

'Mama' Without Ego or Self

(By Bhante T. Seelananda, Dhamma Hadaya Meditation Center, Virginia, USA)

"Mama" in Sinhala, means 'mine' as it does in Pāli. The Buddha used Pāli (Māgadhi) to convey his message of peace. However, its Sinhalese meaning is 'I am', which has its egoistic connotation too. Even so, using this term in language is not that harmful but if one grasps the term and develops one's arrogant and egoism then it will be really a big problem.

According to the teachings of the Buddha, whenever worldly people use the terms like 'mine', me ('I am') and 'myself', (*etam mama, eso aham asmi, eso me attā*)¹ there is a tendency to increase greed, desire, urge, thirst, as well as repulsion as their opposite and eventually the state of self-centeredness or an egotistical state of mind. It is certainly a pessimistic and emotional aspect of mind which is always heading to mental devastation. Buddhism sees the possibility of a positive side of life. Therefore, the Buddha's teaching is to reduce the notions of I, me, my or myself and be more and more humble and simple to experience non-attachment (*anupādāna*). Non-attachment is the way to absolute liberation (*anupādā parinibbānāyāti*)². The Buddha once said, "In the world, there is nothing to cling to"³. Buddhism is not an optimistic teaching either. The whole teaching of the Buddha is for the purpose of living lightly, amicably in society with a contented and pacified mind.

There are two aims to present this article. The first is to show that the honorable recipient of this commemorative volume, the departed Venerable Māpalagama Wipulasāra Mahā Thera was a true member of the Sangha who dedicated his whole life to lead an exemplary life without ego though he used the term "mama" in Sinhala as his identity. As a well-disciplined monk, renowned artist, and an outstanding sculptor, he was an excellent model for the present generation of the Sangha. His simplicity was an extraordinary characteristic.

Secondly, the author will examine and explain the Buddhist perspective of Self and the state of selflessness which leads to the highest goal, deathless and coolness of *Nibbāna*. That is the culmination of the spiritual path and the

¹ S.N. Khandha Vagga. Ditthi Samyutta. Etam Mama Sutta.

² S.N. Mahā Vagga. Magga Samyutta. Anupādā Parinibbāna Sutta.

³ D.N. Mahā Satipatthāna Sutta (Na ca kinci loke upādiyati).

achievement of human perfection which is entirely free from all taints. The one who achieves that goal is called the 'Taints Free One' (*khīnāsava*).

The author studied under the tutelage of this Mahā Thera Wipulasāra for more than 20 years witnessing in daily life that though the Venerable used the term 'mama' on many occasions, he did not express any egoistic intentions towards his patrons or fellow community members of the Sangha when speaking at home or abroad.

Specifically, he used the term 'mama' whenever he had telephone conversations. People recognized him by his very first utterance: the term 'mama' meaning 'it's me'. However, his facial expressions were very clear and harmonious and disclosed but no trace of egoistic expression. He was certainly an exemplary monk, a great son of the Buddha (*Buddhaputra*). We can recollect his numerous virtues and bow to him even today without hesitation. He was a great human and always worthy of our respect. We honor him from the bottom of our hearts.

The Buddhist perspective of Self and the state of selflessness

Self or soul is a belief that there is a permanent entity with everlasting substance emanating from a Creator-God, and eventually unified with that same Creator. With Buddhism as exception, almost all other religions in the world today, believe in that concept. In accordance with many religious, philosophical, psychological, and mythological traditions; Self or soul is the incorporeal immortal essence of a person, living thing or an object. The terms Soul or Self both are interchangeably use in many religious and non-religious works without much clear distinction.

