

third centuries CE, they too were present in the North-West of India<sup>44</sup>. Moreover, given the fact that the Mahāsāṃghikas had followers in China, they probably also met Sarvāstivādin monks on the Chinese sub-continent. Yet, given the many dissimilarities between the Bhīpras of the Sarvāstivādins and Mahāsāṃghikas, partly due to a different organisation of the *prātimokṣā*<sup>45</sup>, it seems unlikely that the Sarvāstivādins admitted any authority of the Mahāsāṃghikas as to the content of the precepts<sup>46</sup>.

Summarising, it is clear that SHT I 44 and P.Skt. Bleu 46 and 47 are, given the many similarities with the Bhīpra of the Sarvāstivādins (T 1437), manuscripts belonging to the Sarvāstivāda school. In this school, however, there is a discussion on the exact content of the Bhīpra, and at least two slightly different versions have been handed down. Eventually, only the compilation by Fa-ying, T 1437, survived and is considered to be correct. The presence of the precept on the 'five to six sentences' in SHT I 44 and P.Skt. Bleu 46, and in the Tun-huang Ms studied by Nishimoto, is based on the opinion that this precept belongs to the original Sarvāstivāda Bhīpra. This opinion is probably influenced by the position of other schools, most likely the Mūlasarvāstivādins and/or the Dharmaguptakas.

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44 See, G. Roth, *Bhikṣu-Vinaya*, Patna 1970, p.xi.

45 See Hirakawa, *Monastic Discipline*, op. cit., p.18.

46 In this sense, a few similarities between the Mahāsāṃghika and Sarvāstivāda precepts, such as the lack of the precept on the 'five to six sentences' (see C. Kabilsingh, *A Comparative Study of Bhikkhunī Pāṭimokkha*, Varanasi 1984/Delhi 1998, p.93) are probably due to a remainder of a very old common stage or to a coincidentally common evolution.

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## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE INJUNCTION TO HOLD ONESELF AND THE DHAMMA AS AN ISLAND AND A REFUGE IN THE BUDDHA'S TEACHING\*

Abraham Vélez de Cea

### INTRODUCTION

The Buddha frequently used the term *attā* in its colloquial sense as 'oneself', 'myself', 'yourself', 'himself', etc., as required by the everyday linguistic usage of his time, because this did not necessarily contradict the teaching of *anattā*. As Steven Collins has pointed out: 'The linguistic items translated lexically as "self" and "person" (in Pali *attā*, *purisa/puggala*, Sanskrit *ātman*, *puruṣa/pudgala* respectively, are used quite naturally and freely in a number of contexts, without any suggestion that their being so used might conflict with the doctrine of *anattā*'<sup>1</sup>.

Similarly, the Buddha used certain current idiomatic phrases involving the term *attā* because this was part of the usual terminology in philosophical and religious circles of his time, and such usage did not imply a philosophical commitment to a particular conception of *attā*, nor an acceptance of *attā* as an ultimate reality.

Just as other teachers did, in order to make themselves better understood, the Buddha resorted to the language currently in use, and saw no problems in putting forward his own ideas in the religious terminology and idiomatic terms that were common in his cultural context. Now the fact that the Buddha occasionally used idiomatic phrases and religious terminology common to other teachers and schools in no way means that he interpreted this language in the same manner. On the contrary, a comparative analysis of religious terms in current use in the cultural context of the times, such as *kamma*, *brahmā*, *brāhmaṇa*, *ariya*, etc., makes it clear that the Buddha

\* Translated by the author from his (forthcoming) doctoral dissertation, 'La filosofía del Buddha según los sermones Pali' (Madrid).

1 S. Collins, *Selfless Persons*, Cambridge 1982, p.71.

invested those terms with new meanings more in accordance with his own thinking. Similarly, a comparative analysis of other idiomatic terms that were equally common in philosophical and religious discussions of the times, such as for instance, *brahmacariya*, *brahma-bhūtena attanā*, *brahmavihāra*, *attakāma*, *attānaṃ gavesati*, *bhāvitatto*, *attadīpā viharatha attasaraṇā anaññasaraṇā*, etc., shows that the Buddha used those terms rather as metaphors to convey his own spirituality. As Prof. Gombrich rightly indicates: “the Buddha regularly used the language of his opponents, but turned it into metaphor”<sup>2</sup>.

