

Rune E. A. Johansson's Analysis of *Citta*: A Criticism

by Arvind Sharma

It has been questioned whether the enumeration of the five *skandhas*¹ in Buddhist psychology is exhaustive of the human personality.² As a matter of fact this question underlies the whole doctrine of *anattā*. In this regard it has been asserted that "If it be true to say that the Buddha has nowhere explicitly stated in so many words, that the 'being' (*satta*) is composed only of the *khandhas*, it would be a hundred times truer to say that nowhere has he said of 'being' that it comprises anything else at all, of any description whatsoever, apart from the five *khandhas*."³

Rune E. A. Johansson has recently raised the question anew. He remarks:

We have also the final question, whether the *khandhā* are to be considered an exhaustive enumeration of *all* personality factors. Is there nothing in personality not included in the *khandhā*? There certainly is. *Attā* is denied, with good reason, but *citta* is not denied.⁴

He goes on to argue that this *citta* is "a name for the core of the personality, mainly conscious but including also the subconscious processes on which continuity depends. It is not a soul, but it reminds of the 'ego' of Western psychology: the person knows that *citta* is what he is; he usually identifies himself with it but need not do so; he can observe his *citta*, discuss with it, train it, punish it, and so on."⁵

Johansson seems to present two kinds of evidence, analytical and empirical, to establish his case for the *citta* constituting the core of the personality according to Buddhist psychology as found in the Nikāyas.

The analytical evidence turns on the analysis of the *skandhas*.

After an analysis of all the personality factors in relation to Nibbāna and after having identified *citta* as an independent personality factor, he remarks:

To some extent, it is possible to map the relations between *citta* and other psychological factors. *Saññā* and *vedanā* are called *citta-sankhāra*, so we know that the perceptual processes affect *citta*. We also know that the working of *citta* is called *sankhāra*. The relation of *citta* to *viññāṇa* is not so clear-cut.⁶ There are texts that simply identify *viññāṇa* with *citta*, and other that identify *viññāṇa* with *saññā* and *vedanā*. *Viññāṇa* is more frequently said to be actively engaged in rebirth, and *citta* is frequently said to attain nibbāna. Nibbāna is attained through the stopping of *viññāṇa*. The relations must be close, and probably *viññāṇa* is a function of *citta*, a name for certain *citta*-processes. When in the case of ordinary rebirth, both are said to undergo this process (never in the same context, always in different), then we may assume a simple identification. In the case of a living person, there should be no identification, because somebody should experience the function of *viññāṇa* and also experience that it has stopped: that is *citta*. *Citta* can go on functioning (*viññāṇa*, *paññā*, *mettā*, *karuṇa* are still to be found) and can observe *viññāṇa* and other *khandhā* as being still.⁷

The empirical evidence is provided, according to Johansson, by the fact that the assertion that the arahant cannot be known either in this life or afterwards “is not a universal truth, since arahants always can recognize each other. . . . This fact will not surprise us once we have understood that *citta* is the agency within the person which really attains nibbāna,”⁸ and that it is “thought to survive death.”⁹ Johansson goes on to stress that “we are not without information about exactly what is thought to survive death in the arahant, although in a form that not everybody can recognize, not even Māra or the gods.”¹⁰ He goes on to say:

We know, however, that at least the Buddha himself claimed ability to identify and report about dead arahants: We have, for instance, the story about Vakkali (S III 119 ff), who was ill and killed himself. The Buddha said about him later: *Apatitthitena ca bhikkhavant viññāṇavakkali kulaputto parinibbuto ti*, ‘with consciousness not established the noble-born Vakkali has attained parinibbāna.’ A similar story is to be found in D II 91 f, where Ānanda tells the Buddha that a number of people, some monks and some lay people, had died in Nadika, where the Buddha

