



THE BUDDHA'S TEACHING ON TILAKKHAÑA: A BUDDHIST DECONSTRUCTION OF SOUL THEORY IN INDIAN PHILOSOPHY

Kustiani¹, Tri Saputra Medhācitto²

¹Syailendra Buddhist College, Indonesia, kustisyailendra@gmail.com

² Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Thailand, trisaputramedhacitto@gmail.com

Received: 11/10/2024

Revised: 18/11/2024

Accepted: 27/11/2024

DOI: 10.53565/abip.v10i2.1387

Abstract This research aims to examine the Buddha's teaching on *Tilakkhaṇa* and present a critical analysis of how the *Tilakkhaṇa* teaching can be used to reject the soul theory. By using the qualitative research methodology, carried out with a library approach, this research presents a comprehensive explanation of the non-soul theory (*anatta*) presented by the Buddha in order to counter the soul theory. *Tilakkhaṇa* is the philosophical teaching that proves that soul theory is ungrounded. The three characteristics of existence, such as impermanence (*aniccā*), suffering (*dukkha*), and non-self (*anattā*), are the truth of existence rejecting the soul theory. It is because all conditioned things are impermanent. Therefore, they are fraught with suffering (*yad aniccaṃ taṃ dukkham*). Because they are impermanent and suffering, therefore they are to be seen as non-self. Whatever suffering, it is also non-self (*yaṃ dukkham tadanattā*). By utilizing the content analysis method, this research contributes insight into how *Tilakkhaṇa* teaching is applied to reject the soul theory.

Keywords *Tilakkhaṇa, Anatta, Soul Theory, Deconstruction*

INTRODUCTION

Buddhism arose in India in the 6th century BC, based on the Buddha's teachings and practices. In India at that time, there were many religious beliefs and practices dominated by Vedic traditions along with the philosophies of Brahmanism and Sramanaism. Although Buddhism arose in the region and period where numerous religious traditions flourished, the Buddha came with different philosophical teachings and practices, which made Buddhism different from the religious landscape of ancient India. One of the most unique teachings introduced by the Buddha is the concept of *Anatta*, which rejects the concept of the soul. During the time of the Buddha, the philosophical view on the nature of human personality had settled into two opposing theories, namely eternalism (*sassatavada*) and annihilationism (*ucchedavada*), believing the existence of the soul (*atman*) (Kalupahana, 2011). Eternalism is the belief in a permanent substance or entity, whether conceived as a multitude of individual souls or selves, created or not, as a monistic world-soul, a deity of any description, or a combination of any of these notions. Annihilationism, on the other hand, asserts

the temporary existence of separate selves or personalities, which are entirely destroyed or dissolved after death (Nyanaponika, 1959).

The soul theory is closely associated with the philosophical concept of life after death according to Indian philosophy. *Pāli Nikāya* refers to those two views as *Bhavadiṭṭhi* and *Vibhāvadiṭṭhi* (A. I. 83). In regard to the concept of rebirth, those who believe in eternalism advocate that there is an eternal entity which is called a soul that keeps moving from one life to another following one's death to exist in either eternal heaven or hell or to attain with final union with the creator God. On the contrary, those who believe in annihilationism advocate that there is no life after death. According to them, at the time of death and with the breakup of the physical body, the entity that exists in this life is annihilated, with nothing remaining after death (Medhacitto, 2022).

The concept of soul in Indian philosophy has played a significant role in shaping religious beliefs and practices. According to eternalism, the body is one, and the soul is another (*aññām jīvām aññām sarīram*). They have a philosophical view that the soul is imprisoned in the body; therefore, to release it and for the union with the universal soul, one has to practice some penances. They promote the practice of self-mortification (*attakilamathānuyoga*). Annihilationism or materialism, on the other hand, believes that the soul is identical to the body (*tām jīvām tām sarīram*). According to this view, with the death of the person, his soul also perishes. Based on this view, they advocate indulgence in sensual pleasures (*kāmasukhāllikanuyoga*) (Medhacitto, 2022). *Brahmajāla Sutta* reports sixty-two views; fifty-five views belong to eternalism, and seven other views belong to annihilationism (D. I. 1-46). Buddhism stands apart from the eternalism (*sassatavada*) and annihilationism (*ucchedavada*). Buddhism rejects the theory of soul (*attā* or *ātman*) and presents with the theory of non-soul (*anattā* or *anātman*). The Buddha introduced various teachings to reject the soul theory. One of them is the *Tilakkhana* teaching, which consists of three characteristics of existence, i.e., impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and non-self (*anatta*). The purpose of this study is to delve into the Buddha's teaching on *Tilakkhana* and how this teaching can be applied to reject the theory of the soul.

