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**Vedānta and Buddhism**  
**A Comparative Study**

*Helmuth von Glasenapp*



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by

**Helmuth von Glasenapp**

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# Preface

The present treatise by Prof. Dr. H. von Glasenapp has been selected for reprint particularly in view of the excellent elucidation of the Anattā doctrine which it contains. The treatise, in its German original, appeared in 1950 in the Proceedings of the Akademie der Wissenschaften and Literatur (Academy of Sciences and Literature). The present selection from that original is based on the abridged translation published in *The Buddhist*, Vol. XXI, No. 12 (Colombo 1951). Partial use has also been made of a different selection and translation which appeared in *The Middle Way*, Vol. XXXI, No. 4 (London 1957).

The author of this treatise was an eminent Indologist of Western Germany, of the University of Königsberg. He also occupied the indological chair of the University of Tübingen. Among his many scholarly publications are books on Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism and on comparative religion.

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# Vedānta and Buddhism



edānta and Buddhism are the highlights of Indian philosophical thought. Since both have grown in the same spiritual soil, they share many basic ideas: both of them assert that the universe shows a periodical succession of arising, existing and vanishing, and that this process is without beginning and end. They believe in the causality which binds the result of an action to its cause (*karma*), and in rebirth conditioned by that nexus. Both are convinced of the transitory, and therefore sorrowful character, of individual existence in the world; they hope to attain gradually to a redeeming knowledge through renunciation and meditation, and they assume the possibility of a blissful and serene state, in which all worldly imperfections have vanished for ever. The original form of these two doctrines shows however strong contrasts. The early Vedānta, formulated in most of the older and middle Upanishads, in some passages of the Mahābhārata and the Purāṇas, and still alive today (though greatly changed) as the basis of several Hinduistic systems, teaches an *ens realissimum* (an entity of highest reality) as the primordial cause of all existence, from which everything has arisen and with which it again merges, either temporarily or for ever.

With the monistic metaphysics of the Vedānta contrasts the pluralistic Philosophy of Flux of the early Buddhism of the Pali texts which up to the present time flourishes in Ceylon,

Burma and Siam. It teaches that in the whole empirical reality there is nowhere anything that persists; neither material nor mental substances exist independently by themselves; there is no original entity or primordial Being in whatsoever form it may be imagined, from which these substances might have developed. On the contrary, the manifold world of mental and material elements arises solely through the causal co-operation of transitory factors of existence (*dharma*) which depend functionally upon each other; that is, the material and mental universe arises through the concurrence of forces that, according to the Buddhists, are not reducible to something else. It is therefore obvious that deliverance from saṃsāra, i.e., the sorrow-laden round of existence, cannot consist in the re-absorption into an eternal Absolute which is at the root of all manifoldness, but can only be achieved by a complete extinguishing of all factors which condition the processes constituting life and world. The Buddhist Nirvāna is, therefore, not the primordial ground, the eternal essence, which is at the basis of everything and from which the whole world has arisen (the Brahman of the Upanishads) but the reverse of all that we know, something altogether different which must be characterized as a nothing in relation to the world, but which is experienced as highest bliss by those who have attained to it (Aṅguttara Nikāya, Navaka-nipāta 34). Vedāntists and Buddhists have been fully aware of the gulf between their doctrines, a gulf that cannot be bridged over. According to Majjhima Nikāya,

Sutta 22, a doctrine that proclaims “The same is the world and the self. This I shall be after death; imperishable, permanent, eternal!” (see Brh. Up. 4, 4, 13), was styled by the Buddha a perfectly foolish doctrine. On the other side, the Katha-Upanishad (4, 14) does not see a way to deliverance in the Buddhist theory of dharmas (impersonal processes): He who supposes a profusion of particulars gets lost like rain water on a mountain slope; the truly wise man, however, must realize that his ātman is at one with the Universal Atman, and that the former, if purified from dross, is being absorbed by the latter, “just as clear water poured into clear water becomes one with it, indistinguishably.”