and his disciples had just arrived, and asks what has happened to them. He got detailed information, indeed, and among them one monk was mentioned as arahant. We can take these stories to mean that at least the Buddha himself was able to trace an arahant even after death. After the quotations given earlier, this would not seem to involve any fundamental difficulties, as there seems to be small difference between his state before and after death. One more text is worth quoting to this effect. In SN 1075, the Buddha is asked: *Atthan gato so uda vā so n'atthi udāhu ve sassatiyā arogo?* 'The man who has gone to rest, is he no more or is he forever free from illness?' And he replies: *Atthan gatassa na paṃāṇam atthi, yena naṃ vajju, taṃ tassa n'atthi, sabbesu dhammesu samūhatesu samūhatā vādapathā pi sabbe ti.* 'There is no measure of him who has gone to rest, by which to define him: that is not for him; when all *dhammā* are removed, then all means of recognition are removed.' This informs us again that the arahant, when dead, cannot be found or recognized, but an explanation is given which is extremely interesting: *dhammā* are removed. The PTA translation gives the rendering 'conditions,' but a more normal translation would be 'ideations' or 'mental contents,' 'mental processes.' This would give an easily understandable psychological meaning. For one of the effects of meditation is to make the mind (*citta* or *viññāṇa*) stable and empty of mental contents (*dhamma*). As we know that *citta* was thought to survive, it can easily be understood that an empty *citta* is more difficult to read and recognize than the more complicated and desire-ridden 'normal' *citta*: it is more impersonal. In order to 'read' a person's mind, there must be a mind to read, and this mind must be as differentiated and rich in content as possible. *Sabbesu dhammesu samūhatesu* may well imply the same psychological process as *viññāṇassa nirodhenā* in A I 236, quoted above.¹¹

Johansson concludes that

the word *nibbāna* is used because of the fire analogy (to some extent, the word *upādāna* and related words seem to be used for the same reason). Still, it does not imply annihilation but rather a different type of existence: perhaps a diluted, undifferentiated, 'resting' existence, more or less impersonal but still recognizable.¹²

Is this evidence adduced by Johansson sufficient to challenge the standard Theravāda position on the question of whether the arahant continues to exist after death? The standard Theravāda position, of course, is that "It does not fit the case to assert existence or non-existence."¹³

It is as much the Theravāda position that one may not assert the existence of the arhat after death, as that one may not posit his non-existence. This was the elder Yamaka's view, and was corrected by Sāriputta.¹⁴ Sāriputta asserts that "A Tathāgata cannot be held to be perceived as existing even in this life in truth and reality," what to say of his post-mortem state! But while Theravādins draw the conclusion of the nonpredicability of the post-mortem state of the arhat from his case, Johansson remarks:

What Sāriputta wanted to stress here is that the *anatta* doctrine applies also to the arahant and that he cannot be identified with any of the personality factors (*khandha*). It is therefore not possible to define what an arahant really is even in this life, and so no conclusion can be drawn as to the state after death. The *khandhā* are *anicca* and *dukkha* and therefore dissolved: this is pointed out in the continued discussion. Two things should be noted: first that it is denied that the arahant is annihilated in death, secondly that *citta* was not mentioned in this discussion. The fact that the arahant cannot be known either in this life or afterwards, is not a universal truth, since arahants always can recognize each other. We find, for instance, in S I 194 that Maha Moggallāna in a company of five hundred arahants could check that they really were arahants: *Tesaṃ sudaṃ āyasmā Maha-Moggallāno cetasā cittaṃ samannesati vip̐pamuttaṃ nirupadhiṃ*. 'The venerable Maha-Moggallāna saw with his mind (*ceto*) that their mind (*citta*) was freed without basis (for rebirth remaining).' This can only mean that the arahant has still his *citta* and that this has kept enough of its individuality in order to be identified.¹⁵