According to Hinduism (*Bhagavadgītā*), there exists an eternal and indestructible soul or Self called '*ātman*,' a spiritual being endowed with consciousness. In this understanding, consciousness is the key property of such a soul. In accordance with that faith, the eternal reality of the soul's immortality is given as "*Na jāyate mrīyate vā kadācittrayam, bhūtvā bhavitā vā na bhūyah. Ajo nityah śhāsvato'yam purāno, na hanyate hanyamāne sharire*" (The soul is never born nor dies; nor does it become only after being born. For it is unborn, eternal, everlasting and ancient; even though the body is slain, the soul is not).⁴

⁴ Bhagavad Gītā. Chapter 2, verse 20. Ashok Kaushik (editor). Star Publications Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi, India. 2017. This is the editor's translation.

Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Bahai) maintain that there is a soul or permanent entity that their God breathed into the man's nostrils right after being created.⁵ They teach that only the immortal souls of human beings are capable of union with the divine. For example, the Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas attributed 'soul' (*anima*) to all organisms but only human souls are immortal.

Among other religions, most notably Jainism teaches that all biological organisms have souls and even non-biological entities such as rivers and mountains also possess souls. This latter belief is called animism. As described in these religions, soul or Self can function as a synonym for spirit, mind, psyche, or Self. The immortality of the soul is the foundation in Western thought, both philosophy and religion.

What is the difference between 'Self' and 'self'

Commonly, the term 'Self' (with a capital S) represents soul in religious traditions. The term 'self' (with a lowercase s) is usually used in English mainly as the reflective pronouns, like myself, yourself, himself, herself. In the Buddhist perspective, the term 'self' is the translated term for '*atta*' in Pāli. Buddha has used the term '*atta*' in many discourses to denote 'self' in the conventional, mundane sense. In the Dhammapada, a concise collection of the Buddha's Teachings, there is a chapter titled '*Atta*' (self). However, it doesn't mean that the Buddha has unquestionably talked about a permanent entity to be called 'Self'. Nonetheless, unfortunately, some people have mistakenly taken this word 'self' for granted and hastily come to a conclusion that there is a Self, or something belonging to the Self, in the teachings of the Buddha similar to other religions.

What leads to this confusion is the fact that some scholars have mistranslated and misinterpreted some of the early teachings of the Buddha. Specifically, from the same chapter of the Dhammapada,⁶ there is a classic example in verse number 160. In general, it is correctly translated as: *"One truly is the protector of oneself; who else could the protector be? With oneself fully controlled, one gains a mastery that is hard to gain."* But it has been wrongly translated and misinterpreted as: *"One's Self is one's own refuge; who else could the refuge be? or*

⁵ The Bible. O.T. Genesis. 2:7. "And the Lord God formed the man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul."

⁶ Dhammapada. Chapter 12, verse 165. Read the whole chapter to understand clearly that none of these verses set forth the nature of Self or soul. The Buddha said, "By oneself is evil done and by oneself is one sullied. By oneself is evil not done and by oneself is one purified. Purity and impurity belong to oneself. One does not purify another."

sometimes as, "Self is indeed the lord of self, for who else would be one's lord?" This is how people have misinterpreted and mistranslated the teachings of the Buddha.

The Buddhist perspective of self and Non-self

As mentioned above, in the ancient Pāli language, the term *atta* is used to denote self, not Self or soul as described in other religions. The Sanskrit term for Self or soul is *ātman*. Perhaps, it is because of this that they have conflated the Pāli term *atta* with the Sanskrit term *ātman* to imply the meaning 'Self' with a capital S representing an immortal soul. Therefore, in this line of thinking, they declare that the Buddha also talked about the soul or Self. That is a misunderstanding and a totally incorrect interpretation. In the Buddha's teaching, there is not even a vestige of words or ideas to maintain that there is anything to be grasped as a permanent entity, Self, or soul.

We should understand furthermore that the Pāli term *atta* has two different meanings: self and Self/soul. The Buddha has used the term '*anatta*' to explain that there is no self or anything that is belonging to a self. Once when Venerable *Rādha* went to the Buddha and asked, "Venerable Sir, it is said, 'non-self, non-self' what now, Venerable Sir, is non-self?" Then, the Buddha said, "Form, *Rādha*, is non-self, feeling is non-self, perception is non-self, volitional formations are non-self, consciousness is non-self."⁷ That is how the Buddha talked about non-self.