Vedānta and Buddhism have lived side by side for such a long time that obviously they must have influenced each other. The strong predilection of the Indian mind for a doctrine of universal unity (monism) has led the representatives of Mahayana to conceive Saṃsāra and Nirvāna as two aspects of the same and single true reality; for Nāgārjuna the empirical world is a mere appearance, as all dharmas, manifest in it, are perishable and conditioned by other dharmas, without having any independent existence of their own. Only the indefinable “Voidness” (*sūnyatā*) to be grasped in meditation, and realized in Nirvāna, has true reality.

This so-called Middle Doctrine of Nāgārjuna remains true to the Buddhist principle that there can be nowhere a substance, in so far as Nāgārjuna sees the last unity as a

kind of abyss, characterized only negatively, which has no genetic relation to the world. Asaṅga and Vasubandhu, however, in their doctrine of Consciousness Only, have abandoned the Buddhist principle of denying a positive reality which is at the root all phenomena, and in doing so, they have made a further approach to Vedānta. To that mahayanistic school of Yogācāras, the highest reality is a pure and undifferentiated spiritual element that represents the non-relative substratum of all phenomena. To be sure, they thereby do not assert, as the (older) Vedānta does, that the *ens realissimum* (the highest essence) is identical with the universe; the relation between the two is rather being defined as “being neither different nor not different.” It is only in the later Buddhist systems of the Far East that the undivided, absolute consciousness is taken to be the basis of the manifold world of phenomena. But in contrast to the older Vedānta, it is never maintained that the world is an unfoldment from the unchangeable, eternal, blissful Absolute; suffering and passions, manifest in the world of plurality, are rather traced back to worldly delusion.

On the other hand, the doctrines of later Buddhist philosophy had a far-reaching influence on Vedānta. It is well known that Gaudapada, and other representatives of later Vedānta, taught an illusionistic acosmism, for which true Reality is only “the eternally pure, eternally awakened, eternally redeemed” universal spirit whilst all manifoldness is only delusion; the Brahman has therefore not developed into the world, as asserted by the older Vedānta, but it

forms only the world's unchangeable background, comparable to the white screen on which appear the changing images of an unreal shadow play.

In my opinion, there was in later times, especially since the Christian era, much mutual influence of Vedānta and Buddhism, but originally the systems are diametrically opposed to each other. The Atman doctrine of the Vedānta and the Dharma theory of Buddhism exclude each other. The Vedānta tries to establish an Atman as the basis of everything, whilst Buddhism maintains that everything in the empirical world is only a stream of passing Dharmas (impersonal and evanescent processes) which therefore has to be characterized as Anattā, i.e., being without a persisting self, without independent existence.

Again and again scholars have tried to prove a closer connection between the early Buddhism of the Pali texts, and the Vedānta of the Upanishads; they have even tried to interpret Buddhism as a further development of the Atman doctrine. There are, e.g., two books which show that tendency: *The Vedāntic Buddhism of the Buddha*, by J.G. Jennings (Oxford University Press, 1947), and in German language, *The Soul Problem of Early Buddhism*, by Herbert Guenther (Konstanz 1949).

The essential difference between the conception of deliverance in Vedānta and in Pali Buddhism lies in the following ideas: Vedānta sees deliverance as the manifestation of a state which, though obscured, has been

existing from time immemorial; for the Buddhist, however, Nirvāna is a reality which differs entirely from all dharmas as manifested in Saṃsāra, and which only becomes effective if they are abolished. To sum up: the Vedāntin wishes to penetrate to the last reality which dwells within him as an immortal essence, or seed, out of which everything has arisen. The follower of Pali Buddhism, however, hopes by complete abandoning of all corporeality, all sensations, all perceptions, all volitions, and all acts of consciousness, to realize a state of bliss which is entirely different from all that exists in the Saṃsāra.

After these introductory remarks we shall now discuss systematically the relation of original Buddhism and Vedānta.

(1) First of all we have to clarify to what extent a knowledge of Upanishadic texts may be assumed for the canonical Pali scriptures. The five old prose Upanishads are, on reasons of contents and language, generally held to be pre-Buddhistic. The younger Upanishads, in any case those beginning from Maitrāyaṇa, were certainly written at a time when Buddhism already existed.

