Review of and Response to Mark Siderits's Interpretation of Not-Self in *Buddhism as Philosophy: an Introduction*

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Siderits, Mark 2007. *Buddhism as philosophy: an introduction.* (Ashgate World Philosophies Series.) Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing. 232 p. £ 16.99, ISBN 978-07546-5369-1.

Abstract: Mark Siderits's book *Buddhism as Philosophy: an Introduction* is an intriguing attempt to bring early Buddhist thought into dialogue with modern analytic philosophy. This review focuses on the author's reconstruction of the Buddha's argument of not-self. Using an ahistorical and philosophical approach Siderits reconstructs the Buddhist argument as an ontological denial of the self. However, I argue that a close analysis of early Nikāyic sources suggests a different understanding of not-self, one that is not an ontological denial of an essential self, but rather a far more complex, practical, and non-philosophical argument meant to show a path that avoids attachments, specifically to the self. I further argue that the methodology employed by Siderits in his book, although successful in recognising one level of sophistication in early Buddhist thought, is nevertheless less suited to the analysis of the specific arguments under consideration. Indeed it misses what I understand to be the more interesting and nuanced position taken regarding not-self, one that perhaps cannot be captured using a Western analytic framework.

In his book *Buddhism as Philosophy: An Introduction* (Siderits 2007) Mark Siderits attempts to provide an introduction to Buddhist thought for a Western audience. His book is one of the few modern attempts to extrapolate early Buddhist concepts and arguments from their more traditional contexts in history, philology, and area studies, and bring them into the working framework of Western analytic philosophy.

Siderits's methodological approach is primarily ahistorical and philosophical, which greatly determines his interpretation of not-self (*anattā*) as ontological. Moreover, I will argue that his conclusions could be seen as being predetermined in scope; by ignoring many historical considerations and completely removing the early Buddhist concept of *anattā* from the historical and philological contexts it is contained within, Siderits's reconstruction of 'Buddhism as philosophy' engenders somewhat misleading

claims of what exactly the Buddha taught; or at the very least a depiction that is not supported by early Buddhist sources. Through a close textual analysis of the original Pāli,[1] as well as a deeper investigation into other academic theories on this subject, we will come to see that Siderits's characterisation of *anattā* as an ontological denial of the self is unfounded.

Siderits outlines his methodological approach very explicitly. Indeed his entire first chapter is dedicated to making clear what he takes himself to be doing, and in which broadly speaking, he addresses three distinct issues. Namely, what philosophy is, what Buddhism is, and what it means to take Buddhism as philosophy. In regards to the first, Siderits operates with an analytic definition, although he does not explicitly state this. In fact, he sees himself as merely engaging in pure philosophy. Nevertheless, his understanding of what philosophy is, combined with his lucid writing style, characteristic of analytic philosophy, makes it apparent that he is operating within this philosophical tradition. He explains that what separates philosophy from other fields is that it is not simply a collection of facts or body of knowledge in the strict sense, but rather it is a method of argumentation and rational scrutiny, or a 'critical examination of arguments' (Siderits 2007: 3). Philosophy does not typically provide clear cut answers in the same way other fields do. Instead, according to Siderits, it is defined by some key practices: 'defining one's terms carefully, constructing good arguments in support of one's views, critically evaluating arguments (one's own and others'), responding to objections, and the like' (Siderits 2007: 2). Of course, as Siderits himself clarifies, these skills can be used in many areas, but in philosophy in particular the subject matter is limited to the specific domains of ethics, metaphysics, epistemology and so forth. Hence philosophical inquiry, then, can be understood as the critical formulation and examination of arguments specifically relevant to questions and theories of morality, the nature of reality, or of knowledge. In brief, philosophy as Siderits defines it, is a way to think critically by applying unbiased reasoning to complicated issues.

[1] All Pāli Canon citations in this paper refer to the Pali Text Society publication. In cases where a translation is not cited, it is my own translation. For these translations I am greatly indebted to Dr. Mudagamuwe Maithrimurthi (Heidelberg University) for his help.

