Anattâ: A Different Approach
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Buddhism has often been said to complicate the attempts of scholars of religious traditions to find common defining characteristics of ‘religion’. One of the difficulties is that unlike all the other major religious traditions Buddhism is not concerned with the existence of a creator God. Furthermore, it is frequently pointed out that it does not accept the existence of an individual self or soul: it teaches a doctrine of anattā, usually translated ‘no-self’. Because Buddhism is sometimes described more in terms of a way of life, some have even asked whether it is simply a philosophy or an ideology. It is, however, defined as a religion because its central concern is to offer to human beings salvation from earthly existence, which is characterised by suffering, or unsatisfactoriness (dukkha). The non-acceptance of a creator God in a system which offers salvation to human beings is not too problematic: it can readily be accepted that salvation is achieved through one’s own efforts. The apparent denial of the existence of an individual self or soul has, however, been found less easy to reconcile with such a notion of salvation. If there is no self, what is it that is saved?

Perhaps because of the problems associated with understanding this unique doctrine, problems compounded by the fact that the Buddha himself never really explained it, a great deal has been written about the subject - in terms of psychology, ‘conventional selves,’ that the doctrine allows for the existence of a transcendent Self, the refutation of a transcendent Self, and how best to accept the notion that one has no self. In this paper, I would like to suggest an alternative approach to answering the question ‘if there is no self, what is it that is saved?’ First, I will draw out what appears to me to be the common characteristic of the main doctrinal teachings of the Buddha. Second, I will briefly explain the analysis of the human being which is given in Buddhist texts, and the way this has traditionally been understood by Theravāda Buddhism. I will then consider this traditional understanding of the human being in the light of the main Buddhist doctrines. This will show that they seem to be incompatible: the traditional view of the analysis of the human being produces severe conceptual and philosophical problems if one considers it alongside the Buddhist doctrines. My fourth point is to look not so much at doctrinal teachings of the Buddha, but to draw attention to his attitude towards the sort of question we are asking here. How would he have dealt with questions such as ‘what is it that is saved?’ I will go on to suggest that if we approach the subject in a different way, we can come up with

1. This paper is an adaption of a lecture given at the School of Oriental and African Studies, Centre of South Asian Studies Seminar Series on 3rd November 1994.
2. I am drawing only on the Sutta Pitaka of the Pali Canon. All references are to Pali Text Society editions
an explanation which is compatible both with the main Buddhist doctrinal
teachings and also with the approach of the Buddha to questions of this
nature. Finally, I will illustrate how this approach can be extended to certain
other key areas of the Buddha's teachings which are also frequently consid-
ered conceptually problematic. In other words, I am suggesting that the
approach can be used for general hermeneutic purposes.

First, briefly, the key doctrinal teachings of the Buddha in order to draw
out their common characteristic. Perhaps the most central of these, and the
most well-known and readily identified with Buddhism, is the doctrine of
the Four Noble Truths, which the Buddha articulated in his first sermon in
the Deer Park at Sarnath. The Four Noble Truths are: (1) The human con-
dition is characterised by unsatisfactoriness (dukkha). This is sometimes
translated as 'suffering'. But it is much more of a profound term than just
suffering, and applies to every aspect of human existence, not just the parts
of it that are overtly unpleasant. It means that nothing within the human con-
dition, the cycle of rebirth, is ultimately satisfactory, nothing can be seen as
offering a permanent satisfactory answer to our needs. At its most basic, this
is simply because in the end we all age and die. (2) Dukkha is caused by
 craving/desire (tanha). Again craving or desire has to be understood as hav-
ing a very profound meaning: it does not only refer to overt cravings or
desires, though of course these are very much part of it, but to every aspect
of human nature which produces a sense of continuity, a sense of an individ-
ual having individual needs which are to be satisfied at any and every level.
All of these cravings or desires are summed up in the threefold formula of
greed, hatred and delusion. These three cover all cravings, in whatever
degree, that cause a continuation of unsatisfactoriness. (3) There can be ces-
sation of unsatisfactoriness (dukkhanirodha). If this sounds simple, we need
to remember that if the human condition is characterised by unsatisfactori-
ess, then the cessation of unsatisfactoriness is liberation from the human
condition. This Noble Truth is a statement that salvation exists. This experi-
ence is also called Nirvāṇa. Nirvāṇa, which literally means 'blowing out',
refers to the blowing out, or cessation, of the three cravings of greed, hatred
and delusion - so it is the cessation of the fuel for the continuation of unsat-
satisfactoriness, and as such is liberation from the cycle of rebirth. Other than
the cessation of dukkha, Nirvāṇa is most frequently stated to be 'seeing
things as they really are' (yathābhūtāṁ). (4) The way to achieve cessation
is to follow the Noble Eightfold Path (magga). This offers a way to achieve
Nirvāṇa, and consists of eight things one should cultivate at different stages
of one's spiritual progress. The eight are broadly divided into the cultivation
of three qualities: morality, meditation or concentration, and wisdom or
insight. Morality reflects the ethical aspects of one's state of mind, wisdom
or insight reflects the need to eliminate ignorance, and meditation or con-

