

THE CENTRALITY OF EXPERIENCE IN THE TEACHINGS OF EARLY BUDDHISM

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Experience in Indian Religions

Experience is, in one way or another, an important feature of all religions. Though there are a wide range of focuses and understandings of what is being experienced, and though the degree of intensity and the expected present or future effect of a believer's experience varies profoundly both between individuals and between religious traditions, there would be few members of any faith who would not agree that 'religious experience' is an integral part of their religion as a whole.

Indian religions, if I may continue in very general terms a little longer, differ from Western religions in that salvation itself, the goal of the path, is described in terms of a liberating experience. Typically, this is stated to be experientially knowing (the existential nature of the experience is sometimes just called knowledge or knowing) the true nature of Reality. And also typically, Reality is explained in terms of the nature of the self and the nature of everything else. Thus one might say that in these religions what one is aiming to experience is one's self and its ontological context. Within this tradition, Buddhism has been said to differ from other Indian religions only in the sense that the Buddha taught that liberation was achieved not by experiencing one's true self but by experiencing that in Reality all things are **not** self, *anatta*.

The Difference in Early Buddhist Teaching

For Indian religions, then, including Buddhism which is the specific subject of my paper, experience is a *sine qua non*.¹ What I would like to do in this paper is to suggest that what makes the early Buddhist teachings different from those of other Indian religions is not that they are saying that it is a differently structured truth about Reality that one should be aiming **to** experience, but that what they are saying is that one should be aiming to know the truth about the reality **of** experience itself. In my view, the doctrine of *anatta* (not self) in early Buddhism, can act – and indeed has acted – as a red herring if it is taken as the central teaching of Buddhism and interpreted in the way in which it usually is. What I would like to suggest is, first, that one should understand it slightly differently, and accord it a different emphasis; and, second, that the truly central point about what the Buddha taught is that one should understand experience *qua* experience.

I have already begun making these suggestions in recently published work,² and this paper itself is part of on-going work in progress.³ So far, I have contextualised my challenge to the common interpretation of *anatta* by discussing it in the light of an examination of what is meant by the *khandhas*, the related teaching that is usually explained as stating that human beings are comprised of five constituent parts called *khandhas*. These five are the living body, feelings, apperceptions, volitions and consciousness.⁴ So that I can more readily draw out my suggestion about the centrality of experience *per se*, I shall first rehearse the essential aspects of how I think we should understand both *anatta* and the *khandhas*.

Understanding *Anatta* and the *Khandhas*

The reason I first embarked on this work was that I had previously found (and I am sure I was not alone in this) the doctrine of *anatta* most difficult and seemingly also inconsistent in the context of the other teachings. Its meaning is not actually explained in the texts themselves and it is open to different interpretations. Until quite recently this doctrine was understood to be saying that liberation (called nirvana⁵ in Buddhism) from the cycle of rebirth is achieved by, or involves, the extinguishing of your self. The word nirvana means 'blowing out', and it was thought that it referred to the blowing out of the self. In fact this interpretation, which represents the view of people called annihilationists (the self is annihilated at liberation), is strongly denied in the early Buddhist texts and was clearly wrong.

But though Buddhists and scholars alike then successfully refuted this earlier erroneous interpretation of *anatta*,⁶ pointing out that what nirvana refers to is the blowing out not of one's self but of what fuels one's continuity, I found the 'corrected' interpretation if anything conceptually more difficult to grasp and actually less in harmony with other Buddhist teachings than the earlier interpretation. The corrected interpretation⁷ of the doctrine states that what you need to understand is that you are not, and nor do you have, and nor have you ever been or had, an abiding self.

This interpretation draws out the contrast with other prominent religious ideas being taught at the time of early Buddhism, notably those of the early *Upanisads*, which stated that in fact the essence of a human being, one's real Self, is identical with the immortal and unchanging essence of the universe. This is usually expressed by the well-known formula *atman is Brahman*. *Atman* is the Sanskrit form of the Pali word *atta*, meaning self, and Brahman refers to the universal Absolute. A famous Upanisadic way of putting this is 'you are [all] that' (*tat tvam asi*).⁸ So the Upanisadic teaching, given within what is called the Brahmanical religion of India, was that if one realised, in the sense of existentially experiencing, this micro- and macro-cosmic identity, then one achieved liberation (called *moksa* by the brahmins) from the cycle of lives on earth in which all human beings otherwise continue. The Buddhist teaching was similarly experiential, but, it was suggested, it was the experience not of what your self is, but that you do not have one: ultimately, you **are** not.

