

# Personal Identitylessness as Taught by the Buddha in the Early Teachings

Translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu

*Samyutta Nikaya 22.59, Anatta-Lakkhana Sutta, The Discourse on the Not-Self Characteristic*

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying at Varanasi in the Game Refuge at Isipatana. There he addressed the group of five monks: "Form, monks, is not self. If form were the self, this form would not lend itself to dis-ease. It would be possible [to say] with regard to form, 'Let this form be thus. Let this form not be thus.' But precisely because form is not self, form lends itself to dis-ease. And it is not possible [to say] with regard to form, 'Let this form be thus. Let this form not be thus.'

"Feeling is not self... Perception is not self... [Mental] fabrications are not self... Consciousness is not self. If consciousness were the self, this consciousness would not lend itself to dis-ease. It would be possible [to say] with regard to consciousness, 'Let my consciousness be thus. Let my consciousness not be thus.' But precisely because consciousness is not self, consciousness lends itself to dis-ease. And it is not possible [to say] with regard to consciousness, 'Let my consciousness be thus. Let my consciousness not be thus.'

"What do you think, monks -- Is form constant or inconstant?" "Inconstant, lord." "And is that which is inconstant easeful or stressful?" "Stressful, lord." "And is it fitting to regard what is inconstant, stressful, subject to change as: 'This is mine. This is my self. This is what I am'?" "No, lord." "...Is feeling constant or inconstant?" "Inconstant, lord."... "...Is perception constant or inconstant?" "Inconstant, lord."... "...Are fabrications constant or inconstant?" "Inconstant, lord."... "What do you think, monks -- Is consciousness constant or inconstant?" "Inconstant, lord."

"And is that which is inconstant easeful or stressful?" "Stressful, lord." "And is it fitting to regard what is inconstant, stressful, subject to change as: 'This is mine. This is my self. This is what I am'?" "No, lord." "Thus, monks, any body [form] whatsoever that is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: every body is to be seen as it actually is with right discernment as: 'This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am.' Any feeling whatsoever... Any perception whatsoever... Any fabrications whatsoever... Any consciousness whatsoever that is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: every consciousness is to be seen as it actually is with right discernment as: 'This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am.'

"Seeing thus, the well-instructed disciple of the noble ones grows disenchanted with the body, disenchanted with feeling, disenchanted with perception, disenchanted with fabrications, disenchanted with consciousness. 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.'"

That is what the Blessed One said. Gratified, the group of five monks delighted at his words. And while this explanation was being given, the hearts of the group of five monks, through not clinging, were fully released from fermentation/effluents/outflows [became arahats].

---

*Samyutta Nikaya 44.10, Ananda Sutta, To Ananda (On Self, No Self, and Not-self)*

Then the wanderer Vacchagotta went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, exchanged courteous greetings with him. After an exchange of friendly greetings and courtesies, he sat to one side. As he was sitting there he asked the Blessed One: "Now then, Venerable Gotama, is there a self?" When this was said, the Blessed One was silent. "Then is there no self?" A second time, the Blessed One was silent.

Then Vacchagotta the wanderer got up from his seat and left. Then, not long after Vacchagotta the wanderer had left, Venerable Ananda said to the Blessed One, "Why, lord, did the Blessed One not answer when asked a question by Vacchagotta the wanderer?"

"Ananda, if I — being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer if there is a self — were to answer that there is a self, that would be conforming with those priests and contemplatives who are exponents of eternalism [the view that there is an eternal, unchanging soul]. If I — being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer if there is no self — were to answer that there is no self, that would be conforming with those priests and contemplatives who are exponents of annihilationism [the view that death is the annihilation of consciousness]. If I — being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer if there is a self — were to answer that there is a self, would that be in keeping with the arising of knowledge that all phenomena are not-self?"

"No, lord." "And if I — being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer if there is no self — were to answer that there is no self, the bewildered Vacchagotta would become even more bewildered: 'Does the self I used to have now not exist?'"

