

Points of Controversy

Nibbāna and the Self

Let us look once more at the questions about self (*attā*): The claim that the Buddha's rejection of the five aggregates as self indicates that he wished us to discover a true self beyond the body/mind and the question as to whether Nibbāna is the Self.

All beliefs about the self or soul spring from *bhava-taṇhā*: the desire for eternal life. This desire incites one to seize something as stable and lasting, leading to suppositions, beliefs and theories on self. Initially, one takes the body as self, but soon it is clear that the body cannot satisfy one's desire and one searches for something else. When even the mind cannot fulfil one's desire, one goes further, grasping for example exalted states encountered in *jhāna* as the true self. Some define *attā* in a broader sense than the ego, as the source of all things or an immortal spirit. But no matter how refined these concepts of self, they are essentially the same, in that they satisfy the craving for eternal life.

The error here does not lie with the objects surmised as self, which follow their own nature in line with causes and conditions and are not affected by attachment. [382] The error lies with the craving for being which gives rise to ideas of self. When one grasps at something, real or imaginary, the perception of that thing gets distorted. This distorted perception is precisely the (image of) self, which is then attached to. Ideas of self depend on the relationship between craving and the object taken to be self. The self is associated with such an object but does not exist separate from the craving for being: the source of these beliefs.

Self perceptions (*atta-saññā*), self views (*atta-ditṭhi*) and the grasping that leads to repeated assertions of self (*atta-vādupādāna*) are accumulated so habitually that they become deeply lodged in the mind. When these views are contradicted, people tend to look for a loophole and search for something else to call self. The search for a replacement is proof of the urgency in maintaining a self. When the original perception of self is threatened or ruled out, the person fears annihilation and reaches for a new concept of self. The basic craving for existence and self views are still fully intact, and nothing will essentially change by attaching to a new object. The idea of self is merely expressed in a more elaborate and detailed way. One may grasp onto an aspect of truth in this way, but it will result in a misrepresentation of that truth. Grasping at Nibbāna as self results in a distorted image of Nibbāna that is

masked by desire, indicating that one has not yet realized true Nibbāna.¹ Any viable solution to this problem is prevented by the inability to abandon craving. One may acknowledge that one's self view is false, but deep down this idea still conflicts with craving and the acceptance of it is therefore not complete. When one belief is invalidated the tendency is to search for another belief to take its place. One may also swing to the opposite side: the theory of nihilism.

Solving this dilemma is not a matter of identifying the true self, but rather correcting the very belief in self and addressing the root of the problem: the craving which creates ever more elaborate ideas of self. One must uproot self-view (*atta-ditṭhi* or *attānuditṭhi*), reject the belief in an enduring self or soul (*atta-vāda*), and abandon the craving for existence (*bhava-tanhā*). When this craving is abandoned, the self or the ideas of self in which one invests so much importance are also relinquished. With this relinquishment the question of self is concluded; one need not affix a concept of self onto something else. The self ceases automatically with the destruction of this native craving.² [383] Nothing more needs to be said about the self; the self becomes meaningless.

The extreme and controversial interpretation that Buddhism rejects the five aggregates as self, and that Nibbāna is the true self, is an error resulting from misdirected focus. Proponents of this view pay too much attention to what the Buddha rejected as self, rather than how he rejected the self and how he rejected the attachment that gives rise to the self.

The reason the Buddha chose the five aggregates as the focus in the Three Characteristics, asserting that they are insubstantial and not truly controllable, is because the aggregates are all that ordinary people are able to know and conceive of.³ They comprise all things that are generally held to be self, including experiences in *jhāna*. The Buddha's rejection of the aggregates as self was not an encouragement to find something else to grasp. The aim of his teaching is precisely to eradicate self view, self attachment, and craving for existence, not merely to know the insubstantiality of the aggregates. If the Buddha wanted us to reject the

