

Kaccānagotta Sutta
Entering the Middle Way

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At Sāvattḥī. [17] Then the Venerable Kaccānagotta approached the Blessed One, paid homage to him, sat down to one side, and said to him: “Venerable sir, it is said, ‘right view, right view.’ In what way, venerable sir, is there right view?”

“This world, Kaccāna, for the most part depends upon a duality—upon the notion of existence and the notion of nonexistence.¹ But for one who sees the origin of the world as it really is with correct wisdom, there is no notion of nonexistence in regard to the world. And for one who sees the cessation of the world as it really is with correct wisdom, there is no notion of existence in regard to the world.²

¹Dvayanissito khvāyaṃ Kaccāna loko yebhuyyena atthitañ c’ eva natthitañ ca. Spk: “For the most part” (yebhuyyena) means: for the great multitude, with the exception of the noble individuals (ariyapuggala). The notion of existence (atthitā) is eternalism (sassata); the notion of nonexistence (natthitā) is annihilationism (uccheda). Spk-pt: The notion of existence is eternalism because it maintains that the entire world (of personal existence) exists forever. The notion of nonexistence is annihilationism because it maintains that the entire world does not exist (forever) but is cut off.

In view of these explanations it would be misleading to translate the two terms, atthitā and natthitā, simply as “existence” and “nonexistence” and then to maintain (as is sometimes done) that the Buddha rejects all ontological notions as inherently invalid. The Buddha’s utterances at 22:94, for example, show that he did not hesitate to make pronouncements with a clear ontological import when they were called for. In the present passage atthitā and natthitā are abstract nouns formed from the verbs atthi and natthi. It is thus the metaphysical assumptions implicit in such abstractions that are at fault, not the ascriptions of existence and nonexistence themselves. I have tried to convey this sense of metaphysical abstraction, conveyed in Pāli by the terminal -tā, by rendering the two terms “the notion of existence” and “the notion of nonexistence,” respectively. On the two extremes rejected by the Buddha, see 12:48, and for the Buddha’s teaching on the origin and passing away of the world, 12:44.

Unfortunately, atthitā and bhava both had to be rendered by “existence,” which obscures the fact that in Pāli they are derived from different roots. While atthitā is the notion of existence in the abstract, bhava is concrete individual existence in one or another of the three realms. For the sake of marking the difference, bhava might have been rendered by “being” (as was done in MLDB), but this English word, I feel, is too broad (suggestive of “Being,” the absolute object of philosophical speculation) and does not sufficiently convey the sense of concreteness intrinsic to bhava.

²Spk: The origin of the world: the production of the world of formations. There is no notion of nonexistence in regard to the world: there does not occur in him the annihilationist view that might arise in regard to phenomena produced and made manifest in themselves world of formations, holding “They do not exist.” Spkpt: The annihilationist view might arise in regard to the world of formations thus: “On account of the annihilation and perishing of beings right where they are, there is no persisting being or phenomenon.” It also includes the wrong view, having those formations as its object, which holds: “There are no beings who are reborn.” That view does not occur in him; for one seeing with right understanding the production and origination of the world of formations in dependence on such diverse conditions as kamma, ignorance, craving,

“This world, Kaccāna, is for the most part shackled by engagement, clinging, and adherence.³ But this one [with right view] does not become engaged and cling through that engagement and clinging, mental standpoint, adherence, underlying tendency; he does not take a stand about ‘my self.’⁴ He has no perplexity or doubt that what arises is only suffering arising, what ceases is only suffering ceasing. His knowledge about this is independent of others. It is in this way, Kaccāna, that there is right view.⁵ “‘All exists’: Kaccāna, this is one extreme. ‘All does not exist’: this is the second extreme. Without veering towards either of these extremes, the Tathāgata teaches the Dhamma by the middle: ‘With ignorance as condition, volitional formations [come to be]; with volitional formations as condition, consciousness... Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering. But with the remainderless fading away and cessation of ignorance comes cessation of volitional formations; with the cessation of

etc., that annihilationist view does not occur, since one sees the uninterrupted production of formations.

