

# ‘Asoulity’ as Translation of Anattā: Absence, not Negation

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*Abstract:*

*This paper seeks how best to capture in English the Buddha’s concept of anattā. First, the Brahmanic concepts of anātman and ātman are contrasted with the concepts of anattā and attā in Buddhism. Pointing out that the prefix a- in anattā is used by the Buddha in the sense of ‘absence’ rather than ‘negation’, the term ‘asoulity’ is proposed as best capturing the sense of the term, in the contexts of both sentience and dhammā (phenomena). In a theoretical thrust, distinguishing between anātman 1 and 2 in Brahmanism and attā 1 and 2 in Buddhism, a linguistic concept, **zero-seme** is introduced. The autonomous nervous system that responds to stimuli without an inherent centre is posited as an analogy of anattā.*

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## **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

*Anattā* is a fundamental teaching of the Buddha (see *Anattalakkhana sutta*, S.3.66), identified as one of the three characteristics of sentience, along with *aniccā* ‘impermanance’ and *dukkhā* ‘suffering’. In seeking to communicate the idea of *anattā* in English, scholars have come up with several terms, the most used among them ‘no-self’, ‘non-self’, and ‘selfless’, as e.g., in Collins’ *Selfless Persons* (1982, [1995]).<sup>2</sup> This paper explores the issue of English terminology, primarily from a Communicative Linguistics point of view, understanding ‘linguistic’ as the *means*, and

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‘communicative’ as the *purpose* of the linguistic means.<sup>3</sup> Our interest here is the general populace, as more and more English speakers, of multiple cultures, take an interest in Buddhism.

## 2. Meaning of Pali / Buddhist and Sanskrit / Brahmanic Usages

### 2.1 Linguistic Structure of *Anattā*

Structurally, the term *anattā* is made up of *an-* plus *attā*<sup>4</sup> (from *attan*, itself derived from Sanskrit *ātman*), giving us <*an* + *attā* (*anattā*). Semantically, however, the prefix can be said to be derived from *a-*, in the ‘privative’ sense (Whitney, 1924; Monier-Williams, 1899)<sup>5</sup> of ‘absence’ (as e.g., in *anidassana* (D I 223) ‘without example’<sup>6</sup>, the reference being to the consciousness of an Arhant at Nibbana).

The change of *a-* to *an-*, of course, is for morphophonemic reasons, as in English too - adding an intervocalic *-n-* before vowels, as e.g., *a* + *apple* > *an apple*;<sup>7</sup> this occurs for reasons of euphony (*sukhocchāraṇa*), i.e., ease of pronunciation.<sup>8</sup>

Like its first member, *a-*, the second member of the compound - *attā*, too, presents difficulties in translation. And so we shall try to explore its differential meanings in relation to both *attā* and *anattā*. But since the roots – both structural and semantic, of *attā* (and thus *anattā*) are from the Brahmanic, and Sanskrit, terms *ātman* and *anātman*, we begin our exploration with them.

### 2.2 *ātman* and *Anātman*

Sanskrit *ātman* has two meanings – physical and non-physical. We begin with the latter, translated into English as ‘soul’ (Monier-Williams, 1899 [1993 ed.]), ‘individual soul’ (one gets from the Creator God Brahman at the beginning of life<sup>9</sup>), ‘principle of life’ and ‘sensation’. In all of these, then, the sense is *incorporeal*, as also confirmed when the term *paramātman* is used in the sense of ‘the highest life principle, Brahma’, or *parātman* ‘Supreme Spirit’ (ibid: 587), by which<sup>10</sup> *ātman* comes to be created. Whatever the label in translation, *ātman* (in Sanskrit<sup>11</sup>) is understood religiously, i.e., in the Brahmanical context, as an entity ‘behind’, or ‘underlying’, or ‘foundational to’ a given individual. It is the

“inner controller” (*antaryamin*) as in the Upanishads,<sup>12</sup> and by definition, permanent and unchanging. So, to recap, a ‘soul’ is a *construct* in Brahmanism, with the characteristics of being (a) created, (b) permanent and unchanging, and (c) an inner controller.<sup>13</sup>

But *ātman* is also used in Brahmanism in a *corporeal* sense as an ‘abstract individual’, ‘person’ and ‘whole body’, and is “used as a reflexive pronoun for all three persons and all three numbers,” a point well-reflected in the compound *ātma-kāma* ‘loving one’s self’ (op. cit.: 135). Grammatical support for this is found in the fact that *ātman* is masculine in gender, masculine being the marked form of nouns in Sanskrit.<sup>14</sup>

So in Brahmanism, one encounters no difficulties in understanding the two distinct but complementary senses of the term. A sentient being with a physical body (*ātman*) comes to be so called precisely because behind or subsumed in the body is a soul (*ātman*) – sort of like a puppeteer. And so, with apologies to Descartes, we may say, *ātmano ergo sum!*<sup>15</sup> ‘I am of (incorporeal) *ātman*; therefore I am’, or, ‘I have a soul, therefore I am’!

We may show the two meanings of *ātman* above as follows:

- (a) corporeality (= ‘sentient being’ (as in Buddhist language) having a mind and a body (=‘mindbody’), in a reciprocal relationship), and
- (b) incorporeality (= ‘soul’) (entailing no physical body).

Analytically and structurally speaking, *anātman* (made up of the bound morphemes *an-* and *-ātman*<sup>16</sup>), has the same dual range of meanings, even in negation:

- 1 (a). *an + ātman* = ‘non-corporeality’;
- 1 (b). *an + ātman* = ‘non-incorporeality’.

But *semantically* speaking, neither 1(a) nor 1(b) makes sense *in the discourse of Brahmanism*. As noted, it is the very presence of an incorporeal *ātman* that speaks to a corporeal *ātman*, incorporeality serving as the grounds for corporeality. So it may be said that while *anātman*, in either or both of 1 (a) and 1 (b), is indeed a *lexeme*,<sup>17</sup> as is *ātman*; it is, in

the context of Brahmanism, not a *morpheme*, i.e., a morph with meaning, since it contains no *sememe*,<sup>18</sup> denotatively or connotatively.

To explain, it was noted that *anātman* has a meaning both in its parts (*an-* and *-ātman*) as well as in its totality. But in the present context, it doesn't. So in that sense, it is not a *sememe*. However, given that the parts *an-* and *-ātman* do have meanings by themselves, we need to capture the idea that it is at the most basic level, namely the 'seme',<sup>19</sup> that the meaning is absent. So we may capture such absence in each of *anātman* 1 (a) and 1 (b) in terms of, to coin a term, a '*zero-seme*'. It may be defined as "a lexeme reduced to the smallest unit of meaning",<sup>20, 21</sup>.

'*Zero-seme*', it may be noted, is based on the concept of '*zero-morph*' in Linguistics (Bloomfield, 1933, 209), itself drawn upon the Indian grammarian Panini's<sup>22</sup> (4<sup>th</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> BCE) concept of *lopa* 'elision' (see Cardona, 1988, 53-54 for a characterization). Bloomfield (219) explains: "... the Hindus<sup>23</sup> hit upon the apparently artificial but in practice eminently serviceable device of speaking of a zero element..." Giving an example, "in *sheep*, the plural suffix is replaced by zero – that is, by nothing at all." It is, in Paninian terms, an 'unperceived elision' (*adarśanam lopah*).<sup>24</sup> It can be seen in the following pair of sentences:

- a. *The sheep grazes.* (Singular)  
 b. *Sheep graze.* (Plural)

In sentence (b), the plural appears without the pluralizing suffix *-s*, as would be expected, as e.g., in *book* / *books*.<sup>25</sup> Now to understand the concept of '*zero-seme*', we seek the help of a figure:

	Linguistic manifestation	Semantic manifestation
<i>zero-morph</i> : sheep (plural)	No	Yes
<i>zero-seme</i> : <b><i>anātman 1a / b</i></b>	Yes	No

**Fig. 1: Concepts of 'zero-morph' and 'zero-seme' contrasted**

In this Figure, we note that 'no' appears under the column 'Linguistic manifestation' in the case of 'sheep' (plural), since the grammatically required and expected suffix (*-s*) does not appear. But it is 'yes' under 'Semantic manifestation', since the meaning is imputed. Thus

we have a ‘zero-morph’. In the case of *anātman* (remembering that we are talking about the sense in *1a / b* above), there is clearly (as above) a ‘Linguistic manifestation’ (thus ‘yes’), while there is no ‘Semantic manifestation’. Or to put it in Paninian terms, the meaning is ‘unperceived’.<sup>26</sup> This, of course, is the point we have made – that *anātman 1a / b* means nothing in Brahmanic discourse.

There is, however, indeed a sense in which *anātman* does gain morphemic and sememic status in Brahmanism:

2. *an + ātman* = ‘different from + spirit or soul’ (Monier-Williams, op. cit., 27).

Here, it is a grammatical term of negation, the very meaning of negation rendering it sememic. It has meaning however: grammatical negation is by no means to negate incorporeality in relation to an individual. Contrariwise, it has the meaning of ‘not spiritual’ or ‘destitute of spirit or mind’ (unlike in Buddhism, ‘mind’ and ‘spirit’ are equated in Brahmanism).<sup>27</sup>

So far, then, there are two senses in which *an-* (< a- + euphonic – n) in its Sanskrit-Brahmanic rendering is understood: ‘negative’ and ‘different from’. Significantly, each presupposes its ‘positive’ form, having a ‘reality’ in the universe of Brahmanism.

