

‘Asati’ in the Alagaddūpamasutta

Ernst Steinkellner

In an earlier paper, I tried to explain how and why a denial of the existence of a permanent self (*attā*) by the Buddha cannot be definitively attached to the attribute in the expression *saccato thetato anupalabbhamāne*¹. I also rejected (in note 35) the possibility propounded by K. R. Norman² that in passages of the Alagaddūpamasutta (MN I 135 ff.) the Buddha denied its existence “by implication, if not explicitly”³. Then I said with regard to the concluding sentence of the first paragraph (MN I 135, 27 - 136, 15), where the Buddha deals with six wrong views (*ditthiṭṭhānāni*), namely *so evaṃ samanupassanto asati na paritassatīti* (MN I 136, 15 f.) that “the attribute *asat* refers to the ideas, “mine, I self” as identified in the views rejected above...”, and “that it cannot be understood as an attribute of the Self...”⁴.

Following Buddhaghosa (Ps II 111, 11 - 15), I took this sentence to be the conclusion of the preceding paragraph and, therefore, related *asati* to the last of the preceding views, namely that there is a self and that “after death I will exist, as permanent, lasting, eternal, unchanging” (*so pecca bhavissāmi nicco dhuvo sassato avipariṇāmadhammo...*, MN I 135, 37 f.).

However, limiting of the reference of *asati* to the last view is certainly wrong. It would have to refer to all the six views mentioned, i.e. the view of an untrained person with regard to *rūpa* and the other constituents “that is mine, I am that, that is my self” (*etaṃ mama eso ’ham asmī eso me attā*, MN I 135, 31)⁵. It may be possible to regard these six views as non-existent (*asat*) when—in the second part of the paragraph—the trained expert in the *dhamma* correctly considers *rūpa* etc. as “that is not mine”, etc.⁶, thereby eliminating the wrong views, rendering them non-existent. But why would the Buddha then conclude with the words “He, when regarding [these six

items] in this way, is not anxious about something which does not exist” ? Anxiety (*paritassanā*) was not considered at all in the preceding text. Therefore, it does not seem appropriate to summarize in opposition that anxiety does not prevail with the trained expert in the *dhamma*. However, if it is stated here, at the end of the paragraph, that the trained person (*ariyasāvako*) is not anxious about something which does not exist (*asati na paritassati*), this statement implies that (although not indicated at all) the opposite is the case indeed with the untrained person (*assutavā puthujjano*) who cares for his possessions and his own existence and, thus, might be anxious when hearing the Buddha’s teaching for uprooting all resolve for the corresponding wrong views. In this sense the last sentence of the paragraph indicates a new, hitherto not yet mentioned consequence of the preceding which demands an explanation. This explanation is, then, delivered in the following paragraph. In other words, while the reference of *asati* to something in the preceding paragraph is not very likely, the statement that he is not anxious (*na paritassati*) in conclusion indicates a newly considered consequence of the preceding paragraph which, however, has not been touched upon so far.

The solution to this textual problem is not my own. I owe the decisive clues to my friends Lambert Schmithausen⁷ and Enomoto Fumio⁸ rather than as a concluding sentence of the preceding paragraph, this sentence must be considered as introducing the topic of the following paragraph, namely that of anxiety about something which does not exist (*asati paritassanā*).

The Buddha ends the preceding, or begins the following paragraph first by referring back to the trained person who correctly regards *rūpa* etc. as “that is not mine”, etc. (*so evaṃ samanupassanto*), and then introduces the new topic (*asati na paritassati*). And, indeed, anxiety (*paritassanā*) is the topic of the next paragraph (MN I 136, 17 - 137, 16). It is here, then, that we have to look for the terms which *asati* refers to.

