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AN INSPIRED UTTERANCE ON ANNIHILATION

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Abstract

Based on a translation of the Chinese *Āgama* parallel to the *Udānasutta* (SN 22.55), the article evaluates the significance of the early Buddhist adoption of a maxim ostensibly employed by ancient Indian practitioners aiming at annihilation. The main proposal is that changing a formulation of the type “I will not be” to “it will not be” probably intends to encourage a shift of attention from the unwarranted assumption that there is a truly existing self, underlying the original maxim, to targeting clinging to self-notions and conceit as the appropriate objects of annihilation.

Keywords

Adhimutta Thera; Annihilationism; neither-perception-nor-non-perception; not self; right view; *Samyuktāgama*; *udāna*

Introduction

This article presents a translation and study of the *Samyuktāgama* parallel to the *Udānasutta* of the *Khandhasamyutta*. The *Samyuktāgama* collection in question, found as entry 99 in the Taishō edition, results from a translation begun in 435 CE by the Chinese monk Baoyun,¹ based on an original read out to him by the Indian monk Guṇabhadra. The original used for this translation appears to have been acquired by the Chinese monk Faxian during his sojourn in Sri Lanka.² Faxian stayed at the Abhayagiri Monastery,³ which appears to have had lively contacts with various Buddhist traditions in India. The Chinese pilgrim would thus presumably have had access to the relevant manuscript from the library of the Abhayagiri Monastery. Comparison of the extant *Samyuktāgama* translation with discourse quotations in other Mūlasarvāstivāda texts make it safe to conclude that the Indic original used by Faxian stems from a Mūlasarvāstivāda reciter lineage.⁴

In what follows, my study of the *Samyuktāgama* discourse that parallels the *Udānasutta* alternates between translations from the Chinese and comments on aspects of the relevant text.⁵

Translation (Part 1)

Thus have I heard. At one time the Buddha was staying at Sāvattthī in the Eastern Park, the Hall of Migāra’s Mother. At that time the Blessed One rose from meditation in the afternoon, came out of the hall and, in the shade of

the hall, sat down on a prepared seat in front of a great assembly. At that time the Blessed One uttered an inspired utterance:

“In the Dharma there is no ‘I’

And also no ‘mine.’

Since there won’t be an ‘I,’

How could ‘mine’ arise?

A monastic resolved on this,⁶

Will abandon the lower type of fetters.”

Then a certain monastic rose up from his seat, bared his right shoulder, knelt on the ground with his right knee and, with palms together, said to the Buddha: “Blessed One, how is it that:

‘There is no ‘I’

And also no ‘mine.’

Since there won’t be an ‘I,’

How could ‘mine’ arise?

A monastic resolved on this

Will abandon the lower type of fetters?’”

Study (Part 1)

Unlike the version translated above, the Pāli discourse sets in directly with the Buddha’s inspired utterance and thus does not report his afternoon meditation, etc., or the detail that the Buddha sat down “in the shade of the hall.” The inspired utterance (*udāna*) itself is one of several cases where *udānas* are found outside of the canonical *Udāna* collection.⁷ Its wording in the Pāli version is as follows:⁸

It might no be, and it might not be for me;

It will not be, and it will not be for me.

no c’assa no ca me siyā,

na bhavissati na me bhavissati.

The Pāli discourse continues after the inspired utterance by indicating that a monastic determined on this aphorism will cut off the lower fetters. Thus, the main difference between the two parallels is the content of the inspired utterance in question. As will become evident below, however, repetitions of this inspired utterance in the Chinese version differ from the version given first and translated above.

Here it may well be of relevance that, as noted by Zürcher (1991: 288), in Chinese translations “there is a strong tendency to avoid the monotonous effect of ... verbatim repetition ... by introducing a certain amount of diversification and

irregularity.” As a result of this tendency, “in the same translated scripture we often find various alternative forms and longer or shorter versions of the same cliché.” Perhaps due to the somewhat puzzling nature of the actual inspired utterance, Guṇabhadra gave some explanation of his understanding of its implications, and these influenced the translation. Needless to say, this is just a speculation on my part and at present it is no longer possible to provide any evidence for the proposed scenario.

Translation (Part 2)

The Buddha said to the monastic: “A foolish unlearned worldling speculates that bodily form is the self, is distinct from the self [in the sense of being owned by it], exists [within the self, or a self] exists [within bodily form] ... that feeling tone ... perception ... formations ... consciousness is the self, is distinct from the self [in the sense of being owned by it], exists [within the self, or a self] exists [within consciousness].⁹

“A learned noble disciple does not see bodily form as the self, as distinct from the self [in the sense of being owned by it], as existing [within the self, or a self] as existing [within bodily form], does not see feeling tone ... perception ... formations ... consciousness as the self, as distinct from the self [in the sense of being owned by it], as existing [within the self, or a self] as existing [within consciousness]; being one who does not understand [it in this way], does not see [it in this way].

