciple is fully cognizant of this fact. But this is a major contradiction with orthodox Buddhism, because the only 'self' usually acknowledged is the lower mind of the skandhas, which ceases to exist when karma is depleted. And if it is not having the "Ah-ha I must arise and return to Unity" moment, then who is?

However, an interesting evolution is occurring in Mahayana Buddhism, so that now teachers are referring to a higher mind aspect that continues from life to life. In the following quote, if the word *soul* is interposed over the phrase 'very subtle mind', the two philosophies are reconciled.

Although our superficial conscious mind ceases, it does so by dissolving into a deeper level of consciousness, call 'the very subtle mind' [SOUL]. The continuum of our very subtle mind has no beginning and no end, and it is this mind which, when completely purified, transforms into the omniscient mind of a Buddha. ²

Theravada Buddhism doesn't seem to have any direct link between Nirvana and skandhas-mind. It acknowledges that skandhas mind eventually is eliminated, it does not accept or reject 'self', it describes enlightenment as "a mental state where conditioning, defilement and suffering are abolished". So how does enlightenment occur? Here are two explanations:

(1). "There is no *atta* or self which realises Nibbana (Nirvana). What realises Nibbana is insight-wisdom.. It is not the property of a personal or universal self, but is rather a power developed through meditative penetration of phenomena." ³

(2). "You become more enlightened every time you accept the facts that you find when you look honestly into yourself. You become more endarkened (ignorant and dissatisfied) every time you ignore or reject these facts." ⁴

Silananda takes great pains to dismiss 'self', then goes on to describe a mysterious developing "power" and "insight-wisdom" as a result of meditation. Hunt rightly points out the benefit of looking honestly into oneself. But both of them do not address the fact that the only mechanism available to bring about this magical effect is poor, lowly skandhas mind. It cannot be transformed into something higher; because we are told it does not survive the dissolution of the aggregates. There is no suggestion it is rehabilitated. But both testify to the fact that something does grow and evolve. Occultists call it 'soul' - Buddhists go into denial.

Conclusion: in earlier Buddhist mainstream thought, there seemed to be Nirvana and the skandhas – the two opposite poles, and not much in between. The gradual expansion of (soul) consciousness presented in esoteric philosophy was, and still is, soundly rejected. However, in Mahayana, there is a definite shift and it seems that the dots between the opposites are beginning to be filled in.

BUDDHIST VIEW #3: "BUDDHA SAID THERE IS NO GOD"

The Mahayana *Lankavatara Sutra* seems to support this no-Creator view, especially the following section:.

All such notions as causation, succession, atoms, primary elements, that make up personality, personal soul, Supreme Spirit, Sovereign God, Creator, are all figments of the imagination and manifestations of mind... No, [Buddha]hood is not the same as the philosopher's *Atman*. ⁵

But in the "Sagathakam" section of this same sutra, the previous statement seems to be contradicted. Buddha talks of the reality of the pure Self (*atman*), equating it with the *Tathagatagarbha* (Buddha-Essence). There are several verses proclaiming "self" as being right and good, in fact "an entire rhetoric" say Hubbard and Swanson in their book 'Pruning the Bodhi Tree'. The following is perhaps the clearest example:

1 Thanissaro Bhikkhu, www.accesstoinsight.org

2 About Buddhism, <http://www.aboutbuddhism.org/buddhism-beliefs.php/>

3 Silananda, www.dhammadownload.com

4 Hunt, www.zenki.org

5 Wikipedia, God in Buddhism

746: The atma [Self] characterised with purity is the state of self-realisation; this is the Tathagatagarbha, which does not belong to the realm of the theorists. [Suzuki translation]¹

On close examination, Buddha is drawing a clear distinction between the personalising, humanising and materialising of Deity ("personality, personal soul, Supreme Spirit, Sovereign God, Creator... *the philosopher's Atman*") and the purified "atma" or consciousness when freed from the human worlds and trammels ("realm of the theorists"). In other words, Gautama was differentiating between the material and spiritual aspects of man. There is no rejection of Atman or a presiding Deity.

Generally, when contradictions are found in the same text, it is Buddhist tradition that both opinions be open to interpretation. Here is what the Dalai Lama said:

The Buddhist point of view does not accept the validity of affirmations which do not stand up to logical examination. If a sutra describes the Primordial Buddha as an autonomous entity, we must be able to interpret this assertion without taking it literally. We call this type of sutra an "interpretable" sutra."²

Hence the dismissal of the passages in the Sagathakam sutra, which seem to provide evidence that 'self-Atman' exists.

