

Chapter 1

Senses of Self and Not-self in the Upaniṣads and Nikāyas

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Introduction

As is widely recognised, many of the contrasting conceptions about consciousness, personal identity, and the psycho-physical components of a human being, which were articulated by Hindus and Buddhists during the classical period in Indian philosophy (c. 200–400 CE), were prefigured by speculations in the Vedic Upaniṣads and the Buddhist Nikāyas. While Brahmin composers of the Upaniṣads tend to posit a self that is essential, stable, and eternal, the early Buddhists deny the notion of an abiding self, instead discussing human beings in a way that emphasises change and multiplicity. One of my aims in this chapter is to review some of the key ideas regarding these issues in the early sources as a way of providing a context for some of the subsequent philosophical debates about the self that are discussed in the other chapters of this book. In the process, however, I also want to bring attention to how the Upaniṣads and Nikāyas articulate their arguments and positions. Unlike most later sources of Indian philosophy, both the Upaniṣads and Nikāyas present their philosophical views within the context of narratives about teachers, students, and rival philosophers. As I will argue, the literary dimension of their philosophical stances has important implications for how we understand brahmanical and Buddhist senses of the self, as well as how we understand the relationship between the two traditions.

The Self in the Upaniṣads

The self (*ātman*) is the primary focus of philosophical speculation in the Upaniṣads.¹ The word *ātman* is a reflexive pronoun, likely derived from *an* (to breathe). Even in the *R̥g Veda* (c. 1200 BCE), the earliest textual source from ancient India, *ātman* already had a wide range of lexical meanings, including ‘breath’, ‘spirit’, and ‘body’ (Elizarenkova 2005: 126). By the time of the Upaniṣads, the meaning of the word had further evolved to include life-force, consciousness, essence, nature, or

¹ All references to the Upaniṣads are to the edition and translation of Olivelle (1998).

even ultimate reality. Indeed, in some passages in the Upaniṣads, *ātman* is linked to male orgasmic bliss (Olivelle 1997).

This diversity of meanings can be better understood when we consider the fact that different Upaniṣads were composed within the context of separate and often competing scholarly traditions or schools (*śākhās*). Accordingly, *ātman* does not have one consistent meaning across all of its textual appearances, yet there can be considerable uniformity within a particular text or within a group of texts aligned to the same school, and even more so according to the lessons ascribed to any particular teacher. Moreover, not only do different Upaniṣads often have discernibly distinct philosophical agendas, but on many occasions it is suggested that philosophers offered their teachings about the self in the context of a competitive marketplace of ideas, in which Brahmins were pitted against each other to recruit students, secure patronage, and win public debating competitions.

One of the best-known teachings of the self appears in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (6.1–16), when the Brahmin Uddālaka Āruṇi teaches his son Śvetaketu. Uddālaka uses analogies with natural phenomena to explain that the self is the essence of all living beings. He first uses the example of nectar, which is collected by bees from different sources, but becomes an undifferentiated whole when gathered together. Similarly, he explains that water flowing from different rivers merges without distinction when reaching the ocean. After each analogy Uddālaka brings attention back to Śvetaketu, emphasising that the self operates the same way in him as it does in all living beings: ‘The subtle essence here is what the self is of this whole world. It is the truth. This is *ātman*. That is what you are (*tat tvam asi*), Śvetaketu’ (CU 6.8.7). The thrust of Uddālaka’s teaching is that the self is both the essence that connects parts with the whole and the constant that remains the same even while taking on different forms. Uddālaka reinforces his message through repetition: by the end of his teaching he has repeated the above quotation nine times, as he reiterates the same point with each analogy. This notion that someone can know the self by means of verbal proclamations also appears in the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* (6.13):

In just two ways can he be perceived:
by saying that ‘He is’,
by affirming he’s the real.
To one who perceives him as ‘He is’
it becomes clear that he is real.²

Moreover, in Uddālaka’s teaching the relationship between the same refrain and the many analogies he uses illustrates what he is trying to convey to Śvetaketu: the refrain, which is the essence of the teaching, remains the same although he explains it in different ways.

² A similar affirmation appears in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, with the declaration ‘I am he’ (4.4.12).

Yājñavalkya, the most prominent teacher in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, also uses analogies throughout his teachings, but he tends to characterise *ātman* more explicitly in terms of consciousness than in terms of natural philosophy, discussing the self in relation to cognitive faculties on several occasions.³ In a debate that pits him against Uddālaka – his senior colleague and, by some accounts, his former teacher (BU 6.3.7; 6.5.3) – Yājñavalkya explains that the self is the inner controller (*antaryāmin*), present within all sensing and cognising, yet at the same time distinct: ‘He is the seer that cannot be seen, the hearer that cannot be heard, the thinker that cannot be thought, the knower that cannot be known’ (BU 3.7.23). Here, Yājñavalkya characterises the self as that which has mastery over the otherwise distinct psycho-physical capacities. He goes on to explain that we know the existence of the self through actions of the self, through what the self does, not through our senses – that the self, as consciousness, cannot be an object of consciousness. As Yājñavalkya rhetorically asks his wife Maitreyī later in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*: ‘By what means can one know him, by means of whom one knows this whole world?’ (4.5.15).

Throughout his teachings Yājñavalkya describes the self as being hidden or behind that which is immediately perceptible. When teaching King Janaka, for example, he explains that the self is ‘the breathing behind the breathing, the sight behind the sight’ (4.4.18). Here, Yājñavalkya suggests that the self cannot be known by rational thought or described in conventional language because it can never be the object of thought or knowledge. As Jonardon Ganeri explains: ‘If we cannot catch the self as an object among others in the world, we can catch it in the very act of thinking’ (2007: 35).