¹ This is a very important distinction between Buddhism and religions that avow a soul or an eternal god. The absolute truth as presented by some religions and branches of theology can appear almost identical to that of Buddhism. The difference is that these faiths define the highest reality in terms of a Self or Supreme Being. Although adherents of these faiths may reach profound states of consciousness, they are still caught up with the latent yet insistent need for a self. When discussing one of these profound states, they look for an angle or reference to label it as self in the hope that they will continue to exist in some enduring, constant way, which indicates that they still have *bhava-tanhā* to be indulged. In Buddhism this mechanism is called 'the master-ensnaring net' (*brahma-jāla*: 'the net that traps Brahma'; see the *Brahmajāla-Sutta*, D. I. 12-46). More important than any concept of self is the desire for self, which breeds all pursuit for and debates over self.

² On the apparent contradiction between *kamma* and *anattā* see chapter 5 (section 4) of *Buddhadhamma* on *kamma*, especially the Buddha's statements quoted there ('Good, Evil & Beyond', trans. by Bruce Evans, Buddhadhamma Foundation, 1993, pp. 89-98).

³ Author: The 12 sense spheres (*āyatana*) are also frequent topics of analysis.

aggregates as self in order to adopt something else as the true self, he would have made it amply clear what that is. He wouldn't have left us guessing and disputing.

Non-self as part of the Three Characteristics is usually referred to in the scriptures in the phrase: *All conditioned phenomena are impermanent, all conditioned phenomena are dukkha, all things are non-self* (*anattā*). This phrase shows that *anattā* has a range of meaning broader than *anicca* and *dukkha*. The first two clauses refer to conditioned phenomena (*saṅkhāra* or *saṅkhata-dhamma*), while the third refers to all ‘dhammas’, normally defined as both conditioned phenomena and the Unconditioned (*saṅkhata-dhamma* and *asaṅkhata-dhamma*, or *saṅkhāra* and *visaṅkhāra*). And the following passage in the *Parivāra* of the *Vinaya-Pitaka* clearly demonstrates that *Nibbāna* is included in the clause ‘all things are non-self’: *All formations are impermanent, dukkha, and nonself; Nibbāna and designations are nonself.*⁴ Although evidence shows that the *Parivāra* is a later text in the *Tipiṭaka*, one must concede that this is an interpretation from early, pre-commentarial Buddhism. In any case, although such text material exists one ought to define *anattā* with caution. [384]

The Buddha showed caution when discussing *attā/anattā*. His approach can be summarized as follows: Firstly, when the listener had an adequate basis of understanding, the Buddha would explain the nature of the object held to be self and the grasping that needs to be abandoned, as can be seen in his references to the five aggregates and twelve sense bases in the teaching of the Three Characteristics. Secondly, if someone asked him the isolated metaphysical question whether the self exists or does not exist, the Buddha remained silent and would not answer:

At one time the wanderer Vacchagotta approached the Buddha and asked: *Is there a self?* The Buddha was silent. Vacchagotta resumed: *Then, is there no self?* The Buddha remained silent. Vacchagotta then rose from his seat and departed. Later, Venerable Ānanda said to the Buddha: *Why is it that when the Blessed One was questioned by the wanderer, he did not answer?* The Buddha replied: *If I had answered, ‘There is a self,’ this would have been siding with those who are eternalists. If I had answered, ‘There is no self,’ this would have been siding with those who are annihilationists.*⁵

In the first manner of teaching about non-self stated above, the Buddha points out how the things a person identifies with as self cannot be held in any real way. When a person recognizes this misapprehension, the dangers of grasping and advantages of letting go become apparent. One understands the meaning of freedom and knows how to conduct oneself appropriately in the world, living with purpose rather than drifting aimlessly and allowing craving to develop into a more

⁴ Vin. VI. 86.