The no-God, no-Creator belief is fundamental to mainstream Buddhist thought. The following examples are typical of this view:

(1). "Much of Buddhist philosophy is actually opposed to the idea of creation by a supreme being. This is because it would introduce an arbitrary element (will of a creator) into an otherwise orderly universe."³

(2). The theory of first cause asserts that God comes first, and creates everything. This violates the Buddhist Law of Dependent Origination, which posits that all phenomena depend upon a number of causal and connected factors. Nothing can exist by itself and be its own (first) cause.

The notion that a Supreme Being exists who created the world and intercedes in human affairs, arises from primitive and fundamentalist religions. This is not the view of esotericism. The *Law of Periodicity* clearly states that our universe is only one of an infinite number of universes, all linked, without beginning or end." See Esoteric Principle 2 given previously. The following quote is interesting and comes from the Dalai Lama.

(3). "Dharmakaya.. this ultimate source.. is close to the notion of a Creator, since all phenomena, whether they belong to Samsara or nirvana, originate therein. But we must be careful in speaking of this source, we must not be led into error [by thinking that it is] analogous to the non-Buddhist concept of Brahma.. We must not deify this luminous space.. when we speak of ultimate or inherent clear light, we are speaking on an individual level." Likewise, when we speak of karma as the cause of the universe we eliminate the notion of a unique entity called karma existing totally independently. Rather, collective karmic impressions, accumulated individually, are at the origin of the creation of a world. When, in the tantric context, we say that all worlds appear out of clear light, we do not visualize this source as a unique entity, but as the ultimate clear light of each being. We can also, on the basis of its pure essence, understand this clear light to be the Primordial Buddha."⁴

What HH seems to be warning against, is the error of turning Dharmakaya - the ultimate source and pure consciousness, into an interfering God in the model of Jehovah. But he uses the term Brahma, which suggests he primarily wants to avoid the concept of "self" or Atman creeping in - in this case a super-self or Paramatman (Brahma). Rather he says, the collective lights or karmic impressions of individuals make up Dharmakaya, and that is what causes worlds to appear. There is no super-Self or Supreme Consciousness - only a collection of little selves working together. Is this what he meant? If so, then it dismisses the 'holism' concept - "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts." While each of the individual parts of an organism have meaning on their own, there is an integrated purpose which is entirely different to and greater than, any of the parts. We all know, that when a group of dedicated people gather for a specific purpose, and start sharing their ideas and visions, a super-conscious state takes over than is greater than the individual.

1 Pruning the Bodhi Tree, Hubbard and Swanson

2 Dalai Lama, talks given in France, 1993

3 Punnadhammo Bhikku, Toronto Star, Dec 3, 2005

4 Dalai Lama, from talks given in France, 1993.

This holism concept underlies the Buddhist Sangha idea of monastic life, which is said to provide the environment most conducive for advancement toward enlightenment. The thought behind this is - if you put a lot of holy people together in one place, the combined energies and integrated life of that community, is like a spiritual accelerant, enabling the individual to progress faster than would otherwise be the case. Then again, Nirvana (Monadic Essence) could be considered a super-Sangha, containing as it does the collective wisdom of the Buddha's, and therefore "greater than the sum of its parts".

The question is; "Is the super-collective state whether we call it Dharmakaya, Brahman, or God in the esoteric sense - conscious or unconscious, intelligent or not"? Here is what the greatest scientist who ever lived said:

The scientists' religious feeling takes the form of a rapturous amazement at the harmony of natural law, which reveals an intelligence of such superiority that, compared with it, all the systematic thinking and acting of human beings is an utterly insignificant reflection. ¹

From the Theosophical Glossary on Nirvana:

Nirvana (Sk.) According to the Orientalists, [Nirvana is] the entire "blowing out", like the flame of a candle, the utter extinction of existence. But in the esoteric explanations it is the state of **absolute existence** and **absolute consciousness**, into which the Ego of a man who has reached the highest degree of perfection and holiness during life goes, after the body dies.. ²

Conclusion: According to Esoteric Lore, the "Sum" is greater than its parts.