---

*Majjhima Nikaya 22, Alagaddupama Sutta (excerpt regarding Not-Self), The Water-Snake Simile*

"I do not envision a clinging to a doctrine of self, clinging to which there would not arise sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair..."

"Monks, where there is a self, would there be [the thought,] 'belonging to my self?'" "Yes, lord."

"Or, monks, where there is what belongs to self, would there be [the thought,] 'my self?'" "Yes, lord."

"Monks, where a self or what belongs to self are not pinned down as a truth or reality, then the view-position — '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?"...

"Speaking in this way, teaching in this way, I have been erroneously, vainly, falsely, unfactually misrepresented by some brahmans and contemplatives [who say], 'Gotama the contemplative is one who misleads. He declares the annihilation, destruction, extermination of the existing being.'..."

"Both formerly and now, monks, I declare only stress and the cessation of stress. And if others insult, abuse, taunt, bother, and harass the Tathagata for that, he feels no hatred, no resentment, no dissatisfaction of heart because of that. And if others honor, respect, revere, and venerate the Tathagata for that, he feels no joy, no happiness, no elation of heart because of that. And if others honor, respect, revere, and venerate the Tathagata for that, he thinks, 'They do me such service at this that has already been comprehended [the aggregates].'"

"Therefore, monks, if others insult, abuse, taunt, bother, and harass you as well, you should feel no hatred, no resentment, no dissatisfaction of heart because of that. And if others honor, respect, revere, and venerate you as well, you should feel no joy, no gladness, no elation of heart because of that. And if others honor, respect, revere, and venerate you, you should think, 'They do us such service at this that has already been comprehended.'"

"Therefore, monks, whatever isn't yours: Let go of it. Your letting go of it will be for your long-term welfare and happiness. And what isn't yours? Form [body] isn't yours: Let go of it. Your letting go of it will be for your long-term welfare and happiness. Feeling isn't yours... Perception... Thought fabrications... Consciousness isn't yours: Let go of it. Your letting go of it will be for your long-term welfare and happiness."

"What do you think, monks: If a person were to gather or burn or do as he likes with the grass, twigs, branches and leaves here in Jeta's Grove, would the thought occur to you, 'It's us that this person is gathering, burning, or doing with as he likes?'"

"No, lord. Why is that? Because those things are not our self, nor do they belong to our self."

"Even so, monks, whatever isn't yours: Let go of it. Your letting go of it will be for your long-term welfare and happiness. And what isn't yours? Form isn't yours... Feeling isn't yours... Perception... Thought fabrications... Consciousness isn't yours: Let go of it. Your letting go of it will be for your long-term welfare and happiness."

# Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way

Mulamadhyamakakarika by Nagarjuna  
translated by Kokyo, based on Jay L. Garfield

## Chapter 18: Examination of the Self (Atma-pariksha)

1. If the self (atma) were identical with the aggregates (skandha), it would have to arise and cease. If it were different from the aggregates, it would not have the characteristics (lakshana) of the aggregates.
2. If there is no self, how could there be something that belongs to the self? From the pacification of the self and what belongs to it, there is no more creating "I" (ahamkara) and "mine" (mama).
3. One who does not create "I" and "mine," that one does not exist. Whoever perceives one who does not create "I" and "mine," he does not perceive.
4. When views of "I" and "mine" are extinguished, whether with respect to the internal or external, grasping (upadana) ceases (nirodha). With the cessation of grasping, birth ceases.
5. Intentional actions (karma) and afflictions (klesha) having ceased, there is liberation (moksha). Intentional actions and afflictions come from conceptual elaboration (vikalpa). This comes from mental fabrication (prapancha). Mental fabrication ceases through emptiness (shunyata).
6. The Buddhas have taught the concept of self (atma), and the doctrine of no-self (anatma), as well as the doctrine of neither self nor nonself.
7. What language expresses is nonexistent. The sphere of thought (chitta-gochara) is nonexistent. Unarisen and unceased, like freedom (nirvana) is the nature of things (dharmata).
8. Everything is real (tathya) and is not real, both real and not real, neither real nor not real. This is the Buddha's admonition.
9. Not dependent on another, peaceful, not fabricated by mental fabrication (prapancha), without conceptual elaboration (nirvikalpa), without distinctions, that is the character (lakshana) of reality (tattva).
10. Whatever comes into being dependent on (pratitya) another is not identical to that thing, nor different from it. Therefore it is neither annihilated nor permanent.
11. By the Buddhas, patrons of the world, this ambrosial truth is taught: without identity, without difference; not annihilated, not permanent.
12. When the fully enlightened ones (sambuddha) do not appear, and when the disciples (shravaka) have disappeared, the wisdom (jnana) of the self-enlightened ones (pratyeka-buddha) will arise completely without a teacher.