“This bodily form is impermanent; feeling tone ... perception ... formations ... consciousness is impermanent. Bodily form is *dukkha*; feeling tone ... perception ... formations ... consciousness is *dukkha*. Bodily form is not self; feeling tone ... perception ... formations ... consciousness is not self. This bodily form will not be; feeling tone ... perception ... formations ... consciousness will not be. This bodily form will become extinct; feeling tone ... perception ... formations ... consciousness will become extinct. Therefore, it is not I and not mine. There shall be no I and mine. One who resolves in this way will abandon the five lower type of fetters.”

Study (Part 2)

The Pāli discourse agrees with its *Samyuktāgama* counterpart that each aggregate will come to an end, *vibhavissati*; in fact, it has such a treatment already in its exposition on the worldling.¹⁰ The Pāli commentary explains that this refers to the fact that each aggregate will break up, *bhijjissati*.¹¹ Bhikkhu Bodhi (2000: 1063 note 76) offers an alternative interpretation: “I believe the verb refers to the final cessation of the aggregates with the attainment of the *anupādisesanibbānadhātu*. This meaning harmonizes better with the opening formula, and also seems supported by Th 715cd: *saṅkhārā vibhavissanti, tattha kā paridevanā*.”¹²

The relevant stanza from the *Theragāthā* (Th 715) forms part of a fearless reply given by the arahant Adhimutta Thera to bandits about to kill him. The reading

of the relevant line is uncertain, as some editions read *saṅkhārā vigamissanti* instead. Norman (1969: 226) considers *saṅkhārā vibhavissanti* to be the preferable reading, as “the structure of the verse, with *bhavati* appearing four times in one form or another in the first line, seems to demand a compound of *bhavati* in the second line.” However, it is also possible that the occurrence of *bhavissāmī* in the preceding line led to an error during the course of oral transmission, whereby the reading *vigamissanti* was accidentally changed to become *vibhavissanti*. Anyhow, whatever may be the last word on the preferable reading, on adopting *vibhavissanti* the stanza could be rendered poetically as follows:

It does not occur to me
That ‘I was’ or ‘I will be.’
Formations will come to end,
So, what is there to lament?

Here *saṅkhārā vibhavissanti* does indeed refer to the (impending) death of an arahant. Nevertheless, the expression as such does not seem to be specific to such an event. Suppose the bandits had gotten hold of another person who is not an arahant, perhaps even a close relative of Adhimutta Thera. Could he not still employ the phrase *saṅkhārā vibhavissanti* to express that he is free of any lamentation? Such a usage would be in line with a sense carried by the corresponding noun *vibhava*, which at times can just refer to ordinary death.¹³

Be that as it may, in the case of the *Udānasutta*, the other characteristics of the aggregates all apply not only to the noble disciple but also to the worldling. It is the impermanent, *dukkha*, and not self nature of their own aggregates that worldlings fail to understand, whereas noble disciples understand this. In such a setting, the additional specification regarding the coming to an end or annihilation of each aggregate probably follows the same pattern of being applicable to the worldlings’ own aggregates. In fact, since a worldling is neither an arahant nor on the path to arahant-ship, the cessation of the aggregates of an arahant would not really be a relevant topic, certainly much less so than the ending of one’s own aggregates. In sum, it seems fair to assume that the indication that each aggregate will come to an end or be annihilated could simply be a way of driving home with additional force the fact of impermanence.

As mentioned earlier, the Chinese version presents the inspired utterance in different ways. At the outset it had: “There is no ‘I’ and also no ‘mine’. Since there won’t be an ‘I’, how could ‘mine’ arise?” In the present section, however, the following phrase can be found: “It is not I and not mine, there shall be no I and mine,” the later part of which comes a bit closer to the Pāli phrase. Since this is followed by an indication regarding “one who resolves in this way,” it is clear that this must be intending the same inspired utterance. In the part of the Chinese version to be translated next, yet another variation occurs in the form of describing the worldling’s fear “that ‘there is no ‘I’,’ that ‘there is no ‘mine’,’ that

these two together should not arise.”