The two renderings of *anātman* (1 (a & b) and 2) can be said to be merely *homophonous* (same sounding) without being *homonymous* (same meaning) – the former a mere lexeme, and the latter alone a sememe.

### 2.3 *Attā* and *Anattā*

In contrast to the double meaning of *ātman*, the Buddha uses *attā* in but one single sense. And that is the corporeal, the psychophysical form (*nāmarūpa*) in the conventional sense of a living person, even though, of course, it is to be understood in the sense of an ‘acquired self’ (*atta-pañilābho*, D. 1.197) - transitory, subject to *dukkha*, etc. We see this sense, for example, in *attāhi attano nātho* ‘One is indeed one’s own lord’ (Dhp, 160) or in *atta dīpā viharatha* ‘Be a lamp unto yourself’ (S), or indeed in *atta-hita* ‘self-care’, as contrasted with *para-hita* ‘other-care’ (D III 233).<sup>28</sup> *Samānattatā*, literally ‘state of equal self’, but meaning

‘egalitarianism’, would be another. It refers to a living entity, a phenomenological individual sentient being, by definition with a ‘gross’ (*oḷāriko*) body,<sup>29</sup> and which one calls ‘I’ *denotatively*, and ‘me’ *connotatively*. In using the term *attā* in this corporeal sense, then, the Buddha seems to go with the flow of the conventional (*sammuti*) use of language,<sup>30</sup> and indeed in agreement with the Brahmanic corporeal sense of *ātman* (as above). We shall label this corporeal sense, for heuristic reasons as we shall see, *attā 1*.

But for the *puṭhujjana* ‘member of the masses’, or the *sekha* ‘one in training’, this ‘I’ comes to be seen as something permanent, and somehow ‘belonging’ to ‘Me’, ‘Myself’, etc., the capital M reflective of the ego-boosting connotative associations. The psychologist of Religion William James, no stranger to Buddhism,<sup>31</sup> writing in 1892 (p. 82), captures this succinctly:

... This Me is an empirical aggregate of things objectively known. The *I*, which knows them, cannot ... be an unchanging metaphysical entity like the Soul, or a principle like the transcendental Ego.... It is a *thought*, at each moment different from that of the last moment, but *appropriative* of the latter, together with all that the latter called its own. All the experiential facts find their place in this description, unencumbered by any hypothesis save that of the existence of passing thought or states of mind.<sup>32</sup>

The Buddha captures this sense of perceived ownership, continuity and being in control, in the terms *asmimāna* (D III.273) ‘I am’ conceipt’, *ahamkāra* (M III. 18), literally, ‘I-making’ or *mamamkāra* ‘“Mine-making!’ But his Teaching *sabbe sankhārā aniccā* (A I, 286-7) ‘all forces are impermanent’, of course, speaks to the *absence* of any such ‘reality’, and that the corporeal, psychophysical *attā* is not to be taken to mean as having any permanence, or an inner control[er] as implicit in *ātman* in the corporeal sense. As a contemporary scholar puts it, it is “not so much a thing to be thought about as to be *done*, applied to actual experience, so that the meditator can actually experience, so that the meditator actually *sees* ...” (Harvey, 2010, 571). So what is denied by the Buddha is not the “I”, or the self per se, as a living entity,<sup>33</sup> but the ‘inner controller’, the ‘soul’ (as defined above) in the “I” (the ‘misapprehension’ as in note #30). So we may say, as an initial take, that *attā* is a ‘soul-less I’, drawing upon the meaning of *ātman* as given by Monier-Williams (above). So, instead of *ātmano ergo sum* ‘I have a soul, therefore I am’ as in Brahmanism, what

we have in Buddhism may be a counter characterization, *anatto ergo sum* “Absent a soul, therefore I am”!

In addition to the existential reality of the person with which *attā* comes to be associated, as above, there is also an ontological<sup>34</sup> claim (as implicit in the incorporeal *ātman* in Brahmanism), *qua* concept (*paññatti*), and a view (*diṭṭhi*). We may understand this *attā*, which we shall call *attā* 2, as independent of the phenomenological association of an individual, i.e., *attā* 1, in the corporeal sense. It is this *attā* 2, then, that the Buddha can be said to deny in his Teaching *sabbe dhammā anattā* (A I, 286-7) ‘all dhammas are absent of *attā*’. He is pointing to its characteristics: *impermanance* and *interdependence* (and we may add *automaticity*), all applicable to any system (*dhamma*) – sentient or other. This, of course, follows the Teaching of ‘conditioned co-origination’ (*paticca samuppāda*).

The Buddha’s interest in clarifying the meaning of *attā*, contra the concept *ātman* in Brahmanism, of course, is not unrelated to the claim in Brahmanism of a creator God, Brahman. But the Buddhist view, as captured by Adhimuttatthera, is *anissara* ((Th. 1, 713) (< an- + -issara) ‘without a personal creator’ (Davids & Stede, 1979). While again, as noted, *a(n)-* can mean negation, what we clearly have here is the sense of absence: ‘absent + God’. It is not a negation of an existent reality labelled ‘*issara*’ (Sanskrit *āvara*).

As in the case of *anātman* 1 (a & b), *attā* 2, in the context of Buddhism, can also be characterized as a ‘zero-seme’. It just makes no sense. In the absence of a Creator God behind *dhammas*, the further point is made that an ‘incorporeal *attā*’, i.e., *ātman* ‘soul’ is also absent, for what can be said to be created by a non-existent Brahman? Drawing upon the texts, we may characterize it as a case of a ‘a child of a barren woman’ (*vañjhāputta*) creating ‘sky-flowers’ (*gaganakusuma*) (MN-t 1)! Thus we see that whether in relation to a phenomenological I / Me, or an ontological concept, *attā* 2, unlike *ātman*, *anātman* is to be understood as being devoid of an inner controller, i.e., soul.

### 3. Absence and Negation explored

The concept of ‘absence’ as used and intended here, then, is to be understood as being distinct from the concepts of ‘negation’, ‘contrastive of’ and ‘different from’.<sup>35</sup> As subtle as they may be, the differences are nevertheless, as we shall see, critically significant.

We may gain an initial understanding of this distinction through a comparison of *anattā* with *adukkhā*:

1.1	ADUKKHĀ	Structural	a-	+	- dukkhā	=	<i>adukkhā</i>
1.2		Semantic	negation	of	suffering	=	Non-suffering
2.1	ANATTĀ	Structural	a-	+	- attā	=	<i>anattā</i>
2.2		Semantic	absence (= Ø)	of	*soul	=	* ???

**Fig. 2. Contrasting ‘negation’ in *adukkhā* with ‘absence’ in *anattā***

As can be seen from the chart, *adukkhā* and *anattā* are structurally, i.e. grammatically, identical (lines 1.1 and 2.1), save for the morphophonemic variation a(n)- in the latter. Yet semantically, they (1.2 and 2.2) refer to distinct universes of discourse.

*Adukkhā*, e.g., presupposes *dukkhā*, ‘suffering’, which is a **reality** as can be seen from its characterization in the classical line, ‘*jāti pi dukkhā jarā pi dukkhā...*’ (D 2, 305) or contrastively, as in *adukkhamaṣukha* (*satipittthāna sutta*, D 2).

*Anattā*, too, may be seen as presupposing *attā*. However, unlike in the case of *dukkhā*, it is, in any *incorporeal* sense (this being the sense in our discussion), **not a reality** that exists. That is, as the Buddha teaches, it does not correspond with any reality. So while *anattā* is indeed a linguistic term, a lexeme (i.e., in conventional language), it stands for something that does not exist (i.e., absent); hence, it is a ‘zero-seme’.<sup>36</sup> The Buddhist concept closest in the context, of course, is *suñña* (D I, 17) / *suññatā* (M III. 111) ‘void’, and / or *ākāsa* ‘space’ (D I.183).

It is this absence, i.e., ‘does not exist’, then, that is to be understood by the ‘Ø (zero) in the last line, and the star in ‘\*soul’ (in column 5) indicating ‘does not occur’, realistically, existentially or phenomenally, both conventions, zero and star, as noted, being from Linguistics. But it needs to be noted here that the analogy ends there, since the ‘zero’ does have a tangible correspondence (‘sheep’ in the second sentence standing for ‘plural’), while in *anattā*, there isn’t any such.



The ‘???’ (question marks) in the last column indicates that we are, at this stage of our discussion, still in search of an appropriate translation.

The distinction between negativity and absence may be clarified further with another example:

1	2	3	4
	<b>STRUCTURAL</b>	<b>SEMANTIC</b>	<b>EXISTENTIAL</b>
<i>adukkhamāsukha</i>	Presence	Presence	Presence
<i>anattā</i>	Presence	Presence	Absence

**Fig. 3: Contrasting *adukkhamāsukha* with *anattā* along structural, semantic and existential dimensions**

In Figure 3, the prefix *a-* is present structurally (Column 2) in both *adukkhamāsukha* and *anattā*. It also *means something*, hence showing a semantic presence (3).