**Five aggregates**, bundles, piles, heaps of body and mind (skandha) – in order of gross to subtle  
**form**, body, physicality (rupa): eye, ear, nose, tongue, body; color, sound, smell, taste, touch  
**feeling**, sensation (vedana): pleasure, pain, or neither; born from contact of six sense organs & objects  
**conception**, perception, identification, discernment (samjna): apprehension of signs of sense objects, such as blue, long/short, enemy/friend, including mental objects like impermanence and sense of self  
**formations**, fabrications, karmic tendencies, habits (samskara): intention with regard to six sense objects, including all aspects of mind not in other four aggregates, such as desire, anger, pride, doubt  
**consciousness**, cognition, awareness, knowing (vijnana): nondiscriminating illumination of objects associated with six sense organs, including mental objects like emptiness and sense of self

## Types of Self

- 1. Dependently co-arisen self** (exists conventionally) – the interrelationship of the five aggregates, which includes body, mind, and the whole world, including the conceptually imputed self, inconceivably coming to be from beginningless time; this self is inconceivable, and it is not to be refuted.
- 2. Conceptually imputed self** (exists conventionally) – an aspect of dependently co-arisen self, imagined to be inherently existent, but actually merely imputed in dependence on the five aggregates; also called the mere “I,” this self is what “I” actually refers to, and it is not to be refuted.
- 3. Inherently existent self** (does not exist at all) – the innate deeply-rooted illusion that the conceptually imputed self exists by way of its own character, from its own side; this self, which appears to be completely mixed with the five aggregates, is the most subtle self that must be refuted.
- 4. Other false views of self** (do not exist at all) – other illusions of inherently existent self that are non-innate, learned from others or through false thinking and speculating, such as an eternal soul; this self, which often appears to be something other than the five aggregates, must also be refuted.
- 5. True Self** (ultimate truth, beyond existence and non-existence) – the emptiness, or absence, of any type of inherently existing self or non-self, manifested as joyful, compassionate, spontaneous freedom.

## Meditation on Self and Not-Self

- 1. Sit silently and brightly in the present:** Let go of past, future, and all discursive thinking while focusing on the clear, open, aware quality of mind, until body and mind are quite calm and concentrated.
- 2. Feel the sense of “I”:** Carefully extract a small corner of this concentration, and use it to identify a clear, vivid, strong sense of the person who is meditating, the self. It helps to silently say “I” or one’s own name, or to imagine being falsely accused, insulted, frightened, praised, etc. Sometimes the thought “I’ll never be able to realize awakening” can help to bring it up. Stay focused on this sense or feeling of “I” and examine whether it seems to exist inherently, by way of its own character. It does seem to.
- 3. Understand how “I” must exist:** See how an inherently existing “I” must be either identical to or completely unrelated, different, and separate from the aggregates of body and mind. Remember one’s conviction in this fact that was established through previous reasoning.
- 4. Look for the “I” in the body and mind:** While remaining calm and concentrated, carefully examine whether this seemingly inherently existing “I” is:
  - identical to the constantly arising and ceasing body and sense organs
  - identical to the constantly arising and ceasing feeling of pain or pleasure
  - identical to the constantly arising and ceasing discernment of sounds, sensations, etc.
  - identical to the constantly arising and ceasing formation of desire, anger, doubt, etc.
  - identical to the constantly arising and ceasing awareness of what is happening  
(identical to the constantly arising and ceasing combination of all five of these aggregates)
  - completely unrelated, different, and separate from the body and sense organs
  - completely unrelated, different, and separate from the feeling of pain or pleasure
  - completely unrelated, different, and separate from the discernment of sounds, sensations, etc.
  - completely unrelated, different, and separate from the formation of desire, anger, doubt, etc.
  - completely unrelated, different, and separate from the awareness of what is happening
  - the base of the five aggregates; the five aggregates are in the “I” (if so, it would be separate from them)
  - based on the five aggregates; the “I” is in the five aggregates (if so, it would be separate from them)
  - possessing the five aggregates, owner of them (if so, it would be identical to or separate from them)
- 5. Realize that the “I” is empty of inherent existence:** See without doubt how the “I” is neither identical to nor completely unrelated, different, and separate from the aggregates of body and mind, but merely a conceptual imputation dependent on the aggregates of body and mind. Its appearance as real and inherently existing is a complete illusion. Rest nondiscursively in the conviction of the emptiness of self, with awareness focused on the utter unfindability of the inherently existing “I.”