This interpretation is taken in tandem with the teaching that one should understand oneself in terms of the five components called *khandhas*. The link between *anatta* and the *khandhas* is made through an analogy found in the texts which 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'."⁹ This suggests that we are made up of five separate parts which, when together, constitute our functioning self; but there is (and never has been and never will be) in fact no abiding self other than that temporary combination.

It is as thus understood that I found the doctrine of *anatta* at best seriously problematic and at worst incoherent in the context of the way other key Buddhist teachings are collectively characterised. Even a relatively casual acquaintance with them, especially if one looks at how they are given in the texts and not in secondary sources, impresses on one that their focus is primarily not just on personal continuity but on personal responsibility: understanding that through the knock-on effect(s) of one's desires and volitions, one has created one's own present and will create one's own future (and can therefore change it); that it is because those desires and volitions originate in a matrix of ignorance that we keep having them and thus keep fuelling our continuity (this is the fuel that needs to be blown out); that it is the qualitative state of one's own mind that determines the qualitative context of one's rebirths; and above all the teachings are about knowing how and why one is continuing as one is, and about knowing that one can, and how one can and eventually does, attain liberation.

There is a strong emphasis on knowing: the aim of the teachings is not a catatonic trancelike state; on the contrary, it is the positive insight that comes with the total cessation of ignorance. This, indeed, is what the term *buddha*, which means awakened or enlightened, refers to, and one has only to read the accounts of the Buddha's enlightenment to realise the profundity of what is meant by it.¹⁰ How might this combination of understanding one's continuity, accepting personal responsibility, attending to one's state of mind, and progressing from ignorance to knowledge accommodate a goal of experiencing that one has no self?

The Structure of the Teachings

Several scholarly studies have drawn together extensive textual evidence suggesting that early Buddhist texts do in fact allow for a conventional everyday self.¹¹ But they did not satisfactorily explain what to me was the fundamental problem: how **can** one experience that one is or has no self, that one **is not**? With the best will in the world, I could not but think that in any context outside of a madhouse the very idea of it is incoherent. In offering alternative interpretations, some scholars went so far as to suggest that the point of the *anatta* teaching was that one should not confuse any conventional notion of self with one's eternal and real transcendental self.¹² But eternalists are coupled with annihilationists in the texts and get equally short shrift. I felt one needed to try another approach.

In looking at the way most of the main doctrinal teachings found in the Pali *Nikayas* are given, I found that they had a common structure. And I suggested that interpreting the *anatta* doctrine in the same way not only overcame the problem with that doctrine but in fact showed that it fitted together with the other teachings very well. The common structure of all of the teachings is that they are concerned with how something works: none of them is concerned with what something is, or, indeed, with what it is not. Most crucially, they are focused on how all the factors of human experience in the cycle of lives are dependent on other factors (the most common expressions used for this are that everything is dependently originated or conditioned): nothing, of whatever nature, exists or occurs independently of conditioning factors. It is important to grasp that this is the case both subjectively and objectively, so not only is the state of any individual human being (who I take to be a subject) at any given moment dependent on conditioning factors, but so are chairs, trees, toenails, musical notes, ideas and thoughts (all of which I take to be objective in relation to the subject), and so on. It is the dependent nature of all of our actions (karma¹³) that explains the mechanics of how one is responsible for one's own experiences and can achieve liberation: in understanding how the process of the cycle of lives works one can do something about changing it.