The number of passages in the Pali Canon dealing with Upanishadic doctrines, is very small. It is true that early Buddhism shares many doctrines with the Upanishads (*karma*, rebirth, liberation through insight), but these tenets were so widely held in philosophical circles of those times that we can no longer regard the Upanishads as the direct

source from which the Buddha has drawn. The special metaphysical concern of the Upanishads, the identity of the individual and the universal Atman, has been mentioned and rejected only in a few passages in the early Buddhist texts, for instance in the saying of the Buddha quoted earlier. Nothing shows better the great distance that separates the Vedānta and the teachings of the Buddha than the fact that the two principal concepts of Upanishadic wisdom, ātman and Brahman, do not appear anywhere in the Buddhist texts, with the clear and distinct meaning of a “primordial ground of the world, core of existence, *ens realissimum* (true substance),” or similarly. As this holds likewise true for the early Jaina literature, one must assume that early Vedānta was of no great importance in Magadha, at the time of the Buddha and the Mahāvīra; otherwise the opposition against it would have left more distinct traces in the texts of these two doctrines.

(2) It is of decisive importance for examining the relation between Vedānta and Buddhism, clearly to establish the meaning of the words *atta* and *anattā* in Buddhist literature.

The meaning of the word *attan* (nominative: *attā*, Sanskrit: *ātman*, nominative: *ātmā*) divides into two groups. (a) In daily usage, *attan* (“self”) serves for denoting one’s own person, and has the function of a reflexive pronoun. This usage is, for instance, illustrated in the 12th Chapter of the Dhammapada. (b) As a philosophical term, *attan* denotes the individual soul as assumed by the Jainas and other schools, but rejected by the Buddhists. This individual soul

was held to be an eternal unchangeable spiritual monad, perfect and blissful by nature, although its qualities may be temporarily obscured through its connection with matter. Starting from this view held by the heretics, the Buddhists further understand by the term “self” (*ātman*) any eternal, unchangeable individual entity, in other words, that which Western metaphysics calls a “substance”: “something existing through and in itself, and not through something else; nor existing attached to, or inherent in, something else.” In the philosophical usage of the Buddhists, *attan* is, therefore, any entity of which the heretics wrongly assume that it exists independently of everything else, and that it has existence on its own strength.

The word *anattan* (nominative: *anattā*) is a noun (Sanskrit: *anātmā*) and means “not-self” in the sense of an entity that is not independent. The word *anātman* is found in its meaning of “what is not the Soul (or Spirit),” also in brahmanical Sanskrit sources (Bhagavadgīta, 6.6; śaṅkara to *Brahmasūtra* I.1.1, *Bibl. Indica*, p. 76; *Vedāntasāra* § 158). Its frequent use in Buddhism is accounted for by the Buddhists’ characteristic preference for negative nouns. Phrases like *rūpaṃ anattā* are therefore to be translated “corporeality is a not-self,” or “corporeality is not an independent entity,” or similarly.

As an adjective, the word *anattan* changes from the consonantal to the *a*-declension; *anattā* (see Sanskrit *anātmaka*, *anātmya*), e.g., *Samyutta* 22: 5.7 (PTS III p. 56), *anattaṃ rūpaṃ ... anattā saṅkhāre ... na pajānāti* (“he does not know that corporeality is without self, ... that the mental

formations are without self"). The word *anattā* is therefore, to be translated here by "not having the nature of a self, not independent, without a (persisting) self, without an (eternal) substance," etc. The passage "*anattaṃ rūpaṃ 'anattā rūpaṃ' ti yathābhutaṃ na pajānāti*" has to be rendered: "With regard to corporeality having not the nature of a self, he does not know according to truth, 'Corporeality is a not-self (not an independent entity).'" The noun *attan* and the adjective *anattā* can both be rendered by "without a self, without an independent essence, without a persisting core," since the Buddhists themselves do not make any difference in the use of these two grammatical forms. This becomes particularly evident in the case of the word *anattā*, which may be either a singular or a plural noun. In the well-known phrase *sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā ... sabbe dhammā anattā* (Dhp. 279), "all conditioned factors of existence are transitory ... all factors existent whatever (Nirvāna included) are without a self," it is undoubtedly a plural noun, for the Sanskrit version has "*sarve dharmā anātmānaḥ*."