One of the most famous phrases with the term *attā* in the Pāli discourses is the injunction to hold oneself and the Dhamma, and no one or nothing else, as an island and a refuge<sup>3</sup>.

Some authors, such as C.A.F. Rhys Davids<sup>4</sup>, I.B. Horner<sup>5</sup>, A. K. Coomaraswamy<sup>6</sup>, K. Bhattacharya<sup>7</sup>, J. Pérez-Remón<sup>8</sup>, etc., claim that this injunction shows that the Buddha accepted the ultimate existence of an unchanging *attā* (as an individual or a universal entity, depending on each author’s philosophical stance) which is literally one’s island and refuge. However, and this is the point of the present study, a close examination of the Pāli discourses shows that this injunction does not constitute an explicit reference to an immortal and transcen-

2 R. Gombrich, *How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings*, London & Atlantic Highlands 1996, p.42.

3 D II 100, etc.

4 Cf. C.A.F. Rhys Davids, *A Manual of Buddhism*, London 1932, first Indian edition, New Delhi 1978, pp.158-9, 166-7; *Buddhist Psychology*, London 1924 — rev. ed. *The Birth of Indian Psychology and its Development in Buddhism*, London 1935, pp.209-10.

5 Cf. I.B. Horner & A.K. Coomaraswamy, *The Living Thoughts of Gotama Buddha*, London 1948, p.177 ff.

6 Cf. A.K. Coomaraswamy, *Hinduism and Buddhism*, New York 1943, p.77.

7 Cf. K. Bhattacharya, *L’Ātman-Brahman dans le Bouddhisme*, Paris 1973, p.30.

8 Cf. J. Pérez-Remón, *Self and Non-Self in Early Buddhism*, New York 1980, pp.20-6.

dent *attā* which is identical with the Dhamma, but simply uses current everyday language as a metaphor to recommend the practice of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, that is to say, the awareness of an impermanent and dependently originated process which is the result of causes and conditions which are themselves impermanent. As we shall see, this injunction is addressed to persons who are confused and depressed because of someone’s illness or death. The purpose of this is, on the one hand, to provide encouragement at times of crisis, so as to help the person to avoid unwholesome mental states that are an obstacle to spiritual practice, and on the other hand to serve as a reminder of the fact that, irrespective of whether this or that teacher may have died or be about to die, it is still possible to go on practising the Dhamma.

We shall also see that when the Buddha declares that he has achieved his own refuge he is far from referring to an immortal *attā* that finds shelter from suffering, and far from suggesting that Nibbāna, Dhamma and *attā* are identical. All he is saying is that he has practised the Four Foundations of Mindfulness and that through this practice he has attained the refuge of Nibbāna, a state defined in the Pāli texts as non-*attā*<sup>9</sup>.

#### I. POSSIBLE TRANSLATIONS OF THE INJUNCTION AND PROBLEMS ARISING WITH THE ATMANIC INTERPRETATION<sup>10</sup>.

The *locus classicus* for this injunction is, of course, the *Mahā-parinibbāna Sutta*, where the Buddha, shortly before expiring, says to Ānanda:

9 For details of the Pāli texts where Nibbāna is defined as *anattā*, see S. Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities*, Cambridge 1998, pp.141-2.

10 The interpretation just described, which takes idiomatic phrases and compounds including the term *attā* as proving that the Buddha accepted the existence of an immortal *attā*, and therefore tends to translate *attā* as a noun (the *attā* or an *attā*) instead of a reflexive pronoun (oneself). The terms ‘atmanic’ and ‘anatmic’ are neologisms coined by Raimundo Panikkar to identify, respectively, traditions which accept or do not accept the reality of *attā*.

*'Tasmātihānanda. attadīpā viharatha attasaraṇā anañña-saraṇā, dhammadīpā dhammasaraṇā anaññasaraṇā'*<sup>11</sup>.