The Nature of Self-Hood

If all things are dependently originated, then it **follows** that the way human beings occur is not as independent selves. As such, any self-hood one may have cannot be permanent and unchanging, as independence would be a pre-requisite of such qualities. Accordingly, it is clear that early Buddhist teachings **are** in direct contrast to their contemporary Upanisadic teaching that the essence of one's self is immortal and unchanging: identical with the essence of the universal absolute. But in making the clear contrast, the doctrine of *anatta* is not stating 'there **is** no self'. Rather, it states that self-hood, being conditioned, is not independent (and therefore not immortal and unchanging). And, further, taken together with the other teachings of early Buddhism it is stating that in seeking to know what you **are**, or even whether or not you **are**, you are missing the solution to the problem of cyclic continuity. The solution lies in understanding the mechanics of your situation. **That** you are is neither **the** question nor **in** question: you need to forget even the issue of self-hood and understand instead how you work in a dependently originated world of experience.

It is important to grasp the religious context of the time. In common with very many others, the Buddha had embarked on a search to understand how to achieve liberation from the cycle of lives. This was a problem needing to be solved: none of these people was seeking information about the universe for its own sake. Most of these religious seekers, including the brahmins, thought that the answer to the problem lay, one way or the other, in knowing what you are, or whether you are or are not – hence the above-mentioned references to annihilationists and eternalists, amongst others. And hence the typical characterisation of Indian religions I referred to at the beginning of this paper. So pervasive and persistent was this line of questioning, that there are many references in the *Sutta Pitaka* to the Buddha having denied that this that or the other part of what makes up a human being, particularly one of the five *khandhas*, is actually one's 'self'.¹⁴

Because of the frequency with which such questions are clearly denied, some may find it difficult to leave behind the view that the early Buddhist doctrine of *anatta* teaches that there is no self, and that realising this is the goal of the path to liberation. But in fact the denials are not inconsistent with the alternative interpretation of *anatta* I have been suggesting. Being dependently originated, all the things within the scope of human experience in the cycle of lives, including the *khandhas*, are impermanent and subject to change. As I have said above, it follows that the way such things occur is not as independent abiding 'selves'. Any question asking if any particular thing is in fact one's permanent 'self' would, therefore, be denied. But the repeated denials should be construed as a response: both to the persistence of the line of questioning, and also to the assumption on the part of the questioners that the self they are seeking is independent and permanent.¹⁵ They are not in themselves the focus of the Buddhist teaching in a more positive sense.¹⁶ That focus is, as described above, centred not at all on what one is or is not but on how things operate. It is this that is the Buddha's solution to the problem.

The Right Emphasis

The distinction may be subtle, but it is important: focusing on the notion that *anatta* means 'there is no self' wrongly emphasises it as a denial of being instead of the way what we think of as self-hood occurs. And in sticking out like a conceptual sore thumb, such wrong emphasis draws attention away from the harmony of *anatta* with the all important focus of the rest of the teachings. Metaphysics and soteriology are in fact intimately connected in that it is because everything is dependently originated that one can, in understanding how the process of individual continuity works, then reverse it. My point is supported by passages in the texts. It is stated not just that thinking "this is mine, I am this, this is my self" is not helpful,¹⁷ but also that when one understands dependent origination one **will no longer ask** (my emphasis) questions such as: "Am I, or am I not? What am I? Why am I? This 'being' that is 'I', where has it come from, where will it go?"¹⁸ Such passages should not be construed in the sense that thinking 'this is mine' (and so on) is not helpful because actually there is no such thing. Rather, for the solving of the problem of continuity, these are all, quite simply, irrelevant questions.

An analogy will perhaps explain more clearly. I acquire an object that I am told is a computer. The storekeeper also tells me that though it will perform a range of functions it is at the moment programmed for just one. I realise that it is not the function I want it to perform, so it is important that I learn how to change the programme. But I am so fascinated by the whole thing that I get side-tracked and keep asking what exactly it is about it that constitutes the fact that it is a computer, referring to part after part asking 'is this bit the computer?'. I also ask what each individual part is made of. The storekeeper keeps trying to explain how to change the programme, and every time I ask 'is this bit the computer?' and what a part is made of, he just says 'not it's not the computer', and 'you need to understand this programming section'. At the