⁵ S. IV. 400. If the Buddha had answered, ‘There is a self,’ this would have been inconsistent with the arising of the knowledge that ‘all things are nonself’. If he had answered, ‘There is no self,’ Vacchagotta, already confused, would have fallen into even greater confusion, thinking, ‘It seems that the self I formerly had no longer exists.’

serious mental complex. [385] By gaining understanding, a practitioner removes self views and reduces the craving for existence. At the same time questions about self gradually dissolve.

This way of explaining differs greatly from trying to answer metaphysical questions about the self, which spring from people's *bhava-taṇhā* or *vibhava-taṇhā* (craving for extinction). The craving is tied up with fixed views: either a variant of eternalism (*sassata-ditṭhi*) or annihilationism (*uccheda-ditṭhi*). Answering or repudiating these kinds of questions to someone with fixed beliefs is risky and leads to confusion. No matter how one answers, the person will base his conceptions upon established beliefs. If the answer is consistent with his views, he will take this as confirmation of his specific understanding. If inconsistent, he will conclude the opposite. For example, if one answers that the self exists the view of a listener biased towards eternalism will be reinforced. If one negates the self he will go to the opposite extreme and interpret this as a form of annihilationism. He may then develop the misguided idea that since no self exists, persecution has no consequences; since no-one acts, no-one receives the fruits of action and therefore why should one perform good deeds? Some people may develop a phobia of extinction. Some may conclude that Nibbāna equals extinction and give up practising the Dhamma out of fear. Such reactions and views are extremely unfortunate. Responding at this level to these questions of self can cause confusion. People form conclusions according to their cravings and fixed opinions; these conclusions inevitably result in the extreme views of eternalism or annihilationism, neither of which is embraced by Buddhism.

When someone asks whether things exist or do not exist, neither answer 'they exist' or 'they do not exist' is suitable, because such answers maintain the views of eternalism and annihilationism. One should not answer categorically; one should state that things exist or do not exist conditionally since things arise mutually dependent on one another (*paṭicca-samuppanna*). The Buddha therefore did not answer with a simple affirmative or negative; he referred to the process of origination. This form of response aims to dispel our misconceptions of things. The word *anattā* functions to remove self concepts fabricated by craving and wrong view. With the release of attachment, the self or self-concepts cease automatically. If one comprehends *anattā* as the common (i.e. unawakened) belief of 'no self', however, then one falls into the wrong view of annihilationism. [386] In the Sutta-Nipāta the Buddha often characterizes enlightened beings as having neither *attā* nor *nirattā*: having neither 'a self' nor 'an absence of self'.⁶ They have no thirst for being (*bhava-taṇhā*) which seeks a self, nor do they hold a view of existence (*bhava-ditṭhi*), which leads to self view (*atta-ditṭhi*) or self-extinction (*uccheda-ditṭhi*). Another definition is that they believe neither in an 'existing self' nor an 'expired

⁶ See: Sn. 154, 157, 168, 180; elucidated at: Nd1. 82, 107-8, 247, 352-53.

self': the misinterpretation of a fixed self identity followed by the belief that the self has vanished.⁷

In conclusion, although the Buddha declared the truth, the truth must always be linked to practice. He wished that those who receive his teachings apply them and benefit. The way of explaining *anattā* by examining the objects a person identifies with and their relationship to craving intends to free the listeners from harmful views and attachments, enabling them to have a liberated heart and to prosper. Metaphysical responses, when indulged in, add to confusion and deepen wrong view. As the Buddha said: *I do not see any doctrine of self that would not arouse sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair, in one who clings to it.*⁸

What Happens After an Arahant's Death?

An inevitable question that arises in the discussion of Nibbāna is: 'What happens to an arahant after death?' or: 'Does a person who has realized Nibbāna exist after death or not?' In truth, this question is centred around self-view: the devotion to self is acting as a catalyst in posing the question. This attachment to self or to the label of self (*attavādupādāna*) is firmly embedded in the hearts of unenlightened people, supported by the thirst for being (*bhava-taṇhā*) and based on ignorance (*avijjā*). [387] The Buddha did not encourage debating this question if one has not eliminated ignorance and craving. He encouraged knowledge through application rather than conjecture.