## Reasons that Inherently Existent Self Cannot Exist

An inherently (intrinsically, essentially, independently) existent “I” (self) is defined as permanent, singular, and independent. If such an “I” inherently exists, in the way it is conceived, it must be inherently identical to or inherently unrelated, different, and separate from the aggregates of body and mind (form/body, feelings, conceptions, formations, consciousness). In other words, if the “I” is related to (dependent on) body and mind in some other way than complete identity or complete difference, it cannot inherently (independently) exist. These two possibilities of sameness or difference can be elaborated into five relationships, all of which are still aspects of sameness or difference. If the “I” is not in one of these five relationships to body and mind, it does not inherently exist. One must come to understand through reasoning that something that is inherently neither the same entity as nor a different entity from body and mind does not inherently exist. Upon such a conclusion, one begins to doubt the inherent existence of the “I” like starting to doubt an old friend. Having come to such a logical conviction, one can then start to prove step by step, through the reasonings below, that the “I” cannot exist in any of these five ways:

### **1. If the “I” is identical to (the same as) the aggregates of body and mind:**

It would have to arise and cease just as body and mind do, moment to moment. For example, just as feelings change every instant, so the self would last only one instant and then be replaced by another.

An inherently existent self is permanent, and body and mind are impermanent. There would be no memory of past selves since each self would be unrelatedly different from one other. There would be no sense of recognizing the same self that we experienced yesterday.

It would have to be many in number just as the aggregates of body and mind are many. Each part of the body would be a different self and each thought would be a different self. There would be no sense of oneself as an individual, single person.

It would no longer be able to possess body and mind. One could no longer say “my head,” “my feelings,” or “my thoughts” since those statements assume that the self and body and mind are different.

It would meet with the results of actions not done by itself, or a self which was totally different from the self that committed the action would undergo the results of that action.

### **2. If the “I” is completely different from (unrelated to) the aggregates of body and mind:**

It would not have any of the characteristics of the aggregates. It would not take birth, live, or die, because all things that arise, abide, and cease are included in body and mind.

It would not be able to perform any function, because everything that performs a function is included in body and mind. It would not be able to experience anything, because experience only happens to body and mind.

It would not be able to be grasped as body and mind. There would be no experience of clinging to body and mind as “me.” One could no longer point at one’s body and say, “this is me.”

It could not be experienced or observed by means of body and mind. All objects of consciousness are included in the aggregates of body and mind.

### **3. If the “I” is the base of the aggregates of body and mind (if body and mind are in the “I”):**

It would be completely different from body and mind (as in number 2 above), like a bowl holding food or like snow surrounding a forest of trees.

### **4. If the “I” is based on the aggregates of body and mind (if the “I” is in body and mind):**

It would be completely different from body and mind (as in number 2 above), like a person living in a house or a lion living in a forest.

### **5. If the “I” possesses (owns) the aggregates of body and mind:**

It would be completely different from body and mind (as in number 2 above), like a person possessing a cow; or identical to body and mind (as in number 1 above), like a person possessing his body or a tree possessing its core.