4. The Nirvana Sutra provides conclusive evidence of higher Self.

After Gautama's death, Blavatsky wrote that Buddha rejected Nirvana and was reborn in a mysterious fashion as Samkara (Sankaracharya).

"Fifty odd years after his death "the great Teacher" having refused full 'Dharmakaya³ and Nirvana, was pleased, for purposes of Karma and philanthropy, to be reborn.. as Samkara.. the greatest Vedantic teacher of India, whose philosophy.. finds itself in the middle ground between the [metaphysics of the Brahman's and Gautama].. The object he had in view was to fill up some gaps and repair certain errors in his own previous teaching." ⁴

We are told that Gautama wished to "repair certain errors in his own previous teaching". The corrections resulted in the great teaching of Vedanta, which enshrined soul and Atman. Although this notion would likely be rejected by most Buddhists, there is one final sutra given out by Buddha that extols Atman.

The **Mahaparinirvana** or **Nirvana Sutra** (Mahayana) teaches the reality of the higher Self, and contains no such contradictions or ambiguities. Allegedly delivered on the last day of Buddha's life, it is said to be the key to Buddhism and corrects misunderstandings arising from earlier teachings regarding the Self.

..this cultivation of non-Self is [a] cognitive distortion.. When I have taught non-Self, fools uphold the teaching that there is no Self. The wise.. are free from doubts. ⁵

Gautama is unequivocal in his assertion that eternal Self exists, and this is made clear in the following verse, one in which he also assigns qualities to the Self.

1 Albert Einstein, *The World as I see it* (1999)

2 Theosophical Glossary, p232

3 Dharmakaya (Mahayana) the "original clear light of mind" wisdom and emptiness". Dalai Lama "The Primordial Buddha [is] the realm of the Dharmakaya-- the space of emptiness--where all phenomena, pure and impure, are dissolved.. the tantric tradition is the only one which explains the Dharmakaya in terms of Inherent clear light, the essential nature of the mind; this would seem imply that all phenomena, samsara and nirvana, arise from this clear and luminous source".

4 Helena Blavatsky, *Collected Writings*, vol XIV, p389-390

5 Dr Tony Page, *Nirvana Sutra*, www.nirvanasutra.org.uk

..it is said that all dharma's [things, phenomena] are devoid of Self. [But actually] it is not true.. The Self is Reality, the Self is unchanging, the Self is virtue, the Self is eternal, the Self is unshakable/ firm, the Self is peace..¹

And in the final verse selected from this sutra - the *Dharmakshema* version, Buddha equates 'Atman' the Self, with the Tathagata / Buddha/ Dharmakaya.

The constant presence / abiding of the Tathagata is called 'the Self' [atman]. The Dharmakaya [essential being of the Buddha] is unbounded, unimpeded, neither arising nor perishing..²

If this were not enough, the Buddhist tantric scripture entitled *Chanting the Names of Mañjusrī*, as quoted by the great Tibetan Buddhist master, Dolpopa, repeatedly exalts the Self and applies the following terms to Dharmakaya:

Pervasive Lord, Buddha-Self, the beginningless Self, the Self of primordial purity, Source of all, the Self pervading all, the Single Self, the Diamond Self, the Supreme Self.³

But still this is not enough to convince the doubters. When commenting on the Nirvana Sutra some say that Buddha is only being concessionary, is trying to soften the hard reality for students who are not yet ready to face up to the frightening enormity of the non-Self and Emptiness doctrines. So the argument persists, with diverse opinions, as the Dalai Lama acknowledges:

We find some Tibetan scholars, such as the Sakya master Rendawa, who accept that there is such a thing as self or soul, the "kangsak ki dak". However, the same word, the "kangsak ki dak," the self, or person, or personal self, or identity, is at the same time denied by many other scholars. We find diverse opinions, even among Buddhist scholars, as to what exactly the nature of self is, what exactly that thing or entity is that continues from one moment to the next moment, from one lifetime to the next lifetime."⁴

The 'no God-Creator' opinion, is not universal in Buddhism. This is especially so amongst East Asian Buddhists. In fact, even though Buddhism is considered by many to be atheistic, writers have observed a religious and worshipful type of trend appearing in modern times, towards the Bodhisattva and Buddha.