*Adukkhamāsukha* is also real as a sensation, as we see, e.g., in the *satipaṭṭhāna bhāvanā* where feelings (*vedanā*) are shown to be threefold: *dukkha*, *sukha* and *adukkhamāsukha* ‘neither *dukkha* nor *sukha*’. Just as the meditator recognizes and feels the sensations of *dukkha* and *sukha*, so does s/he experience the absence of both. So it is a feeling a meditator comes to experience, when watching the mind closely. Hence, it constitutes an *existential* reality.

This, however, is not so with *anattā*, for while it has a structural and semantic presence, it has no parallel in reality. That is to say, it can be characterized, as in Column 4, only as an ‘absence’.

Seeking Canonical evidence, while *anattā* itself is a topic in many a Discourse of the Buddha,<sup>37</sup> we go to the *satipaṭṭhāna sutta* (D.II.289) where it is not taken up at all as a concept, but which nevertheless allows for a graphic and experiential understanding of the concept, clearly, as we hope, by showing the distinction between ‘absence’ and ‘negation’. In the ‘Contemplation on the Body’ (*kāyānupassanā*), e.g., the meditator goes through each of the 31 anatomical parts of the body,<sup>38</sup> beginning with ‘head hair’ (*kesā*) and ending in ‘stomach’ in the solids domain, and with ‘feces’ (*karīsaṃ*) to ‘urine’ (*muttaṃ*) in the liquid

domain.<sup>39</sup> Liquid or solid, what is clear is that all 31 parts of the body are ‘corporeal’, that is, material<sup>40</sup> in the context of a human being.

Furthermore, in this contemplation, the meditator comes to see clearly and experientially that there is ‘nothing other than’ (*natth’aññam kīñci*) as the texts put it (A II.161)<sup>41</sup> these body parts that constitute, or are needed to explain, one’s (mind-) body<sup>42</sup>, with no ‘agent’ outside of or behind them. So again, it is the ‘absence’ that we have here, and *not* a negation.

If we were to seek an understanding of the Buddha’s concept of *anattā* in scientific terms, each of the body parts is made up of a cluster of cells resulting from the division (mitosis) of the first cell that ‘comes to be constituted’ (*sammuccha*) (D II,63)) (through coagulation) at conception (Kordon, 1993).<sup>43</sup> It is these cells, taken individually or as cluster(s), each in their interrelationships, and in a constant flux (*anicca*), and self-generated, that come to constitute, in the Buddhist technical sense, a mind-body (*nāmarūpa*), and in ordinary language, a human being (or, still in Buddhist language, a ‘sentient being’ (*sattā*)). So again we see that there is ‘nothing other than’ these body parts that constitute, or is needed to explain, one’s (mind-) body, with no ‘agent’ behind or outside of them. So again, it is the ‘absence’ that we have here and *not* a negation.

This idea of ‘nothing else’, of course, comes through elsewhere as well, as e.g., in relation to the ‘five aggregates of clinging’ (*pañcupādānakkhandā*) and the six senses (*saḷāyatana*), each characterization exhaustive of what constitutes the mind-body, and requiring no additional agency.

We may be confirmed in this understanding of absence via a reference to yet another scientific concept, namely, the *autonomous nervous system* (ANS hereafter). While at first brush, the label may suggest a presence, in reality what it seeks to capture is the absence of anything other than a natural process that keeps our mind-body functioning, from *in-vivo* development to death. The blinking of the eye to avoid a particle of dust, the auto-immune system activating and sending a horde of attacker cells mobilized to keep out an intruding germ, enzyme generation ensuring the digestion of food, creativity of thought in the mind helping to solve a mathematical problem or produce a brand new insight such as The Theory of Relativity or the Four Noble Truths, reading these lines and understanding their meaning, or indeed falling asleep or waking

up – these are all explainable in terms of an *automatic*, and *autonomous*, response to external or internal stimuli, and *without the need to appeal to an outside (metaphysical) agency*. That is to say, there is ‘nothing else other than’ natural process.

The Buddha explains this natural process in terms of the presence of conditions (*paccaya*) as in conditioned co-origination (*paticca samuppāda*) (M III). It is a reciprocal process in the presence of a multiplicity of conditions. One of the links of the chain of causation is ‘conditioned by consciousness is mind-body’ (*viññāṇa paccayā nāmarūpa*), and the meditator is to practice it in its reverse form as well: ‘conditioned by mind-body is consciousness’ (*nāmarūpa paccayā viññāṇa*). But for consciousness to arise there has to be a stimulus and working physical parts. Take for example eye-consciousness: without this page in front of you, there would be no ‘eye-consciousness’ arising in you (meaning ‘seeing’) in relation to the content, namely, this written page. Then there is also your ‘physical’ eye, made up as it is of different parts – retina, optic nerve, aqueous duct, etc. But unless the physical eye is in working condition (i.e., not blind), there would result no visual input, reading or understanding (see Jayasuriya, 1963, for a detailed study).

A similar conditionality applies to the ANS. ‘Autonomous’ speaks to the process with no outside agency, while ‘system’ refers to its reciprocity and multi-conditionality, ‘nervous’ identifying the key physiological pathway facilitative of the process in its physical and functional dimensions.<sup>44</sup> The ANS may then be seen as the way science, a matter-based intellectual endeavour, seeks to capture the notion of *absence*, ironically with a ‘presence’ (i.e., a label) using explanatory language to present the complex process.<sup>45</sup>

*Anattā* can, then, said to mean ‘absence of *attā*’, in both its corporeal (phenomenological) and incorporeal (ontological) senses. In other words it expresses, to repeat, for the purposes of emphasis, something that does not exist in reality.

#### 4. The Buddha’s Choice of *a-*

Many are the choices available for negation in Pali, but why did the Buddha decide on *a-* in the specific context of *-atta*?

Leaving *a-* for later (for reasons that will become evident), we may begin with the negative form *na-*, with words beginning with consonants, where it remains intact *sans* change. Examples would be *nacira* ‘short’ (literally ‘not long’), (Davids & Stede, under *na-*), or *napuṅsaka* ‘neuter’ (literally ‘not male’) (Davids & Stede, under *pun̄s*). Then there are words formed with reduplication, as in *nappariṇā* ‘abundant’.

*Na-* also, of course, occurs with words beginning with vowels. There is the example of *nāham* < *na* + *aham* ‘not I / me’, where the final vowel of the prefix comes to be combined with the initial vowel of the pronominal – *aham*, with a resulting *lengthening*.<sup>46</sup>

In a variation, *na-* comes to be combined with a noun beginning with *a-* through the deletion of the final *-a* in *na-*, as e.g., in *na-* + *atthi* > *n’atthi* meaning ‘doesn’t have’, i.e., as a *negation* of *atthi* ‘having’, whose meaning is clearer in terms of ‘wealth’ (Davids & Stede, 1979). Then there is *neka* (= *aneka* < *an* + *eka*) ‘several’ < *na* + *eka*, with the elision of *-a* of *na-*.

The use of *vi-* for negation is clear from a term like *vibhava*, the opposite of *bhava* ‘becoming’, both being types of *tañhā* ‘thirst’. A related prefix is *vīta* (< *viḥita*), as e.g., in *vītarāga* ‘dispassionate’.

A completely different way of expressing negation is with the prefix *ni-* as in *nikkaruṇ* < *ni* + *karuṇ*, ‘heartlessness’ (Davids & Stede, op. cit.) resulting from the doubling of the initial consonant, the positive counterpart being *karuṇ*.<sup>47</sup> Another such negative participle entailing doubling is *du-* as in *dussīla*.

Yet again is the use of the morphologically unrelated terms, as e.g., *paññā* as the opposite (negation) of *moha*.

It should be evident that while all these choices express negation, none of them seems to capture the concept of absence at all, or in strong enough a sense.<sup>48</sup> So we now return to an examination of *a-*.

We see *a-* in, e.g., *adukkha*, but this is in the context of an initial *consonant*, as also e.g., in *aniccā* (above) or *akusala* ‘unskilled state’.<sup>49</sup> But *attā-*, the concept in question begins with a vowel.

So how about the grammatically *not* allowed *\*āttā*<sup>50</sup> (hence the asterisk)<sup>51</sup> (< *a-* + *attā*), with a lengthened first vowel, along the lines of the compound morpheme *nāham* < *na* + *aham* (as above), where the final vowel of the first morpheme is combined with the initial vowel of the second, resulting in lengthening? And further, by extension, why not *\*nāttā* < *na* + *attā* (see Davids & Stede, op. cit., under *na-*)? Or finally, the abbreviated form *\*n’attā* (paralleling, e.g., *n’atthi*)?

In addition to the grammatical violation in the case of the first two, we may also postulate, again, that it is because *none captures absence*, although, like all of the above choices, they allow for negation. So we see the Buddha, ever the communicator, ever-sensitive to the imperatives of communication, opting for the homophonic prefix *a-*, one that allows the meanings of *both* negation<sup>52</sup> and absence, but *exclusively in the sense of the latter* in the context of *attā*.<sup>53</sup> It must surely be of more than a passing interest that we find the use of *a-* in an identical sense (of absence) used by a disciple of the Buddha in relation to another concept that is absent (or an idea not accepted) in the Buddha’s worldview. As noted, the term is *anissara* meaning ‘without a personal creator’ (Th I, 713). Another, as also noted, is *anidassana* (D I 223) ‘without example’ (as above).