One day, while both the Buddha and his son Venerable *Rāhula* were on their way to collect alms, the Buddha looked back and addressed *Rāhula*, "*Rāhula*, any kind of material form whatever, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, all material form should be seen as it actually is with proper wisdom thus: 'This is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself.'" Then, Venerable *Rāhula* inquired, "Only material form, Venerable Sir? Only material form, Sublime One?" The Buddha replied, "Material form, *Rāhula*, and feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness. All these are to be seen as 'not mine', 'not I am', 'not myself.'" Thereafter, Venerable *Rāhula* well thought out thus: "Who would go into the town for alms today when personally admonished by the Blessed One?" With that he turned back and sat down at the root of a tree, folding his legs crosswise,

⁷ S.N. 23.17.7. Non-self.

setting his body erect, and establishing mindfulness in front of his face stated to practice as the Buddha advised.⁸

On another occasion, a monk went to the Buddha and said, "Venerable Sir, is there any form that is permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change, and that will remain the same, just like eternity itself? Is there any feeling... any perception... any volitional formations... any consciousness that is permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change, and that will remain the same just like eternity itself?" The Buddha then said, "Monk, there is no form... no feeling... no perception... no volitional formations... no consciousness, that is permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change, and that will remain the same just like eternity itself."

Thereafter the Buddha picked up a little bit of soil with his fingernail and said, "There is not even this much of form, feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness that is permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change, and that will remain the same just like eternity itself. If there was this much form, feeling, perception, volitional formations and consciousness, that was permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change, this living of the holy life for the complete destruction of suffering could not be discerned."⁹

On one occasion, Venerable Ananda approached the Buddha and said to him, "Venerable Sir, it is said, 'empty is the world, empty is the world.' In what sense, Venerable Sir, it is said, 'empty is the world?' In reply the Buddha said, "Ananda, because it is empty of self and of what belongs to self that it is said, 'empty is the world.' (*Suñño loko suñño lokoti bhante vuccati. Kittāvatānu kho bhante suñño lokoti vuccati? Yasmā ca kho Ananda suññam attena vā attaniyena vā tasmā suñño lokoti vuccati.*)¹⁰ That is the Buddhist perspective of Self and self. Based on this description, there is no permanent Self; however, Buddhists use the term 'self' only for conventional reasons.

Unlike other religions that posit a Self or soul to be recognized as a permanent entity, Buddhists, in general, never believe in these two things: a Creator-God and an everlasting Soul.

All the same, the term self is used in different contexts. as mentioned earlier, in day-to-day language, all of us use the terms self, oneself, myself, yourself, etc.

⁸ M.N. 62. Mahā Rāhulovāda Sutta.

⁹ S.N. 22. 97.5. The Fingernail.

¹⁰ S.N. 35. 85.2. Empty is the World.

In the Dhammapada the Buddha has given ten different verses to denote the nature of self; however, none of these represents Soul or Self with a capital 'S'. In accordance with the teachings of the Buddha, the term self is used to denote only oneself (*atta*) as an individual. For instance, here it is said, "By oneself is evil done; by oneself is one defiled. By oneself is evil left undone; by oneself is one made pure. Purity and impurity depend on oneself; no one can purify another."¹¹

Nevertheless, this is not something new. Even in the time of the Buddha many people believed that there is a soul emanated from the Creator-God and unified with the Creator-God after one's death. Take for instance the five disciples who listened to the Buddha's maiden discourse. They all were brahmins. Thus, they had to believe the Creator Brahman. As a result, they could not understand the nature of non-self (*anatta*). When the Buddha came to the conclusion of this discourse only Kondañña attained the state of stream entry. Then, right after that the Buddha had to deliver another discourse named "The Characteristics of Non-self (*Anattalakkhana Sutta*) where the Buddha explained the nature of non-self or not self. The Buddha said, "Monks, form is not self. For if form were self, then form would not prone to affliction and it would be possible to say: 'Let my form not be thus.' Because form is not-self, form is prone to affliction and it is not possible to say: 'Let my form be thus and let my form not be thus.' Monks, feeling is... perception is... volitional formations are ...consciousness is not self."¹²