".. the idea of God is not absent from Buddhism, when understood as ultimate, true Reality.. Buddhism is not atheistic as the term is ordinarily understood. It has certainly a God, the highest reality and truth, through which and in which this universe exists. However, the followers of Buddhism usually avoid the term God, for it savors so much of Christianity, whose spirit is not always exactly in accord with the Buddhist interpretation of religious experience... An equivalent most commonly used is Dharmakaya... When the Dharmakaya is most concretely conceived it becomes the Buddha, or Tathagata."⁵

Conclusion: For the true Pilgrim who is following the Light in his Heart and the higher Wisdom in his mind, it does not matter what people think - that Soul or God, does, or does not, exist. The Dalai Lama points to the only important thing that matters in the long run.

"Different religions have different views.. But it does not matter, as all religions are meant to help in bringing about a better world with better and happier human beings. On this level.. all religions have the same goal and the same potential. Take the concepts of the creator and self-creation.. they have the same purpose. To some, the concept of the creator is very powerful in .. becoming a good person with a sense of love, forgiveness and devotion to the ultimate truth - the Creator or God.. The other concept is self-creation.. One's future is entirely dependent on oneself: it is self-created. This concept is very powerful in encouraging an individual to be a good and honest person.. the two are different approaches but have the same goal."⁶

1 Ibid

2 Ibid

3 *Mountain Doctrine: Tibet's Fundamental Treatise on Other-Emptiness and the Buddha-Matrix*

4 Dalai Lama, from *Healing Anger: The Power of Patience from a Buddhist Perspective*

5 Soyen Shaku, *Sermons of a Buddhist Abbot*, p25-26, 32

6 Dalai Lama, *Live in a Better Way: Reflections on Truth, Love and Happiness*

5. In Summary

The Self (Atman) is reality, the Self is permanent, the Self is virtue, the Self is eternal, the Self is stable, the Self is peace.¹

The no-Self belief is deeply entrenched in mainstream Buddhism, a resistance which is understandable, given the fact that Buddha deliberately cultivated such a culture. Primarily, it is thought, to help his students avoid the messiness that can occur in religions, when true teachings are distorted and corruption taints the priestly orders.

Gautama wanted his teachings to be available to those who merited them, as this was not possible in his day. It appears he also wanted to cut out the “middle-man” (religious officiator, or false God) who so often became an obstruction to enlightenment, rather than a facilitator of the process. This would have the added advantage of speeding up the enlightenment process. In the author’s opinion, one of the things especially appealing about Buddhism is that its cultivation seems to get rid of the ego faster.

Generally, mainstream Buddhist teachings appear to leap from lower mind consciousness, to the Monadic level (Nirvana). Adherents deny that there is a growing, evolving reincarnating ‘Self’ called Soul. But Buddha never actually said that, but pointed out what soul was not. For the more advanced, for those ready for the esoteric approach, the Mahayana teachings were given out - and in the Nirvana Sutra, Self, Atman (and his parent Paramatman), are restored. To their rightful position, the Occultist would say. The acceptance of Atman implies the acceptance of the *chariot* of Atman – the Soul.

Based upon all this, when Buddha said, “Rely only on yourself” in his final sermon, the author believes he did not mean, “Because there is no Atman or God”. He was highlighting the need to personally attend to one’s own liberation and that in the final analysis, we all reach Nirvana (the Atmic level) based upon our own efforts.

But his real underlying message is “rely only on your (Atman) Self.” It is this Self which manipulates mind-soul-consciousness across lives, so that enlightenment can be achieved. This Self is the ever present talisman and witness of the light and goodness of Divine Presence. When we rely on this Self, we are aligning ourselves with the only truth and reality in the universe, whether we call it Dharmakaya, God or Brahman.

In the final analysis, it is not important whether one believes in a soul or God. What is important is that the student sincerely follows the teachings of the Eight Noble Truths of Buddhism, or the Eight Means of Raja Yoga from Vedanta, or the Ten Commandments of the Bible for that matter. All these means when sincerely applied, lead to enlightenment. The great illusion which some religious orders make is to believe that their method, path or set of beliefs, is the only way. But all true paths lead to enlightenment, when they are essentialised down to the development of selflessness, harmlessness, kindness, love, understanding, compassion, and wisdom. Some people simply thrive on one path, some on another.

That is just the way it is!



¹ Dr Tony Page, *Nirvana Sutra*, www.nirvanasutra.org.uk