The following chart seeks to capture the distinction between negation and absence in the above argument:

TERM	Linguistic	Semantic	Experiential	Oppositional
<i>dukkha</i>	presence	presence	presence	presence
<i>Sukha</i>	presence	presence	presence	presence
<i>attā</i> (corporeal)	presence	presence	presence	absence
<i>anattā</i> (incorporeal)	presence	absence	absence	absence

**Fig. 4: Contrasting *dukkha* and *sukha* with *attā* and *anattā* linguistically, semantically, experientially and contrastively**

Line 1 shows *dukkha* as having all the four types of presence: linguistic, semantic, experiential and oppositional. Not only is it a morpheme (a *meaningful* phonetic concatenation<sup>54</sup>), it is, for that reason a ‘sememe’, in that it has a meaning. We can conceptualize what *dukkha*

entails, particularly because we can experience it (as suffering). And it has an opposite in *sukha*<sup>55</sup>, which likewise has the four-fold presence; its contrastive presence, of course, being *dukkha*. ‘Presence’, then, may be taken to stand for ‘things as they have come to be’ (*yathābhūta*); both *dukkha* and *sukha* are aspects of real-life, existential experience for sentient beings. Just as we experience the *dukkha* of birth, sickness, ageing, death, and the separation from loved ones, etc., we also experience the ‘happiness of having (wealth)’ (*atthi sukha*) (A.II.69), etc.

*Attā*, in its *corporeal* sense, has the first three types of presence as well – linguistic, conceptual and experiential (as noted, in *atta dīpā viharatha*). But it has no oppositional reality (‘presence’); there is no *\*anattā*’ in a corporeal sense.<sup>56</sup>

When we come to *attā* in its *incorporeal* sense, all we have is a linguistic presence (i.e., there is a morph<sup>57</sup> *-attā*), even if only to be denied, the hyphen indicating its presence as a ‘bound form’ (that is, part of the larger construct *anattā*). It doesn’t, in the Buddha’s Teachings, exist as a *morpheme* (i.e., morph with meaning, or *sememe*) in the real world. It has no experiential, and hence no semantic presence — the star indicating such non-presence. By the very fact that it is ‘unreal’, it cannot, by definition, have an opposite, any more than ‘a sky flower’. So it is the *absence* of a reality called *attā*, in the ‘incorporeal’ sense, then, that is to be understood by the term *anattā*. This indeed is the Buddha’s insight – there simply isn’t, as claimed in Brahmanism, such a reality. Hence, *anattā* is, to emphasize, *not a negation* of an existing reality, but the *absence* of such a reality. We may say that ‘*anattā*’ is an ‘absent *attā*’, so to speak, a zero-seme, thus becoming conspicuous by its very absence!

Not, however, leaving it to the language user to remember the reality of impermanence, it is the Buddha’s ingenuity, then, in thinking about how best to linguistically express this idea of absence, that he judiciously settles on *a-* as the prefix of choice. Allowed for in the language, he thus arrives at *anattā*, with *a-* as the mnemonic linguistic device, a marker, to remind the sentient being of this reality of the *absence* of an inner core that remains static, or of an inner controller running the show from a stationary central control tower. In tagging this semantic device, the Buddha seems to be pushing the idea of impermanence and change implicit in the *second* member of the compound on to the *first* member. It is as if to dispel the ‘wrong view’ (*micchā dīṭṭhi*), then, that the Buddha uses *a-* (meaning absence), successfully distancing himself from

the Brahmanic sense of *anātman*, too. (It needs to be remembered that *anattā* here is to be taken in both the phenomenological and the ontological senses.)

## 5. Asoulity as best capturing ‘Absence’

We have above underscored the distinction between negativity and absence, indicating that what the Buddha intends is the latter. So what would be the best term to capture the Buddha’s sense? Just as he was constricted by the natural constraints of language, are we also faced with the same challenge? Does English allow us to capture the sense of absence unequivocally?

Happily, the answer seems to be in the affirmative. English appears to offer an option that Pali, in fact, doesn’t, in order to help distinguish negativity from absence. We can see this in the concept of ‘morality’, not unrelated to religion. There is ‘morality’ (marked) and its negative, ‘immorality’ (< in + morality, morphophonemic rules requiring changing in- to im-). Additionally, however, there is also ‘*amorality*’, meaning ‘absence of (= nothing to do with) morality’.<sup>58</sup> An example would make the sense clear here. While developing the scientific-theoretic capacity for and the technology for atomic/nuclear fusion in itself is amoral (i.e., nothing to do with morality<sup>59</sup>), using it to develop a bomb, with only the one obvious use for harming, would be immoral. On the other hand, its use in health and power generation would be moral. There are also examples in biology: *asexual* (reproduction *without* the union of male and female germ cells; there is no act of sex that *asexuality* entails) and ‘non-sexual’ (as e.g., in ‘non-sexually transmitted diseases’).

Based on these examples, we may say that the *prefix* that best captures the notion of absence in English is *a-*, as contrasted with *un-* and *non-*. Analyzing Pali *anattā*, then, as ‘*a-*’ + ‘*-attā*’, we may translate it literally as ‘*a-*’ + ‘*-soulity*’, i.e., ‘**asoulity**’, the ‘*-ity*’ suffix indicative of an *abstraction* and not an entity,<sup>60</sup> thing or phenomenon. It is as if ‘*-ity*’ is skimming off the *-tā* ending in *anattā* (cf. *sattā* < *sat* + *tā*), meaning ‘state of being’, i.e., ‘*-ity*’<sup>61</sup>!

Sharing, in its technical rigour, the same podium as the Autonomous Nervous System, *asoulity*, can be said to capture the sense of *anattā*, in both its senses (in relation to sentience, and qua concept), and with a precise translation.

It may also be a happy coincidence that the morpheme ‘absence’ begins with ‘a-’. The ‘a-’ with which *anattā* begins, then, may serve as a mnemonic device to remind that *anattā* should be understood as an absence, having nothing to do with negation!

We may also note the morphemic congruence of the prefix *a-* in both Pali *anattā* and in English *asoulity*. Of course, this is not accidental, for they are cognates, tracing their origins to common proto-Indo-European roots, and preserved in English through Greek, and in Pali through Indic, of which Sanskrit (literally, ‘refined’) serves as the equivalent of Greek. Awkward as it may look at first appearance, ‘asoulity’ violates no rules of English either.<sup>62</sup>

But is it not contrived? To the extent that it is put together by using several elements – a- + -soul- + -ity, it may be said to be so. But being contrived in itself can hardly be an argument against new terminology. Creating a new term is nothing new to the scientist, or a discoverer. Hitting upon a new discovery, the natural tendency is for a new and unique label to be given, distinct from others. ‘Quarks’ and ‘qualia’ in science serve as examples.

Interestingly, the term proposed here matches well with the early translation of *anattā* (as e.g., in Davids & Stede, op.cit., 22): ‘not a soul’; ‘without a soul’.<sup>63</sup> Most importantly, it immediately directs the mind of the reader to the core concept – absence of a soul.

In adopting *asoulity*, then, we propose that the adjective of *asoulity* be ‘*asoulic*’, here paralleling ‘symbolic’ from ‘symbol’ and ‘alcoholic’ from ‘alcohol’, both (ending in –l), or ‘idyllic’ from ‘idyll’ (double –ll ending). Thus we may render the famous line *sabbe dhammā anattā* (see above) as ‘All dhammas are *asoulic*’! What, again, the Buddha seeks to underscore is the impermanance and interdependence, as well as automaticity, of any system – be it sentient or other, as well laid out in ‘conditioned co-origination’ (*paticca samuppāda*).

But at first blush, the term ‘soul’, best known in the context of sentience, may appear to make no sense in relation to other dhammas. But we need to remember that the term soul, in relation to sentience, is, as noted, a Brahmanic construct, and what the Buddha does is to *deconstruct* it:



Each *skandha* is impermanent, and hence a *dukkha*. It is not fit to consider that which is impermanent and *dukkha*, and of a nature to change, as ‘This is mine, This I am, This is my soul’ (*Anattalakkhana Sutta*).<sup>64</sup>

With ‘soul’ deconstructed out of existence, the Buddha seems to be underscoring the point that what doesn’t exist surely cannot be part of sentience. So there is no umbilical or intractable relationship between ‘soul’ with ‘sentience’. An inability to see this may be indicative of a misapprehension that the Tathagata avoids. He does not advocate taking ‘soul’ to be more than a ‘designation in common use in the world’ (see footnote 26), and thereby buying into the Brahmanic understanding of it as part of reality.

As long as the term *attā* (2) is understood as a zero-seme, there should be no semantic difficulty in associating asoulity with all phenomena, not just sentience. We only have to remember that ‘asoulitic’ simply means ‘absence of permanence’ and ‘absence of an inner controller’. This is no more than saying that we need to remember the definition of a technical or scientific term, if it is to be useful. In this sense, then, scientific rigor would dictate that ‘asoulitic’ in ‘all dhammas are asoulitic’ needs to be understood by what is meant by ‘soul’ – not anything specific to do with sentience, but as a characteristic of all reality, which also happens to include sentience. It may be worth noting that ‘asoulitic’ in association with, say, a rock (a *dhamma*), i.e., an ‘asoulitic rock’ makes no less sense than saying ‘self-less rock’, the term ‘self’, too, having the primary association of sentience.