Having accounted for his concept of 'philosophy' and how he will use it in his book, Siderits next turns to the second issue, namely what he means by 'Buddhism'. He explains that Buddhism should be understood as a religion insofar as its general concerns are soteriological in nature. However, in many respects Buddhism is not a religion in the strict sense of the word and he argues, although a religion, it is not therefore a 'faith' because the latter is defined as 'a commitment for which no reasons can be given' (Siderits 2007: 4). Buddhism cannot be described as such a commitment. Instead, he explains, 'to become a Buddhist is not to accept a bundle of doctrines solely on the basis of faith […] rather liberation […] is to be attained through rational investigation of the nature of the world' (Siderits 2007: 4). Hence, Siderits concludes, that unlike most world religions in which followers are supposed to simply believe in the propositions made by their founders without questioning them, 'they [Buddhists] are expected to examine the arguments that are given in support of these claims, and determine for themselves if the arguments really make it likely that these claims are true' (Siderits 2007: 7). The above-cited passages make it apparent that Siderits holds a view of Buddhism, according to which sophisticated philosophical inquiry is a crucial part of the path to liberation. In other words, for a practicing Buddhist such inquiries are crucial from the very beginning. He states: 'In the context of the Buddhist path, "wisdom" means the practice of philosophy: analysing concepts, investigating arguments, considering objections and the like […] Doing philosophy is said to help us acquire the conceptual tools we need to make sense of what we encounter in meditation' (Siderits 2007: 25). As such he takes himself to be justified in treating Buddhism *as philosophy,* which he further clarifies in the last section of his first chapter.

Siderits discusses this third issue, namely that in order to successfully understand Buddhism as philosophy, his account will only reference those aspects of Buddhist doctrine that 'present philosophical theories and arguments' (Siderits 2007: 11). Thus, he acknowledges that he will decontextualise the material and glean only that which is philosophical in nature—only that which fits into the general domains of ethics, metaphysics, and epistemology, and then examine these arguments to see whether they are valid and sound. In so doing, Siderits will subject them to an analytic logical anal-

ysis, the tools of his own philosophical tradition, although he himself does not understand it in these terms; for as he notes 'in studying philosophy we are interested in finding out what truth is' (Siderits 2007: 10). In this regard, Siderits views the tools of his own tradition to be in some sense universal and objective.

It is with this methodological background that Siderits accounts for *anattā* and the related five aggregates. Firstly, and crucially, Siderits believes that when the Buddha taught not-self, as seen specifically in the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta* of the Pāli Canon, the intention was to show that in a final ontology, no notion of a self can be found. He states that, even in early Buddhism the aim was to demonstrate through argumentation that 'there is no self, and persons are not ultimately real' (Siderits 2007: 32). Self, as Siderits's reconstructs it, is an essence—a stable, unchanging, continued existence that is required for the continuity of an individual person and his/her identity over time. Upon setting up the issue in this way, Siderits then proceeds to analyse the arguments in the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta* that he believes prove the idea that, according to the Buddha, such a stable essence does not exist.

Siderits interprets the Buddha's strategy to prove that there is no self as being an examination of the various parts of a person (specifically here the five aggregates or *khandha*s, Sanskrit *skandha*) and a demonstration through rational inquiry that no self is to be found in each. He reconstructs two arguments that he takes the Buddha to be making—one he terms the 'argument from impermanence' (Siderits 2007: 39), the other the 'argument from uncontrollability' (Siderits 2007: 47). Siderits understands the former as an argument whereby the Buddha shows that each of the five *khandha*s is impermanent—'subject to destruction and transitory' (Siderits 2007: 39). Yet, if there were a self, it would have to be permanent. Therefore, there is no self. Hence, Siderits describes the logic behind the Buddha's argument as follows: 'All that would be needed to show that something is not a self is to establish that it does not last forever' (Siderits 2007: 39). He reconstructs it in a formalised way as follows:

1. *Rūpa* is impermanent.
2. Sensation is impermanent.
3. Perception is impermanent.
4. Volition is impermanent.
5. Consciousness is impermanent.
6. If there were a self it would be permanent.