This is translated by M. Walshe as: 'Therefore, Ānanda, you should live as islands unto yourselves, being your own refuge, with no one else as your refuge, with Dhamma as an island, with Dhamma as your refuge, with no other refuge'<sup>12</sup>.

T.W. & C.A.F. Rhys Davids, taking *dīpa* in the other possible sense, translate: 'Therefore, O Ānanda, be ye lamps unto yourselves. Be ye a refuge to yourselves. Betake yourselves to no external refuge. Hold fast to the Truth as a lamp. Hold fast as a refuge to the Truth. Look not for refuge to any one besides yourselves'<sup>13</sup>.

Considering that the term *attā*, in the colloquial and idiomatic usage of the Pāli discourses, is a reflexive pronoun that refers back to one's own person, or to oneself, it may be agreed that both the Walshe and Rhys Davids translations are not only philologically correct but, in my view, consistent with the philosophy of the Pāli discourses.

Nevertheless, the Spanish Jesuit father Joaquín Pérez-Remón has queried these translations, maintaining that the compounds *attadīpā* and *attasaraṇā* are: '*Bahubbihi* compounds containing two nouns in apposition, and therefore to be explained as, "those who have the self as an island", "those who have the self as a refuge", etc.'<sup>14</sup>.

In consequence, he argues that the most accurate translation of this passage would be: 'Therefore, Ānanda, stay as those who have the self as island, as those who have the self as refuge, as those who have no other refuge; as those who have *dhamma* as island, as those who have *dhamma* as refuge, as those who have no other refuge'<sup>15</sup>.

11 All Pāli quotations refer to the Pali Text Society edition, in this case D II 100.

12 *Thus Have I Heard, The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, London 1987, Boston 1995, p.245.

13 *Dialogues of the Buddha* II, PTS, p.108.

14 Pérez-Remón, *op. cit.*, p.20.

15 *Ibid.*, p.20.

Without getting into a philological debate as to whether it is legitimate to translate *attā* as 'the self', instead of simply 'oneself', or into hermeneutic dispute about whether the 'self' supposedly referred to in this passage is meant to be a permanent and eternal individual 'I' (as Pérez-Remón seems to believe on the basis of Christian philosophical premises) or a universal 'I' (as A.K. Coomaraswamy and S. Radhakrishnan maintain from a neo-Vedantic point of view), let us admit, for argument's sake, that the atmanic translation is, at least, philologically acceptable and consider some of the problems it raises.

The atmanic translation of the passage in question assumes that Dhamma is the same as *attā*<sup>16</sup>.

The atmanic interpretation would seem to maintain that if the Buddha exhorts his disciples to take *attā* and Dhamma as an island and refuge, those two terms, Dhamma and *attā*, denote the same reality. Now this identity or equivalence assumed in the atmanic translation is highly problematic because it makes the Pāli texts contradict themselves. If the passage, *attadīpā viharatha attasaraṇā anaññasaraṇā, dhammadīpā dhammasaraṇā anaññasaraṇā*, implies that Dhamma and *attā* are one and the same thing, this means that there is at least one dhamma which is *attā*, which is in clear contradiction of the Buddha's other statement that '*sabbe dhamme anattā*' (all dhammas are non-*attā*).

To claim that Dhamma and *attā* are identical or equivalent renders the teaching of Dependent Origination unnecessary. In effect, Dependent Origination explains suffering and the nature of things on the basis that there is no such thing as an *attā* that might constitute the essence, or substantive foundation of the impermanent processes that constitute a human being. But if it is assumed that in the ultimate analysis there exists in fact an *attā* that is the same as Dhamma, what would be the point of Dependent Origination?

The identification of *attā* and Dhamma is in direct contradiction to the Buddha's explicit identification of Dependent Origination with

16 See, for instance, K. Bhattacharya, *op. cit.*, pp.79-114. See also A.K. Coomaraswamy, *op. cit.*, pp.72-3.

the Dhamma when he declares that he who sees the one sees the other, and vice versa<sup>17</sup>. If to see the Dhamma is to see that things arise dependently, and Dependent Origination does not need to postulate a real, essential *attā*, it does not make much sense to claim at the same time that Dhamma and *attā* are the same.

