

I have finished the book, and, as I hoped, I have found that it gives me a fairly coherent idea of your view of the Dhamma and enables me to see in what respects it differs from mine. The most I can say in a letter, without writing at inordinate length, is to indicate a fundamental point of difference between our respective views, and then to consider very briefly what consequences are entailed.

On p. 302 you say, 'The Arahāt Grasps only towards the end of all Grasping'. With this I do not agree. There is no grasping (up d na) whatsoever in the arahāt. The puthujjana is describable in terms of pañc'up d nakkhandh , but the arahāt (while he still lives) only in terms of pañcakkhandh . Up d na has already ceased.

There are four kinds of up d na—k ma, ditthi, s+labbata, and attav da—, and the arahāt has none (see Majjhima 11: i,67). The expression in the Suttas for the attainment of arahātship is anup d ya savehi cittam vimucci.[1] The term sa-up disesa-nibb nadh tu, which applies to the living arahāt, you take (p. 299) as 'Nibb na with the Grasping Groups remaining'. But this, in fact, has nothing to do with up d na. Up disesa means simply 'stuff remaining' or 'residue'. In Majjhima 10: i,62 the presence of up disesa is what distinguishes the an g m+ from the arahāt, and this is clearly not the same precise thing as what distinguishes the living arahāt (sa-up disesa-nibb nadh tu) from the dead arahāt (an-up disesa-nibb nadh tu). Up disesa is therefore unspecified residue, which with the living arahāt is pañcakkhandh . The arahāt says pañcakkhandh pariññ t titthanti chinna (Therag tha 120),[2] and the mka (or root) that is chinna (or cut) is up d na. This means that there can still be rkpa, vedan , saññ , sankh r , and viññ na without up d na.

This statement alone, if it is correct, is enough to invalidate the account on p. 149 (and elsewhere) of life as a process of grasping—i.e., a flux, a continuous becoming. For this reason I expect that you will be inclined to reject it as mistaken. Nevertheless, I must point out that the two doctrines upon which your account of grasping seems principally to rely—namely, the simile of the flame (p. 146) and the celebrated expression 'na ca so na ca añño' (p. 149), both of which you attribute to the Buddha—are neither of them to be found in the Suttas. They occur for the first time in the Milindapañha, and there is no evidence at all that they were ever taught by the Buddha.

You will see, of course, that if we reject your account of grasping as a process, we must return to the notion of entities, and with this to the notion of a thing's self-identity (i.e., for so long as an entity endures it continues to be 'the self-same thing'). And would this not be a return to attav da? The answer is, No. With the question of a thing's self-identity (which presents no difficulty if carefully handled) the Buddha's Teaching of anatt has nothing whatsoever to do. Anatt is purely concerned with 'self' as subject ('I'). And this is a matter of considerably greater difficulty than is generally supposed.

In brief, then, your book is dealing with a false problem; and the solution proposed, however ingenious, is actually beside the point—it is not an answer (either right or wrong) to the problem of dukkha, which is strictly a subjective problem.

Perhaps this response to your request for criticism may seem unexpectedly blunt; but where the Dhamma is concerned 'polite' replies designed only to avoid causing possible displeasure by avoiding the issue serve no useful purpose at all and make confusion worse confounded. Since I think you are a person who understands this, I have made no attempt to conceal my thought.

Editorial notes:

[36.1] anup d ya...: 'freed in mind by not holding to the cankers' [Back to text]

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[36.2] pañcakkhandh ....: 'The five aggregates, being completely known, stand with the root cut off.' [Back to text]