IP [There is no more to the person than the five skandhas.]

C Therefore there is no self (Siderits 2007: 39).

Moreover, given what he labels an implicit premise and calls 'the exhaustiveness claim', i.e. that the five *khandha*s are an exhaustive list of what makes up a person, the argument from impermanence becomes even stronger. For if the self cannot be found in any of the *khandha*s or in their totality, then surely it cannot be found anywhere outside of them.

Siderits's second argument, that from uncontrollability, recounts the Buddha again going through the five *khandha*s, but this time making note that sometimes we 'dislike and seek to change' each of them (Siderits 2007: 47). However, if we had a self, it would perform what Siderits calls the 'executive function', that which 'evaluates the states of the person and seeks to change those it finds unsatisfactory' while also being unable to operate on itself, something he calls the Anti-Reflexivity Principle (Siderits 2007: 46). But such a function is not found in the five *khandha*s because each *khandha* is subject to criticism and to some extent outside of our control. When we examine each there are aspects of it we dislike and seek to change. Similar to the previous argument under scrutiny, Siderits reconstructs this one as follows:

1. I sometimes dislike and seek to change *rūpa.*
2. I sometimes dislike and seek to change feeling.
3. I sometimes dislike and seek to change perception.
4. I sometimes dislike and seek to change volition.
5. I sometimes dislike and seek to change consciousness.
6. If the self existed it would be part of the person that performs the executive function.

IP [There is no more to the person than the five s*kandha*s.]

C Therefore there is no self (Siderits 2007: 47).

What becomes evident is that by presupposing the exhaustiveness claim as an implicit premise, we are forced to conclude that there is no self. In other words, if the five aggregates are an exhaustive analysis of a person, and if it is shown that not one of them nor their totality contains the self because

each is subject to criticism, then the self must be deemed as not existent. In this way, Siderits concludes, the Buddha's arguments are valid in their attempt to deny the existence of a self ontologically.

Siderits provides an accurate and precise disentangling of the two arguments found in the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta.* There is enough evidence to support Siderits's interpretation that there are indeed two ways in which the Buddha argues for *anattā*—one based on the lack of controllability of the *khandhas*, the other based on their impermanence. Siderits thus seeks to demonstrate the sophistication of the Buddha's arguments. Moreover, as a modern professional philosopher, Siderits's intention is to extrapolate those aspects of Buddhist thought which he thinks can be interpreted as philosophical and moreover as *sophisticated* philosophical arguments. Given that professional philosophers are primarily concerned with questions of metaphysics, ethics, and epistemology, Siderits's enterprise can be seen as productive. In other words, if one seeks to demonstrate that even when employing modern tools of evaluation, sophisticated arguments can be found in Buddhist thought, and that furthermore these arguments should be taken into consideration and used to help resolve various issues in modern Western philosophical discourse, then undoubtedly the undertaking is of great value to the progress of modern philosophy. The field of modern Western professional philosophy can be somewhat self-contained and by and large ignores various potential intellectual contributions originating outside of the existing well-defined sources. In fact, the starting point of philosophy proper as typically recognised within the West is with the ancient Greeks. Insofar as ancient India also demonstrates very clear indications of being preoccupied with similarly complex intellectual questions, Siderits is warranted in bringing some of these ideas into modern philosophical discourse. Especially for future generations and his intended audience, it appears this ahistorical approach allows for, at the very least, a limited recognition of the sophistication of ancient Indian thought in modern philosophy departments. This is indisputably a positive aspect of his approach.

However, there are some problems in Siderits's methodology. Although I am in favour of his ahistorical approach in principle, especially when tackling philosophical texts that are products of one's own tradition, neverthe-

less when engaging in systems of thought that lie outside one's tradition, the frameworks and paradigms of modern analytic philosophy are often unsuitable for the ideas under investigation. Indeed, beyond unsuitable, it can even be questioned why those paradigms in particular have been chosen as the benchmark of 'truth'. In Siderits's case, his methodology leads to certain misinterpretations of the Buddha's argument for not-self, which will be further explored below. Attention will be drawn not only to his general methodology, but also to certain basic claims about Buddhism that he takes for granted.