3. SN.V. 420 ff.
centration is the practice of mental discipline which contributes to both of these.

As is commonly known, the Four Noble Truths are sometimes used to illustrate the metaphor of the Buddha as a physician. He diagnoses the human condition, explains the cause of the problem, gives a prognosis, and then explains how to achieve the cure.

The next two teachings we need to consider here are closely linked. They both tell us about the nature of things, including the nature of the human being. The first of them is the doctrine of dependent origination. This is that all things within the experience of the cycle of rebirths, all things within samsāra, are dependently originated. Nothing exists independently. It is a doctrine of causation - all things are caused by something else. This is put as follows: 'When this is, that is; This arising, that arises; When this is not, that is not; This ceasing, that ceases'. This doctrine applies to everything within samsāra, and for this reason all things within samsāra are referred to as 'conditioned' things - 'conditioned' means 'dependently originated'.

The doctrine of dependent origination is applied quite specifically to the human being. We are given a detailed formula about the human being which explains the mechanics of how a human being is a human being. It explains how the birth of a human being in this life is dependent on his or her accumulated actions in his or her previous lives. These condition one's consciousness, one's individual identity, one's psychological faculties, one's physical body at birth, and one's ageing and dying. In this way the cycle of rebirth continues. And in including the specific influences which condition a person's life, this formula actually tells us how the individual human being comes to be as that particular individual.

The other doctrine about the nature of things, and the third of the doctrines I will discuss, is called the Three Marks of Existence (tilakkhana). This tells us more about the human condition. In fact it is a teaching which simply tells us how all things, including the human being, are characterised. It is what one might call a general metaphysical formula. The first characteristic is that all conditioned things, all the dependently originated things within the samsāric experience of a human being (that is, a human being on the cycle of rebirth), are impermanent, anicca. The second characteristic is that all such conditioned things are unsatisfactory, dukkha; so this reiterates the First Noble Truth. And it is because they are impermanent that they are unsatisfactory. The third characteristic is that all things, whether conditioned or not, are selfless, anattā. The significance of the last point referring

4. This teaching is repeated in many different ways throughout the Nidāna Samyutta, SN, Vol II.  
5. MN.II.32, III63; SN.II.28. 95.  
6. SN.II.25 etc., DN.II.55ff.  
8. AN.I.286; Dhammapada 5-7, 277-279; cf. also MN.I.336; DN.II.157.
to all things rather than just conditioned things, is that it includes anything that might lie outside or beyond the human experience of *samsāra*. For example, it would include the experience of *Nirvāṇa*: selflessness also characterises that experience.