What is explicitly stated throughout the Pāli Canon is that to see the Dhamma is to see Dependent Origination, but nowhere is anything said to the effect that seeing the Dhamma is equivalent to seeing *attā*. Rather the opposite: what is explicitly declared is that the concept of *attā* is the consequence of an inadequate perception of the psychophysical aggregates which constitute human reality<sup>18</sup> and that, if an *attā* existed, liberation from suffering would not be possible (not be perceived)<sup>19</sup>.

Now, since the passage we are examining is to be found in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, which narrates the Buddha's last days, an atmanic interpreter might argue that, before dying, the Buddha meant to reveal the esoteric meaning of the *anattā* doctrine, so as to make everything clear before his disappearance and prevent any misunderstanding about the ultimate meaning of the *anattā* doctrine, i.e. — according to this interpretation — he would not have been questioning the ultimate reality of an *attā* but the mistake that would consist in confusing this *attā* with the physical and mental aggregates that make up the individual.

Firstly, however, this interpretation may easily be countered by recalling that the injunction under consideration is also found in many other texts of the Pāli Canon, and there is no reason to assume that it appears for the first time in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*.

Secondly, it would not seem to be at all consistent to believe that the Buddha, just before his disappearance, decided to enjoin his

17 *Yo paṭiccasamuppādaṃ passati. So dhammaṃ passati. Yo dhammaṃ passati. So paṭiccasamuppādaṃ passaṃti* — M I 191, etc.

18 S III 46.

19 S III 144.

disciples to hold the *attā* as their island and refuge in a literal, rather than an idiomatic or figured sense, when he had previously spent forty-five years tirelessly repeating that nothing is to be regarded as 'I am' or as 'this is my *attā*'.

Thirdly, the esoteric interpretation is untenable in the light of what the Buddha says just before: 'I have preached the truth without making any distinction between exoteric and esoteric doctrine; for in respect of the truths, Ānanda, the Tathāgata has no such thing as the closed fist of a teacher who keeps things back'<sup>20</sup>.

If the Buddha has just been saying that he has been preaching the Dhamma without making any distinction between exoteric and esoteric teaching, it would be absurd for him to reveal, shortly afterwards, a secret meaning of the *anattā* doctrine. If the Buddha had wanted to teach that there was such a thing as a real *attā* he would have said so clearly in the course of his long life, without waiting for his dying day to reveal a supposedly true esoteric, occult meaning of his often repeated teaching of non-*attā*.

Fourthly, the context (in D II 100) does not justify the inference that the Buddha is advising his disciples to turn to an unchanging, eternal *attā* as an island and a refuge. Rather, the context makes it clear that what the Buddha is saying is that no one needs to be appointed to succeed him at the head of the Order, as a refuge for others, after his death. In fact, in the context we see that the Buddha is very ill. Ānanda says that he feels purposeless (*madhurakajāto*) and unable to make sense of things (*me na pakkhāyanti dhammā*) because of the Lord's sickness, but he derives some comfort from the thought that the Master would not attain final Nibbāna until he had made some statement about who would be his successor and lead the Order of monks after his death. It is at this point that the Buddha says to him that he has preached the Dhamma without making any distinction between open and occult teachings and that he does not think it necessary to say anything further about the Community of monks, i.e., that

20 D II 100; trans. in *Dialogues of the Buddha I*, op. cit., p.107.

he does not think it necessary to appoint anyone to succeed him as the leader of the Community. He then adds that he will soon die, that he is old and frail and that he can only overcome physical suffering by dwelling in certain meditative states.

It is at this point that the Buddha exhorts Ānanda and all his disciples to live 'as those who have the self as island, as those who have the self as refuge, as those who have no other refuge; as those who have Dhamma as island, as those who have Dhamma as refuge, as those who have no other refuge'<sup>21</sup>.