METHODS

This research examines the Buddha's teaching on *Tilakkhaṇa* and its role in rejecting soul theory in Indian philosophy. This research is carried out using qualitative research methodology with a library approach. The research is also called library research since it uses the method of collecting data from a library. According to Zed (2003), library research is a series of activities relating to methods of collecting data, reading, taking notes, and processing research materials. Library research is classified as qualitative research in which the data is taken from the exploration of library materials, which are studied holistically, then analyzed based on a particular framework of thought or theory/philosophical paradigm that underlies it, then uses a certain approach in accordance with the research objectives achieved (Hamzah, 2019). By utilizing this library method, the researcher collects the data on the relevant topic and examines it in order to produce a critical analysis of the Buddha's teaching on *Tilakkhaṇa* and how this teaching can be used to reject the theory of soul. Based on this method, this research is carried out with three following steps: 1) *Esanā*: Data collection step, or step of collecting information from both primary and secondary sources.

Primary sources in Buddhist studies refer to the Buddhist scripture, namely the Pali Canon or Tipitaka. Secondary sources refer to books, journals, articles, and research relevant to the topic. 2) *Vimāṇsā*: Data analysis step. Data analysis in the study was carried out by following the Miles and Huberman model, namely data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. Data reduction is the process of sorting data to obtain data that is important for research. Data presentation is the step of presenting or the process of conveying research data either in the form of text or tables to clarify the research results. 3) *Anubodha*: Conclusion drawing step. Conclusions are drawn to achieve the research objectives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Soul Theory in Indian Philosophy

Soul theory means a belief in the soul or self (*atta*) as a subtle metaphysical entity. The entity that is conceived and sought and made the subject of a certain class of views called in early Buddhist texts *attadiṭṭhi* (self-views), *attānudiṭṭhi* (heresy of self) and *attagāha* (misconception regarding self (Malalasekera, 1961). *Mahānidāna Sutta* mentions several theories of self or soul. Some declare the self to be material (*rūpim*) and limited (*parittam*). Some declare it to be material (*rūpim*) and unlimited (*anantam*). Some declare it to be immaterial (*arūpim*) and limited (*parittam*). Some declare to be immaterial (*arūpim*) and unlimited (*anantam*) (D. II. 66). Actually, the theory of soul or self is discussed in various ways. In several discourses, the theory of self is described as *Etam mama* (this is mine), *Esohamasmi* (this I am), *Eso me attā* (this is my self) (S. III. 67). Various views on the soul have influenced the perspective of Indian society at that time and became an important concept that determined the teachings of certain philosophical and spiritual beliefs in India.

As a result of its importance to the Indian people, the theory of soul or *ātman* is very famous in Indian belief. One of the old Indian beliefs was a kind of pantheism with Brahman (eternal, absolute) as the first cause of the universe. The manifestation of Brahman was sometimes personified and called *Brahmā* (God or Great Self). Every human being had in him a part of Brahman, called *ātman* or 'little self.' Brahman and *ātman* were one and of the same 'substance.' Salvation consisted of the little *ātman* entering into unity with Brahman. The *ātman* was an eternal 'substance' exempt from the vicissitudes of change and incapable of entering into combination with anything else except itself (Malalasekera, 1961).

Tilakkhana Teaching

Buddhism has several teachings that can be taken as a way to reject the theory of the soul. According to Buddhism, the theory of the soul can be rejected by using Dependent Origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), Five Aggregates (*pañcakkhandha*), Three Characteristics of Existence (*Tilakkhaṇa*), etc. However, the teaching of Tilakkhaṇa will be a concern in this study. *Tilakkhaṇa* refers to three characteristics of existence, namely impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and non-self (*anatta*). This is also called *Sāmaññalakkhaṇa* or general characteristics. *Anicca* (impermanence), *dukkha* (suffering), and *anatta* (soullessness or insubstantiality) are the three signs or the three universal characteristics of all conditioned things (*saṅkhāra*, *saṅkhata-dhammā*) are seem to be mutually convertible terms. Each term implies two other characteristics; for example, the term *dukkha*

includes the characteristics of anicca and anatta, and so do the other two terms (Abhayawamsa, 2018).