Translation (Part 3)

Then that monastic said to the Buddha: “Blessed One, having abandoned the five lower types of fetters, how does one eradicate the influxes and, by the influx-free liberation of the mind and liberation by wisdom, knows here and now for oneself and is completely established in the realization that: ‘Birth for me has been eradicated, the holy life has been established, what had to be done has been done, I myself know that there will be no receiving of further existence?’”

The Buddha said to the monastic: “A foolish worldling, an unlearned being, gives rise to dread and fear on occasions that are not fearful. For a foolish worldling, an unlearned being, it gives rise to fear that there is no ‘I,’ that there is no ‘mine,’ that these two together should not arise.

“There are four establishments of consciousness, by which it is supported. What are the four? That is, consciousness is established on bodily form, is supported by bodily form, craves for and delights in bodily form, [thereby] increasing, expanding, and evolving. Consciousness is established on feeling tone ... perception ... formations, is supported by them, craves for and delights in them, [thereby] increasing, expanding, and evolving.

“Monastic, on this occasion consciousness – as it comes, as it goes, as it is established, as it arises, as it ceases – increases, expands, and evolves. Suppose someone were to say: ‘There is still another way how consciousness – as it comes, as it goes, as it is established, as it arises, as it ceases – increases, expands, and evolves.’ Yet, on being questioned, one who says so would not know and would give rise to ever more bewilderment, because this is outside the sphere of their experience. Why is that?

“Monastic, on having become free from lust for the sphere of bodily form, the fetter that arises in the mind for bodily form is also abandoned. On having abandoned the fetter that arises in the mind for bodily form, the support for consciousness is also abandoned. Consciousness will not be further established and will not further increase, expand, or evolve. On having become free from lust for the sphere of feeling tone ... perception ... formations, the fetter that arises in the mind for feeling tone ... perception ... formations is also abandoned. On having abandoned the fetter that arises in the mind for feeling tone ... perception ... formations, the support [for consciousness] is also abandoned. Consciousness will not be further established, and it will not further increase, expand, or evolve.

“Because consciousness is not established anywhere, it does not increase. Because of not increasing, it is not active anywhere. Because of not being active anywhere, it is steady. Because of being steady, it is content. Because of being content, it is liberated. Because of being liberated, there is no

clinging to anything in the whole world. Because of not clinging to anything, there is no being attached to anything. Because of not being attached to anything, one personally realizes Nirvana, [knowing]: ‘Birth for me has been eradicated, the holy life has been established, what had to be done has been done, I know myself that there will be no receiving of further existence.’

“Monastic, I say that consciousness is not established in the eastern direction, the southern ... western ... northern direction, the four intermediate directions, above, or below. Having relinquished desire, one sees the Dharma, Nirvana, cessation, peace, the cool.”

When the Buddha had spoken this discourse, hearing what the Buddha had said the monastics were delighted and received it respectfully.

Study (Part 3)

Alongside some differences in wording, including the absence in the Pāli version of a counterpart to the paragraph on consciousness not being established in any direction, the parallels agree on the key aspect for progress from non-return, corresponding to the eradication of the five lower fetters, to full awakening. This requires aiming insight at consciousness in particular. In both versions, such cultivation of insight stands in contrast to the worldling’s fear of any threat to what is perceived as the self.

It is this type of fear that in both versions the inspired utterance targets, although due to the variations in the Chinese version it remains uncertain if the two parallels intend exactly the same idea. In the Pāli discourse, at least, this idea is based on a reformulation of an aspiration apparently held by non-Buddhist practitioners in the ancient Indian setting who aspired to annihilation.¹⁴ The annihilationist version of this aspiration takes the following form:

I might not be, and it might not be for me;

I will not be, and it will not be for me.

no c’ assaṃ no ca me siyā,

na bhavissāmi na ca me bhavissati.

The Buddhist adaptation of this aspiration involves changing the first person singular in the first half of each line to the third person singular, so that “I might not be” becomes “it might not be” (*assaṃ* changed to *assa*), and “I will not be” becomes “it will not be” (*bhavissāmi* changed to *bhavissati*). Bhikkhu Bodhi (2000: 1061) reasons that the “change of person shifts the stress from the view of self implicit in the annihilationist version (‘I will be annihilated’) to the impersonal perspective that harmonizes with the *anattā* doctrine.” This is indeed the case. Notably, however, a reference to “me” (*me*) is still found in the second half of both statements. This problem has been duly noted by Ñāṇadīpa Thera (2020: 90 note 4), who comments that in “the first part the Buddha changed the first person of *cassaṃ* in the annihilationist formula to the third person so as to

accord with right view, but not in the second part (*no ca me siyā*). Probably this was because one would not be able to find a third person word that fits the metre, which requires one long syllable.”