Since the Buddha has already taught everything that is necessary to make oneself free from suffering, what the disciples have to do is simply to protect themselves from unwholesome mental states, i.e., to be their own island and refuge and to have the Dhamma as an island and refuge, which means practising the Dhamma.

In the past, as stated elsewhere in the Pāli discourses<sup>22</sup> the disciples could turn to the Buddha as their island and refuge. But once the Buddha is gone, they themselves and the Dhamma must be their own island and refuge, i.e., they must concentrate on practising the Dhamma and not place their expectations in any successor of the Buddha as head of the Community and future preacher of the Dhamma that has already been taught. That is to say, they must practise the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, thereby eliminating all unwholesome mental states: 'And how does a monk live as an island unto himself. . . with no other refuge? Here, Ānanda, a monk abides contemplating the body as body earnestly, clearly aware, mindful and have put away all hankering and fretting for the world, and likewise with regard to feelings, mind and mind-objects. That, Ānanda, is how a monk lives as an island unto himself. . . with no other refuge'<sup>23</sup>.

This confirms that to live 'as an island unto oneself, being one's own refuge, with Dhamma as an island, with Dhamma as one's refuge'

21 D II 100.

22 S IV 315.

23 D II 100; trans. Walshe, *op. cit.*, p.245.

does not presuppose a Dhamma/*attā* identity as an unchanging and eternal entity, but refers simply, in the context of an impermanent and dependently originated process, to the need to protect oneself from unwholesome states (taking oneself as island and refuge) by practising the Four Foundations of Mindfulness (taking the Dhamma as island and refuge)<sup>24</sup>.

## II. THE MEANING OF THE 'ATTADĪPĀ VIHARATHA ATTASARAṆA' INJUNCTION IN THE LIGHT OF OTHER TEXTS, AND SIMILES.

There are other passages in the Pāli texts where the Buddha similarly stresses the relationship between the practice of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness and the fact of living with oneself or the Dhamma as an island and refuge. See for instance the beginning of the *Cakkavatti Sihanāda Sutta* (D III 58), which parallels the passage in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (D II 100), and follows it with a further simile for the practice of the Foundations of Mindfulness, recommending to 'keep to one's own pasture, to one's own home range, and not to leave them'.

If one does so, the Buddha goes on to explain, Māra (the personification of evil and of unwholesome mental states) will not be able to seize his prey<sup>25</sup>.

Now, in the *Makkato Sutta* of the Saṃyutta Nikāya (S V 149), 'one's own pasture' is defined as the practice of the Foundations of Mindfulness. At the same time, we have seen that 'living with oneself and the Dhamma as an island and refuge' is also defined in terms of the Foundations of Mindfulness. It is therefore perfectly legitimate to equate the two similes as referring, both of them, to the practice of the Foundations of Mindfulness.

Māra's own home range or territory is defined as the five strands of sensual pleasure: 'Objects cognizable by the eye, objects desirable,

24 See A. Solé-Leris, *Tranquillity and Insight* (London & Boston 1986; Kandy 1992, 1999).

25 In other discourses, e.g. M I 174, Māra is compared to a hunter.

pleasant, delightful and dear, passion-fraught, inciting to lust. . . There are sounds cognizable by the ear. . . scents cognizable by the nose. . . savours cognizable by the tongue. . . tangibles cognizable by the body, objects desirable, pleasant, delightful and dear, passion-fraught, inciting to lust. This, monks, is the range that is not yours, that belongs to others'<sup>26</sup>.

In the *Āneñjasappaya Sutta* (M II 261-2) Māra's domain is described specifically as the realm where unwholesome mental states prevail: 'Bhikkhus, sensual pleasures are impermanent, hollow, false, deceptive; they are illusory, the prattle of fools. Sensual pleasures here and now and sensual pleasures in lives to come, sensual perceptions here and now and sensual perceptions in lives to come — both alike are Māra's realm, Māra's bait, Māra's hunting ground. On account of them, these evil unwholesome mental states such as covetousness, ill will, and presumption arise, and they constitute an obstruction to a noble disciple in training here'<sup>27</sup>.