Firstly, Siderits's claim that rational investigation plays a central role within the context of Buddhism is not necessarily problematic on its own, as there are indeed later schools of Buddhist thought that would perhaps agree with his characterisation. A problem, however, emerges, when he takes this idea to have been a central tenet directly taught by the Buddha himself and something that is true of Buddhism as a whole. Siderits moreover, provides no references in support of his claim. There are simply no indications in Nikāyic sources to validate such a proposition. In fact, there is evidence of the Buddha making exactly the opposite claim; for when the Buddha tells his followers, as Siderits remarks, that they can see and check for themselves that what he is saying is true, he does not have in mind the use of any sort of rational argument. Rational arguments are used in the realm of theoretical knowledge and/or speculative philosophy. But the central tenets of the Four Noble Truths as well as the three characteristics of existence, *anattā, anicca,* and *dukkha,* are meant to be understood as more empirical in nature; they can be observed by anyone who seriously follows the Buddhist path. In this way, the Buddha says one can empirically see the truths as he has explained them and thus empirically verify for oneself that the teachings are true. It is key here to understand that this verification is not something realised through philosophical argumentation—not something to be understood solely through intellect (cf. Karunadasa 1996; Gombrich 1996: 28–99). Perhaps this is why we see forms of meditation in the Nikāyic sources that are intended for those who are prone to speculate, intellectualise, or generally engage in discursive thinking, which are designed to help minimise and eventually eradicate such habits (Gethin 1998: 177).

Support for this empirical interpretation can be found in several sources. For example, in the *Kālāma Sutta* we find that the Buddha tells the Kālāmas, who are lay people, to not believe something just because an authority told them to; but he also states that they should not believe something just because it is reached by logical reasoning or by inference (of reason).[2] Additionally, the Buddha also advises against a reliance on scriptures and authorities as a means for verifying whether or not a proposition is true. Instead, whilst speaking to the Kālāmas, the Buddha seems to appeal to some sort of basic moral instinct or common sense, present in all people.[3] As we see here, the Buddha appears to have been unwilling to advise his followers to examine everything he said using rational analysis, but instead there was an appeal to some faculty more akin to common sense, often gained from life experience. This means that in its earliest formulations, Buddhism was not a philosophical system in the strict sense of the word—one according to which all claims made were presented as theoretical arguments that were expected to first be examined by logic and reason before they were accepted by listeners. For if this were the case, then why would the Buddha explicitly say that one should not accept certain doctrines just because they are logical or reached by inference (*mā takkahetu mā nayahetu*)? This seems to be opposite in meaning (and intention) to what Siderits posits.

Furthermore, if we take a look at the *Aggivacchagotta Sutta*, in which the Buddha is asked by Vaccha if he has any theories of his own, we see that in Pāli, the Buddha says: *Diṭṭhigatanti kho, vaccha, apanītam etaṃ tathāgatassa. Diṭṭhañ hetaṃ, Vaccha, tathāgatena—iti rūpaṃ, iti rūpassa samudayo, iti rūpassa atthaṅgamo* […].[4] The key here is the beginning of the second sentence, specifically the phrase *diṭṭhañ hetaṃ* as well as the word *diṭṭhigatanti*, at the beginning of the first sentence. What we see here is that the Buddha really did not say anything about theories or knowing, instead he says this: 'A Tathāgata does not have a view or belief or opinion that one holds on to (*diṭṭhigatanti*), but this, Vaccha, has been seen (*diṭṭhañ*

[2] Etha tumhe Kālāmā mā anussavena mā paramparāya mā itikirāya mā piṭakasampadānena mā takkahetu mā nayahetu mā ākāraparivitakkena mā diṭṭhinijjhānakkhantiyā mā bhavyarūpatāya mā samaṇo no garū ti (AN i 188).