Spk: The cessation of the world: the dissolution (bhaṅga) of formations. There is no notion of existence in regard to the world: There does not occur in him the eternalist view which might arise in regard to phenomena produced and made manifest in the world of formations, holding “They exist.” Spk-pt: The eternalist view might arise in regard to the world of formations, taking it to exist at all times, owing to the apprehension of identity in the uninterrupted continuum occurring in a cause-effect relationship. But that view does not occur in him; because he sees the cessation of the successively arisen phenomena and the arising of successively new phenomena, the eternalist view does not occur.

Spk: Further, “the origin of the world” is direct-order conditionality (anuloma-paccayākāra); “the cessation of the world,” reverse-order conditionality (paṭilomapaccayākāra). [Spk-pt: “Direct-order conditionality” is the conditioning efficiency of the conditions in relation to their own effects; “reverse-order conditionality” is the cessation of the effects through the cessation of their respective causes.] For in seeing the dependency of the world, when one sees the nontermination of the conditionally arisen phenomena owing to the nontermination of their conditions, the annihilationist view, which might otherwise arise, does not occur. And in seeing the cessation of conditions, when one sees the cessation of the conditionally arisen phenomena owing to the cessation of their conditions, the eternalist view, which might otherwise arise, does not occur.

³The reading I prefer is a hybrid of Be and Se: upayupādānābhinivesavinibaddho. I take upay from Be (Se and Ee: upāy-) and -vinibaddho from Se (Be and Ee: -vinibandho). The rendering at KS 2:13, “grasping after systems and imprisoned by dogmas,” echoed by SN-Anth 2:17, is too narrow in emphasis. Spk explains that each of the three nouns—engagement, clinging, and adherence—occurs by way of craving and views (taṇhā, diṭṭhi), for it is through these that one engages, clings to, and adheres to the phenomena of the three planes as “I” and “mine.”

⁴Taṇhā cāyaṃ upayupādānaṃ cetaso adhiṭṭhānaṃ abhinivesānusayaṃ na upeti na upādiyati nādhīṭṭhāti “attā me” ti. I have unravelled the difficult syntax of this sentence with the aid of Spk, which glosses ayaṃ as “this noble disciple” (ayaṃ ariyasāvako). Spk says that craving and views are also called “mental standpoints” (adhiṭṭhāna) because they are the foundation for the (unwholesome) mind, and “adherences and underlying tendencies” (abhinivesānusaya) because they adhere to the mind and lie latent within it. Spk connects the verb adhiṭṭhāti to the following “attā me,” and I conform to this interpretation in the translation.

⁵Spk explains dukkha here as “the mere five aggregates subject to clinging” (pañcupādānakkhandhamattam eva). Thus what the noble disciple sees, when he reflects upon his personal existence, is not a self or a substantially existent person but a mere assemblage of conditioned phenomena arising and passing away through the conditioning process governed by dependent origination. In this connection see the verses of the bhikkhuni Vajirā, I, vv. 553-55. Spk: By just this much—the abandonment of the idea of a being (sattasaññā)—there is right seeing.

Aparappaccayā ñāṇaṃ, “knowledge independent of others,” is glossed by Spk as “personal direct knowledge without dependence on another” (aññassa apattiyāyetvā attapaccakkhañāṇaṃ). This is said because the noble disciple, from the point of streamentry on, has seen the essential truth of the Dhamma and thus is not dependent on anyone else, not even the Buddha, for his or her insight into the Dhamma. Until arahantship is attained, however, such a disciple might still approach the Buddha (or another enlightened teacher) for practical guidance in meditation.

volitional formations, cessation of consciousness.... Such is the cessation of this whole mass of suffering.” [18]

Buddha (2000)

Bibliography

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