end of the day, I have heard from him countless times the expression ‘that bit is not the computer’. Given my fascination, I am very puzzled about this, and though I continue to speculate as to exactly what the computer *is*, I also have the very distinct impression from what the storekeeper kept saying that there is really no such thing at all. It takes me a while to realise that what the computer was not, was **not what the storekeeper was trying to tell me**. Rather, he understood that what I needed to know was how to change the programme and so all he was trying to tell me was how the computer **worked**. It was only my perpetual questions that forced him to answer as he did. Furthermore, none of his denials was spoken with the intention of informing me that there is no computer at all. Rather, he did not intend to tell me anything whatsoever about it in those terms because what the computer *is* is simply not relevant to me: for the solving of my programming problem it is neither **the** question to ask, nor is its existence in question. It may be that there is some part or collection of parts that *is* the computer in the sense that I am seeking, and it may be that there is not: I do not need to know either way, and so the storekeeper did not tell me, either directly or indirectly.

Understanding of Doctrine

To a large extent I think this different approach to *anatta* overcomes the difficulties posed by the traditional understanding of the doctrine. So what, then, is meant by the analysis of the human being into *khandhas*, these five constituents of the living body, feelings, apperception, volitions and consciousness? According to the texts, the Buddha was consistent in referring to the *khandhas* as the focus of what one should understand about oneself. But other than this, the *khandhas* are as unexplained as *anatta*; there is very little clear account either of why they are to be focused on or of how each or all of them should be understood. What, then, is the suggestion that one should think of oneself in terms of five *khandhas* about? Why would a body of teachings concerned with the dependent originatedness of all things describe the human being in terms of these five clearly delineated constituents? How does this fit in with the structure of the rest of the teachings? And if gaining liberation is neither about knowing what one’s self is or that one has no self, then in what way was understanding oneself as being comprised of a temporary combination of five *khandhas* helpful to gaining liberation?

Furthermore, though perhaps less obviously incoherent than the idea of experiencing that one has no self, the notion of the *khandhas* as usually understood is perplexing for the additional reason that there is something counter-experiential about the idea that we are so comprised. Not only superficially but even on deep reflection I think such an analysis at best simplistic: several more meaningful and readily recognisable alternative ways of analysing oneself could be arrived at without too much difficulty. So why the *khandhas*?

Why the *Khandhas*?

A large part of my book *Identity and Experience* consists of an attempt to answer this question. And what that study showed was that the *khandhas* are not a comprehensive analysis of what a human being is comprised of: that is all we **are**. Rather, they are the factors of human experience (or, better, the experiencing factors) that one needs to understand in order to achieve the goal of Buddhist teachings, which is liberation from the cycle of lives. In other words, closer study showed that in line with all the other teachings, they are about how the human being operates.

In particular, they are about how human cognition operates. We have all our conscious experience by means of our cognitive apparatus, and the *khandhas* are that apparatus. Perhaps the most important single indication of this is a passage which states: “Seeing occurs when there is contact between an eye and [visible] forms, accompanied by consciousness; this gives rise to

feelings, which are then identified; and what is thus identified one reflects on and makes manifold.”¹⁹ Involved in this are the *khandhas* of the body (*rupa*), providing both the living locus of subjectivity and, more specifically, the sense organs – in this case the eye; feelings (*vedana*), in the sense not of emotions but of the initial feeling of awareness of seeing; apperception (*sañña*), in the sense of being the process of identifying what that initial feeling of awareness is; and consciousness (*viññana*), the fact that the process is one of knowing that one is (in this example) seeing something. The identifying process, which operates on the huge mass of incoming experiential data, collectively and generically referred to as *dhamma*, makes sense of that data; it organises it so that it can then be the subject of more sophisticated mental processes such as thinking and reflecting about it and clarifying it to however refined a degree our intelligence permits and that is appropriate to the subject matter of the data.

So the answer to the question ‘why the *khandhas*?’ is that it is not the *khandhas qua* constituent parts that is relevant, but that what the word is referring to is the process by which one is having one’s experience. And it is this process that one needs to understand, because understanding it is the key to knowing how to change it.

