



Not-Self Sutra

by Mu Soeng

Inspired by *Anattalakkhana Sutta*, SN 22.59

and *Brahmana Sutta*, AN 9.38

“Friends, the Brahmin priesthood to the west claim that the Brahman is a cosmic self, an eternal, unchanging, substantial entity. They claim it encompasses the entire cosmos. They claim that the Atman is the individual self, a particle share of the Brahman that inhabits each person’s body/form. In their claim, the Atman is what essentializes each person and it is the true inhabitant in a person. They claim it exists beyond the limitations of time and space because it shares all the attributes of the Brahman. They claim the Atman to be a fixed, permanent, and enduring self that migrates from one bodily inhabitation to another.

“Friends, the Tathāgata is a shramana and, like most shramana teachers, disagrees with the Atman-Brahman claim because he sees it as a social argument for the sake of social power rather than a religious clarification. As a shramana ascetic, the Tathāgata has done extreme mortification of the body and has explored every single particle in this fathom-long body. He has not found anything resembling the Atman particle that remains fixed and enduring amid all the radical cellular changes. He has found that at the cellular level of the body, there is constant change like a mountain stream rushing downhill. He has found that within this constant change, the

solidity of matter is an illusion. This is the direct knowledge and vision of the Tathāgata.

“Friends, in this knowledge and vision, the Tathāgata speaks from personal experience. He sees that a person is composed of the five aggregates (khandha; skandha) and the six senses (salayatana) that are unique to a human being. A person is a conglomerate (nama-rupa) of these properties that are always in a state of dynamic emergence from interacting with each other. There is no ownership of this dynamic emergence because it is always dependently arising (patticasamuppada; pratitya-samyutpada). It is named and called a person (puggala; pudgala) in its functioning but it does not own the five aggregates and the six senses. What ownership can there be in a mountain stream rushing downhill?

“Friends, there is an agency in the functioning of the five aggregates in their inner and outer aspects but it is entirely self-generated. There is no outer agency nor is there an outer ownership like that of an Atman-Self. The agency-functioning of the five aggregates in a person is the most marvelous thing in the universe when moving in a wholesome direction, and the most destructive when moving in an unwholesome direction. Either movement is like a hand shaping the rubber foam in different shapes.

“Friends, the Tathāgata invites his disciples to explore their experience of the agency-functioning of the mind and the body as he has done himself. And find out for themselves the entire universe disclosed in such exploration. That is why he does not make ontological or metaphysical claims about anything that cannot be discovered in a person’s direct experience of the mind-body structure.

“Friends, the Tathāgata’s rejection of the Atman/Self claim is not nihilism, nor is it denial for its own sake. It is simply a rejection of a speculative view. One cannot be nihilistic about something that cannot be found in the phenomenal experience of a human being. The Tathāgata speaks from the perspective of the deepest exploration of the

human mind-body system. In this exploration, nothing is hidden. All is illuminated. No Atman particle is to be found here.

“Friends, the functioning of a person should be understood as the physical part— eyes, ears, nose, tongue, tactility—functioning as receptors of stimuli; and the mental part— hedonic tone (Vedana), perceptual awareness (sanna), active thinking (sankhara), and knowing faculty (vinnana)—functioning as reifiers or processors of the stimuli that have come in. The complexity and intricacies of the mutual causality of the receptors, stimuli, and processing generates an inner agency which is the functional self of a person. A functional or enactive self is not an abstraction but embodies the experience of the five aggregates and the six senses. The functional self is an experiencing self. And the experiencing self is a minimal self because it is primordial awareness entwined with self-awareness. The Tathāgata affirms the functional self of a person. It is a network of causes and conditions. It is a dynamic functionality of its own. It arises interdependently but there is nothing self-existent or static here. There is no ownership here. The agency is not ownership. A human being, then, is a story written by the network of performative and interlocking selves.

“Friends, a person’s functioning in the world is either wholesome or unwholesome, or a painful mix of both. The pointing to the lack of ownership in the five aggregates and the six senses does not negate a person’s functioning in the world. This functioning in the world is the focus of Tathāgata’s teaching. This is how the Tathāgata speaks of anatta as the “not-self” in any or each of five aggregates and six senses. A form lacks a self-existent essence (atman), a feeling lacks a self-existent essence ... a perception ... a formation ... a mentality lacks a self-existent essence. But together they function in the world as a person together with the six senses. Speculation about a substantial Atman-Self as the true agent of a person is ignorance of how a person functions in the world.

“Friends, as agents of their processes, each person functions in the world in a wholesome or unwholesome way, in ignorant ways or wise ways. When they function wholesomely, they are creating an ethical agent-self. When they function unwholesomely, they are creating a deluded agent-self. Functioning in the world through a wholesome or unwholesome agency is a matter of actions leading to consequences. Creating an ethical self brings a person happiness while creating a deluded self brings them stress and anguish. Neither the ethical self nor the deluded self is a fixity. The deluded self can be purified and the ethical self can be protected. This functioning of the human person as an ethical self or a deluded self is what the Tathāgata addresses.

“Friends, a functioning self, either wholesomely or unwholesomely, is a performative self, an enactive self, and a behavioral self because each functioning has a consequence, beneficial or harmful. Each functioning brings happiness or suffering in equal proportions. If there was no functioning self and if the Atman-Self was a fixed, permanent, enduring self, nothing could be changed because only what is fluid and unfixed can be changed, for better or for worse.