Finally, a key teaching of the Buddha concerns the law of karma. The word karma literally means ‘action’, and broadly speaking it means that actions have consequences. A very common law in the Indian religious tradition as a whole, in the religious milieu at the time of the Buddha the predominant understanding of it was that ritual actions, in the form of prescribed physical and verbal actions, brought about desired consequences. This was the rationale underlying the sacrificial religion of the Brahmans which was brought into India about two millennia BCE, and which has dominated the Hindu religious tradition in some shape or form ever since. The Buddha made a radical departure from this materialistic understanding of karma and defined karma as intention or desire. He stated: ‘I say that karma is intention (cetanā); having willed, one acts through thought, word and deed’.\(^9\) This doctrine in effect ethicises the law that actions have consequences. It is far more, the Buddha states, than a materialistic law that prescribed physical actions bring about the results one desires. Rather, it throws personal responsibility onto individuals themselves. It places the individual at the centre of the process of cause and effect.

The Buddha’s definition of the law of karma is strongly related to the Second Noble Truth. The latter states that the human condition, characterised by unsatisfactoriness, is caused by craving or desire, and the law of karma explains how this is the case. It states that consequences are brought about by one’s intentions or desires. So the human condition, existence on the cycle of rebirth, is a consequence of one’s desires: one is personally responsible for one’s continued existence. But, the Four Noble Truths go on to state, the prognosis is good - there is salvation from this state, and the Buddha offered a path to follow in order to achieve that salvation.

From this somewhat sketchy outline of key doctrinal teachings of the Buddha, one can perhaps suggest they have a striking common feature: they are all concerned with the question of how things work. The Four Noble Truths are concerned with diagnosing, explaining the cause, giving a prognosis, and providing a cure for the human condition as a whole. This is intensely practical - what we should *do* - how to understand the human condition and how to attain salvation. The doctrine of dependent origination tells us how things come to be - that everything is caused, or dependently originated. This applies to the human being also, and we are told how an individual human being arises in a given life. Similarly, the Three Marks of Existence explain the nature of things in terms of how they are. The characteristics it describes are all concerned with the *manner* in which things exist.

\(^9\) AN.III. 415.
And the law of karma further explains how we are affected by our intentions—all the things we experience arise because they are the consequences of previous intentions. This is an ethical aspect of the law of cause and effect, or dependent origination. In none of these doctrines does there appear to be any concern with what anything is. There is no attempt to explain anything in terms of being. In contrast to the religion of the Brahmans, where salvation is the realisation that the self of the individual is in fact identical with the very stuff of God, in the Buddha’s teachings there is no suggestion that samsāra and Nirvāṇa are considered in ontological terms. They are, rather, described in terms of the continuity or cessation of experience, and the underlying cause and characteristics of that experience. So the emphasis on how things are underlies the fundamental doctrinal teachings of Buddhism. And the point of following these teachings and understanding the doctrines is the attainment of liberation. We might tentatively conclude at this stage, then, that the most important thing to understand in order to attain liberation is how things operate.

I will turn now to the analysis of the human being that is given in the Pali canon, and the way this has traditionally been understood by Theravāda Buddhism. The human being is analysed into five constituents, called khandhas. These are: (1) the body (rūpa), which consists of everything the human body needs in order to function as a living body—various organs, faculties such as breathing, temperature, and so on. (2) Feelings (vedanā). These are classified according to whether they are pleasant, unpleasant or neutral, and are more than mere sensation. (3) Apperception and conception (saññā). This is the apperceiving or recognising of what one experiences; and also the ability to have conceptions or ideas. (4) Volitional activities (samkhāra). All desires, cravings, volitions or intentions at every conceivable level are included here. The range covers both overt greed and sensual desire, and at the other end of the spectrum, the life force of which one is more or less unaware until very spiritually advanced. (5) Consciousness (vīśīṇa): the faculty by which we are aware of things. It is particularly important in Buddhism, because if we are to overcome the karmic link between our intentions and being reborn, then we need to be aware of them.