So we can see that both injunctions — to live having oneself and the Dhamma as an island and a refuge, and to remain within one's own pasture and home range — refer to the Four Foundations of Mindfulness and to the prevention of unwholesome mental states. So when the Buddha exhorts his disciples to take themselves and the Dhamma as an island and a refuge he is not talking about an immutable, eternal self or *attā* to which one turns as a refuge, but simply about the practice of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness to eliminate and prevent unwholesome mental states.

As we have seen, the oft-quoted advice from the Buddha to Ānanda follows immediately upon the latter's admission that he has been feeling purposeless and confused because of the Lord's sickness. That is to say, Ānanda has been experiencing unwholesome mental states which are not conducive to mindfulness, and the Buddha advises him accordingly.

The first unwholesome mental state is a sense of purposelessness (*madhurakajāto*) which undermines one's motivation and the zeal and effort that are necessary for proper practice. The second unwholesome state is mental confusion (*me na pakkhāyanti dhammā*) which makes it impossible to see things clearly and accurately. It is not for nothing that the standard passage on the practice of mindfulness always specifies that the monk should dwell 'ardent, clearly comprehending and mindful' (*ātāpī, sampajāno, satimā* — M I 56), i.e., that he should at all times endeavour to cultivate mental states that are favourable to practice, and avoid purposelessness and confusion, which are unfavourable to it.

It is important to note that the injunction to be an island and a refuge unto oneself usually follows upon the loss of a respected teacher or of a loved one and the states of purposelessness and mental confusion arising on that account. The significance of that advice is not that there is an essential *attā* where one may seek refuge as an island in the stream of Saṃsāra, but that even if a great and beloved teacher dies, one should remain strong-minded, ardent, clearly comprehending and mindful, and not allow oneself to be discouraged or confused by his disappearance. You no longer have the dead or dying teacher as an island or refuge to turn to, but what this means is that you have to rely on yourself and the Dhamma as an island and refuge, that is to say, that you have to practise the Four Foundations of Mindfulness and avoid unwholesome mental states.

This can clearly be seen in the *Cuṇḍa Sutta* of the Saṃyutta Nikāya (S V 161-3), when Ānanda reports to the Buddha that Sāriputta has died and states that he, Ānanda, had been discouraged and confused on learning the news.

The Buddha points out to him that, in dying, Sāriputta has not taken away with him either the practice of the Path that leads to liberation (morality, concentration, wisdom) or the possibility of liberation through knowledge and vision. He then goes on to recall that separation from what one loves is inevitable, that everything is subject to arising and becoming, that things are conditioned and impermanent, and this is why it is not conceivable that they should give us satisfaction. It is at this point that the Buddha advises

26 S V 149; trans. F.L. Woodward, *The Book of Kindred Sayings* V, PTS, p.128.

27 M II 261-2; trans. Bhikkhu Ñānamoli & Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, Boston 1995, p.869.

Ānanda to live with himself and the Dhamma as an island and refuge and again explains this as the practice of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness.

Elsewhere again, the advice to have oneself as an island and refuge is brought up in connection with the death of two leading disciples to whom the other monks usually turned, as islands and refuges, for explanations of the teaching.

For instance, in the *Ceḷa Sutta*, the next discourse in the Saṃyutta Nikāya (S V 163-5), the Buddha, speaking to the monks about the deaths of Sāriputta and Moggallāna, agrees that they leave a great vacuum behind them and praises their excellent qualities, but adds that, despite this, he does not experience sorrow (*soka*) or lamentation (*parideva*)<sup>28</sup> because it is not conceivable that whatever is born, becomes, is conditioned and impermanent should be satisfactory. He concludes that, in consequence, now they will have to live with themselves and the Dhamma as an island and refuge, and again defines this as the practice of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness.

So we see that time and again the Buddha advises his disciples not to give in to depression and sorrow when someone dies, because this is inevitably inherent in the impermanent nature of things, but to carry on practising the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, i.e. dwelling with themselves and the Dhamma as their island and refuge. Only thus will they transcend birth, becoming and death and achieve the final liberation from suffering. The solemn utterance at the beginning of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* makes this quite clear: 'Bhikkhus, this is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation [*sokapariddavānam*], for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of the true way, for the realisation of Nibbāna — namely, the four foundations of mindfulness'<sup>29</sup>.