One recurring theme in Yājñavalkya’s discussion with Janaka is that the self is described as consisting of various parts, but not reducible to any (for example, BU 4.4.5; see also TU 2.2.1). In a creation myth at the beginning of the *Āitareya Upaniṣad*, the *ātman* is cast as a creator god, who creates the various elements and bodily functions from himself. After completing his creation he asks himself:

If speaking is done through speech; if breathing-out is done through the out-breath; if seeing is done through sight; if hearing is done through hearing; if touching is done through the skin; if thinking is done through the mind; if breathing is done through the in-breath; and if ejaculating is done through the penis – then who am I? (ĀU 1.3.11)

Similar to Yājñavalkya’s teaching, the functions of the body and cognitive capacities are seen to be components of the self and even evidence of the self, but the self cannot be reduced to any particular part. Such examples emphasise that an understanding of the self cannot be attained through observing how the self operates in just one faculty, but by means of regarding the self in relation to a

³ See Brereton (1990: 129) for a discussion of the different paradigms used by Uddālaka and Yājñavalkya to describe the self.

number of psycho-physical faculties, some understanding of the self is conveyed. Thus, in addition to being portrayed as the agent or inner controller (*antaryāmin*) of sensing and cognising, the self is characterised as an underlying base or foundation (*pratiṣṭha*) of all the sense and cognitive faculties.

Another important aspect of Yājñavalkya's teaching is that he draws attention to the limitations of language, suggesting that because the self cannot be an object of knowledge it cannot have attributes, and therefore can only be described by using negative propositions. When speaking to King Janaka, Yājñavalkya famously says:

About this self (*ātman*), one can only say "not, not" (*neti, neti*). He is ungraspable, as he cannot be grasped. He is indestructible, as he cannot be destroyed. He cannot be clung to, as he does not cling. He is unbound, not trembling, not able to be harmed. (BU 4.4.22)

Moreover, it is relevant that this description of the self *via negativa* is repeated on three different occasions in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*: in his exchange with Śākalya in the debate in Janaka's court (3.9.26), in his private instruction to Janaka (4.2.4), and again in his conversation with his wife Maitreyī (4.4.22). While these passages may once have been part of separate texts, when they appear together in Books 3–4 of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, they gain a rhetorical force through repetition, thus reiterating the notion of an abiding self beyond language and conceptual thought. The multiple appearances of Uddālaka's *tat tvam asi* and Yājñavalkya's *neti neti* undoubtedly contribute to these statements playing a key role in the work of later commentators such as Śaṅkara (c. 700 CE).⁴

Perhaps the most famous teaching of the self, the linking of *ātman* and *brahman*, is delivered by Śāṇḍilya in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*. Śāṇḍilya begins his teaching by stating that *brahman* is the entire world. He then explains that what happens to people at the time of death is in accordance with their resolve in this world. After describing *ātman* in various ways, Śāṇḍilya equates *ātman* with *brahman*: 'This self (*ātman*) of mine within the heart is *brahman*. On departing from here, I will enter into him' (CU 3.14.4). Thus, if one understands *brahman* as the entire world, and one understands that the self is *brahman*, then one becomes the entire world at the time of death. Advaita Vedānta philosophers, such as Śaṅkara, would later interpret the equation of *ātman* and *brahman* in terms of an absolute identity and would regard this as the central teaching of all the Upaniṣads. As we have seen, however, the diversity of teachings of the self in the Upaniṣads cannot easily be reduced to one interpretation. Moreover, it is important to note that Śaṅkara's interpretation of the Upaniṣads was not the only one accepted by later Hindu philosophers. Rāmānuja (c. 1000 CE), the main proponent of a form of Vedānta known as Viśiṣṭādvaita, or qualified non-dualism, used the Upaniṣads to argue that *ātman* is not identical with *brahman*, but an aspect of *brahman*. Two

⁴ For a discussion of Śaṅkara's treatment of these phrases, see Hirst (2005: 141–5).

centuries later, Madhva (c. 1200 CE), who used the Upaniṣads as a source for a dualist branch of the school known as Dvaita Vedānta, would interpret *brahman* as an infinite and independent God, while the self would be regarded as finite and dependent. According to Madhva, then, *ātman* is dependent upon *brahman*, but they are not exactly the same.

Keeping in mind later Hindu philosophical developments, it is also worth noting that the Upaniṣads often present *ātman* in ways that contrast with the changeless and inactive senses of the self as articulated by traditions such as Sāṃkhya, Yoga, and Advaita Vedānta. As we have seen, the self can be characterised as both active and dynamic: as the inner controller (*antaryāmin*), the self is depicted as the agent or actor behind all sensing and cognising (for example, BU 3.7.23), while as a creator god, *ātman* is cast as a personal deity – closely resembling Prajāpati – from whom all creation emanates (BU 1.4.1; 1.4.17; TU 2.1; AU 1.1).