In interpreting the analysis of the human being into khandhas, Theravāda Buddhism usually refers to an analogy given in the Sutta Piṭaka. The analogy states: ‘When all constituent parts are there, the word ‘cart’ is used; just so, where there are five khandhas, there is the convention of a ‘living being’. In the light of this analogy, the traditional Theravāda view of the analysis of the human being is that it explains what a human being is. They state that if one analyses a human being one sees that there are only con-

10. cf. numerous references in the Khandha Samyutta, SN, Vol. I.
11. The ‘desire for continued existence’ is considered to be so subtle and deeply embedded in the human psyche that it is one of the āsavas which need to be ‘rooted out’ at enlightenment.
12. SN.I.135.
stituent parts and there is no permanent self. The notion of the individual living being is simply a verbal convention, in the same way that we call a collection of wood and metal a 'cart'. The Theravāda tradition uses this to explain that the way to understand the doctrine of anattā, selflessness, is to realise that there never has been a self, only constituent parts. This, they claim, means that one should neither think that the self is extinguished at death, nor that it persists.

The third part of my paper is simply to state that this traditional explanation is puzzling in the light of the other Buddhist doctrines. It is very odd that on the one hand all the main doctrinal teachings other than this one are concerned with how things are, and this one alone is concerned with what one is. I shall return to this later. On the other hand it is odd that all the main doctrinal teachings other than this one are concerned in one way or another with understanding the human condition, not with establishing that the human being doesn't exist. They are all concerned with human experience, and human liberation. There is never any suggestion that the experience of dukkha, suffering, is unreal, for example. The Buddha does not take the view that in fact what we have to realise is that we do not suffer. Rather, he identifies suffering as the key characteristic of the human condition and what he teaches is a way to bring about the cessation of suffering: samsāra and Nirvāṇa: are described in these terms. The doctrine of karma explains that individuals are responsible, because their intentions have consequences, for whether or not they continue to experience the cycle of rebirth. It seems odd that this can be such an important doctrine in the Buddha's teachings if the analysis of the human being is at the same time intended to indicate that there is no-one to have intentions or experience consequences. In fact it seems very unlikely that all the Buddha's doctrinal teachings would be so concerned with the human condition if he is also specifically teaching that there is no referent for them. This seems not just to pose severe conceptual problems (many religions, after all, have teachings which are conceptually problematic), but in effect to make a nonsense of one or other aspect of the teachings. It also seems likely that if the meaning of the doctrine of anattā were so straightforward the Buddha himself would have explicated it as such.

My recent research has been centred very much in the area of the analysis of the human being, and my findings have suggested an explanation to this puzzle, a way out of this apparent incompatibility between two aspects of the Buddha's most important teachings. I believe my research has shown that in fact the traditional Theravāda interpretation of the analysis of the human being into khandhas can be misleading. They are not intended to illustrate that this is all there is to a human being; that these are constituent parts which, when they are found together, are collectively given the verbal designation a human being, as the analogy of the cart suggests. Rather, they
represent those aspects of how a human being operates that need to be understood in order to achieve liberation from samsāra. Put differently, the formula of dependent origination explains how a human being comes to be born, and the khandha analysis explains how that human being, having been born, functions. The constituents are not so much actual parts, but faculties or functions or processes. The khandha of the body, for example, is the faculty which provides both physical organs, and breathing, movement, temperature and so on. The relevance of them is not at all in that they are things, but as faculties or processes which explain how our body operates. The khandha of feelings is not a collection of things called feelings, but the actual process of feeling. The need to understand them is explained because each khandha participates in the cognitive process, and it is in understanding that process - how the mind works - that samsāric perception is penetrated and understood, culminating in seeing things 'as they really are'.

So rather than being in direct conflict with the other doctrinal teachings of the Buddha, the analysis of the human being into khandhas is very much along the same lines. It is concerned both with the human condition, and also with offering an analytical explanation of how the human being functions. This harmony with the other teachings of the Buddha is of more than aesthetic importance: one of the ways the early Buddhist monks decided which teachings to include in the developing canonical material was by considering their compatibility. In the light of this, it is significant that the verses which describe the analogy of the cart are not claimed in the text to be buddhavacana, the teaching of the Buddha. The Sutta in which they are found is clearly a collection of versified teachings from different sources, and I strongly suspect the analogy is simply someone's mistaken interpretation of the teachings.