# Emptiness of Personal Identity in the Mahāyāna: A Reading List

"Any kind of form... feeling... perception... volitional formations... consciousness whatsoever, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, is to be seen as it actually is with right discernment as: 'This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am.' "

Samyutta Nikāya 22.59: Anattā-Lakkhana Sutta (Characteristic of Not-Self Scripture)

## **Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, chapter 18 (translations with commentary):**

\*The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nagarjuna's Mulamadhyamakakarika – Jay L. Garfield, 1995 (Tibetan perspective)

Lucid Exposition of the Middle Way: The Essential Chapters from the Prasannapada of Candrakirti – Mervyn Sprung, 1979 (pp. 165-186) (partial translation of Candrakirti's commentary on Mulamadhyamakakarika)

\*Nagarjuna: The Philosophy of the Middle Way – David J. Kalupahana, 1986 (Theravada perspective)

Ocean of Reasoning: A Great Commentary on Nagarjuna's Mulamadhyamakakarika – rJe Tsongkhapa, translated by Geshe Ngawang Samten and Jay L. Garfield, 2006

\*The Sun of Wisdom: Teachings on the Noble Nagarjuna's Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way – Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso, translated by Ari Goldfield, 2003 (partial translation)

Verses from the Centre: Mulamadhyamakakarika – Stephen Batchelor, 2000 (literal translation):

[www.stephenbatchelor.org/verses2htm](http://www.stephenbatchelor.org/verses2htm)

## **Chandrakīrti's Madhyamakāvātāra, chapter 6 verses 120-165 (translations with commentary):**

The Emptiness of Emptiness: An Introduction to Early Indian Madhyamika – C. W. Huntington, 1989

\*Introduction to the Middle Way: Chandrakirti's Madhyamakavatara with Commentary by Jamgon Mipham – Padmakara Translation Group, 2002 (verses plus pp. 281-309)

\*Introduction to the Middle Way: Chandrakirti's Madhyamakavatara with Commentary by Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche, 2003:

<http://www.bodetam.org/English/BodhicittaSastras/Madhyamakavatara.pdf>

\*The Karmapa's Middle Way: Feast for the Fortunate, by the Ninth Karmapa Wangchuk Dorje – Tyler Dewar, 2008 (translation and commentary on Chandrakirti's Madhyamakavatara)

Moon of Wisdom: Chapter Six of Chandrakirti's Entering the Middle Way, with commentary by the Eighth Karmapa, Mikyo Dorje – Ari Goldfield, Jules Levinson, Jim Scott, Birgit Scott, 2005

## **General:**

Center of the Sunlit Sky: Madhyamaka in the Kagyu Tradition – Karl Brunnholzl, 2004 (pp. 126-142, 264-271)

\*Emptiness Yoga: The Tibetan Middle Way – Jeffrey Hopkins, 1987 (pp. 209-302) (application of the teachings in everyday life)

\*How to See Yourself as You Really Are – His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Jeffrey Hopkins, 2007

Introduction to Emptiness – Guy Newland, 2008 (pp. 86-100)

\*Meditation on Emptiness – Jeffrey Hopkins, 1983 (pp. 43-51, 175-196) (large thorough sourcebook on Madhyamika, how to meditate on the teachings, etc.)

Nagarjuna's Madhyamaka: A Philosophical Introduction – Jan Westerhoff, 2009 (pp. 153-164)

Nagarjuna's Middle Way – Jonah Winters, 1994 (analysis of Mulamadhyamakakarika):

<http://bahai-library.org/personal/jw/other.pubs/nagarjuna/>

\*The Open Door to Emptiness – Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche, 1997 (pp. 17-44)

Realizing Emptiness: Madhyamaka Insight Meditation – Gen Lamrimpa, 2002

\*Progressive Stages of Meditation on Emptiness – Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso, 2001 (pp. 9-25)

\*Stars of Wisdom – Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso, 2010 (pp. 21-32) (from "meditation" perspective)

(\* = Kōkyō's recommendations)