One feature of the self that is quite consistent throughout the Upaniṣads and continues to be shared by a number of subsequent schools of Hindu philosophy is that knowledge of *ātman* can lead to some sort of liberation or ultimate freedom. While the Sāṃkhya and Yoga schools would conceptualise such emancipation as *kaivalya* and Advaita Vedāntins as *mokṣa*, in the Upaniṣads the ultimate goal achieved through knowledge of the self is primarily freedom from death.⁵ The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, for example, offers the instructions that if one is asked about what remains when a person dies, then one should respond: ‘That is the self free from evils – free from old age and death, free from sorrow, free from hunger and thirst; the self whose desires and intentions become real’ (CU 8.1.5). Similarly, Prajāpati has the following teaching:

The self (*ātman*) that is free from evils, free from old age and death, free from sorrow, free from hunger and thirst; the self whose desires and intentions are real – that is the self that you should try to discover, that is the self you should seek to perceive. When someone discovers that self and perceives it, he obtains all the worlds, and all his desires are fulfilled. (CU 8.7.1)

Throughout such passages is the assumption that *ātman* is the immortal essence of a living being. Some philosophers, such as Yājñavalkya, explicitly connect their teachings about the self with ideas of karma and rebirth – though it is important to note that not all discussions about *ātman* are in the context of explaining transmigration and moral retribution and, moreover, it is not clear that all teachers in the Upaniṣads even assume this doctrine.⁶ None the less, a prominent philosophical strand in the Upaniṣads, particularly in the teachings of

⁵ For a discussion of the topic of death in the debate in King Janaka’s court, see Lindquist (in press).

⁶ While Bronkhorst (2007: 120) perhaps goes too far in characterising karma and rebirth as completely alien to the Vedic worldview, he raises the important point that these ideas are not nearly as prevalent in the Upaniṣads as they often are assumed to be.

Yājñavalkya, is that *ātman* dwells within the body when it is alive, that *ātman*, in one way or another, is responsible for the body being alive, and that *ātman* does not die when the body dies, but rather finds a dwelling place in another body. In a dialogue with King Janaka, Yājñavalkya compares the self to a caterpillar, inching its way across the grass:

Just as a caterpillar, having reached the end of a blade of grass, as it takes another step, draws itself together. So the self (*ātman*), having thrown down the body and having dispelled ignorance, in taking another step, draws itself together. (4.4.3)

Another teaching about the process of transmigration appears in an episode that features in both the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (5.4–10) and the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (6.2.9–16). In this scene, King Pravāhaṇa Jaivali teaches Uddālaka Āruṇi the ‘knowledge of the five fires’ (*pañcāgnividyā*), which describes human life as part of a cycle of regeneration, whereby the essence of life takes on different forms as it passes through different levels of existence: when humans die, they are cremated and travel in the form of smoke to the other world (the first fire), where they become soma; as soma they enter a rain cloud (the second fire) and become rain; as rain they return to earth (the third fire), where they become food; as food they enter man (the fourth fire), where they become semen; as semen they enter a woman (the fifth fire) and become an embryo. In both the *Chāndogya* and *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣads*, Pravāhaṇa combines his teaching of the five fires with the discourse of the two paths of the dead – a discourse which also appears in slightly different variations in other Upaniṣads: for example, *Muṇḍaka* (1.2.10–11), *Kaṭha* (1.3), and *Praśna* (1.9–10). According to Pravāhaṇa, those who know the teaching of the five fires follow the path of the gods and enter the world of *brahman*, but those who do not know this teaching will follow the path of the ancestors and continue to be reborn.

Pravāhaṇa does not use the word *ātman*, yet as with some of Yājñavalkya’s teachings, this is one of the earliest discussions of the process of rebirth. Also, like Yājñavalkya, Pravāhaṇa articulates an understanding of rebirth that suggests an essence or core is being reborn. This is made clear in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* version, where the king, whilst talking about the fifth fire, says when a man reaches the end of his lifespan ‘they take him to the very fire from which he came, from which he sprang’ (CU 5.9.2).

Not-self in the Nikāyas

Buddhist views regarding the self are notoriously controversial. One of the terms to appear frequently in the Pāli sources is *anattā* (*anātman* in Sanskrit), the negative form of *ātman*, which, as we have seen, is a central topic of philosophy in the Upaniṣads. The overlapping terminology used by Brahmins and Buddhists has provoked a wide variety of interpretations. While some scholars take *anattā*

as an explicit denial of any sense of self, others suggest that a notion of self continues to lurk behind all negations.⁷ A related controversy regards the extent to which Buddhist ideas of not-self were influenced by brahmanical ideas about *ātman*, as articulated in the Upaniṣads. Thomas Kasulis, presenting widespread opinion, writes: ‘The Buddha himself made *anātman*, the negation of *ātman*, an emblem of his break from the Hindu tradition around him’ (1997: 400).⁸ A number of scholars, however, have questioned the degree of brahmanical influence on Buddhism. Bodhi (1997: 293), for example, rejects the suggestion that *anattā* is a negation of the Upaniṣadic *ātman*:

While it is true that the *anattā* doctrine excludes Upanishadic ideas about the self, the purpose for which the Buddha expounded it was not to negate any specific theory of the self but to correct the universal human proclivity to seek a substantial basis of personal identity amidst the five aggregates. If this were not the case, the teaching of *anattā*, like the Buddha’s rejection of sacrifice, would hardly have any relevance outside the narrow context of ancient Brahminism.

In this section I will address these issues by looking at how the Buddhist Nikāyas⁹ express their teachings of *anattā*, as well as at the audiences they seem to address. As we will see, while much of the rhetoric points to a direct engagement with the brahmanical tradition, the narrative context indicates that Buddhist teachings of not-self might be addressing other opponents, implying that Brahmins may not have been their main rivals in their debates about the self.

As with the philosophers in the Upaniṣads, the Buddha and other teachers in the Nikāyas use analogies to convey their teachings about the self.¹⁰ In the *Aggivacchagotta Sutta* the Buddha uses the imagery of fire to explain to Vacchagotta that any notion of self disappears after death (MN 72.19–20). The Buddha asks where a fire goes after it has been extinguished, with Vacchagotta responding that such a question does not apply because when the fuel of the fire has been put out, there is no more fire and therefore no place for fire to go. The Buddha concludes that, like asking where fire is without fuel, the question of where someone goes after death is not appropriate.