The fact that the *anattā* doctrine only purports to state that a *dharma* is "void of a self," is evident from the passage in the Saṃyutta Nikāya (35, 85; PTS IV, p.54) where it is said *rūpā suññā attena vā attaniyena vā*, "forms are void of a self (an independent essence) and of anything pertaining to a self (or 'self-like')."

Where Guenther has translated *anattan* or *anattā* as "not the self," one should use "a self" instead of "the self," because in the Pali Canon the word *attā* does not occur in the sense of

“universal soul.”

(3) It is not necessary to assume that the existence of indestructible monads is a necessary condition for a belief in life after death. The view that an eternal, immortal, persisting soul substance is the *condition sine qua non* of rebirth can be refuted by the mere fact that not only in the older Upanishads, but also in Pythagoras and Empedocles, rebirth is taught without the assumption of an imperishable soul substance.

(4) Guenther can substantiate his view only through arbitrary translations which contradict the whole of Buddhist tradition. This is particularly evident in those passages where Guenther asserts that “the Buddha meant the same by Nirvāna and ātman” and that “Nirvāna is the true nature of man.” For in Udāna 8, 2, Nirvāna is expressly described as *anattaṃ*, which is rightly rendered by the commentator Dhammapāla’s commentary to the Udāna (p. 21) as *atta-virahita* (without a self), and in Vinaya V p. 86, Nirvāna is said to be, just as the conditioned factors of existence (*saṅkhata*), “without a self” (p. 151).

Neither can the equation ātman = Nirvāna be proved by the well-known phrase “*attadīpā viharatha dhammadīpā*,” for, whether *dīpa* here means “lamp” or “island of deliverance,” this passage can, after all, only refer to the monks taking refuge in themselves and in the doctrine (*Dhamma*), and *attan* and *Dhamma* cannot possibly be interpreted as Nirvāna. In the same way, too, it is quite preposterous to

translate Dhammapada 160, “*attā hi attano nātho*,” as “Nirvāna is for a man the leader” (p. 155); for the chapter is concerned only with the idea that we should strive hard and purify ourselves. Otherwise Guenther would have to translate in the following verse 161, *attanā va kataṃ pāpaṃ attajaṃ attasambhavaṃ*: “By Nirvāna evil is done, it arises out of Nirvāna, it has its origin in Nirvāna.” It is obvious that this kind of interpretation must lead to manifestly absurd consequences.

(5) As far as I can see there is not a single passage in the Pali Canon where the word *atta* is used in the sense of the Upanishadic *ātman*. [1] This is not surprising, since the word *ātman*, current in all Indian philosophical systems, has the meaning of “universal soul, *ens realissimum*, the Absolute,” exclusively in the pan-en-theistic and theopantistic Vedānta, but, in that sense, it is alien to all other brahmanical and non-Buddhist doctrines. Why, then, should it have a Vedāntic meaning in Buddhism? As far as I know, no one has ever conceived the idea of giving to the term *ātman* a Vedāntic interpretation, in the case of Nyaya, Vaisesika, classical śāṅkhya, Yoga, Mīmāṃsā, or Jainism.

**all worldly  
phenomena**

## are said to be *anattā*

(6) The fact that in the Pali Canon all worldly phenomena are said to be *anattā* has induced some scholars of the West to look for an ātman in Buddhism. For instance, the following “great syllogism” was formulated by George Grimm: “What I perceive to arise and to cease, and to cause suffering to me, on account of that impermanence, cannot be my ego. Now I perceive that everything cognizable in me and around me, arises and ceases, and causes me suffering on account of its impermanence. Therefore nothing cognizable is my ego.” From that Grimm concludes that there must be an eternal ego-substance that is free from all suffering, and above all cognizability. This is a rash conclusion. By teaching that there is nowhere in the world a persisting ātman, the Buddha has not asserted that there must be a transcendental ātman (i.e., a self beyond the world). This kind of logic resembles that of a certain Christian sect which worships its masters as “Christs on earth,” and tries to prove the simultaneous existence of several Christs from Mark 13, 22, where it is said: “False Christs and false prophets shall arise”; for, if there are false Christs, there must also be genuine Christs!