After his attainment of enlightenment, the Buddha enjoyed the Bliss of Enlightenment for seven days. While still seated under the same Bodhi tree, he surveyed the world and saw numerous beings affected by greed, hatred and delusion, and being quite disappointed said, "This world is burning. Afflicted by contact, it calls disease a 'self'. (*Ayam loko santāpajāto phassa pareto rogam vadati attato*).¹³ This means the person has mistakenly grasped this disease (five aggregates) as 'self'. In many discourses, the Buddha clearly asked the monks to understand these five aggregates as something impermanent, unsatisfactory, a disease, a tumor, a dart, a misery, an affliction, an alien, a disintegration, something emptied, and as non-self.¹⁴

¹¹ Dhammapada. Verse 165.

¹² S.N. Anattalakkhana Sutta, 22.59.7.

¹³ Udāna Pāli Lokavolokana Sutta. Nanda Vagga Sutta, 10.

¹⁴ M.N. 121. Cula Suññata Sutta; M.N. 74. Digha Nakha Sutta; and S.N. 22.Khandha Samyutta. 48.Seela Sutta.

In the *Sutta Nipāta* it is said, "See this world, together with its *devās* (angels), conceive what is not-self to be self. Entangled in name and form, they conceive that 'this is true': (*Anattani attamānim passa lokam sadevakam, Nivitttham nāmarūpasmim idam saccanti maññati*).¹⁵

As expressed earlier, Buddhists use the term 'self'. The Buddha clearly and categorically stated that one should not grasp things as mine, me and myself. However, normally, that is what the general public do and as a result, they cling to the five aggregates and fettered to *samsāra*, the cycle of births and deaths. The Buddha's teaching is to be freed from such fetters and attain supreme bliss of *Nibbāna*. That supreme bliss is possible here in this very world. For this purpose, one should practice the technique of both serenity and insight (*samatha* and *vipassanā*) meditation taught by the Buddha. Then, one can clearly understand the nature of selflessness or non-self. The Buddha's whole teaching is focused on the realization of non-self. That is, in other words, called selflessness (*anatta*).

By pointing out the cause and condition of non-self, the Buddha says, "Monks, form is non-self. The cause and condition for the arising of form is also non-self. As form has originated from what is non-self, how could it be self? Feeling is non-self.... Perception is non-self... Volitional formations are non-self... Consciousness is non-self. The cause and condition for the arising of consciousness is also non-self. As consciousness has originated from what is non-self, how could it be self?"¹⁶

The best discourse to understand the Buddha's teaching on non-self or not self is the *Cula Saccaka Sutta of the Middle Length Teachings of the Buddha*, where when *Saccaka* the debater asked, "How does Master *Gotama* discipline his disciples? And how is Master *Gotama's* instruction usually presented to his disciples?" The Buddha then responded, "This is how I discipline my disciples, *Aggivesana*, and this is how my instruction is usually presented to my disciples: '*Bhikkhus*, material form is impermanent, feeling is impermanent, perception is impermanent, volitional formations are impermanent, consciousness is impermanent. *Bhikkhus*, material form is not self, feeling is not self, perception is not self, formations are not self, consciousness is not self. All formations are impermanent; all things are not self.' That is the way I discipline my disciples, and that is how my instruction is usually presented to my disciples."¹⁷ Whoever needs to understand the real teachings of non self as taught by the Buddha the

¹⁵ *Sutta Nipāta*, 3:12. Mahā Vagga. Dvayātānupassanā Sutta.