In the *Nandakovāda Sutta* (MN 146) the monk Nandaka also uses several analogies in his teaching to the *bhikkhunis*. This *sutta* begins with Mahāpajāpatī approaching the Buddha to ask him to deliver a teaching to the *bhikkhunis*. It turns out that Nandaka was supposed to teach the nuns, but he had been avoiding his

⁷ See Collins (1982: 4–12) and Watson (2006: 51–5) for discussions about contrasting interpretations of *anattā*.

⁸ See also Hamilton (2000: 22–3).

⁹ All references to the *Dīgha Nikāya* are from Walshe (1995), to the *Majjhima Nikāya* from Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi (1995), and to the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* from Bodhi (2000).

¹⁰ As Gombrich comments: ‘Summaries of the Buddha’s teaching rarely convey how much use he made of simile and metaphor’ (1996: 63).

turn. He agrees to teach, however, when the Buddha addresses him: ‘Give the Bhikkhunīs a talk on the Dhamma, brahmin’ (MN 146.4). Nandaka begins his talk by explaining that he will deliver his teaching in the form of questions and answers, instructing the nuns what to say to indicate when they understand, when they do not understand, and when they are doubtful or perplexed. After beginning his talk with a discussion of the 18 *dhatu*s, Nandaka describes *anattā* through the analogy of an oil lamp, which consists of oil, a wick, a flame, and the radiance of its light. All of these aspects of the oil lamp, Nandaka explains, are impermanent and subject to change. Nandaka asks the *bhikkhunīs* if it would be possible for radiance to be permanent and eternal, when the other aspects of the oil lamp on which it is dependent are impermanent and subject to change. Unsurprisingly, the *bhikkhunīs* respond with a resounding ‘no’. Similarly, Nandaka explains, the six internal bases (*āyatana*s) are impermanent and subject to change, so the feelings of pleasant, painful, or neither-painful-nor-pleasant must also be impermanent and subject to change. Nandaka extends his point by comparing the external bases (*āyatana*s) to a great tree, with roots, a trunk, branches, and foliage. He then compares the inner bases to the inner flesh of a cow, the external bases to its hide, and the inner tendons, sinews, and ligaments to lust and desire. He concludes by comparing the sharp butcher’s knife to noble wisdom that ‘cuts, severs, and carves away the inner defilements, fetters, and bonds’ (MN 146. 12). Here Nandaka uses three different analogies which build upon each other to convey the point that the various components of a human being are mutually dependent, without an essence or base.

Perhaps the most well known presentation of *anattā* is in the Buddha’s second sermon, which appears in both the *Anattālakkhaṇa Sutta* of the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (SN 22.59) and in the *Mahāvagga* section of the *Vinaya*. In this teaching the Buddha addresses five ascetics who had just recently become his first followers. Here, the Buddha presents *anattā* as one of the three marks (*tilakkhaṇa*) of phenomenal existence. The full list of three marks is as follows:

1. impermanence (*anicca*);
2. suffering (*dukkha*);
3. non-self (*anattā*).

These three marks emphasise that change, degeneration, and non-essentialism are fundamental features of everything, except for *nibbāna*. Crucially, the three marks are used to describe the five psycho-physical factors that, when combined, give us a false sense of an abiding self. This doctrine, called the five aggregates (*khandha* in Pāli, *skandha* in Sanskrit) deconstructs the sense of a unified self by breaking it down into five separate factors.¹¹ The Buddha lists the five *khandhas* as follows:

¹¹ While the doctrine has generally been understood as an explanation of the psycho-physical aspects of a person, Gethin has argued that the five *khandhas* are ‘not so much the presentation of an analysis of man as object, but rather the understanding of the nature of conditioned existence from the point of view of the experiencing subject’ (1986: 49).

1. form/body (*rūpa*);
2. feeling (*vedanā*);
3. recognition/perception (*sañña* in Pāli, *saṃjñā* in Sanskrit);
4. constructing activities, volitional formations (*sankhāra* in Pāli, *saṃskāra* in Sanskrit);
5. consciousness/conscious awareness (*viññāṇa* in Pāli, *viññāna* in Sanskrit).

When the Buddha discusses each of the five aggregates, he rhetorically asks the five ascetics: ‘And that which is impermanent, subject to decay, and not-self, is it possible to regard that in this way: “This is mine, this am I, this is my self?”’ Each of the five times the Buddha asks this question, the ascetics answer emphatically: ‘That is impossible, Lord.’ Here, the Buddha is illustrating to the ascetics that to identify any of the five *khandhas* as self, as *ātman*, would be a mistake. At the end of his discourse, the Buddha then concludes:

Therefore, bhikkus, 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, all ... should be seen as it really is with correct wisdom thus: ‘This is not mine, I am not this, this is not my self. (SN 22.59)

Similar exchanges, in which the Buddha applies the teaching of not-self to each of the five *khandhas*, appear in both the *Mahāpurṇṇama Sutta* (MN 109) and the *Alagaddūpama Sutta* (MN 22.26–7).¹²

In addition, the refrain of not-self is recited within the context of the 18 *dhatus*. In the *Nandakovāda Sutta* (MN 146), discussed above, Nandaka begins his teaching to the *bhikkhunīs* with the following question: ‘Is what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: this I am, this is myself?’ After the *bhikkhunīs* correctly respond ‘no’, Nandaka asks the same question about the ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind, before asking about forms, sounds, odours, flavours, tangibles, and mind objects. He then asks about the consciousness of each organ: eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, nose-consciousness, tongue-consciousness, body-consciousness, and mind-consciousness. Together, these three groups of six constitute all the 18 *dhatus*. The same question – ‘Is what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: this is mine, this I am, this is myself?’ – is repeated 18 times and applied to each component. Similarly, in the *Channovāda Sutta* (MN 144), Sāriputta asks the gravely ill

For other detailed discussions of the five *skandhas*, see Hamilton (2000: 18–31, *passim*), Collins (1982: *passim*), and Siderits (2007: 32–68).