“Friends, all species are gifted with a functional self. Each species has primordial awareness through which they perceive the world around them according to the genetic specificity of their species. Each species has its primordial volition which moves their bodies around in the world in search of food and comfort according to their genetic specificity. They cannot change their inherited genetic programming of how they move in the world.

“Human beings alone are gifted with the additional layer of self-awareness through which they are conscious of themselves as the knower of a known object. But self-awareness is a gift of their biological system and not independent of it. There is no extraneous owner of self-awareness.

“Friends, human beings also have the biological gift of a knowing consciousness (*mano*) through which they

discriminate between choices to be made in the construction of views, intentions, and enactments. The knowing consciousness in human beings is far superior to simple awareness in other species but it is an emergent condition as part of the human biological system. That is why it does not possess an eternal substantial element like in the Atman claim.

“Friends, in the dhamma taught by the Tathāgata, the Atman claim is the declaration of a narrative self that thrives on the narratives of I, me, mine. This narrative self is rooted in ignorance of the basic functioning of the five aggregates and the six senses. It delights in appropriating the functioning of the five aggregates and the six senses and projecting them into an acquisition and possession of an owner-self.

“Friends, when the owner-self imagines itself as standing outside the experiencing self, it creates an inflated sense of its own centrality. It becomes deluded in its understanding of the experiences of the mind and the body. Its inflated sense causes it to chew and feed upon the experiences of the five aggregates and the six senses as belonging to I, me, mine. It causes endless dukkha which is entirely the consequence of the inflated sense of a narrative self.

“Friends, in the anatta teaching of the Tathāgata, the primordial awareness and knowing consciousness are in a relationship of mutually dependent arising. It is a relationship of networks without ownership. It provides the core of experiencing in human experience. It has a capacity for constructing views and intentions but it is also capable of witnessing without discrimination and without indulging in speculative views. This is the minimal self of a person. It is not the owner of conditioning but it can be an agent for wholesome or unwholesome engagement with the conditioning. As an agent without ownership, the minimal self is a functional self, an enactive self, and an experiencing self.

“Friends, the agency of the experiencing self can regulate itself into one-pointed awareness (ekagatta) which allows itself to stay in a deep flow state without awareness of time or space. In that state, there are no discriminatory or

speculative views. But if the agency of the experiencing self allows itself to become distracted and scattered, it lets itself be gripped by each passing distraction. It becomes the monkey mind which cannot be still even for a moment and must keep moving without knowing what it is moving toward.

“Friends, the consequence of monkey mind conditioning in human beings is the emergence of a narrative self which does not happen to other species. It is because other species do not have the developed language systems that are gifted in the human person. When the narrative self allows its awareness to become scattered and distracted, it engages in constructing speculative views. The cascading speculative views can go on endlessly in a narrative self about the imagined reality of an Atman or a Brahman or both or none of them. It becomes their egoic self of I, me, mine narratives. But in its underlying ignorance, the egoic self does not realize that it is a conceptualized self. It exists only in the imagination of the ego. But, once put into place, it becomes the root source for all turmoil and strife in the human experience. The narrative-self concocts misguided scenarios through its ignorant views, opinions, and speculations. It imagines the Atman as an object outside the experiences of the five aggregates and the six senses. Through such imagination, the Atman-Self becomes an other-power in its association with the Brahman-Self.

“Friends, the Tathāgata rejects claims about the efficacy of an other-power which the Brahmanical tradition subscribes to gods in the sky. In their estimation, the gods have omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence. They have the time and interest to intervene in human affairs if properly propitiated. From this estimation, they construct a relationality of the Atman with the Brahman with gods in the sky as the mediators.

“Friends, in his knowledge and vision, the Tathāgata speaks of self-power that lies within each person and through which they can be knowers of the processes in their internal and external worlds. This exploration is not based on hearsay,

attribution, speculation, or inference. When a person explores their experience of five aggregates (khandha—form, feeling, perception, formation, and mentality) and the six senses (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, mind) through investigative wisdom, it is seen clearly that physical and mental phenomena arise and pass away in a vast interrelated network of causes and conditions. The causes and conditions also arise based on a prior network of causes and conditions of dependent arising. In this cauldron of change, no self-existent essence like the Atman can be found. This insight becomes their self-power to liberation (vimutti/vimukti) which is liberation from ignorance (avijja/avidya) about the dependently-arising phenomena in the nama-rupa and the external world.

“Friends, the Tathāgata points out that whether one speaks of a narrative self or a functional self or any of other cognates, it is always a sense of self. There is never ever a concretized self in any of the experiences in the mind-body system. A narrative self and a functional self are both linguistic designations to facilitate human understanding but are not meant to be reified.

“Friends, the Tathāgata speaks of a conditioned self which is kept in place by corruptions of a narrative self, and the functional self which has been purified of the corruptions of the narrative self. The functional self is a discipline of sila, samadhi, and panna. It is an antidote to greed, hatred, and delusion that are corruptions of the narrative self. The Tathāgata speaks of the poignancy and discontent of the human condition. And how a person can overcome it in this very life with their own effort. The Tathāgata is a doctor who prescribes a medicine but it is up to a person to medicate themselves. Or not.”