No matter how one responds to these inquiries, the latent root attachment to self will inevitably lead to a biased understanding. The questioner will incline towards a wrong view of Nibbāna as either an enduring self or an eradication of self. It is easy for annihilationists to view Nibbāna as extinction, because Buddhism emphasizes disentangling from the widespread belief in eternalism.⁹ As for eternalists, when their idea of self is invalidated, they search for a substitute to compensate for the sense of void or to restore the idea of a stable self. When they

⁷ Note the teaching in the Visuddhimagga: *There is no doer of a deed, or one who reaps the deed's results... For here there is no Creator God, no Creator of the round of births; phenomena alone flow on, dependent on the marriage of conditions.* This matches the teaching in the Sammohavinodanī: *When no being can be found, there is neither substantiality nor extinction* (Vism. 602-3; VbhA. 194). The use of expressions such as 'inflated ego' and 'destroy the ego' are simply idioms of speech. They are often used in the context of intensified levels of clinging to self. It is the clinging which should be eradicated rather than the self, since no self exists to eradicate. The thought of eradicating the self is linked to an annihilationist view. The self is merely a mental concept fabricated by *bhava-taṇhā* and superimposed on something which occurs naturally on its own. The self does not exist independently and therefore has no inherent reality. Furthermore, the term *attavādupādāna* suggests clearly that clinging exists merely for the word (or idea of) 'self', since no real self exists to be clung to (Vism. 569; VismT.: Dutyo Bhāgo, Paññābhuminiddesavaṇṇanā, Taṇhāpaccaya-upādānapadavithārakathāvaṇṇanā).

⁸ M. I. 137.

⁹ Note the Buddha's remark that despite annihilationism (*vibhava-ditṭhi*) being wrong view, it is closer to Buddhism than other views (A. V. 63).

encounter a teaching that advocates uprooting the fixed belief in self, it can seem to them that the self vanishes. They may then seize Nibbāna as a haven for the self or equate Nibbāna as eternal life or the Promised Land. Many esteemed and wise individuals who are free from almost all forms of attachment get caught in these views. The escape from this net leads to complete liberation. The Buddhist teachings admit that such freedom is extremely difficult to achieve and refer to this subtle attachment to views as ‘the Brahma-ensnaring web’ (*brahma-jāla*): an entanglement for the virtuous and wise.

Nibbāna and the practice for Nibbāna have nothing to do with destroying the self because there is no self to destroy.¹⁰ It is the attachment to the concepts of self that must be destroyed. One must remove the attachment to self-assertions, self-views and self-perceptions. Nibbāna is the end of these misunderstandings and the end of the suffering caused by attachment. [388] When the yearning for self ceases, all theories of self automatically lose their significance. When the attachment to self is uprooted, things will be seen as they truly are; there is no need for further speculation about self. When the desire which gives rise to self ceases, the matter of self vanishes of its own accord. Nibbāna is the cessation of suffering, not the cessation of self, since there is no self that will cease. Reflect on the Buddha’s words: *I teach only suffering and the end of suffering.*¹¹ In order to shift the emphasis from the preoccupation with Nibbāna and philosophical debate, the Buddha usually referred to Nibbāna in the context of practical application or the related benefits for everyday life, as demonstrated in passages of the Tipiṭaka.

Rather than give lengthy explanations on the subject of what happens to arahants after they die, some teachings of the Buddha are listed below for consideration:

A) This teaching offers a basic understanding on the subject of self, presenting the two extreme views of eternalism and extinction. It also elucidates the meaning of *bhava-tanhā* and *vibhava-tanhā*:

Bhikkhus, both devas and humans are possessed by two views. Some are bogged down, some overreach, while those with vision see. And how, monks, are some bogged down?