¹² In the *Chabbisodhana Sutta* (MN 112) the Buddha does not use the same refrain, but he similarly discusses each of the six elements – (1) earth, (2) water, (3) fire, (4) air, (5) space, and (6) consciousness – in terms of *anattā*, treating each element as ‘not self, with no self based’ on that element (MN 112.7–8). See Gethin (1986: 43–4).

Channa if he regards any of the 18 *dhatu*s as ‘this is mine, this I am, this is my self’ (MN 144.9–10); in each case Channa replies: ‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself’ (MN 144.9–10). The *anattā* refrain is applied to other lists as well: in the *Rāhulasamyutta* (SN 7.18), for example, the refrain is applied to 59 categories; while in the *Mahārāhulovāda Sutta* (MN 62), a similar exchange – but with a different list of categories – appears in a discussion between the Buddha and Ānanda.

Crucially, in none of these exchanges does the Buddha explicitly claim that there is no such thing as a self; indeed, nowhere in the Nikāyas is he depicted as making explicitly negative claims, such as ‘there is no self’ or ‘no things exist’. The Buddha’s avoidance of such negative assertions is clear in the *Salāyatanavagga* section of the *Samyutta Nikāya*. In a conversation with the wanderer (*paribbājaka*) Vacchagotta, who is the most prominent non-Buddhist interlocutor about the self, the Buddha remains silent when asked ‘is there a self’ and when asked ‘is there no self’ (SN 4.10). Similarly, the Buddha refuses to make the negative claim ‘there is no self’ in the *Poṭṭhapada Sutta*, when the wanderer Poṭṭhapāda asks him the ten indeterminate (*avyākataṇi*) questions (DN 9.28).¹³

In most of the examples above, *anattā* is discussed within the context of the three marks. In other words, *anattā* is often presented as one component of a larger teaching. Moreover, on these occasions the three marks of existence itself is not put forth as an independent teaching, but is applied programmatically to doctrinal lists, such as the five *khandhas* and the 18 *dhatu*s. Throughout these teachings, one of the main concerns is to explain how personal continuity operates and how one can ultimately attain liberation. By applying the teaching of not-self to the five *khandhas* and 18 *dhatu*s, the Buddha argues that what we might consider to be the self is actually composed of smaller, distinct operations, each of which is subject to change, decay, and a lack of essence. The teachings of the five *khandhas* and 18 *dhatu*s do not deny that there is a continuity of character throughout one’s life and from one lifetime to the next. However, according to the Buddha, this can be attributed to the repeated occurrence of similar conditions.

As we can see, both the Upaniṣads and Nikāyas discuss the topic of self in the context of enumerating a number of psycho-physical components. But whereas the Upaniṣads discuss these components as a way of pointing to an essence or foundation they have in common, the Buddhist sources use such enumerations to emphasise the lack of any intrinsic quality or base. As an integral part of the teachings of the five *khandhas* and the 18 *dhatu*s, the three marks serve as a crucial reminder that no component of these doctrinal lists can operate as a base or foundation for the other components. As Steven Collins explains:

¹³ While the Buddha’s refusal to answer such questions directly has contributed to the contrasting interpretations, mentioned above, about the implications of *anattā*, it is worth noting that the lack of explicit denials of the self in the Nikāyas contrasts with more overt statements of ‘no-self’ that are expressed in later Buddhist philosophy.

things are regularly said to be not-self because there is ‘no exercising of mastery’ over them. The five constituents of phenomenal personality, the *khandhā*, are not-self because they have no ‘leader’, no ‘guide’, no ‘inner controller’ as the *Upaniṣads* had put it. (Collins 1982: 97)

When it is applied to the five *khandhās* and other teachings, then, we might suggest that *anattā* is not so much a doctrine as it is a method for reinforcing the principles of impermanence and non-essentialism or, as Collins (1982: 12) suggests, not-self operates as a ‘soteriological strategy’.

Indeed, an understanding of *anattā* is on several occasions directly linked to achieving enlightenment, thus characterising the teaching of not-self as ‘liberating knowledge’ (Bronkhorst 2009: 134). During the Buddha’s second sermon, for example, the five ascetics achieved enlightenment.¹⁴ Similarly, in the *Chachakka Sutta* sixty *bhikkhus* become enlightened while the Buddha was teaching about not-self (MN 148.41); while at the end of the *Paṭṭhapāda Sutta*, Citta, the son of an elephant trainer, is declared an *arahant* after hearing the teaching of not-self (DN 9.56). In comparison with philosophers in the Upaniṣads, who declare that knowledge of *ātman* leads to immortality and freedom from death, the Buddhist sources present the teaching of *anattā* as leading directly to the ultimate Buddhist soteriological goal of *nibbāna*.¹⁵

Indications of Upaniṣadic Influence on the Nikāyas

A number of scholars have highlighted examples where the Buddhist sources use terminology, narrative situations, and imagery that are reminiscent of discussions about the self in the Upaniṣads. Bronkhorst (2009: 26) notes, for example, that a specific characterisation challenged by Buddhist sources is of the self as ‘joyful’ (*ānanda*), a description that is prominent in the Upaniṣads (for example, TU 2.5; 2.7; KsU 3.8). Indeed, according to Bronkhorst (2009: 25), this is part of a wider conceptualisation of the self that is rejected by the Buddhists: ‘the self that is permanent, joyful, and not subject to change’. The similarities between what the Buddhists challenge and what the Upaniṣads put forth as the self, lead Bronkhorst (2009: 20, 25) to speculate that the Buddha may ‘have been familiar with the contents of some Upaniṣads or of parts of them’.