A final added advantage is that just as *anattā* was in the Buddha’s India a new term to capture a unique concept,<sup>65</sup> so too is *asoulity* in our culture. In ‘asoulity’, then, we seem to have a tight translation of a unique concept!

Further, as far as one can tell, there does not seem to be a reason why ‘asoulity’ should create any confusion in the minds of the average English speaker as to what is being talked about. Simply, it is about ‘soul’, a familiar enough term in whatever sense it may be understood. The native speaker will also immediately recognize, and have no technical qualms about, the concept of ‘absence’ in *a-*, in contradistinction to *un-* or *non-* which, as noted, indicate ‘negation’.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

### 6.1 Need for Clarity towards Spiritual Interaction

In the past when there was little interest in Buddhism in the West, the topic of *anattā* may have been of import only to Buddhologists. But today, interest in Buddhism is on the rise in the English speaking world, both the average speaker (e.g. Internet users) as well as the non-Buddhologist academics looking at Buddhism from their own disciplinary perspectives (sociology, psychology, health and medicine, to name but a few). The responsibility of the translator, then, is to make Buddhist terms and concepts as understandable, unmistakable and least misleading as possible. In Buddhist terms, the responsibility is for ‘clear communication’ (*sannivedana*, to create a term<sup>66</sup>), as an extension of ‘excellent language’ (*sammā vācā*) of the Noble Eightfold Path. Or even ‘excellent communication’ between the speaker / writer and the listener / speaker (*sammā sannivedana*,<sup>67</sup> to coin yet another parallel term).<sup>68</sup> It is in this light that we have sought to explore how best to render this complex Buddhist concept.

So is it a matter of splitting hairs, or quibbling over whether to call something a ‘bucket’ or ‘pail’ as in different parts of the English world, or to give an example from the Buddha, arguing about whether to call a ‘dish’ by its different names in different regions?<sup>69</sup> A dish or bowl has a physical reality, and so, any commonly accepted term used in any language or any locality would serve the purpose of communication. But *anattā* has no such tangibility to check against. Hence one is left with only the label to help one’s understanding. *Anattā* as a concept is complex enough. So how much more difficult would it be for the enquirer who knows no Pali or Buddhadhamma? This is why our terminology needs to be as precise as possible, and sharp like a scientific tool, to the extent that such precision and sharpness is allowed for by language.

Of course, a test of the efficacy of ‘asoulity’ (as noun) and ‘asoulitic’ (as adjective) might be to do a field research with non-specialist subjects (i.e., average speakers of English, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist, as well as western and non-western speakers), with two simple questions: 1. “Do you get a sense of what it means?” and 2. “What does it mean to you?” Another test might be to see how it “performs” in

translation in the languages of Buddhism –Sinhala, Chinese, Tibetan, Thai, Japanese, Korean, etc., as well as in European languages.<sup>70</sup>

We may also note how if *asoulity* captures the contrast between Buddhism and theistic Brahmanism, it equally distinguishes Buddhism from other theistic religions. The significance of employing the term ‘asoulity’, drawing as it does upon the concept of ‘soul’, is that the distinction between Buddhism and other religions regarding this dimension of their worldviews can be presented with the sharpest clarity, allowing for no fuzziness, particularly when there is no knowledge of the historical relationship between Pali and Sanskrit, and Buddhism and Brahmanism. Students and adherents of theistic religions, such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam, etc., generally have a sense of what ‘soul’ means in their religions.<sup>71</sup> And so, ‘asoulity’ will be immediately understood as expressing its absence, or perhaps from their point of view, negation. Would the term ‘selfless’, e.g., bring them the same clarity? To make the distinction as clear and sharp as possible alone, then, this is what can be said to allow for genuine ‘spiritual interaction’ (see Sugunasingh, 1996) between and among religions, in the spirit of honesty, integrity and forthrightness.<sup>72</sup>

## 6.2 Towards an Enduring Dhamma

In the context of this study, two issues, not unrelated, have come to our attention. One relates to the issue of why contemporary scholarship has steered away from any association of *anatta* with soul in translation, as had been done by early scholars (e.g., Rhys Davids). The second relates to why in discussing early Buddhism, scholars fall back on Sanskrit as the primary referent, with Pali playing second fiddle.

To begin with the first, this writer can empathize with the Western scholar of Buddhism seeking to present Buddhism in the least ‘objectionable’ or ‘offensive’ language as possible so as not to antagonize the sensitivities of their social milieu,<sup>73</sup> the same way Japanese Buddhists, settling down in North America in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century CE, adopted terms such as Buddhist Church, Bishop, Minister, etc., even as they continued to be identified as ‘enemy aliens’. It is the sense of this writer (perhaps erroneous, and if so, with apologies) that the avoidance of the term ‘soul’ by Western scholars in translating *anattā* may relate to the fact that the term has either a negative or overly charged connotations in the secular Western world, or perhaps it may be a way of not offending

colleagues and other members of society who do believe in a soul.<sup>74</sup> But it could well be to not offend colleagues who teach Hinduism or are Hindu practitioners.

Fortunately, we are now in better times where each religion can, at least in the English speaking world, identify itself with openness and express itself with clarity, without believers having to look over their shoulders, such as Einstein possibly had to do in his day and age when he said, “Subtle is the Lord.”<sup>75</sup> Let it be remembered that the Buddha was not averse to calling a spade a spade: a ‘foolish man’ (*moghapurisa*) (Vin iv.126) in relation to his own disciples, ‘stupid’ (*appāṭihīra*) (D I.193) ‘blind’ (*andha*) and ‘without eyes’ (*acakkhuka*) (191), in relation to ascetics and Brahmins (*samaṇa-brāhmaṇānam*) (ibid.). A translation that shies away from capturing the essence of a term in the expectation of placating a given constituency may be doing a disservice to the Dhamma. Indeed the Buddha points to two things that ensures the Dhamma’s endurance: “proper placement of words and their natural interpretations” (*sunikkhitaṅca padabyañjanam attho ca sunīto*) (A. 2, 21).

An example from Sinhala Buddhism, the earliest variety outside of India and the longest living Buddhist tradition (two and a half millennia), seems to provide some evidence for the Buddha’s words. While the Buddhist term *kamma* has the meaning of an act leading to results from past lives, it also allows for freedom, as in the Buddha’s words, “Not by birth, but by action alone is one a Vasala or Brahmin” (*na jaccā vasalo hoti, na jaccā hoti brāhmano; kammanā vasalo hoti, kammanā hoti brāhmano*). While the Brahmanic concept of *karma* also shares the first sense – of results stemming from past lives, it also has the sense of ‘inevitability’, as in Monier-Williams (258): a “former act as leading to *inevitable* results, *fate*...” (italics added). And it is this sense of ‘fate’ that the average Sinhala Buddhist villager seems to have accepted and internalized the use of the term *karume* (the Sinhalized rendition of *karma*)<sup>76</sup>.

But what explains it? The most plausible explanation is that the Indian (Brahmanic) invasion of Sri Lanka in the 11<sup>th</sup> century CE (see de Silva, 1981, Ch. 6 for a treatment) not only effectively displaced a Buddhism older than a millennium,<sup>77</sup> but also Sanskritized the thus-far Pali-ized Sinhala language. Thus enters the term *karma*, with its connotations and associations of a worldview of inevitability, which replaced the Pali *kamma* of conditionality.

If we think this far-fetched, it may be instructive to recall the Sapirian hypothesis (Sapir, 1921):

*Human beings ... are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society... the “real world” is to a large extent unconsciously built upon the language habits of the group. We see and hear, and otherwise experience largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation.*

Simply put, then, language shapes perception, and by extension, interpretation, even though, of course, what prevails is a “conditioned origination relationship between language and perception” (Sugunasiri (1978: 193-223) that recognizes the influence in both directions). This theoretical proposition, then, can be said to provide some insight regarding the case of the Sinhala speaker. Indeed the Buddha’s words, “I posit the world in this one-fathom body” confirms it. So it is what the Sinhala speakers have heard through their ear-sense, and come to internalize through their mind-sense that can be said to have brought them over to a Brahmanic worldview, which is distanced from the historical Buddhist one. So, from a specifically Buddhist perspective, sacrificing clarity at the altar of placating may be an example of misplaced compassion, and with possible unintended conceptual and behavioural outcomes in relation to the endurance of the Dhamma.

The second question builds upon the first. Given the potential for confusion in language usage as above, why in Western Buddhist scholarship is the primary referent language Sanskrit,<sup>78</sup> in which there are only fragments of the Tripitaka, and not Pali, the language in which the words of the Buddha were first committed to writing, and the only Indic language in which there is a comprehensive Tipitaka?

It may, however, not be a matter of language choice alone. In our study, we have seen how, though etymologically related, Pali *attā* / *anattā* carry a different range of meanings from Sanskrit *ātman* and *anātman*, though with some overlap, as also the case of *kamma* and *karma* at the ground level. It may be noted, as clarified by the American linguist Gleason (1955/ 1961, p. 55) that, “[t]ranslation can only be accurate where the content structures of the two languages coincide.” The worldview (= content structure) of Buddhism is distinct from Brahmanism. So, to

continue to slap the term *anātman*, carrying the Brahmanic concept,<sup>79</sup> every time *anattā* is used (as e.g., in Harvey, 2010), as if they were ‘equal’, therefore, would be to mislead. It is certainly to not have scientific rigour. (The same thing, of course, could be said in relation to *kamma* / *karma*.) Sanskrit *anātman*, as noted, is a zero-*seme*, while *anattā* is a full-blooded morpheme and *sememe*, the same way ‘autonomous nervous system’ is.