[3] AN i 188.

[4] MN i 483.

hetaṃ) by the Tathāgata'. Here if we analyse the Pāli word we can see that *diṭṭhañ hetaṃ* breaks down into *diṭṭhaṃ-hi-etaṃ*, where *hi* is an emphasis ('indeed'), *etaṃ* is 'this' or 'such' and *diṭṭhaṃ* is actually the past participle 'seen'.[5] As such the Buddha refused to answer any questions about phenomena that he had not directly experienced. Since the context of this *sutta* is more intellectual than the *Kālāma Sutta*, where the Buddha was speaking to lay people, it appears probable that the Buddha is referencing meditative insight as the object of his experience. That is, beyond the common sense and instinctual morality he appealed to in the *Kālāma Sutta*, in the *Aggivacchagotta Sutta* he is further referencing meditation and/or spiritual insight gained through contemplation. It is likely that this change of emphasis occurs because when addressing lay people he spoke in terms that they could understand, however when addressing those who were more spiritually inclined/advanced, such as Vaccha, he could permit himself to discuss more sophisticated topics appropriate to the context. Context aside, what this interpretation of the *Aggivacchagotta Sutta* implies is that the only subjects the Buddha wished to speak concretely about were those that he had realised and experienced personally and not conclusions reached through mere logical and philosophical enquiry.

Further evidence against Siderits's claim can be found in the *Tevijja Sutta*, which Gombrich offers in his book *How Buddhism Began:* 'The Buddha sharply criticises brahmins who say they know the path leading to union with Brahmā though they have never been there or seen Brahmā themselves. He compares them to the blind leading the blind […]' (Gombrich 1996: 28–9). Moreover, compared to the three knowledges (*tevijja*) of the brahmins, that is, the knowing by heart of the three sacred Vedic texts, Gombrich argues, '[t]he Buddha himself claimed to have three knowledges; but his knowledges were not texts, but things he had experienced' (Gombrich 1996: 28–9). Gombrich thus makes a strong case that the text points towards the idea that the Buddha was both pragmatic and anti-theoretical. Surely someone who does not encourage speculation or theoretical musing, and indeed even finds them to be fetters towards the goal of liberation,

[5] *Aggivacchagotta Sutta* (MN i 483); Cf. *The Middle Length Sayings* (*Majjhima Nikāya*), 3 vols., trans. by I. B. Horner (London: Pali Text Society 1954–1959), 2:164.

should not be labeled a philosopher, even if on occasion he engaged in conversations with philosophical underpinnings.

This problem bears directly on Siderits's methodology in attempting to reconstruct the Buddhist notion of *anattā.* This is because, as we have seen, Siderits takes himself to be justified in reconstructing the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta* as a philosophical argument since he takes the Buddha to be engaging in philosophy and he furthermore, maintains that it is in the spirit of Buddhism itself to actually assess such arguments in terms of their philosophical validity and soundness.[6] In so doing, Siderits from the outset incorrectly presupposes a philosophical discussion where there does not seem to be one. If this is not characteristic of early Buddhism, at least as observed in the Nikāyas, then such an approach is severely undermined (Siderits 2007: 39). Hence, if Siderits were to proceed with his philosophical analysis of Buddhist thought, he would at least be expected to modify his position and explicitly specify that such an undertaking although in line with later Buddhist traditions is not supported by the earlier formulations. Indeed there is evidence that in response to the intellectual environment of his time, the Buddha actually sought to avoid the very philosophical issues those around him were preoccupied with (cf. Bronkhorst 2011). This view is further supported if we take into consideration the various *sutta*s in which he refused to answer particular metaphysical questions.