A similar example appears in the *Kosalasaṃyutta* of the *Samyutta Nikāya*. Here there is a short dialogue between King Pasenadi and his wife Queen Mallikā, in which the king discusses the self as that which is ‘dear’ (*piya*): ‘Is there,

¹⁴ See also SN 3.22.59.

¹⁵ It is worth noting, however, that whereas the Nikāyas are quite explicit about the effect of Buddhist teachings on those who learn them, the Upaniṣadic narratives tend to end more inconclusively, without specifying whether the students who hear teachings about the self achieve the promised results (see Black (2011b: 109–10).

Mallikā, anyone more dear to you than yourself?’ (SN 3.8) The terminology, along with the use of a similar narrative situation, recalls a conversation in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, in which Yājñavalkya characterises the self as ‘dear’ (*priyā*)¹⁶ when talking to his wife Maitreyī (BU 2.4; 4.5). As Bodhi (2000: 401–2, n. 212) comments: ‘The conversation between King Pasenadi and Mallikā is strikingly reminiscent of the discussion between the sage Yājñavalkya and his wife Maitreyī It is conceivable that the Buddhist conversation is modeled after the Upaniṣad but with a different message.’ As I have explored elsewhere, other narrative scenarios in the Nikāyas that are reminiscent of scenes in the Upaniṣads include the *Ambaṭṭha Sutta* and *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*.¹⁷

An engagement with the brahmanical tradition is also apparent in the shared use of fire imagery in the teachings of about the self. As we have seen, in both the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (5.4–10) and *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (6.2.9–16) Pravāhaṇa Jaivali discloses the knowledge of the five fires (*pañcāgnividyā*), a doctrine which links karma to the process of rebirth.¹⁸ We have also seen the Buddha use fire imagery to convey his teaching that form does not continue to exist after its causes have disappeared. As Vacchagotta replies to the Buddha: ‘The fire burned in dependence on its fuel of grass and sticks. When that is used up, if it does not get any more fuel, being without fuel, it is reckoned as extinguished’ (MN 72.19). Such fire imagery extends to teachings of the five *khandhas*, which, as Gombrich (1996: 68–9) has suggested, on some occasions refers specifically to a bundle of fire sticks, as each *khandha* is compared to the fuel for fire, with the Buddha teaching that the way towards enlightenment is to run out of fuel. As King (1999: 80) elaborates:

The five ‘bundles’ are no doubt an allusion to the bundles of fire-sticks used by the brahmanical priests in the administering of their five ritual fire sacrifices. The allegorisation of the fire sacrifice had already taken place within the early Upaniṣadic material.

Thus, whereas Pravāhaṇa in the Upaniṣads uses fire as a metaphor to explain continuity from one lifetime to the next, the Buddha draws upon the same imagery to emphasise non-essentialism and impermanence.

Another similarity between the Upaniṣads and Nikāyas is the use of repetition. As we have seen, the Upaniṣads suggest that one can learn about the self through repeated affirmations. Most famously, Uddālaka Āruṇi repeats the phrase ‘This is the self, that is what you are’ when teaching his son Śvetaketu. Gethin (1998: 137) has suggested that the Buddha’s words in the teaching of not-self are an inversion

¹⁶ Yājñavalkya also uses this term in a conversation with King Janaka (BU 4.1.3).

¹⁷ For a discussion on the similarities between the *Ambaṭṭha Sutta* and the Upaniṣads, see Black (2011a). For comments on the similarities between the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* and the Upaniṣads, see Deussen (2004: 475), Goto (2005: 72, n. 4), and Black (2007: 70–74).

¹⁸ See Killingley (1997) for an excellent discussion of this teaching.

of the positive affirmations of self that are declared in the Upaniṣads: ‘in the phrase “this is not mine, I am not this, this is not my self” there appears to be a deliberate echo and rebuttal of the Chāndogya Upaniṣad’s “this is the self, this is what you are”’. While the repetition in the Upaniṣads encourages followers to identify with the teaching of *ātman*, the repetition in the Buddhist sources operates as a persistent and emphatic reminder that one should not identify oneself with any notion of stability or permanence. Such repetition is particularly important when we consider that both the Upaniṣads and Nikāyas were part of oral traditions, indicating a link to mnemonic practices such as recitation and chanting. In other words, besides the arguments put forth for their philosophical positions, both the Brahmins and Buddhists reinforce their stances through practices of repeated rehearsal.

Self and Not-self in Dialogue

Perhaps the most significant shared literary feature of the Upaniṣads and Nikāyas is the use of dialogical narratives: both traditions articulate their views about the self in the context of conversations, teachings, and debates. In this final section I would like to explore some of the ways dialogue serves to characterise the teachings about the self, as well as how it situates such teachings within a social context.