Thus from the analytical point of view Johansson is relying on 'argument of silence' which is rather weak, especially as he is himself unsure of the relation of *citta* to *viññāṇa*. Moreover, the expression *cetovimutti* seems to go against it, as "*Cetovimutti* is . . . not identical with Nibbāna which is much higher than and completely different from pure *viññāṇa*."¹⁶ It is the empirical evidence which seems to argue in favour of the case more strongly. One may first consider the case of Vakkali. "In the *Samyutta Nikāya*, Buddha referring to the *parinibbāna* or Vakkali bhikkhu said that the wicked Māra was searching for the consciousness (*viññāṇa*) of Vakkali, who had been just dead, and predicted that Māra's attempt would not be successful because Vakkali had passed away (*parinibbuto*) with *viññāṇa*, which needed no support (*apatiṭṭhita*). The sense of *apatiṭṭhita-viññāṇa* is

given elsewhere in the *Samyutta Nikāya*, where it is explained as consciousness which arises only when attachment (*rāga*) to material elements of the body (*rūpa*), and the other four constituents is removed. It is unconstituted, devoid of growth and independent of any cause and condition and hence free. Being free it is steady; being steady it is happy; being happy it is without any fear of change for the worse; being fearless it attains *parinibbāna*.”¹⁷

One may note that the Buddha did not say that he had recognized Vakkali, rather that Māra will not recognize him because his “consciousness is not established.” The fact of his having attained *nirvāṇa* is recognised on account of his *caitsasika* non-recognizability. Obviously here is an alternative explanation of how an arhant recognizes another or a Buddha identifies an arhat—the very noncognizability serves to cognize arhathood. This possibility, it seems, has not been taken into account by Johansson.

To conclude: the evidence adduced by Johansson in favour of *citta* as the element of the arhat surviving death does not seem to be strong enough to lead one to modify the standard Theravāda position that the post-mortem state of the arhat is unpredictable.

NOTES

1. S. G. F. Brandon, ed., *A Dictionary of Comparative Religion* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), pp. 394–395.

2. Rune E. A. Johansson, *The Psychology of Nirvana* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1969), p. 68.

3. G. P. Malalasekera, ed., *Encyclopedia of Buddhism Facsimile A-Aca* (Government of Ceylon, 1961), p. 475. It is further stated that “Numerous passages can be quoted from the *Piṭakas* which show beyond all possible doubt that, in Buddhist ontology, when ‘being’ (*satta*) is resolved into the five *khandhas*, there is no residuum whatever left. It is clearly stated in one passage (e.g., S.III, 46 f.) that “all *samaṇas* and *brāhmaṇas*, who talk about the world which is variously described by them, talk about it in reference to the five *khandhas* or one or other of them.” Buddhaghosa says (*Vism.* xiv, § 218) that the five *khandhas* were selected for this very purpose for examination to show that there was no residual self. So does Vasubandhu in the *Abhidharmakośa* (chap. ix) where it is stated that *anātman* is synonymous with *skandha*, *āyatana* and *dhātu*” (*ibid.*).

4. Johansson, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 83. Note, however, that the comparison with ‘ego’ must be made with caution. As Edward Conze has pointed out, it is “Hume’s denial of the existence of the ego as an entity distinct from mental processes” which “comes very near the Anatta-doctrine” (*Buddhism: Its Essence and Development* [New York: Harper & Row, 1959], pp. 19–20, emphasis added).

6. Johansson remarks on this ambiguity elsewhere: "It remains to be said about *viññāna*, that it is probably one aspect of *citta* or a name for some of the processes of *citta*. Both are said to be involved in rebirth, but we should of course not understand this as a dual rebirth; the instrumental processes are the *viññāna*-processes of *citta*. The basis of rebirth (*ārammaṇa*, *upādāna*) is the intense wish (*upādāna*) to go on living. When *viññāna* has stopped, there are practically no *viññāna*-processes left in *citta*, and there is no base for rebirth. Evidently the arahant has conscious processes as long as he lives. This may be explained in two ways, and it cannot be decided which is the more correct. There may be two layers of *citta*: one surface layer which consists of the everyday processes, perceptions and reflections, and one deeper layer that is undifferentiated. Or perhaps D I 223 really describes the highest level of meditation which was considered the most normal stepping-stone to nibbāna and therefore in this text simply was described as a characteristic of nibbāna itself" (Rune E. A. Johansson, *op. cit.*, pp. 76–77).