Devas and humans delight in becoming (bhava), rejoice in becoming, take pleasure in becoming. When the Dhamma is being taught for the cessation of becoming (bhava-nirodha), the hearts of those devas and humans do not leap forward, do not gain confidence, do not become settled, do not yield. Thus are some bogged down.

And how, monks, do some overreach?

¹⁰ Westerners with an inadequate study on the subject of Nibbāna tend to conclude that Nibbāna is self extinction, which is an annihilationist perspective.

¹¹ S. III. 119 = S. IV. 384.

Some devas and humans are afflicted, depressed, and disgusted by becoming. They delight in non-becoming (vibhava: extinction), saying: ‘My good sir, with the breaking up of the body at death, this self is annihilated, destroyed, and no longer exists. This state is supreme, excellent and true.’ Thus do some overreach.

And how, monks, do those with vision see?

In this case, a monk sees becoming as becoming.¹² When he sees becoming as becoming, he practises for disenchantment (nibbidā), dispassion (virāga), and cessation (nirodha) in regard to becoming. Thus do those with vision see.

Whoever sees becoming as becoming,

And sees the state beyond becoming,

Surrenders to the Truth,

Through the exhaustion of lust for existence.

With full understanding of becoming,

One is free from craving,

For both existence and extinction (abhava).

With the end of what has come to be,

A monk comes not to further birth.¹³ [389]

B) The Buddha's repudiation of the view that consciousness leaves the body and takes a new birth is of particular interest in the study of rebirth. Although the subject of rebirth is not directly linked to Nibbāna, examining the teachings on rebirth may add to an understanding of Nibbāna.

On that occasion a wrong view had arisen in a bhikkhu named Sāti, son of a fisherman, thus: ‘As I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, it is this same consciousness that runs and wanders through the round of rebirths, not another’....

¹² I.e., he sees its true nature. The word for becoming here is *bhūta*, meaning ‘what has become’, ‘what exists’, or ‘what has come into being’. It shares the same root as *bhava*. The commentaries define it as the five aggregates (ItA. I. 179).

¹³ It. 43-44; Ps. 1. 159; although the closing verses seem to complement the main passage, the commentaries render them as follows: *Noble disciples, who see the true nature of the five aggregates and see the Path transcending the aggregates, find release in Nibbāna, the Absolute, through the exhaustion of lust for existence. By fully understanding the aggregates, they are free from lust for planes of existence, both high and low. Free of the aggregates, they come to no further birth.* (ItA. I. 180); also, compare the Buddha's words on the two extremes at Ud. 71-72.

The bhikkhus were unable to detach him from that pernicious view, so they went to the Buddha and told him all that had occurred...

(The Buddha then called the bhikkhu Sāti) and asked him: ‘Sāti, is it true that the following pernicious view has arisen in you: “As I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, it is this same consciousness that runs and wanders through the round of rebirths, not another?”

‘Exactly so, venerable sir...’

‘What is that consciousness, Sāti?’

‘Venerable sir, it is that which speaks and feels and experiences here and there the result of good and bad actions.’

‘Misguided man, to whom have you ever known me to teach the Dhamma in that way? In many discourses have I not stated consciousness to be dependently arisen, since without a condition there is no origination of consciousness? But you, misguided man, have misrepresented us by your wrong grasp and injured yourself and stored up much demerit; for this will lead to your harm and suffering for a long time.’

Then the Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus thus: ‘Bhikkhus, consciousness is reckoned by the particular condition dependent upon which it arises. When consciousness arises dependent on the eye and forms, it is reckoned as eye-consciousness; when consciousness arises dependent on the ear and sounds, it is reckoned as ear-consciousness; when consciousness arises dependent on the nose and odours, it is reckoned as nose-consciousness; when consciousness arises dependent on the tongue and flavours, it is reckoned as tongue-consciousness; when consciousness arises dependent on the body and tangibles, it is reckoned as body-consciousness; when consciousness arises dependent on the mind and mind-objects, it is reckoned as mind-consciousness. [390] Just as fire is reckoned by the particular condition dependent on which it burns... it is reckoned as a log fire... a woodchip fire... a grass fire... a cowdung fire... a chaff fire... a rubbish fire...¹⁴

C) This teaching corrects the misguided view that arahants are annihilated after death:

On one occasion the following wrong view had arisen in a bhikkhu named Yamaka: ‘As I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, a bhikkhu whose taints are destroyed is annihilated and perishes with the breakup of the body and does not exist after death.’