28 S V 164.

29 Trans. Bh. Nāṇamoli & Bh. Bodhi, *op. cit.*, p.145.

### III. WHAT DOES IT MEAN, 'TO MAKE ONESELF ONE'S REFUGE'?

When the Buddha, a few moments before dying, says that he dwells 'having made myself my refuge' (*katam me saraṇam attano*)<sup>30</sup>, he is not suggesting that he has somehow made for himself a refuge to shelter an immutable, eternal *attā*, but he is simply saying that by practising previously the Four Foundations of Mindfulness he has definitely put an end to suffering. He has followed the Path that leads to the extinction of suffering (by practising the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, i.e., by having made himself and the Dhamma his island and refuge) and thus attained Nibbāna, that is, the total extinction of unwholesome mental states.

This statement of the Buddha must not be isolated from its context. Just before, he has been urging his disciples to practise those things which he had discovered for himself (*abhiññā*) and proclaimed: the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, the Five Spiritual Faculties, the Seven Factors of Enlightenment, the Noble Eightfold Path, etc. Then he announces that he will take his final Nibbāna within three months, and only then does he speak the verses where this phrase appears:

'Ripe am I in years. My life-span's determined.  
Now I go from you, having made myself my refuge.  
Monks, be untiring, mindful, disciplined,  
Guarding your minds with well-collected thought.  
He who, tireless, keeps to law and discipline,  
Leaving birth behind will put an end to woe'<sup>31</sup>.

As can be seen the phrase 'having made myself my refuge' (literally, 'having made a refuge for myself' — *katam me saraṇam attano*) is preceded and followed by references to what needs to be done to attain liberation, and the successful conclusion is clearly stated in the last two verses. He who practises the Dhamma makes himself free from Saṃsāra and attains the refuge of Nibbāna.

30 D II 119-20. Trans. Walshe, *op. cit.*, p.253.

31 D II 120-1; trans. Walshe, *op. cit.*, pp.253-4.

As we have seen, the atmanic interpretation might, and does, claim that in this text, since Nibbāna is referred to as the refuge, this means that it is identical with *attā* and Dhamma, which are to be taken as one's island and refuge. K. Bhattacharya<sup>32</sup>, for instance, maintains that Nibbāna, *attā* and Dhamma are three designations for one and the same thing because the Buddha uses the same phrase, 'island and refuge', for all three.

However, the use of the same simile for all three does not imply that they are all one. Nibbāna is the end of suffering and the end purpose of the holy life. But to have oneself (*attā*) and the Dhamma as island and refuge is the means for attaining that end. So Nibbāna on the one hand, and *attā* and Dhamma on the other cannot be the same, even though the simile is used for them.

If the atmanic interpretation were correct, *attā* and Dhamma would be the island and refuge where one is safe from the ocean of Saṃsāra. This would mean that they were the same as Nibbāna, i.e., ends in themselves rather than means to an end. But since having oneself and the Dhamma as island and refuge refers in fact to the practice of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, *attā* and Dhamma clearly cannot be identical with Nibbāna, since the latter is the end and the former are the means to attaining this end.

In the *Dhammapada* there is a passage (Dhp 236) that makes this very clear: 'Make an island unto yourself. Strive quickly; become wise. Purged of stain and passionless, you shall enter the heavenly stage of the Ariyas'<sup>33</sup>.

It is important to pay attention to the contrast in the verbal tenses in the earlier and later parts of the verse: first, imperative (make — *karohi*; strive — *vāyama*), then future (you shall enter — *ehisi*). Shortly after we find another verse (Dhp 238) where the Buddha urges the same, with an explicit reference to freeing oneself from

32 K. Bhattacharya, *op. cit.*, pp.79-114.

33 Trans. Bhikkhu Narada, *The Dhammapada: Pali Text and Translation*, Kuala Lumpur 1978, pp.197-8.

birth and old age (here we recall that the various stages of sanctity (*ariya*) mentioned in the previous verse culminate in *arahantship* which, being the attaining of Nibbāna, involves precisely the freedom from birth and old age mentioned here): 'Make an island unto yourself. Strive without delay; become wise. Purged of stain and passionless, you will not come again to birth and old age'<sup>34</sup>.