Why this penchant, then, for using Sanskrit<sup>80</sup> as opposed to Pali in Buddhist scholarship? We may never know what language exactly the Buddha spoke, but it is beyond doubt that it was **not** Sanskrit, though probably a form of Prakrit, of which Pali, of course, is a rendition. So the question needs to be asked, if the Buddha chose not to use Sanskrit, why do contemporary scholars opt for it?

One possible answer may be that many North American scholars came to Buddhism by way of Mahayana, given that it was Zen (since the 1850’s) and Tibetan Buddhism (since the 1960’s) that were the first to arrive in North America. So is it a bias in favour of Mahayana Buddhism, perhaps even buying into its claim of superiority, even perhaps without intending to do so? Or is it a bias against *early* Buddhism (*ādiyāna* as it has been called elsewhere by this writer (Sugunasiri, 2005)), preserved not in the land of origin but in the land of its adoption, Sri Lanka? Or is it a bias indeed against Sri Lanka itself, dwarfed against the giant India, and home of two world religions, Brahmanism and Buddhism? Or is it indeed an elitism on the part of the Western scholar who, having learned Sanskrit as part of one’s study, is enamoured of the robustly healthy, far more developed and far more difficult Sanskrit? Or perhaps it is a natural attraction to the language in the Indic Languages branch that holds the parallel position of Greek and Latin in the Germanic and Romance branches, each tracing its history to a common source, proto-Indo-European. Whatever the reason, they all seem to speak to a bias in the academy, unexamined as it may be, though perhaps never attended to. Would Sanskrit replace Chinese or Tibetan, e.g., in studies on Chinese or Tibetan Buddhism?

To end, our remarks will have served their purpose if they come to be a consciousness-raising exercise in the academy - as to the importance of employing the Pali terminology in writing on Pali Canonical literature, drawing upon the Sanskrit only if and when called for in making a specific point. Of course, the same principle should hold in

discussing Sanskrit Buddhist texts, noting incidentally the ‘Buddhist Sanskrit’ (see Edgerton, (1953) 1985) is not always the orthodox Sanskrit of Panini.<sup>81</sup>

An additional outcome of such a shift to Pali would be to signal a scholarly recognition that Buddhism is distinct from Hinduism. It would also be to signal a simultaneous rejection of the myth held in certain quarters that Buddhism is nothing but a version of Hinduism, the way the later Upanishads are in relation to the earlier Vedas, and that the Buddha is no more than an *avatar* of the Hindu god Vishnu.<sup>82</sup>

Any scholarly help to dispel such misapprehensions would be to both uphold scholarship and remove obstacles in preserving Buddhism in its authenticity, as scholarship continues to seek to separate the wheat from the chaff.<sup>83</sup> It is also to guide the body politic towards an increasingly better understanding of the Buddhadhamma, leading to lesser suffering and increasing the chances of liberation.

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<sup>1</sup> It is with much thanks that I acknowledge the many useful and critical comments made on the several drafts of this paper by Bhikkhu Analayo, Prof. Michael Berman, Bryan Levman and Prof. Leonard Priestley.

<sup>2</sup> Collins is, of course, only one author, but his is perhaps the best-known book length treatment. Scientists (Stevenson, 1975) and journalists (Fisher, in collaboration with scientist Whitton, 1986) are among others who use the term.

<sup>3</sup> Of course, there are para-linguistic forms of communication, such as gestures (kinesics), eye contact (oculesics) and distance (proxemics). But they relate to a real ‘speech activity’ which is not the context of this paper.

<sup>4</sup> See Collins (op. cit.: 71-78) for an overview of the shades of meaning of *attā*.

<sup>5</sup> Both Whitney and Monier-Williams show two other meanings – ‘negative’ and ‘contrary’, which we shall deal with later.

<sup>6</sup> Horner translates *anidassana*, in relation to its occurrence in the context of consciousness (*viññāṇam*) as ‘cannot be characterized’ (*anidassanam*) (Walsh, 1987 (1995), 557, footnote. 241). But if this gives the sense of *negation*, the same sequence occurring in D I, 11, it is rendered as ‘invisible’ by Walsh (ibid, footnote 240) (this in contrast with *sanidassana* ‘visible’) and ‘non-manifesting’ by Nāṇānanda (*Concept & Reality*, 59,

quoted in Walsh, *ibid.*), giving more of a sense of ‘absence’. Rhys Davids seems to capture this same sense when he explains *a-* in the context of *nidassana* (Davids & Stede, 1979, 358) as ‘with no attribute’. In Sinhala usage, with its close ties to Pali and early Buddhism, *nidarṣana* (in its Sanskritic format), means ‘example’, a meaning found in Davids & Stede (*op. cit.*), too. Thus *anidassana* may be understood as ‘without example’, in the sense of ‘unique’. The same sense seems to be captured in another context, in relation to the Path: *anidassanagāmiṇca maggam* (SN 4, 9) ‘one who takes the unparalleled path’. It is in light of this that the present writer intuites *anidassana* capturing the sense of ‘absence’, as contrasted with ‘negation’.

<sup>7</sup> Examples with the rest of the vowels are ‘an egg’, ‘an iron’, ‘an orchard’ and ‘an understatement’.

<sup>8</sup> Of course, *na-* + *-attā* could have become *n’attā*, through elision, as e.g., in the case of *n’atthi*. <*na* + *atthi*. See also later, under section 4.

<sup>9</sup> What constitutes ‘beginning’, of course, bears no relevance to the discussion here.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Whom’ would be inappropriate here, given that the referent is a construct, although for a devotee of Brahminism, it would be totally apt.

<sup>11</sup> It may be kept in mind that the reference is to the Brahmanic / Vedic Sanskrit, and not ‘Buddhist Sanskrit’, for there is no entry *ātman* in Edgerton (1953) 1985. *ātmana* relates to ‘a nāga king’.

<sup>12</sup> Harvey (2010, 570), referring to the “Upanishadic idea”, explains: “Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, 3.7.3 sees the immortal Self as controlling the elements and faculties within a person (and the realms of the world).”

<sup>13</sup> Of course, this definition would be applicable to any theistic religion.

<sup>14</sup> This is as in English, too, as e.g., in ‘chairman’ (although the neutral term ‘chair’ has now come into vogue). An example of more recent origin would be ‘actor’ to mean both male and female.

<sup>15</sup> Clearly a contrived Sanskrit-Latin hybrid, *ātmano* is formed from the root form *ātman* + *o*, emulating *cogito* (in *cogito ergo sum*), the present indicative ending of the verb *cōgitāre*. It may be seen to be anomalous to show a nominal form with a verb ending, but it may be of more than cursory interest that *ātman* happens to be derived from the *verbal* form *an-* ‘to breathe, respire, gasp’ (see Monier-Williams, 24 (under *an*); 135 (under *ātman*)), incidentally making clear the basis for the standard meaning soul, also associated with *jīva* ‘life’ and *prāṇa*.

<sup>16</sup> It may be noted that *ātman* is a ‘free morpheme’ (see Bloomfield, 1933 for a treatment) in the earlier, ‘positive’ context.

<sup>17</sup> A *lexeme* is an abstract unit of morphological analysis in Linguistics, that roughly equals a concatenation of phonemes making up a single word.

<sup>18</sup> “The meaning of a morpheme is a *sememe*.” (Bloomfield, op. cit., p. 162).

<sup>19</sup> A *seme* is “the smallest unit of meaning recognized in semantics”. Introduced “by Eric Buysens in the 1930s and developed by Bernard Pottier in the 1960s”, it is “the result produced when determining the minimal elements of meaning...”

([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seme\\_\(semantics\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seme_(semantics))). Of course, it doesn’t mean that there is a meaning, but just that there exists a combination of sounds that potentially contribute to meaning. The parallel at the phonological level is a ‘phone’ which is just a sound, potentially pronounceable, but only in context.

<sup>20</sup> In the scientific domain, the parallel would be the nano level, as e.g., in nanotechnology.

<sup>21</sup> As also later in the context of a Buddhist parallel, an interesting question arises: can there be a morpheme (or compound morpheme) of which the parts have a literal meaning but with no meaning as a whole? In *anātman*, e.g., both *an-* and *ātman* have meaning. Yet, put together, as in this particular context, it ends up having no meaning.

<sup>22</sup> Panini’s grammar, Bloomfield (op. cit.: 11) observes, “is one of the greatest monuments of human intelligence”.

<sup>23</sup> ‘Hindus’ is meant as ‘Indian’, though with no necessary religious connotations.

<sup>24</sup> While Panini notes three others, in addition to this simplest type, they need not detain us here. See Cardona, *ibid*, for details.

<sup>25</sup> Other examples given are *deer*, *fish* and *moose* (Bloomfield, 215). In past tense verbs, we have examples like *cut*, *bet*, etc.