A number of bhikkhus unsuccessfully tried to rid him of this wrong view. They therefore asked the Venerable Sāriputta for assistance. Venerable Sāriputta approached Yamaka and conducted the following conversation:

¹⁴ Mahātañhāsaṅkhaya Sutta: M. I. 256-260.

'Is it true, friend Yamaka, that such a pernicious view as this has arisen in you: "As I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, a bhikkhu whose taints are destroyed is annihilated and perishes with the breakup of the body and does not exist after death"?'?

'Exactly so, friend.'

'What do you think, friend Yamaka, is form permanent or impermanent?'

'Impermanent, friend.'

'...Is feeling... perception... volitional formations... consciousness permanent or impermanent?'

'Impermanent, friend.'

'Therefore, any kind of form... feeling... perception... volitional formations... consciousness whatsoever, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near... should be seen as it really is with correct wisdom thus: "This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self." Seeing thus, [one's mind] is liberated...'

'What do you think, friend Yamaka, do you regard form as the Tathāgata¹⁵?' 'No, friend.'

'Do you regard feeling... perception... volitional formations... consciousness as the Tathāgata?' 'No, friend.'

'What do you think, friend Yamaka, do you regard the Tathāgata as in form?' 'No, friend.'

'Do you regard the Tathāgata as apart from form?' 'No, friend.'

'Do you regard the Tathāgata as in feeling... apart from feeling... as in perception... apart from perception... as in volitional formations... as apart from volitional formations... as in consciousness... as apart from consciousness?' 'No, friend.'

'What do you think, friend Yamaka, do you regard form, feeling, perception, volitional formations and consciousness [taken together] as the Tathāgata?' 'No, friend.'

'What do you think, friend Yamaka, do you regard the Tathāgata as one who is without form, without feeling, without perception, without volitional formations, without consciousness?'

'No, friend.'

¹⁵ The Buddha.

'But friend, when the Tathāgata is not apprehended by you as real and actual here in this very life, is it fitting for you to declare: "As I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, a bhikkhu whose taints are destroyed is annihilated and perishes with the breakup of the body and does not exist after death"?'

'Formerly, friend Sāriputta, when I was ignorant, I did hold that pernicious view, but now that I have heard this Dhamma teaching of the Venerable Sāriputta I have abandoned that pernicious view and have made the breakthrough to the Dhamma.'

'If, friend Yamaka, people were to ask you: "Friend Yamaka, when a bhikkhu is an arahant, one whose taints are destroyed, what happens to him with the breakup of the body, after death?" - being asked thus, what would you answer?'

'If they were to ask me this, friend, I would answer thus: "Friends, form is impermanent; what is impermanent is dukkha; what is dukkha has ceased and passed away. Feeling... perception... volitional formations... consciousness is impermanent; what is impermanent is dukkha; what is dukkha has ceased and passed away." Being asked thus, friend, I would answer in such a way.'

'Good, good, friend Yamaka...' ¹⁶

D) In this teaching the Buddha, while conversing with the wanderer Vacchagotta, compares the death of an arahant with the extinguishing of a fire:

'When a bhikkhu's mind is liberated thus, Master Gotama, where does he reappear [after death]?'

'The term "reappears" does not apply¹⁷, Vaccha.'

'Then he does not reappear, Master Gotama?'

'The term "does not reappear" does not apply, Vaccha.'

'Then he both reappears and does not reappear, Master Gotama?'

'The term "both reappears and does not reappear" does not apply, Vaccha.'

'Then he neither reappears nor does not reappear, Master Gotama?'