7. *Ibid.*, p. 83.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 63–4.

12. *Ibid.* The use of the fire analogy is not without its difficulties, though elsewhere too Johansson suggests that "Perhaps the fire was thought to 'go back' to some diluted, 'calm' existence, evenly distributed in matter, when it was extinguished (but without ceasing to be fire)" (*ibid.*, p. 61). Normally the danger with the fire-analogy is that it suggested *nirvāṇa* involved annihilation, now the problem, from the orthodox Theravāda point of view seems to be that it suggests survival! "Some scholars who inadvertently compared the extinction of the flame of a lamp to Nibbāna, wrongly interpreted it as annihilation. In the line quoted above there is no ambiguity that the constituted mind (*viññāna*), which was normally functioning during Buddha's life-time through the sense-organs, without, of course, attachment, hatred and delusion, ceased finally, i.e., became fully emancipated. It did not require any more support (*anārammaṇa*, *apatitthita*). It is the constituted mind that suffered extinction and has nothing to do with Nibbāna, which therefore cannot mean annihilation. Prof. Keith also relied on the wrong rendering of the statement but he gave is an Upaniṣadic turn, saying that 'the extinction of fire was not that which occurs to us of utter annihilation but rather the flame returns to the primitive, pure, invisible state of fire, in which it existed prior to its manifestation in the form of visible fire.' Prof. Keith's interpretation is also not acceptable, for, according to the Buddhist philosophy, Nibbāna has nothing to do with anything worldly and unlike the Upaniṣadic *Brahman* it can never have worldly manifestation similar to the flame of a lamp" (Nalinaksha Dutt, *Early Monastic Buddhism* [Calcutta: Calcutta Oriental Book Agency, 1960], pp. 280–281).

13. Edward J. Thomas, *The History of Buddhist Thought* (New York: Barnes & Noble Inc., 1971), p. 128. It should be noted though that the Buddha used the expression "would not fit the case" not in relation to the question does "the saint exist after death, etc." (see Henry Clarke Warren, *Buddhism in Translations* [New York: Atheneum, 1970], p. 122) but in relation to the question "will the saint be reborn" (*ibid.*, p. 127).

14. See *Samyutta Nikāya* iii. 109. Edward J. Thomas presents the following abbreviated account: "Here the charge of annihilationism is simply denied. In a

discourse attributed to Sāriputta it is discussed and refuted. The elder Yamaka had formed the view, 'thus do I understand the doctrine taught by the Lord, that a monk in whom the asavas are destroyed is annihilated and destroyed with the dissolution of the body, and does not exist after death.' Yamaka is made to admit that the body—and all the other constituents of the individual are impermanent, and that, therefore, he cannot say of any one of them 'this is mine, I am this, this my self.' 'What do you think, friend Yamaka, is a Tathagata the body?' 'No, friend.' (And so of feeling, perception, the aggregates, and consciousness.) 'Do you look on a Tathagata as existing in body, etc.?' 'No, friend.' 'Do you look on a Tathagata as existing apart from body, etc.—or as consisting of them—or as existing without any of them?' To all these questions Yamaka answers no. No loophole is left for asserting the existence of a self either within or beyond the five constituents. The conclusion is that 'A Tathagata cannot be held to be perceived as existing even in this life in truth and reality'" (*op. cit.*, pp. 125–126).

15. Johansson, *op. cit.*, p. 62. It may be noted that the context is one of living arhats.

16. Dutt, *op. cit.*, p. 285; also see David J. Kalupahana, *Causality: The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1975), pp. 181–182.

17. Dutt., *op. cit.*, pp. 285–286.