<sup>26</sup> While ‘Semantic manifestation’ in the context of *anātman 1a / b*, *b* alone is characterized here as merely being ‘unperceived’, it may be noted that in comparison to *anātman 2* (next), we may say that there is also ‘elision’.

<sup>27</sup> For a parallel in English, we may take the term ‘right’. First, there are its ‘*oppositional*’ meanings - ‘opposite of wrong’, or ‘opposite of left’. But it also has a non-oppositional meaning, as e.g., in legal right, children’s rights, animal rights, etc., in both the singular and the plural. But in this latter usage, ‘right’ is not the linguistic / semantic opposite of ‘wrong’.

<sup>28</sup> See also *Brahmajāla Sutta* (D.I.1) for the Buddha’s view of *attā* as being material.

<sup>29</sup> See the term *nāmarāpa* ‘mindbody’.

<sup>30</sup> “Citta, these are merely names, expressions, turns of speech, designations in common use in the world, which the Tathagata uses without misapprehending them.” (D. 1 202).

<sup>31</sup> Even though there is no hint, or acknowledgement, of his indebtedness to the Buddha in this understanding, there is little doubt that James was very much up on his Buddhism. See e.g., his Chapter 2, ‘The Stream of Consciousness’ (a phrase, incidentally, not unfamiliar to the existentialist Jean Paul Sartre), the Buddha’s characterization of the mind being *viññāṇa sota*, literally ‘consciousness stream’. A first-hand report by Anagarika Dharmapala, the Sinhala Buddhist from Sri Lanka who is said to have taken the first World Parliament of Religions, 1883, in Chicago by storm (see Guruge (1991: 3 to 22) for the full speech) sheds more light:

*When I was in Boston in December, 1903, I visited William James’s class at Harvard University. I tried unobtrusively to reach the back of the lecture-hall to hear the great teacher of psychology, but it is difficult for a man in a yellow robe to be inconspicuous in America. Professor James saw me and motioned for me to come to the front of the hall. He said, “Take my chair, and I shall sit with my students. You are better equipped to lecture on psychology than I am.” After I had outlined to his advanced class some elements of Buddhist doctrine, he turned to his students and said, “This is the psychology everybody will be studying twenty-five years from now.”*

See also Fields, 1986, pp. 134-5, for a reference.

<sup>32</sup> Flanagan, in his study, *Consciousness Reconsidered*, 1992, in which he cites this passage from James, himself has a chapter on the stream of consciousness, and writes on concepts such as ‘The Mind’ “I” (ch. 9), the “Missing Shades of You” (chap. 5), etc. And so it may be of more than passing interest that there is again no mention of the Buddha in his study either.

<sup>33</sup> “... [The] feeling or sense of being or having an “I” – this feeling is not denied in Buddhism, though it is seen as based on a misconception of reality.” (Harvey, op. cit., 572).

<sup>34</sup> It is interesting to note that the term ‘ontological’ is characterized in Buddhism as *an examination (sattā-vīmaṃsā)* (Buddhadatta, 1949, p. 362, under ‘ontology’), unlike in the theistic sense of just ‘intuiting God’ (Webster’s). It is, of course, in the theistic sense that the term is used here.

<sup>35</sup> *Anattā* may be seen as a ‘linguistic negation’ since it does presuppose the linguistic form *attā*, but it is not a ‘conceptual negation’. As a concept, *attā*, in its corporeal or conventional truth sense, is not, in the Buddhist sense, implicit or implied in *anattā*.

<sup>36</sup> It is not even like the concept of unicorn, which also does stand for something that does not exist, yet is represented in physical form by, say, a sculptor.

<sup>37</sup> The *Anattalakkhana sutta* (see above) and the *Poṭṭhapāda Sutta* (D 9) are among the most often quoted *suttas* (see Warder, op. cit.: 118ff for a discussion of the latter).

<sup>38</sup> It comes to be 32 in Theravada Buddhism with the addition of ‘brain’ (*matthalunga*) by Buddhaghosa (5<sup>th</sup> c. ACE).

<sup>39</sup> The total list is as follows: head hair, body hair, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bone, marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, pleura, spleen, lungs, intestines, mesentery, stomach, feces, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, grease, saliva, mucus, synovial fluid and urine.

<sup>40</sup> In the scientific sense, it is made up of atoms and molecules.

<sup>41</sup> Although the phrase is used in the texts in relation to the six sense-spheres, we associate it with the body parts by extension, given that the body parts are a sub-set of the mind-body, and the context is still the individual, whether characterized in terms of the senses or the body parts.

<sup>42</sup> While the anatomical meditation refers only to the physical component, the term ‘mind-body’ is used to remind ourselves about the necessary relationship of the body with the mind (and, of course, vice versa).

<sup>43</sup> Each cell and cluster by itself and in their interrelationships, being in a constant flux, the complex process at work here involves ‘codes’, ‘messengers’, ‘tags’, specific ‘addresses’ to which a ‘message’ is to be delivered, ‘auto-receptors’, ‘locks’ and ‘keys’, etc. (*ibid.*).

<sup>44</sup> The mechanism called ‘auto-pilot’ that lands a plane on its own without intervention by the pilot may be seen as a parallel in the field of aviation.

<sup>45</sup> By way of a little mischievous word play here, we may parallel the label *anattatā* (< *anattā*) with ANS:

- *a(n)* - for A(utonomous), meaning ‘absence [of an agent]’;

- *atta* - for ‘Nerves’ < ‘Nervous’, indicating a corporeal association;

- *tā* for System, (*-tā* literally meaning ‘state of’, a system being a ‘state’).

<sup>46</sup> We may note how in other contexts, as e.g., in *na + āgata*, literally ‘that which is not come / yet to come’, but meaning ‘future’, there comes to be an epenthesis: *anāgata*.

<sup>47</sup> Other examples would be *nirvipāka* ‘bad result’, or *nirupadhi* ‘free from passion’, both adding (*r*)-. But, as in all the other examples above, each of them can be said to not only presuppose its opposite, *karuḍā*, *vipāka* and *upadhi* respectively, but also *have an intrinsic presence* in its own right in its negativity (still speaking conventionally, of course). *Nirupadhi*, e.g., is the experience of an *arhant*. Additionally, *ni(r)*- also has other shades of meaning, as e.g., in *niraya*, literally ‘going down’ or ‘thrown out’, or in *niratta* ‘which has not been assumed’. An *arhant* is said to have neither *atta* ‘assumption’ nor *niratta* ‘rejection’, and keeps an open mind (Davids & Stede, op. cit., under *atta*, p. 22). Even though in *nirudaka* < *ni*<sup>®</sup> + *udaka*), *nir*- also has the meaning of absence (i.e., ‘without water’), it not only presupposes its opposite, but also has an intrinsic presence in the form of cracked up ground (as in a desert). This would be the case even with *nirupadhi* ‘free from passion’.

<sup>48</sup> There are, of course, other ways of showing negativity in Pali, such as duplication, as e.g., in *na ca so*, *na ca añño* ‘neither the same nor another’ (*Milindapañña*), *apa*- (as in *apakitti* ‘ill-fame’), etc. But the same can be said to hold true.

<sup>49</sup> Other examples are *acira* ‘impermanant’, *adhamma* ‘not-dhamma’, *amata* ‘deathless’, etc.

<sup>50</sup> By the rules of grammar in Pali, a vowel preceding a double consonant is always short(ened).

<sup>51</sup> The asterisk here, and next, means, ‘doesn’t occur in the language’.

<sup>52</sup> Other examples would be *anappameyya* (Th 1, 1089) ‘immeasurable’, *anabhāva* (V III.3) ‘utter cessation of becoming’ (as translated in Davids & Stede, op. cit.).

<sup>53</sup> A commentarial usage, *anasuropa* (Dhs 1341) < *an* + *asuropa* ‘absence of grumbling’ (Davids & Stede, op. cit., 31) seems to capture this sense as well.

<sup>54</sup> “A linguistic form which bears no partial phonetic-semantic resemblance to any other form is a ... *morpheme*” (Bloomfield, op. cit. 161).

<sup>55</sup> *Pīti* ‘happiness’ and *passaddhi* ‘relaxation’ would be associated concepts.

<sup>56</sup> This in contrast to, we may remind ourselves, Brahmanism.

<sup>57</sup> I opt for the term, and concept, ‘morph’ to underscore that it is understood simply as a phonetic concatenation with no semantic counterpart.

<sup>58</sup> As defined in the dictionary, ‘amoral’ is to be “not concerned with moral standards; not to be judged by criteria of morality” and further, “neither moral nor immoral”.

<sup>59</sup> Of course, certain aspects of science may entail elements of immorality, such as e.g., research on animals, or destruction of the environment, etc.

<sup>60</sup> In strict grammatical, and linguistic, terms, ‘asoulity’ would be ‘*anattatā*’, as e.g., in *lahutā* ‘lightness’, ‘buoyancy’, or *vepullatā* ‘abundance’ (see Warder, 1963.: 253 for other examples). The use of the neuter singular of an adjective to form an abstract noun, of course, is standard in Pali.