¹⁶ S.N. 22. Khandha Samyutta. 20.9. Non-Self with Cause.

¹⁷ M.N. 35. Cula Saccaka Sutta.

author's recommendation is this discourse (*Cula Saccaka*) and the Discourse of the Characteristics of Non-self (*Anattalakkhana Sutta*)¹⁸.

How to experience the cessation of existence, the deathless and coolness of Nibbāna.

For this purpose, one should first understand that this so-called man or woman is nothing but a psycho-somatic existence. What is more important here is the psychic power, the mind, which is the forerunner, the fastest energy in the whole universe.¹⁹ The mind has three aspects: the emotional aspect, the intellectual aspect, and the perceptual aspect. The Buddha used the three terms; *citta*, *mano*, and *viññāna* respectively.²⁰ The Buddha very clearly and precisely said, "When the mind is defiled, beings are defiled and when the mind is purified beings are purified" (*citta samkilesā bhikkhave sattā samkilissanti citta vodānā sattā visujjhanti*).²¹ According to the words of the Buddha, the birth of a person means manifestation of aggregates and obtaining of senses (*khandhānam pātubhāvo āyatanānam patilābho*).²² *Khandha* means aggregate.

Thus, we have five aggregates and six sense bases. Five aggregates are not born but manifested in the six sense bases. First of all, this is to be understood clearly and precisely with a developed wisdom.²³ When one is exposed to the world with the impingement of senses, with the support of twelve sense bases, consciousness, and contact, there arise feelings. Then, dependent on feelings, there arises craving. Craving leads to attachment or clinging (*tanhā paccayā upādānam*) and as the Buddha said, in short, the five aggregates affected by clinging are discomfort (*dukkha*). If one is able to apply proper mindfulness at the time of arising feelings, one can switch from craving to wisdom.

However, if one has attachments in this life, he/she is entangled in *samsāra* through the performance of volitional formations of demerits, volitional formations of merits, or volitional formations of *jhānic* results. Then, as the consequence of such attachments, existences in the thirty-one realms are produced. In this way, we roam in *samsāra* but the Buddha taught us the way for

¹⁸ S.N. 22.59.7. *Anattalakkhana Sutta*.

¹⁹ S.N.1.62.2. Mind (The world is led around by mind; By mind it's dragged here and there. Mind is the one thing that has All under its control.)

²⁰ S.N. 12. 61. *Nidāna Samyutta*. *Assutavanta Sutta*.

²¹ S.N. 22. 99. *Khandha Samyutta*. *Dutiya Gaddulabaddha Sutta*.

²² M.N. 141. *Sacca Vibhanga Sutta*.

²³ M.N. 141. *Sacca Vibhanga Sutta*; M.N. 28. *Mahā Hatthipadopama Sutta*; S.N. *Khandha Samyutta*; *Sutta Nipata Hemaka Sutta*; and *Udaya Mānava Puccha Sutta*, etc.

the cessation of such existences. The Buddha's teaching is to completely cease these existences and attain full Bliss of *Nibbāna* (*Bhava Nirodho Nibbānam*). If one becomes mindful enough at the time of feeling of the form aggregates of the six sense bases with the notion of 'mine, me and myself',²⁴ then one can realize the Three Characteristics of Existence, the Four Noble Truths, Dependent Origination, and as well as the whole Dhamma of the Buddha through the six sense bases and experience the supreme Bliss, the final goal of the teachings of the Buddha here in this very world. That is the cessation of existence, the state of perfect peace, the deathless, and the coolness of *Nibbāna* within (*Sītibhuta*).²⁵

May we all experience this real happiness, this real bliss or coolness of *Nibbāna*!

²⁴ S.N.5:8. Hemaka Sutta.

²⁵ A.N. 6. 85. *Sītibhāva Vagga. Coolness Sutta. (A bhikkhu is capable of realizing the unsurpassed coolness .)*