My fourth point, as mentioned at the beginning of this paper, is to draw attention to the Buddha's attitude towards questions such as 'if there is no self, who attains Nirvāṇa.' This question is in effect asking 'what is a human being?' We read in the Pali canon that the Buddha frequently found himself faced with similar sorts of questions. As recorded in the texts, they tended to be along the lines of: 'Is the universe eternal or not? Is the universe finite or not? Is the vital principle of the human being different from the body or not? Does a liberated being exist after death or not? Or does he neither exist nor not exist?’ All of these questions are to do with being, questions of existence, ontological questions. The Buddha refuses to answer any of them. These questions became known in the Buddhist tradition as the classic unanswered questions. The Buddha states very clearly why he will not answer them: he says that to do so would be to give information that could be open to misinterpretation, and - most importantly - that would not be conducive to

the attainment of liberation. He will not give any information that compromises his concern to offer teachings that help human beings to attain liberation.

In sum, what this means is that questions about what cannot be experienced as part of the empirical human condition are considered to be speculative. Because the Buddha refuses to answer these questions, people can, and have, and still do, continue to speculate about whether or not there is a transcendent self or soul which persists at some non-empirical level, whether or not there is a dependently originated self or soul, or whether or not there is no self or soul at all. There were great debates about these things during the lifetime of the Buddha, and some of them are recorded in the texts. They are the most common questions in religious traditions, and other Indian religions set about answering them just as systematically as the Buddha refuses to answer them. It is unnecessary for me to go into the debates or other explanations here, but will just note that in the Pali Canon, whenever anyone puts forward a suggestion about the existence or non-existence of the self or soul the Buddha is equally emphatic that they are both mistaken views. Any statement in terms of the existence of the self is erroneous. Not only is it erroneous, it is not conducive to achieving liberation, and it is with liberation that the Buddha is solely concerned. So I suspect he would have remained silent if we had put to him the question we are asking here: ‘if there is no self, who attains Nirvāṇa?’

I would now like to bring all these points together and suggest a way in which we might understand the doctrine of anattā. On the one hand, I think we should realise that the teachings contained in the Pali Canon are evidence that the Buddha was primarily concerned with the human condition. Every one of his teachings is centred on the human being, and their overall aim is to offer to human beings the opportunity of attaining liberation from the cycle of rebirth. I think this point needs to be emphasised because, as I mentioned earlier, many of the books which are written about Buddhism concentrate on the doctrine of anattā, and some have been distinctly negative about Buddhism overall because they take thisdoctrine in some way or other at face value. This negative attitude towards Buddhism has been fostered by the way the doctrine has been interpreted by the Theravāda tradition: as meaning that there is not and never has been a self. The Theravāda tradition, and many Western scholars too, have devoted much time and energy to writing books about how no-selves can create karmic consequences, and we see catchy titles such as ‘Selfless Persons’, ‘Being No-one, Going Nowhere’, and so on. I do not in any way wish to criticise the larger part of this work, and certainly one of these books is, in my view justifiably, regarded as one of the seminal works on Theravāda Buddhism.

But I think this emphasis on the doctrine of anattā draws attention away

15. For example, SN.II.223, V.437; MN.I.395; DN.III.134ff.
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from the fact that the Buddha’s central concern is with the reality of the human condition. As I have already said, there is absolutely no suggestion that suffering, samsāric existence, is denied: its reality is why the Buddha is concerned to offer a teaching which offers people liberation from it.