The denial of an imperishable ātman is common ground for all systems of Hinayana as well as Mahayana, and there is, therefore, no reason for the assumption that Buddhist tradition, unanimous on that point, has deviated from the original doctrine of the Buddha. If the Buddha, contrary to

the Buddhist tradition, had actually proclaimed a transcendental ātman, a reminiscence of it would have been preserved somehow by one of the numerous sects. It is remarkable that even the Pudgalavādins, who assume a kind of individual soul, never appeal to texts in which an ātman in this sense is proclaimed. He who advocates such a revolutionary conception of the Buddha's teachings, has also the duty to show evidence how such a complete transformation started and grew, suddenly or gradually. But none of those who advocate the ātman-theory has taken pains to comply with that demand which is indispensable to a historian.

(7) In addition to the aforementioned reasons, there are other grounds too, which speak against the supposition that the Buddha has identified ātman and Nirvāna. It remains quite incomprehensible why the Buddha should have used this expression which is quite unsuitable for Nirvāna and would have aroused only wrong associations in his listeners. Though it is true that Nirvāna shares with the Vedāntic conception of ātman the qualification of eternal peace into which the liberated ones enter for ever, on the other hand, the ātman is in brahmanical opinion, something mental and conscious, a description which does not hold true for Nirvāna. Furthermore, Nirvāna is not, like the ātman, the primordial ground or the divine principle of the world (Aitareya Up. 1, 1), nor is it that which preserves order in the world (Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 3, 8, 9); it is also not the substance from which everything evolves, nor

the core of all material elements.

(8) Since the scholarly researches made by Otto Rosenberg (published in Russian 1918, in German trs. 1924), Th. Stcherbatsky (1932), and the great work of translation done by Louis de la Vallee Poussin *Abhidharmakoṣa* (1923–31) there cannot be any doubt about the basic principle of Buddhist philosophy. In the light of these researches, all attempts to give to the *ātman* a place in the Buddhist doctrine, appear to be quite antiquated. We know now that all Hinayana and Mahayana schools are based on the *anātma-dharma* theory. This theory explains the world through the causal co-operation of a multitude of transitory factors (*dharma*), arising in mutual functional dependence. This theory maintains that the entire process of liberation consists in the tranquillization of these incessantly arising and disappearing factors. For that process of liberation however, is required, apart from moral restraint (*sīla*) and meditative concentration (*samādhi*), the insight (*prajñā*) that all conditioned factors of existence (*saṃskāra*) are transitory, without a permanent independent existence, and therefore subject to grief and suffering. The Nirvāna which the saint experiences already in this life, and which he enters for ever after death, is certainly a reality (*dharma*), but as it neither arises nor vanishes, it is not subject to suffering, and is thereby distinguished from all conditioned realities. Nirvāna being a *dharma*, is likewise *anattā*, just as the transitory, conditioned dharmas of the *saṃsāra* which, as caused by volitions (that is, karma-producing energies

[*saṃskāra*]), are themselves also called *saṃskāra*. Like them, Nirvāna is no individual entity which could will or act independently. For it is the basic idea of the entire system that all dharmas are devoid of Atman, and without cogent reasons we cannot assume that the Buddha himself has taught something different from that which, since more than two thousand years, his followers have considered to be the quintessence of their doctrine.

# Notes

1. Except in a few passages rejecting it, as the one quoted by the author: “The same is the world and the self”; see also Suttanipāta, v 477; and one of the six ego-beliefs rejected in MN 2: “Even by the self I perceive the self’: this view occurs to him as being true and correct” (*attanā va attānaṃ sañjānāmī’ti*). Cf Bhagavadgīta VI.19 *Yatra caiv’ ātmanā ātmānaṃ pasyann-ātmani tusyati*. (Ed.)

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