However, the term '*Tilakkhana*' hardly occurs in early canonical texts (Nanayakkara, 2016). Without using the term '*Tilakkhana*', *Uppādā Sutta* of *Ānguttara Nikāya* says that whether Tathāgatas arise or not, there persists that law, that stablyness of the Dhamma, that fixed course of the Dhamma: 'All conditioned phenomena are impermanent,' 'All conditioned phenomena are suffering', 'All phenomena are non-self' (A. I. 286). The rising, passing, and changing of things or disappearance of things that have arisen is called impermanence. The meaning is that these things never persist in the same way but that they are vanishing and dissolving from moment to moment. This is expressed by the words, "All conditioned phenomena are impermanent (*sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā*). Birth is suffering, old age is suffering, the disease is suffering, death is suffering, to be united with what is unpleasant is suffering, to be separated from what is pleasant is suffering, failure in getting what one wants is suffering, and briefly the five groups of physical and mental are suffering (S. V. 421). Therefore, the whole world of experience, which depends on individuality, is suffering. Here, it is clear that whatever is suffering falls into the category of the concept of non-self (*sabbe dhammā anattā*). There is no eternal soul or self that can be found within a human being since what we call a human being is merely a combination of physical and mental aggregates (*pañcakkhandhā*): matter, feeling, perception, mental formation, and consciousness. These forces are working together in a flux of momentary change; they are never the same for two consecutive moments.

Rejecting Soul Theory using *Tilakkhana* Teaching

Some declare that the soul is the same as the body, some declare that the soul is different from the body, but the Buddha declares that the soul is either the same as or different from the body (D. I. 158). The Buddha says that there is no living of the holy life if both ideas on the soul exist (S. II. 62). He, too, does not see any doctrine of self that would not arouse sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair in one who clings to it (M. I. 138). The teaching of self is considered a foolish teaching (*bāladhamma*) (Ibid.). Buddhism regards the ways of thinking "this is mine, and it belongs to me" as a wrong view and calls it *sakkāyaditthi* or the illusion that the self is real.

Tilakkhana is the philosophical teaching that proves that soul theory is ungrounded. Three characteristics of existence, such as impermanence, suffering, and non-self, are facts rejecting the soul theory. It is because of the fact that things are impermanent; therefore, they are suffering (*yad aniccam tam dukham*). Because they are impermanent and suffering, therefore they are to be seen as non-self. Whatever suffering, it is also non-self (*yam dukham tadanattā*). It is clearly explained in the second sermon of the Buddha called *Anattalakkhana Sutta* (S. III. 67). In this discourse, the Buddha begins by emphasizing that if there were a self, it should be autonomous, but no such thing is to be found. Form is not the self. Were matter self, then the body would not be subject to affliction; one should be able to say to it, 'Let my body be thus, let my body be not thus.' But this is not possible; the body is always in change. When it is the nature of change, therefore, it is suffering. Therefore, it is inappropriate to consider it as "This is mine, this am I, and this is my self." Accordingly, it cannot be self. The same is repeated for each one of *pañcakkhandha* (form, feeling, perception, mental formation, consciousness). Then the Buddha concludes that whatever is body, past, future, present,

internal or external, gross or subtle, low or excellent, far or near, are to be viewed thus: 'This is not mine, this am I not, this is not my self.'

Mahānidāna Sutta gives account differently. There are three hypotheses given here. The first is that feeling is my self (*vedanā me attā*). It is argued by presenting three kinds of feelings: pleasant, painful, and neutral (*sukhā vedanā dukkhā vedanā adukkhamasukhā vedanā*). When a pleasant feeling is felt, no pain or neutrality is felt. In the same way, I explained each feeling. Each feeling is impermanent, conditioned, dependently-arisen, bound to decay, to vanish, to fade away, and to cease. If one who, on experiencing a pleasant feeling, thinks, "This is my self," must, at the cessation of that pleasant feeling, think, "My self has gone." And the same with painful and neutral feelings. Therefore, if one thinks "Feeling is my-self," it is something in present life that is impermanent, a mixture of happiness and unhappiness, subject to arising and passing away. Therefore, it is not fitting to maintain: "Feeling is my-self" (D. II. 66).