In the *Aggivacchagotta Sutta*, for example, which can be translated to 'To Vacchagotta Concerning Fire', Vacchagotta, a wandering mendicant, seeks the Buddha's advice on several questions. The first of these set of questions is about whether or not the world is eternal. Specifically Vaccha asks: 'How is it Gotama? Does Gotama hold that the world is eternal, and that this view alone is true, and every other false?' to which the Buddha replies: 'Nay, Vaccha. I do not hold that the world is eternal, and that this view alone is true, and every other false' (Warren 1947: 123). Then, naturally, Vaccha infers the next logical possibility, namely, if the Buddha does not hold the view that the world is eternal, then he must hold the view that the world is not eternal. However, to his surprise (and perhaps dismay) the

[6] 'Buddhist philosophers thought that their most important claims should be subjected to rational scrutiny […]. So perhaps it would actually be dishonouring Buddhism not to subject its doctrines to rational scrutiny' (Siderits 2007: 10–11).

Buddha answers in the same fashion. The dialogue continues in the same format and Vaccha proceeds to ask about whether or not the world is finite or infinite and whether or not the soul and the body are identical or separate, all positions which the Buddha refuses to commit to.

The next question that Vaccha poses is: 'How is it, Gotama? Does Gotama hold that the holy one (*tathāgata*) exists after death?' As is expected the Buddha then claims that he does not hold this view. Vaccha then continues: 'Does Gotama hold that the *tathāgata* does not exist after death? […] Does Gotama hold that the *tathāgata* both exists and does not exist after death? […] Does Gotama hold that the *tathāgata* neither exists nor does not exist after death […]?' (Warren 1947: 124). What is so striking about this passage, beyond the Buddha's refusal to take a stance on the question posed, is that he rejects *all the logical possibilities.* At this stage, it is important to note, the Buddha does not claim that the views Vaccha lists are false. Instead, he merely refuses to take a position by claiming that he does not hold the view. This, of course, implies nothing about what he *does* believe. The Buddha explains that holding onto any one of these theories binds a person and causes pain, making them irrelevant to the goal of attaining liberation. He states: 'The theory that the world is eternal, is a jungle, a wilderness, a puppet-show, a writhing, a fetter, and is coupled with misery, ruin, despair, and agony and does not tend to aversion, absence of pain, cessation, quiescence, knowledge, supreme wisdom, and *nirvāṇa*' (Warren 1947: 124). This quote illustrates the Buddha's general refusal to engage in metaphysical discussions as well as his clear soteriological aims, for he maintains that queries like this, along with their potential answers, distract one from the path to liberation. Hence, the Buddha was not willing to answer any question posed to him (especially not those metaphysical in nature), but only those questions that are worthwhile and lead one closer to understanding the truth. Hence, we learn that when we seek to understand things that transcend reality, unfortunately our most reliable tools, namely logic, reasoning, and language, will not always help us.

Further proof for the Buddha's reluctance to make ontological commitments comes from a *sutta* in which the Buddha lays out views that are wrong or incorrect. Here he describes views that enter into the mind of an unwise man. The passage reads:

> When he attends unwisely in this way, one of six views arises in him. The view 'self exists for me' arises in him as true and established; or the view 'no self exists for me' arises in him as true and established; or the view 'I perceive self with self' arises in him as true and established; or the view 'I perceive not-self with self' arises in him as true and established; or the view 'I perceive self with not-self' arises in him as true and established; or else he has some such view as this: 'It is this self of mine that speaks and feels and experiences here and there the result of good and bad actions; but this self of mine is permanent, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change, and it will endure as long as eternity.' This speculative view, bhikkhus, is called the thicket of views, the wilderness of views, the contortion of views, the vacillation of views, the fetter of views. Fettered by the fetter of views, the untaught ordinary person is not freed from birth, aging, and death, from sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair; he is not freed from suffering, I say.[7]

What is important to note is the first two of these views, which are *atthi me attā* and *natthi me attā,* that is, 'self exists for me' and 'no self exists for me' respectively. The Buddha informs us that having either of these views will not help us attain liberation, for any sort of view we hold on to is simply not conducive to our soteriological path, for they arouse desires in us and are subject to our grasping. This *sutta* makes several points quite clear. Firstly, the Buddha's discussion here is unambiguously and explicitly only about soteriology. He explains to his listeners that men who are not wise and accomplished spiritually often think certain thoughts that only perpetuate their suffering. Secondly, we are informed directly that *any* view of the self is one that is detrimental to those seeking liberation. Here 'view' refers to a theoretical commitment and goes hand in hand with the Buddha's general reluctance to engage in philosophical discourse. Although the content of not-self contemplation and a theory of not-self may be very similar, the plane on which each discourse takes place is very different. In the case of the former, the Buddha expects his followers who are also spiritual practitioners to both directly realise the selfless nature of the aggregates and