A recurring theme in the Upaniṣads is that teachings of the self are often presented in contradistinction to the older, more orthodox knowledge that is primarily based on ritual. In the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, for example, Śvetaketu returns to his father after twelve years of formal Vedic education, but does not know ‘the rules of substitution’ (CU 6.1.1). This initial episode exposing Śvetaketu’s lack of true knowledge serves as a striking contrast to his father’s subsequent teaching – as discussed above – that focuses on the self and contains the well-known refrain: this self, this is what you are. This episode, as well as others (for example, *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 7.1.1–3; *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* 1.4), indicates that there is something lacking in the traditional Vedic education, that despite its importance it does not cover what the Upaniṣads consider to be most crucial to know. As such, knowledge of *ātman* consistently represents the new Upaniṣadic knowledge that is defined in contradistinction to the traditional Vedic knowledge about the ritual.

On some occasions, discourses about the self are presented within the context of competitive verbal debates, where cows, gold, prestige, patronage, and even lives are at stake. In a discussion that appears in both the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* (2.1) and *Kauṣītaki Upaniṣads* (4), the brahmin Gārgya’s discourse based on Vedic homologies is replaced by King Ajātaśatru’s teaching about the vital functions (*prāṇā*) and the self (*ātman*). While the Brahmin’s teaching consists of a series of rehearsed statements all following the same formula, the king’s discourse is an attempt to explain processes of the body and mind. Here, the Upaniṣads juxtapose two styles of discourse, clearly privileging a new type of teaching which focuses on the self. Similarly, in the well known debate (*brahmodya*) in King Janaka’s

court (BU 3), Yājñavalkya's arguments about the self are contrasted with his opponents' views, many of which are similar to the scripted statements we find in the Vedic ritual texts. Although our Upaniṣadic philosophers do not all agree on what *ātman* is, there is a shared rhetorical thrust in which teachings about the self are directed towards particular audiences and social situations.

As we have seen in the previous section, the Buddhist texts make a number of rhetorical moves to position their teachings in opposition to the more permanent notion of selfhood discussed in the Upaniṣads. But while such examples seem to point to an anti-brahmanical dimension of the teaching of not-self, it is noteworthy that the teachings of not-self are directed at non-brahmanical rivals as much as they are directed at Brahmins. In the *Brahmajāla Sutta*, for example, the Buddha teaches his monks about the 62 kinds of wrong views, many of which are presented as wrong views regarding the self. As the Buddha explains, some 'ascetics and Brahmins' (*samaṇa-brāhmaṇā*) are eternalists 'who proclaim the eternity of the self and the world' (1.30), some are non-eternalists who proclaim the 'partial eternity and the partial non-eternity of the self and the world' (2.1); some are partly eternalists and partly non-eternalists (2.14); some are chance-originationists (2.30); some proclaim the doctrine of consciousness after death (2.38); some proclaim the doctrine of unconsciousness after death (3.1); some are annihilationists (3.9).

While some of these views, such as eternalism and the doctrine of consciousness after death might be attributed to philosophers in the Upaniṣads, other views are clearly not associated with the brahmanical tradition. As Walshe points out, the view that a material self exists after death is associated with the Ājīvikas (1995: 542, n. 66), while the view that an immaterial self exists after death is associated with the Jains (1995: 542, n. 67). The Buddha mentions the views of other rival groups as well, including: logicians (2.20); 'eel wrigglers' (*amarā-vikheppikā*) (2.23) – those who resort to evasive views – who, as Peter Harvey (2004: 2) suggests, were 'a group of Skeptics who felt that human beings were incapable of having knowledge of such matters as Self and rebirth', and Annihilationists, who 'were materialists who held that a person was completely destroyed at death'. Although the views of many of the Buddha's opponents remain unclear, we do know that some notion of self was central to both the Ājīvika and Jain philosophies. In the context of the *Brahmajāla Sutta*, the brahmanical views of self, although challenged, are just a few of the many positions about the self that the Buddha criticises.

Furthermore, Brahmins are not represented in the narratives as the Buddha's interlocutors when he presents his teaching of not-self, despite the fact that Brahmins are depicted as the main rival group in narrative scenes about debate more generally.¹⁹ As Manné points out, 18 of the 34 *suttas* in the *Dīgha Nikāya* are about debate, with half of these featuring a debate between the Buddha and a

¹⁹ Jayarava has made a similar point on his blog, but has suggested a different explanation; see <<http://jayarava.blogspot.com/2010/09/early-buddhists-and-atmanbrahman.html>>.

prominent Brahmin (1992: 117).²⁰ Similarly, the entire *Brāhmaṇavagga* section of the *Majjhima Nikāya* features debates between Buddhists and Brahmins. Arguments from silence are always risky, but considering the centrality of the teaching of not-self along with the frequency that Brahmins appear as interlocutors, it is striking that Buddhist narratives do not depict conversations or debates between Buddhists and Brahmins about the self.

Within the context of the narratives, the most likely audience members for the Buddha's teaching of not-self are Buddhist monks. As we have seen, the most well-known teaching of not-self is delivered in his second sermon to his first group of followers. Other discussions of not-self also tend to be between members of the Buddhist community: in the *Brahmajāla Sutta* (DN 1), *Alagaddūpama Sutta* (MN 22), *Mahāpurṇṇama Sutta* (MN 109), and the *Chabbisodhana Sutta* (MN 112) the Buddha teaches not-self to the Bhikkhus;²¹ in the *Channovāda Sutta* (MN 144) both Sāriputta and Channa are already members of the *saṅgha*;²² a similar exchange appears in the *Mahārāhulovāda Sutta* (MN 62) in a discussion between the Buddha and Ānanda; and the Buddha also discusses not-self with Ānanda in the *Mahānidāna Sutta* (DN 15).²³ On these occasions, not-self is discussed in a non-competitive, pedagogic exchange between members of the Buddhist community.