The second hypothesis is that the feeling is not myself and my self is impercipient (*Na have kho me vedanā attā, appaṭisamvēdano me attā*). If no feelings at all were to be experienced, there would not be the thought "I am." Therefore, it is not fitting to maintain the following: "Feeling is not myself, my self is impercipient" (D. II. 67). Thirdly, the self is regarded as not identical with feeling but as possessing feeling. It is said that feeling is not myself, but my self is not impercipient; my self is of a nature to feel (*Na heva kho me vedanā attā, nopi appaṭisamvēdano me attā, attā me vediyati, vedanādhammo hi me attā*). It is argued that if all feelings totally ceased, there could not be the thought, "I am this." Therefore, it is not fitting to maintain: "Feeling is not myself, but my self is not impercipient, my self is of a nature to feel" (D. II. 68).

In brief, the explanation of how *tilakkhaṇa*'s teaching rejects the theory of the soul can be explained as follows. The first characteristic of existence is impermanent (*aniccā*). According to Buddhism, all conditioned things are impermanent (*sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā*) (A. I. 286). When they are subject to change, then the soul cannot be found. The second characteristic of existence is suffering (*dukkha*). All conditioned things are suffering (*sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā*). Since they are impermanent, they are fraught with suffering. Everyone does not like to suffer, but one still suffers because one cannot control his body not to change, become sick, or old. As they are unable to control themselves or to stop sick, their souls cannot be found. The third characteristic of existence is non-self (*anattā*). All phenomena are non-self (*sabbe dhammā anattā*). It directly rejects the theory of soul, for all phenomena are non-self.

Mental Implication from Believing in Non-Self Theory

Having a correct view of self will have positive impacts on one's spiritual development and, of course, will also have a positive vibe on the development of harmonious social relations between human beings. How can this happen? This can happen because, in the mind of a "self-aware" individual, a person no longer has hidden agendas in carrying out every word, action, and deed that they do when dealing with other people in society. People like this will be very aware that everything they do is not to enlarge the concept of this is mine, this and this is me. However, everything is done solely to carry out their duties and obligations as a good individual who is part of society. This kind of person will fully understand that what people call "I" or "mine" in the midst of society is actually a combination of physical and mental aggregates, which are working together

interdependently in a flux of momentary change within the law of cause and effect, and there is nothing permanent, everlasting, unchanging, and eternal in whole existence (Rahula, 2006)

Rahula also reminds us of the important principle regarding the idea of self because, as said by the Buddha, this idea is only imaginary and far from reality (ibid, 51). This understanding will actually create a dangerous mental attitude because it is guided by the principle of "I am" or "mine," which ultimately brings hatred, greed, and desire and can spark conflict, quarrels, and war between humans. Even people are willing to do anything to defend what they believe, as this is mine and my view. It is this kind of understanding that has led to a situation where there has always been conflict in various parts of the world.

Buddhism shows the understanding that everything should be understood as they really are. For example, this understanding is that nothing happens because an extraordinary being creates it; nothing happens suddenly in this world. Everything that exists cannot be seen as self or no self. From the beginning of His Dhamma journey, the Buddha already understood that His teaching would be difficult to understand, but this is the real reality, so the Buddha himself called his teaching against the current *palisotagāmi*.

CONCLUSION

Although many religious beliefs prevalent in India accept the theory of the soul, whether eternalism or nihilism, Buddhism appears with new philosophical teaching and practice. Buddhism does not agree with the theory of the soul. Accordingly, the belief in the soul (*ātman* or *atta*) is considered a wrong view. Buddhism argues the soul theory through several teachings. One of them is *Tilakkhana*. Buddhism argues soul theory with the characteristics of existence such as impermanence (*aniccā*), suffering (*dukkha*), and non-self (*anattā*). With the fact that all conditioned things are impermanent, therefore it is fraught with suffering. If it is suffering, therefore, the self can't be found. Therefore, it is not proper to say: "This is mine, this am I, this is not myself." In short, whatever is impermanent is suffering, and whatever is suffering is non-self (*yad aniccam tam dukkham, yam dukkham tadanattā*).

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