[7] MN i 6; translated from Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu (2013).

also have this realisation affect their mind; i.e. halt their grasping. Hence the plane of discourse is practical and experiential. In the case of a not-self theory, however, the intention is far different—here the plane of discourse is intellectual and ontological. Thus, an intellectual commitment to a doctrine on the soul (or the lack thereof) is a completely different understanding and, the Buddha tells us, detrimental to his soteriology. Perhaps this is why he was so reluctant to discuss so many metaphysical questions. But just because he was willing to discuss not-self, does not mean that he did so in a metaphysical way. Instead, it demonstrates that somehow the concept of *anattā* is such that *if understood in the correct manner, by the correct means* is extremely beneficial for those seeking *nirvāṇa*. Here 'the correct manner' simply refers to not taking aspects of your personality (the five aggregates) to be permanent and part of yourself, or your self. For they too, like the rest of the phenomenal world, are impermanent and always changing. Hence, by experiencing their instability and the fact that they cannot be taken as our self, we let go of any attachment we may have of them—we no longer cling to them. And of course, 'the correct means' or indeed the only means according to the early Buddhists to be able to successfully do this is through the eightfold path along with spiritual contemplation and meditation, *not* intellectual philosophising, reasoning, or theorising. This is why in this *sutta* we see that the Buddha explicitly condemns holding on to any views of self or even thinking and speculating about the self.

As has been noted in Tilmann Vetter's book *The Ideas and Meditative Practices of Early Buddhism,* the role of *dhyāna* meditation is vital for the attainment of liberation. For example, the cankers (*āsava*), which include sense-desire, desire of eternal existence, wrong views, and ignorance, must be conquered, but this cannot be done by a formulated knowledge. Instead one needs the right concentration (*samādhi*) in order to liberate oneself: 'In the doctrine of the four noble truths craving is not conquered by a knowledge, but as is said in the third truth, "by complete detachment, by abandoning and rejecting (the craving), by freedom and from no longer holding onto this (this craving)"' (Vetter 1988: 30). Similarly, in his discussion of *anattā* as well as its realisation through *paññā* or 'discriminating insight', it becomes clear that the argument laid out by the Buddha is not meant to be comprehended on a purely intellectual level. Indeed any sort

of theoretical commitment as to the metaphysical existence or non-existence of a self is besides the point. The deconstruction of the human into five constituents (*khandhas*) and the Buddha's argument about how each is not-self is meant to serve the practical spiritual purpose of conquering desire. As Vetter points out, examples in the *suttas* of those who had become liberated by comprehending this sermon, like Sāriputta for example, were characterised as having minds that were completely free from clinging. This means that, although it is unclear whether or not *dhyāna* meditation is a prerequisite for this spiritual contemplation, it is nevertheless not the mere understanding of a meaning that is important, but rather the effect the meaning has on the listener's mind. Nevertheless, as Vetter himself makes clear, generally speaking it is believed especially by later Buddhist traditions that *dhyāna* meditation is, if not a precondition for *paññā,* then it is at least an act that is done in combination with the latter. For the present purposes, we need to only recognise that, especially in terms of ontological, theoretical commitments, the early sources under discussion do not appear to support such a reading.