After the introductory sentence of the Buddha (*so evaṃ samanupassanto asati na paritassatīti*, MN I 136, 15 f.), the theme of anxiety is developed in four steps consisting of a monk’s four questions together with the Buddha’s answers, the first being asked with reference to the words of the Buddha which introduce this paragraph (*evaṃ vutte...*) :

- 1a (136, 18 - 23) : ... *bahiddhā asati paritassanā ti* (136, 18)
 1b (136, 23 - 29) : ... *bahiddhā asati aparitassanā ti* (136, 23 f.)
 2a (136, 29 - 137, 4) : ... *ajjhataṃ asati paritassanā ti* (136, 29 f.)
 2b (137, 4 - 16) : ... *ajjhataṃ asati aparitassanā ti* (137, 4 f.)

In the first case, one grieves etc. (1a), or one does not grieve etc. (1b) for something objective, something external (*bahiddhā*)⁹ which does not exist (*asati*), because it is either no longer existent now¹⁰, or because now there is no chance of obtaining it¹¹.

In the second case, one grieves etc. (2a), or one does not grieve etc. (2b) for something subjective, something internal (*ajjhataṃ*), namely the self (*attā*) as one might wrongly imagine it (*ekaccassa evaṃ ditṭhi hoti* 136, 31), which does not exist (*asati*), because the wrongly imagined self will be no longer existent in the future¹², after hearing the Tathāgata's *dhamma* for uprooting all resolve for, etc., the wrong views (*ditṭhiṭṭhānādhiṭṭhāna...* 136, 33 - 37).

Thus, it is indeed the self which, as something internal, is said to be non-existent (*asati*), here. But it is the wrongly imagined future non-existence of the self only that this paragraph deals with, and, it neither explicitly nor implicitly denies the existence of the self as such.

That I dare to offer what is essentially a footnote to a previous footnote as a contribution to this volume in celebration of the Muni Jambuvijaya demands an apology. But the subject's import is considerable. For what it means is no less than the dispelling of the last vestiges of doubt that could possibly creep in upon the point then made, that the Buddha did not expressly state a negation of the existence of a self.

Annotations :

1. E. Steinkellner, "Lamotte and the Concept of *aṇupalabdhi*", *Études asiatiques*, 46, 1, Bern etc. 1992, pp. 398-410.
2. K. R. Norman, "A Note on *attā* in the Alagaddūpama-Sutta", in *Studies in Indian Philosophy. A Memorial Volume in Honour of Pandit Sukhlalji Sanghavi*, Ahmedabad 1981, pp. 19-29.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

4. E.g. with F. J. Hoffman, *Rationality and Mind in Early Buddhism*, Delhi 1987, p. 53.
5. Although, contextually, *asati* could also refer to *rūpa*, etc.; however, this is nonsensical, because *rūpa*, etc., certainly does exist.
6. This is Buddhaghosa's interpretation : *iminā bhagavā ajjhatakkhandavināse aparitassamānaṃ...*Ps II 111, 13 f.
7. A marginal note in the manuscript of his lectures on Buddhist Philosophy of 1988/1989 (V, 8) reads : "The sentence does not go well together with the preceding. ... With regard to the following, however, it is meaningful. But there it refers, on the one hand, to no longer existing external things one grieves after, and, on the other hand, to the imagined future non-existence of the *ātman* (in the mind of somebody who responds to the teaching of the Buddha with the view of a static eternal self" (my translation). I would like to thank Professor Schmithausen for allowing me to publish this note and to use his idea for my paper.
8. In a letter of October 23rd, 1992, Enomoto says : "I would think the attribute *asati* still refers to something objective (*bahiddhā*) and subjective (*ajjhataṃ*),..."
9. I.e., according to Buddhaghosa, requisites (*parikkhāra*), like valuables, vehicles, mounts, gold, and jewellery (Ps II 111, 20 and 25).
10. Because it was taken away or ruined by kings, thieves, fire, etc. (Ps II 111, 26 - 28).
11. *āhu vata me, taṃ vata me na tthi, siyā vata me, taṃ vatāhaṃ na labhāmīti*. MN I 136, 20 f.
12. *ucchijjissāmi nāma su, vinassissāmi nāma su, na su nāma bhavissāmīti*. MN I 137, 1 f.

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