Yet, if the envisaged application of right view had indeed been a pressing concern, one would not expect metrical considerations to overrule it. Surely some reformulation could have been found that accurately reflects a matter of such crucial importance in early Buddhist thought as right view. This raises the question of how far right view is indeed the motivating factor at the background of the reformulation of the annihilationist tenet.

Definitions of right view in the early discourses fall into two main types (Anālayo 2018: 30), one of which mentions the four noble truths whereas the other sets a contrast between mistaken types of views, such as the denial of karma, and their opposites. Of these two, the first seems to be more directly relevant to the matter at hand. Notably, in what according to tradition was the first sermon given by the Buddha, he is on record for employing first person singular forms when describing his own realization of the four noble truths.¹⁵ Had the usage of a first person singular form been problematic, this could easily have been avoided by using the third person singular, as is the case in the standard accounts of the gradual path, for example. These begin with a phrase referring to the Buddha’s teaching activity, which serves as the foundation for someone’s undertaking of the gradual path, in the third person singular, stating that “a Tathāgata arises in the world” (*tathāgato loke uppajjati*) and teaches the Dharma.¹⁶ The same basic mode of expression could have easily been used for the Buddha’s description of his insight into the four noble truths in the *Dhammacakkappavattanasutta* and its parallels.

This is not a feature confined to the first sermon, as other discourses also employ formulations that have not been purged of references to the first person singular, yet their presentation does appear to be in full accord with right view. A particularly striking case is the *Saṅkhārappattisutta*, which in the context of a depiction of the power of aspirations in leading to the desired result shows a disciple formulating the aspiration for full awakening in the first person singular (*aho vatāham*) and then indeed reaching it.¹⁷ For this outcome to take place, the disciple must have been endowed with unswerving right view. This passage implies that a commendable type of reflection can still involve explicit reference to ‘I’ without this in any way preventing the speaker from attaining the final goal. It also shows that the use of the first person singular, whenever this happens, is not invariably motivated by the need to adjust to common usage in the ancient Indian setting.

In relation to the two examples given for the Buddha’s own usage, it seems that he was free to use the first or third person singular to refer to himself, according to circumstances. When wishing to impress on his first five disciples the reality of his realization of awakening, the first person singular was the appropriate choice. When depicting the gradual path in such a way as to draw attention to the need for someone who has become a Tathāgata to serve as a teacher for this path,

without restricting this to his own individual case, the more impersonal tone expressed by the third person singular was the proper fit.

In other words, harmonizing with the not self doctrine does not require a change of language. Therefore, the Buddha as well as his awakened disciples could freely use first person verbal forms to refer to themselves. This fact comes up explicitly for discussion in a discourse extant in the *Samyuttanikāya* and its two *Samyukta-āgama* parallels, which agree in indicating that there is no problem when arahants still using the expressions 'I' and 'mine.'¹⁸ This is done simply in conformity with generally established language conventions and is quite compatible with the realization that there is no self (in the sense of an unchanging entity) and with the complete removal of all traces of conceit. In sum, it seems fair to conclude that neither the implementation of right view nor the full realization of not self by an arahant require foregoing the use of the first person singular pronoun or corresponding verbal forms.

The proposed conclusion leads to a need to find a different explanation for the rewording of the annihilationist formulation. Here it is of interest that, according to the *Pañcattayasutta* and its Tibetan parallel, the problem of the annihilationist is that the very attempt to get rid of a self still involves clinging to the notion of a self.¹⁹ As explained by Ñāṇavīra Thera (1987/2001: 81) in a comment related to this passage: "Any attempt I make to abolish my existence tacitly confirms it; for it is *my* existence that I am seeking to abolish." In other words, there is indeed a problem in the aspiration "I will not be."

Another relevant passage occurs in the *Cūlasihanādasutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel, which highlights that insight into the problem caused by clinging to the notion of a self is a specific discovery of the Buddha.²⁰ This is what enabled him to present a comprehensive account of all the types of clinging to be eradicated in order to gain full liberation. It would follow that the problem underlying the aspiration "I will not be" requires the identification and removal of the corresponding type of clinging. This remains outside the purview of the annihilationist practitioners, as long as they fail to recognize the very existence of this type of clinging. That is, even if an annihilationist were to adopt the third person singular, this would not solve the problem as long as clinging to the very notion of a self is still in place.