In the case of how Siderits understands the doctrine of not-self, then, I would argue that framing it as a philosophical investigation is a misrepresentation, and characterising the kind of philosophy the Buddha is engaging in as metaphysics/ontology is even more problematic. For why if the Buddha's intention was to deny the existence of a permanent self or soul, would he not simply state this explicitly and clearly in the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta* and in the discussion of the soul and whether or not it is identical to the body in the *Aggivacchagotta Sutta*? Moreover, framing the Buddha's statements as metaphysical presupposes that the Buddha takes himself to be attempting to prove an ontological account of 'personhood' or 'selfhood' by appealing to rationally sound arguments. But if we examine these arguments it seems quite clear that they are not at all sophisticated in that sense. Indeed, they do not even appeal to any sort of theoretical propositions or even logic, instead they appeal to basic experience—they are completely empirical and attempt not to *prove*, but rather simply point out various aspects of the aggregates that make them not-self. Hence, I would go so far as to argue that this passage in particular and a many similar texts contained in the Nikāyas should not be interpreted as philosophical argu-

mentation, but rather a mere illustration of facts that his audience could both understand and potentially verify as true.

I would like to avoid a mere language game or what Gombrich often refers to as a 'pseudo problem' (Gombrich 1996: 2, 30), so I should clarify that I do not mean to say that the word 'argument' can simply not be applied to the *sutta* under discussion. Of course, to a certain extent it is an argument, for the Buddha is guiding the monks through reasoning of some sort, with the purpose of showing that the aggregates are not-self. Instead, I am attempting to demonstrate that this, however, is far from a *philosophical* argument. Hence assuming it to be in the realm of metaphysics presupposes that the Buddha is engaging in philosophical discussion, which I think is unlikely. The same way a parent must teach a child that an iron, when on, should not be touched because it burns, we can imagine a parent saying 'Does that which is hot burn you or cool you? And that which burns, is it pleasurable or painful? So child, don't touch the iron when it is on'. I hope this example makes it apparent that the parent in this case is not really engaging in philosophy or providing their child with a philosophical argument. Instead, like the Buddha, they are helping their child reason through certain empirically verifiable propositions to a quite obvious, common sense solution.

Nikāyic evidence seems to point to the fact that the Buddha took himself to be engaging in a style of reasoning much closer to this than a philosophically sophisticated one, as presented by Siderits. Perhaps this can also account for the unanswered questions, as well as the often cited remarks made by the Buddha against holding views, engaging in theoretical argumentation, and generally concerning oneself with problems that are ontological in nature. In fact, this analysis is even consistent with the Buddha's refusal to describe the state of an *arahant* and thus indirectly *nirvāṇa*, or his characterisation of it as *samūhatā vādapathā pi sabbe*[8] or 'whose state cannot be described by words'. For, it seems just like questions of metaphysics, such topics are simply not worth discussing, since at the end of the Buddhist path, they are experienced and thus realised through contemplation and direct meditative experience.

[8] Sn 1076.

As we have seen, portraying the Buddha as a philosopher and thus interpreting his statements as recorded in the Nikāyas as philosophical in nature, as if that is how they were intended to be understood, is simply not supported by the evidence. Hence an approach that attempts to interrogate the views of an ancient and foreign tradition using a strictly Western philosophical framework is also problematic. In the case of Siderits's reconstruction of the Buddha's argument for *anattā,* he makes characterisations that could be interpreted differently upon closer inspection of Buddhist texts. In particular, we saw that Siderits's heavy reliance on the Western notion of 'philosophy' has caused him to view the Buddha as a philosopher, to stress (too much) the importance of rational inquiry in the general Buddhist agenda, to understand the Buddha's discourse as metaphysical in nature, and thus to read the concept of *anattā* as an ontological denial of a permanent self. Having said this however, I do not mean to detract from the endeavour of comparative and/or fusion philosophy, indeed, as mentioned, any attempts to bring foreign thought into dialogue with modern Western philosophy is beneficial. Nevertheless, how we ought to do it and what sorts of methodological issues ought to be considered by the modern intellectual community is still far from being solved. In the present review one such methodological issue was addressed, namely an acknowledgement that a historical method and a philosophical lens are not and should not be considered mutually exclusive.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AN *Aṅguttara Nikāya*

MN *Majjhima Nikāya*

Sn *Suttanipāta*

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