On the other hand, when we try to understand the doctrine of anattā, I think we can take a further cue from the Buddha’s other teachings. They are all, without exception, concerned with the question of how things are, and not what they are. We need to put this together with the point that the Buddha never answered any ontological questions because they were not conducive to attaining liberating insight. Then I think we ought to approach the question of what is meant by the doctrine of anattā with the forewarning that it is most unlikely to have an ontological meaning. If a system does not make any ontological statements of a positive nature, then it is highly unlikely to make ontological statements of a negative nature either. The implication of all this is that it is virtually inconceivable that the doctrine of anattā is intended to be a straightforward denial of being: that there is no self. It is, indeed, more likely that to think of it in such terms is in fact making a ‘category mistake’ - thinking in terms of what when one should be seeing it in terms of how. In effect what this means is that our question, ‘If there is no self, who attains Nirvāṇa?’ is wrongly put. It is asking the wrong question. Rather, we should be asking how does a human being exist? We can reply that all that we know is that in common with everything within samsāra, it exists dependently. The doctrine of anattā simply states the manner in which human beings exist is not as independent selves. Beyond this, the only information given by the Buddha is in terms of a methodology one can employ in order to attain liberation from samsāra.

We tend to think continually in terms of independent existence; we virtually have to in order to make any sense of our day to day lives. But it is this very imposition of independent, or separate, existence onto what is in reality dependently originated that constitutes samsāric existence. This is the way we see things, the way we experience things. Nirvāṇa is the cessation of that way of seeing things. The experience of Nirvāṇa is described as seeing things ‘as they really are’, which involves no longer projecting independent existence, no longer thinking in terms of ‘I’ and ‘mine’. Indeed, the Buddha explains that understanding the teaching means that one will no longer ask questions about individual existence in samsāra, past, future, or present, such as ‘Am I, or am I not? What am I? How am I? This ‘being’ that is ‘I’, where has it come from, where will it go?’; explicitly indicating that such terms apply just as much to notions such as ‘I am not’ as they do to the notion ‘I am’. All these notions presuppose independence and when one no longer does this, one no longer has the desires which fuel the cycle of rebirth: the notion of desire presupposes a separate desirer and separate
desires. This is why Nirvāṇa is liberating: it is simply that in seeing things as they really are, it is seen that thinking in terms of ‘I’ is erroneous in the sense that it is making a category mistake. It also explains why Nirvāṇa is included in the statement that all things are anattā, in the formula of the Three Marks of Existence: in this case it is not because it is dependently originated (Nirvāṇa is stated to be Unconditioned), but because it is the cessation of thinking in terms of self. None of the teachings is concerned with questions of what, but simply with the question of how.

Finally, I would like to suggest that if one takes this approach across the board in interpreting the Buddha’s teachings, it can assist in understanding other areas, some of which are traditionally problematic. First, briefly, it can throw light on the analogy of the cart. In using a cart, exactly what it is made of is, in practical terms, irrelevant. The question of the identity of the cart apart from its constituent parts is also notably irrelevant: even if there were in reality some Aristotelian ‘form’ of the cart this would be of absolutely no concern to the user. It is, however, of vital importance to understand how it works, and what process or function each constituent contributes to the whole. As such, the analogy is highly pertinent to the need to understand the khandhas in terms of how the individual operates - it is this that one needs to know. Second, again briefly, it is frequently recorded in the Pali Canon that the Buddha used the term anattā to refute the Brahmanical teaching of the identity of the individual self or soul (ātman) with the cosmic Absolute (Brahman). Rather than an explicit denial of the being that the Brahmans were teaching, this might very legitimately be understood in terms of his stating that if you are positing that there is a permanent, unchanging essence that is identical micro- and macrocosmically, then you are mistaken: this is not how things are.

A more detailed example might be the term viññāṇa, usually translated ‘consciousness’. One of the five khandhas is the viññāṇakkhandha and its importance lies in the simple fact that human beings are conscious beings. Perhaps reflecting our everlasting fascination with the question of the nature of consciousness, this khandha is referred to in a mass of completely unsystematic contexts in the canonical material. Extensive unravelling and analysis show it to be highly complex. Possibly because of the unsystematic nature of the earliest material, and its complexity, much has been written about consciousness in connection with Buddhism that in my opinion is highly misleading. It is my view that what I shall say about it most closely corresponds to what is actually said in the Sutta Pitaka. Because this interpretation, unlike many others, poses no conceptual or philosophical conflict with any of the Buddha’s other teachings, I think it is likely to be fairly accurate.