In this verse we again see the contrast between the imperative (what has to be done, i.e., the means) and the future (what will be attained, i.e., the end). The same pattern can be observed in the standard passage from the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, except that in the early part the verbs are in the present ('he who abides contemplating', i.e. practising the Four Foundations of Mindfulness), and then in the future ('those... who shall live... will become'): 'Here, Ānanda, a monk abides contemplating the body as body earnestly, clearly aware, mindful and having put away all hankering and fretting for the world, and likewise with regards to feelings, mind and mind-objects. That, Ānanda, is how a monk lives as an island unto himself, . . . with no other refuge. And those who now in my time or afterwards shall live<sup>35</sup> thus, they will become<sup>36</sup> the highest, if they are desirous of learning'<sup>37</sup>.

As the following quotation shows, the same point about ends and means, and oneself and the Dhamma as island and refuge (being the means) is made in the *Attādīpa Sutta* of the Saṃyutta Nikāya (S III 42): 'Do ye abide, brethren, island unto yourself, refuges unto yourself: taking refuge in none other; islanded by the Norm, taking refuge in the Norm, seeking refuge in none other.

34 Dhp 238; trans. *id.*, *ib.*

35 *Viharissanti*. The use of the future tense in this case reflects the conditional character of the phrase and does not mean that it is something to be done in the future, i.e., if they live in this manner, then they will become the highest.

36 *Bhavissanti*. This truly refers to the future result of practising the Four Foundations of Mindfulness 'earnestly, clearly aware and mindful' here and now.

37 D II 100-1.



By themselves who are islands unto themselves, brethren, who are a refuge unto themselves, who take refuge in none other; who are islanded by the Norm, take refuge in the Norm, seek refuge in none other — by them the very source of things is to be searched for: thus — What is the source of sorrow and grief, of woe, lamentation and despair? What is their origin?<sup>38</sup>

This understanding of the Dhamma as the means to the end that is Nibbāna, but not as an end in itself (and therefore identical to Nibbāna) is abundantly confirmed in the famous raft simile in the *Alagaddūpama Sutta* of the Majjhima Nikāya<sup>39</sup>, where the Buddha compares the Dhamma to a raft to be used for crossing over the waters of suffering, but that is not to be clung to after its purpose has been served. The raft is the means for crossing over, the end is the extinction of suffering on the far shore.

#### CONCLUSIONS

— To live with *attā* and Dhamma as an island and refuge is defined as the practice of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, that is, as an impermanent process subject itself to Dependent Origination and whose final aim is precisely to realise that all is non-*attā*. Therefore the injunction to have *attā* and Dhamma as island and refuge cannot be interpreted as meaning that there is an immutable, eternal *attā* which is identical to Dhamma.

— The atmanic translation of *attādīpa viharatha attāsarāṇa*, etc., cannot prove anything beyond the fact that the Buddha at that point simply resorts to a metaphor to urge his disciples to practise the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, which means to avoid unwholesome mental states and persevere in practising the Dhamma.

— When the Buddha declares that he has made a refuge for himself, the meaning is not that he has found shelter in a permanent, eternal *attā*, but merely that he has previously practised the Four Foundations

of Mindfulness and has, through this practice, attained the refuge that is Nibbāna.

— The metaphorical reference to Nibbāna as a refuge does not imply its identification with Dhamma and *attā*. It is simply a case of the Buddha using the same simile for two different things: on the one hand, the means (practising the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, which is equated with having oneself and the Dhamma as island and refuge) and on the other hand the end (attaining the ultimate refuge that is Nibbāna).

Abraham Vélez de Cea

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38 S III 42; trans. F.L. Woodward, *op. cit.*, III, p.37.

39 M I 134-5.