Yet, even when addressing his own followers, the Buddha often presents his views in contradistinction to those of his rivals. As we have seen, a common feature of the Buddha's teaching of not-self is its juxtaposition with the views of some 'ascetics and Brahmins' (*samaṇa-brāhmaṇā*). Moreover, on some occasions the Buddha's views are put forth as responses one should say to a hypothetical opponent. In his conversation with Poṭṭhapāda, for example, the Buddha instructs his interlocutor:

Poṭṭhapāda, if others ask us 'What, friend, is this gross acquired self whose abandonment you preach ...?' Being so asked, we should reply: 'This is that gross acquired self for getting rid of which we teach a doctrine for getting rid of the gross acquired self.' (DN 9.43)

²⁰ See Black (2009) for a discussion and modification of Manné's classification of encounters between Buddhists and Brahmins as debates.

²¹ See also the following discussions between the Buddha and Bhikkhus about not-self in the *Samyutta Nikāya* 3.22.7–8, 3.22.11, 3.22.59, 3.22.81, 3.22.118, 3.22.119, and 3.22.143–5. It is noteworthy that all these examples are from the *Khandhavagga* of the *Samyutta Nikāya*, a section that is almost entirely devoted to the five *khandhas*.

²² Sāriputta also appears in a discussion about not-self with the monk Yamaka (SN 3.22.85) and with the householder Nakulapitā (SN 3.22.1). Channa also appears as a listener to the teaching of not-self, with the Bhikkhus as his teachers (SN 3.22.90).

²³ Other individual monks with whom the Buddha discusses not-self include Rāhula (SN 2.18.22, 3.22.91, and 3.22.92), a certain Bhikkhu (SN 3.22.68–9), Rādha (SN 3.22.71), and Surādha (SN 3.22.72).

The Buddha continues his anticipation of the questions of rivals, instructing Poṭṭhapāda what to say if asked about the mind-made acquired self and the formless acquired self (DN 9.44–5). When Citta enters the conversation, the Buddha prefaces his teachings in a similarly anticipatory manner: ‘Citta, suppose they were to ask you ... how would you answer?’ (DN 9.49). Here we see that the Buddha delivers his teaching as if it were a rehearsal for future debates. This rhetorical strategy of delivering a teaching as a response to potential rivals appears on several occasions in the Nikāyas.

Despite the anticipation of potential Brahmin interlocutors, however, rarely in the Nikāyas do we find Brahmins in discussions about *anattā*. The only occasion I could find in which a Brahmin participates in a discussion about not-self is in the *Nandakovāda Sutta* (MN 146), in which the monk Nandaka, who is referred to as a Brahmin, instructs the *bhikkhunīs*. While this passes without comment in the text, it is perhaps significant that a Brahmin serves as a mouthpiece for the Buddhist teaching of not-self. On a few occasions the teaching of not-self is put forth in a debate with a non-Buddhist, but none of these interlocutors is explicitly a Brahmin. In the *Poṭṭhapāda Sutta* (DN 9), for example, Poṭṭhapāda and his follower Citta are both described as ‘wanderers’ (*paribbājaka*). Similarly, in the *Aggivacchagotta Sutta* (MN 72), the Buddha teaches *anattā* to the *paribbājaka* Vacchagotta. On another occasion, in the *Cūlasaccaka Sutta* (MN 35), the Buddha debates about views of the self with Saccaka, who is described as the son of Jain parents (‘the Nigaṇṭha’s son’; MN 35.2). When we look at the Buddha’s interlocutors in discussions about not-self, alongside the various views of not-self that he describes, we might conclude that, although some views of not-self seem to be directed at Brahmins, other traditions may have been their more significant rivals on these issues.

Conclusion

As Samuel (2008: 100) observes, the characterisation of Buddhism as a protest movement against Brahmanism has been widely rejected. None the less, it is still common to present Buddhist notions of not-self as a response to or rejection of brahmanical ideas of the self. While this may partially be true, the Buddhist sources suggest that the situation was far more complicated. As we have seen, the Nikāyas do indicate that some of their views about selfhood are in response to brahmanical ideas. Moreover, the shared modes of expression and rhetorical strategies used to convey teachings of self indicate that Buddhist composers may have had some degree of familiarity with brahmanical literature, such as the Upaniṣads. However, while the Buddhists do not accept brahmanical notions of self, it is also the case that they resist explicitly denying the existence of a self. In this light, it is perhaps more accurate to portray the Buddhist response to brahmanical ideas as one of questioning basic assumptions, rather than outright rejection. Indeed, in the *Brahmajāla Sutta* (DN 1), the Buddha acknowledges that other views can lead to

their stated goals, telling the monks that such views as eternalism (DN 1.36), part eternalism (2.15), finitude (2.22), and infinitude (2.22) can lead to destinations in another world. Such views, then, are not completely false or ineffective in achieving certain results. In other words, the Buddha does not reject these views on the grounds that they are not efficacious, but rather because the results they achieve are not desirable and that they are incapable of bringing about the goals set forth by the Buddha. Even more revealing is the fact that the Buddhist sources seem more concerned with other, non-brahmanical potential opponents when articulating their idea of not-self. This is particularly striking when considering how much textual attention is devoted to debates with Brahmins. Thus, while the Buddhists were entrenched in debates about selfhood with rival traditions, the narratives suggest that Brahmins were not their main opponents on this issue; conversely, while Brahmins are often depicted as the Buddhists' main rival group, the narrative accounts of debates with Brahmins are not about the self.