In sum, then, from an early Buddhist perspective what needs to be annihilated is clinging to the notion of a self. The perspective that emerges in this way would explain the change of terminology of the annihilationist tenet "I might not be" and "I will not be" to "it might not be" and "it will not be." Here the "it" can be interpreted to stand for "clinging." On this understanding, the target shifts from annihilating self to annihilating clinging. The same interpretation would also work well for the second part: "it might not be for me" and "it will not be for me." What "might" or "will not be for me" is clinging.

In fact, rather than being problematic, the second part of the formulation, understood in this way, has an important function, as it serves to highlight a key

aspect of the early Buddhist conception of final liberation. In contrast to other conceptions of liberation in the ancient Indian setting that considered the final goal to be attained only when passing away, the final goal in early Buddhism can be gained while still alive. In this way, the Buddhist reformulation of the annihilationist tenet can indeed serve as an inspired utterance for those aspiring to become arahants by annihilating even the subtlest forms of clinging in the form of any traces of conceit. For the arahant, in turn, the situation is simply: “it is not, it is not for me.”

Endnotes

¹ A recent study of Baoyun’s translation activities can be found in Lettere 2020.

² See in more detail Glass 2010. Critical replies to the suggestion by Karashima 2020: 741–747 that the manuscript brought by Faxian rather served as the original underlying Taishō entry 100 can be found in Bingenheimer 2020: 826–831 and Su 2020: 871–876; see also Anālayo 2020: 415–417.

³ On Faxian’s pilgrimage see, e.g., Anālayo 2010.

⁴ Dhammadinnā 2020 and 2022; see also Anālayo 2019 and 2020.

⁵ The three portions of the translated text are found in SĀ 64 at T II 16c₄ to 16c₁₄, 16c₁₄ to 16c₂₂, and 16c₂₃ to 17a₂₀; the Pāli parallel is SN 22.55 at SN III 55,²⁸. A section of SĀ 64 has already been translated into French by Lamotte 1980: 2291 note 1; a translation of the entire fascicle in which SĀ 64 occurs can be found in Anālayo 2013b.

⁶ My translation is based on the assumption that a reference to what literally would refer to “being liberated” here renders *adhimukta*; see also the corresponding entry in Hirakawa 1997: 1068.

⁷ For a survey of such occurrences see Anālayo 2008a: 381–382 note 1.

⁸ SN 22.55 at SN III 55,²⁹.

⁹ My rendering of this cryptic passage is indebted to the very helpful explanation of this type of formulation offered by Choong 2000: 59.

¹⁰ SN 22.55 at SN III 56,³¹.

¹¹ Spk II 275,¹⁹.

¹² The reference to harmonizing with the opening statement appears to have in view the formulation in SN 22.55 at SN III 57,¹⁸: *so rūpassa vibhavā vedanāya vibhavā saññāya vibhavā saṅkhārānaṃ vibhavā viññāṇassa vibhavā, evaṃ kho, bhikkhu, no c’ assa, no ca me siyā,*

nābhavissati, na me bhavissatī ti, evaṃ adhimuccamāno bhikkhu chindeyya orambhāgiyāni saṃyojanānī ti.

¹³ See, e.g. DN 1 at DN I 34,₂ (first case).

¹⁴ See in more detail Anālayo 2021.

¹⁵ SN 56.11 sat SN V 422,₃; for a comparative study see Anālayo 2012 and 2013a.

¹⁶ See, e.g., DN 2 at DN I 62,₂₄; for a comparative study of gradual path accounts see Anālayo 2016.

¹⁷ MN 120 at MN III 103,₁₆; on the differing presentation in the parallel see Anālayo 2011: 681.

¹⁸ SN 1.25 at SN I 14,₁₄, SĀ 581 at T II 154b₂₆, and SĀ² 166 at T II 435c₂₅.

¹⁹ MN 102 at MN II 232,₂₁ and Skilling 1994: 344.

²⁰ MN 11 at MN I 67,₇, MĀ 103 at T I 591a₂₂ and EĀ 27.2 at T II 664a₁₆; on the significance of this passage see Karunadasa 2006: 3–4 and on differences in the terminology used Anālayo 2008b: 404.

Abbreviations

DN	<i>Dīghanikāya</i>
EĀ	<i>Ekottarika-āgama</i> (T 125)
MĀ	<i>Madhyama-āgama</i> (T 26)
MN	<i>Majjhimanikāya</i>
SĀ	<i>Saṃyukta-āgama</i> (T 99)
SĀ ²	(another) <i>Saṃyukta-āgama</i> (T 100)
SN	<i>Saṃyuttanikāya</i>
Spk	<i>Sāratthappakāsini</i>
T	Taishō (digital)
Th	<i>Theragāthā</i>

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