In simple terms, the viññāṇakkhandha is the process of being conscious, or of being aware, and it might be better translated either as ‘awareness’ or
as 'consciousness of'. As mentioned briefly above, the need to understand this process is in fact crucial given the Buddha's teachings. On the one hand, if karma is volition, then it is cardinal that one should be conscious of the process whereby one's volitions fuel the cyclic rebirth that is samsāra. On the other hand, if liberation is achieved through knowledge, it is cardinal that one should in turn be conscious of the process whereby one's volitions are conditioned by one's state of mind. Thus there is a critical association between consciousness of and spiritual progress.

In elaborating a little on this meaning, I'd like to do so in the light of the most common confusion that arises in the understanding of this khandha. Possibly reflecting the fact that our subjective experience of being conscious is that it is constant, that the process appears to be a continuous one, the confusion is in understanding viññāna as some sort of entity. The confusion lies partly in the English word 'consciousness', which is itself ambiguous and is sometimes taken to imply a continuing entity; and partly in the fact that there are certain ambiguities in the canonical material itself which have led to the same interpretation. But the viññānakkhandha is most unlikely to be an entity. On the one hand, there are also several completely unambiguous passages which establish that its nature is as impermanent as everything else.17 On the other hand, the ambiguities can be interpreted in accordance with the internal consistency of the doctrinal teachings using the approach I have suggested as follows. Possibly for the simple reason that human beings are conscious beings, and because consciousness is subjectively experienced in terms of continuity, the link between consciousness and spiritual progress I've just referred to means that sometimes in the Sutta Pitaka viññāna is described in terms which suggest that it itself is 'growing', 'increasing', and, eventually, 'radiant', 'pure', and 'free': in short, as 'evolving'.18 This can be understood as referring to the fact that at every stage of one's progress along the path to liberation one's experience, which is one's 'consciousness of' one's life, is conditioned by one's level of ignorance. That ignorance is comprised of all the various mental baggages which obscure our perception of Reality, and these are given the collective term 'defilements'. As one makes progress along the path, one's ignorance is reduced and one's experience is characterised by increasing insight. Decreasing ignorance therefore corresponds to being conscious of greater clarity; our consciousness is increasingly less conditioned, or 'restricted', by samsāric ignorance. In Buddhism, insight is also referred to as purity: the path to insight is a path of purification; thus ultimately the viññānakkhandha is the process of being conscious of the 'pure', un-defiled, insight of Reality: things as they really are. This centrality of consciousness to each stage of

17. cf., for example, MN.I.258; SN.II.95, 65f.
18. MN.II.262; SN.III.53 (cf. also MN.I. 101; SN.V.47); DN.II.63; DN.II.223; SN.I.15; DN.I.17 (cf. also SN.I.95).
the human condition allows viññāṇa to function as a metaphor for the entire life of the individual. Another way of understanding the association of viññāṇa with terms such as ‘purity’ and ‘radiance’ is to interpret the provision of awareness on the path to insight as being analogous to the provision of light for one who needs to see. As one cannot see without light, so one cannot be aware without viññāṇa. According to this metaphor, then, as one progresses along the path to insight, so the ‘light’ that is one’s awareness becomes purer and more radiant. The metaphor is one of progressing from darkness to light, or of becoming En-light-ened. It is not that viññāṇa is an entity which either becomes or is revealed to be purer or more radiant, but that the key role played by viññāṇa in the path to insight lends itself to its being identified metaphorically in such ways. In itself it is no less a process or faculty than any of the other khandhas.

In summary: I am suggesting that all the Buddha’s teachings can, if one interprets them with empathy as well as care, be seen to be coherently inter-dependent. This approach overcomes the apparently serious conceptual and philosophical contradiction associated with the traditional interpretation of the doctrine of anattā, renders them more understandable as an organic whole, and, most importantly, I believe this approach is compatible with what is stated in the texts.