<sup>61</sup> Two other nominal suffixes in English are *-ism* (as e.g., in theism) and *-ship* (as e.g., in mentorship). But *-ism* is too loaded for our purposes, coming to be used, as in its dictionary meaning, ‘act’, ‘condition of being’, ‘action’, ‘doctrine’ (e.g., atheism, nihilism), ‘devotion to’ (“as in nationalism”) (Webster’s). The suffix *-ship* also comes with many associations: quality, condition or state, “as in fellowship, friendship”, rank or status “as in kingship..”, ability “as in penmanship”. The suffix *-ity* preferred in the paper, by contrast, has fewer associations: ‘state, character, condition’ “as in chastity, adversity” (Webster’s).

<sup>62</sup> It has been pointed out that there may well be a violation of convention if not the rules of English here: “Unlike ‘non-’, the ‘a-’ prefix, which is originally Greek, is (as far as I know) applied only to words of Greek or Latin derivation. And ‘ity-’ is applied only to words of Latin derivation. But ‘soul’ is a native English word, going back to Anglo-Saxon ‘sawol’” (Leonard Priestley, in personal communication). But, of course, change, as in all phenomena as the Buddha points out, is the nature of language. Words of a more recent French authority, Michael Bréal, who coined the term “semantics” (1897) (back cover) are encouraging: “Each onward step of a language is the work first of an individual.” (Bréal, tr. Cust, 1964, p. 267). Asking the question, “To whom then is the authority [to] be attributed?”, it is answered, “... to the writer, to the philosopher, to the poet..” (p. 274-5). It is in this spirit then that the writer has allowed himself license to go beyond the boundaries of norm.

<sup>63</sup> See also Warder (op.cit.) and Hoffman (1987) for its usage.

<sup>64</sup> See also Poṭṭhapāda Sutta (D .I).

<sup>65</sup> This, of course, is not to say that the Sanskrit term *anātman* was unknown to the Buddha, but that the Pali rendering *anattā* is used by him, not as a cognate of the Sanskrit term (unlike e.g., in the case of, say, *dukkha* < *duhkha*), but in a completely new sense, and not as part of the Brahmanic conceptual universe.

<sup>66</sup> The Pali term for communication is *nivedana*, the causative of *vid-* ‘to know’, thus meaning ‘to make known’, and idiomatically, ‘to communicate’. *Sannivedana* is made up of *saṃ* + *nivedana*, *saṃ-*, literally meaning ‘together’, but used here to convey intensity, meaning ‘clear’.

<sup>67</sup> Though not formally included under *sammā vācā*, ‘noble silence’ (*ariyo vā tuṅhībhāvo*) is a common form of communication practiced by the Buddha (as e.g., to indicate acceptance of an invitation to alms). It is in this spirit that we coin the phrase *sammā sannivedana*, *sai-* also having the sense of *sammā* ‘excellent’ (Davids & Stede, 655).

<sup>68</sup> This interpretation of *sammā vācā* as ‘excellent communication’ is in the spirit of the Buddha’s advice in the *Araṇavibhanga-sutta* (M III 234) not to speak hurriedly, because it would be “hard to understand”.

<sup>69</sup> The examples given are *pati* a ‘bowl’, *patta* a ‘vessel’, *vittha* ‘saucer’, *serava* ‘pan’, *dharopa* ‘pot’, etc.

<sup>70</sup> Of course, the alternative in common acceptance among contemporary scholars, ‘selflessness’ and ‘selfless’, with the addition of ‘persons’ as in ‘selfless persons’ as in Collins, should be put to the same test.

<sup>71</sup> While the term *ātman* itself may be unique to Brahminism, the concept of ‘soul’ itself, of course, is not. All three ‘Religions of the Book’ - Judaism, Christianity and Islam share the concept, each of holding a a specific position about when ‘ensoulment’ takes place - at conception in Catholicism and sometime after conception in the other two.

<sup>72</sup> We may consider the ever-deepening level of spiritual interaction over the last quarter century or more between Buddhist and Christian scholars in North America in particular (see e.g., the *Journal of Buddhist Christian Studies*). Some evidence of such committed interaction coming ‘down’ to the practitioner level is the recent initiative of the former British Prime Minister Tony Blair joining forces with the Canadian politician-philanthropist Belinda Stronach seeking to bring together the different faith communities to work on social issues, such as, for a start, malaria in Africa. As a first activity, 30 youthful ambassadors, selected from Canada, UK and USA, are to work in Africa in interfaith pairs. But the interfaith interaction is not only at the field level. The steering committees in each of the three countries directing the operations are also made up of religious



leaders working across their belief systems. A Buddhism-inspired movement bringing people of the different faiths towards the social good is Sarvodaya of Sri Lanka, founded by A T Ariyaratna some 50 years ago, and still going strong with programs in over 20,000 villages ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sarvodaya\\_Shramadana\\_Movement](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sarvodaya_Shramadana_Movement)).

<sup>73</sup> An example would be Bachelor, *Buddhism without Beliefs*, 1977. See Sugunasiri (2010) for a rejoinder.

<sup>74</sup> Observes Thanissaro: “One of the first stumbling blocks that Westerners often encounter when they learn about Buddhism is the teaching on *anatta*, often translated as no-self. This teaching is a stumbling block for two reasons. First, the idea of there being no self doesn't fit well with other Buddhist teachings, such as the doctrine of *kamma* and rebirth: If there's no self, what experiences the results of *kamma* and takes rebirth? Second, it doesn't fit well with our own Judeo-Christian background, which assumes the existence of an eternal soul or self as a basic presupposition: If there's no self, what's the purpose of a spiritual life?”

<sup>75</sup> See the title of the Study by Abraham Pais, 1982, *Subtle is the Lord: The Science and the Life of Albert Einstein*.

<sup>76</sup> Of course, it would require systematic fieldwork to establish the extent to which the experiential understanding of this writer is valid.

<sup>77</sup> Buddhism was introduced to Sri Lanka in the 3<sup>rd</sup>.c. BCE, by Arhant Mahinda, son of King Asoka. See de Silva (op. cit.).

<sup>78</sup> See e.g., Warder, 1970, for an early example, writing a whole book on Indian Buddhism, using Sanskrit, and more recently Harvey (2010), titling his Encyclopedia entry “Not-self (*anātman*)”.

<sup>79</sup> It is relevant to note here that, as noted (footnote 11), the term is absent in Buddhist Sanskrit.

<sup>80</sup> It may not be irrelevant to note that this critique comes from one whose introduction to Sanskrit was in his boyhood, learning at the local temple, and was the only student of Sanskrit in his high school class, taking Sanskrit as a subject as well for his first degree. He was also to translate A B Keith's *Classical Sanskrit Literature* to Sinhala while still under the age of thirty.

<sup>81</sup> Having searched for precision, it may be worth ending this exercise with a few wise words from an erudite practitioner, Thanissaro Bhikkhu: "... the *anatta* teaching is not a doctrine of no-self, but a not-self strategy for shedding suffering by letting go of its cause, leading to the highest, undying happiness. At that point, questions of self, no-self, and not-self fall aside. Once there's the experience of such total freedom, where would

there be any concern about what's experiencing it, or whether or not it's a self?"

<sup>82</sup> This, of course, is hardly an isolated view. In his article, "Buddha: The Refiner of Hinduism - Exploring Hindu-Buddhist Connections", Subhamoy Das (online), e.g., notes how "Most Hindus today look upon Buddha as one of their own Avatars or Divine Incarnations", ... "or even as a Hindu." The view can indeed be seen as captured in the very words in the title, "the refiner of Hinduism", a view reiterated by Swami Kriyananda, a westerner (J Donald Walters), in his book *The Hindu Way of Awakening*. He "compares Buddha's position relative to Hinduism with Martin Luther's to the Roman Catholic Church." While, of course, it is true that "Both men were reformers...", King's reforms were still within the same belief system. The changes were at the ecclesiastical, and the pragmatic, level. Buddha's by contrast was a complete rejection of the basic premises of Hinduism, as e.g., a Brahman and Atman, caste system, reliance on ritual for liberation, etc. Despite that, the author goes on to say that "Buddha's theistic beliefs are not contrary to Hinduism, but only a step ahead." Further, he states, "It would not be wrong to state, then, that Buddha founded a noble religion by distilling Hinduism"!

The view is not exclusive to religious circles. Notes Gombrich (1997:15), "When I have lectured on Buddhism in Indian universities, I have found the view that the Buddha was 'born a Hindu' and was a Hindu reformer to be virtually universal."

Politically, "The great unification of Buddhism and Hinduism is still prevalent in Nepal, the birthplace of Buddha. Ironically, Nepal is the world's only Hindu nation, where people don't consider the two religions distinct from each other." (ibid.) An educational outcome of "this attempt to colonise Buddhism", as Gombrich (ibid.) puts it, is that "it need not figure in the school syllabus: Hinduism is taught, but there is no requirement to teach the 'Buddhist' part of it, and if Buddhists complain, they can be told that their religion, Hinduism, is indeed taught".

<sup>83</sup> A linguist, featured in *Precise Thought and Language in the Essay: Dimensions, II* (Kirkland, Glen & Richard Davies, 1996) (Sugunasiri, 1996a), this paper is another attempt of the author at promoting clear communication in the academy. Among his other contributions towards the same goal are " 'Spiritual Interaction', not 'Interfaith Dialogue'" (1996b); 'Ādiyāna' to replace the pejorative 'Hīnayāna' (2005) and 'Inherited Buddhists' and 'Acquired Buddhists' (2006) to replace respectively 'Ethnic Buddhist' and 'Euro-Buddhist'.