'The term "neither reappears nor does not reappear" does not apply, Vaccha.'

¹⁶ S. III. 109-112; this dialogue is followed by a lengthy simile; the commentaries interpret the term *tathāgata* here as meaning a being or person (SA. II. 310).

¹⁷ *Na upeti* (the commentaries use *na yujati*): does not 'go with' or is 'incongruent' with this subject.

‘... Here I have fallen into bewilderment, Master Gotama, here I have fallen into confusion, and the measure of confidence I had gained through previous conversation with Master Gotama has now disappeared.’

‘It is enough to cause you bewilderment, Vaccha, enough to cause you confusion. For this Dhamma, Vaccha, is profound, hard to see and hard to understand, peaceful and sublime, unattainable by mere reasoning, subtle, to be experienced by the wise. It is hard for you to understand it when you hold another view, accept another teaching, approve of another teaching, pursue a different training, and follow a different teacher. So I shall question you about this in return, Vaccha. Answer as you choose.

‘What do you think, Vaccha? Suppose a fire were burning before you. Would you know: “This fire is burning before me?”’

‘I would, Master Gotama.’

If someone were to ask you, Vaccha: “What does this fire burning before you burn in dependence on?” – being asked thus, what would you answer?

‘Being asked thus, Master Gotama, I would answer: “This fire burning before me burns in dependence on grass and sticks.”’

‘If that fire before you were to be extinguished, would you know: “This fire before me has been extinguished?”’

‘I would, Master Gotama.’

If someone were to ask you, Vaccha: “When that fire before you was extinguished, to which direction did it go: to the east, the west, the north, or the south?” – being asked thus, what would you answer?

‘That does not apply, Master Gotama. The fire burned in dependence on its fuel of grass and sticks. When that is used up, if it does not get any more fuel, being without fuel, it is reckoned as extinguished.

‘So too, Vaccha, the Tathāgata has abandoned that material form... feeling... perception... volitional formations... consciousness by which one describing the Tathāgata might describe him; he has cut it off at the root, made it like a palm stump, done away with it so that it is no longer subject to future arising. The Tathāgata is liberated from reckoning in terms of material form... feelings... perception... volitional formations... consciousness, Vaccha, he is profound, immeasurable, unfathomable like the ocean. The term “reappears” does not apply, the term “does not reappear” does not apply, the term “both reappears and does not reappear” does not apply, the term “neither reappears nor does not reappear” does not apply.

Following this conversation faith arose in the wanderer Vacchagotta and he declared himself a lay follower.¹⁸

The Ratana-Sutta describes arahants as follows:

*With previous [birth] exhausted, and no new birth arising, the mind disengaged from future birth - the seeds of existence destroyed, with no impulse to grow again. Those wise ones are extinguished even as this lamp.*¹⁹

At the final passing away (*parinibbāna*) of Venerable Dabba-Mallaputta, the Buddha uttered this verse:

*Broken is the body, all perception has ceased,
Feelings are stilled, volitional formations calmed,
And consciousness has reached its end.*²⁰

The Buddha recounted the events of this passing away to the monks and uttered this verse:

*Just as the destination of a blazing spark of fire
Struck from the anvil, gradually fading,
Cannot be known - so in the case of those
Who have rightly won release and crossed the flood
Of binding lusts, and reached unshakeable bliss,
Their destination cannot be defined.*²¹

¹⁸ Aggivacchagotta Sutta, especially the concluding sections (M. I. 486-89); later, the wanderer Vacchagotta was ordained as a bhikkhu and became one of the arahants (M. I. 497); the Buddha and Vacchagotta have another interesting discussion in which the Buddha says: *Just as a fire burns with fuel, but not without fuel, so I declare rebirth for one with fuel, not for one without fuel... Craving is [the] fuel* (S. IV. 398-400).

¹⁹ Sn. 41-42.

²⁰ Ud. 93.

²¹ Ibid.