Two key points, then, can be drawn from the interpretations I have been suggesting: first, that the central orientation of all of the teachings of early Buddhism is the need to understand how personal continuity operates (so that one can achieve liberation from that continuity) and that is not achieved by focusing on what one is or is not; and, second, that the starting place for such an enterprise is one’s own cognitive apparatus. And these two key points underpin my further suggestion that what is being taught in the early Buddhist texts is that the key factor in achieving liberation from the cycle of lives is understanding the nature of human experience.

The First Noble Truth

In fact this is indicated in the first Noble Truth, reportedly the very first teaching ever uttered by the Buddha himself, and arguably therefore worthy of more serious consideration than the doctrine of *anatta*. As is well-known, the first Noble Truth states the fact of *dukkha*. However one translates this problematic word, there are two factors that help one to come as close as possible to getting the proper meaning of it. The first is to remember that this is a truth statement and not a value judgement: that all things are unsatisfactory is in itself neither good nor bad but just factual. To say that something is *dukkha* is qualitatively no different from saying that it is raining: we may have good or bad **reactions to** such statements but they are something added to the statements themselves. And the second is to note that the textual description of what the truth of *dukkha* refers to is summarised as follows: “In short, it is the *khandhas* that are *dukkha*.”²⁰ The first Noble Truth, which identifies the very heart of the focus of the whole of the Buddhist religious teachings, itself states that to be the *khandhas*, the cognitive apparatus by which we experience.

The significance of this becomes the more apparent if one adds to this the further point – and I myself believe this to be a fact, however conceptually or psychologically difficult it may be to accept it – that we do not have access to anything other than our experience. Though it appears to us that there is a whole world out there separate from us, which is constructed in such a way as to lend itself to most of the major religious traditions of the world seeking to understand the nature of the human self and the universe in which it finds itself, the fact is that we cannot get outside of our experience. Whatever knowledge we think we have is **part of** our experience. The way we see things **is** our experience. This is indicated in the description of the cognitive process I quoted earlier. The reference was to an occurrence of seeing giving rise to reflection and making manifold. And the significance of this lies in the metaphysics of dependent origination. If all

things are dependently originated, then the fact that we normally see them as independent and separate (as we do) is **itself dependent** on what happens in the process of cognition: it is that process that ‘makes manifold’, and sorts out all our incoming experiential data into the world as we are accustomed to it.²¹

Dependent Origination

Seen in this way the metaphysics of dependent origination throws illuminating light on the doctrine of *anatta*. In my view, this is the most coherent and appropriate interpretation of *anatta*, and relating it in more positive and substantial terms to the notion of whether or not there is a self is mistaken.²² Given the contemporary obsession with the subject of the self, and the frequency with which the Buddha was questioned about it, it has been all too easy to allow the doctrine both to dominate and to mislead; perhaps partly because the obsession continues to this day. But it is through a better understanding of what is meant by the *khandhas*, and of the centrality of what they really represent in the teachings of the Buddha, that one ceases to be sidetracked by questions about the self and begins to focus properly on what the teachings mean.

In short, then, and to conclude very briefly, the Buddha’s teachings start with the only thing that we have access to – our own experiencing apparatus. And they remain centred on the entirety of our experience, how it works, how it continues, and how it might change. I am suggesting that what the Buddha taught is that one needs to understand experience *qua* experience.

NOTES

1. This is perhaps too great a generalisation, permissible only because of constraints of space, and there are some Indian religions for which experience plays a very different role. I am also confining myself to early Pali Buddhism, using the Pali *Sutta Pitaka* as my source material. All references herein to Pali texts are to Pali Text Society editions, and all translations are my own.
2. “*Anatta: A Different Approach*” in *The Middle Way*, Vol.70, 1. May 1995, pp.47-60; *Identity and Experience*, London: Luzac Oriental, 1996; and “The ‘External World’: Its Status and Relevance in the Pali Nikayas” in *Religion*, 29, 1999, pp.73-90.
3. My next book, *Early Buddhism: A New Approach*, published in London by Curzon Press, April 2000.
4. A chapter is devoted to each of these in my book *Identity and Experience*. See also Mathieu Boisvert *The Five Aggregates*, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1995, for a different treatment; and Peter Harvey *The Selfless Mind*, London: Curzon Press, 1995, for an alternative discussion about *vi—ana* (consciousness). The *Khandha Samyutta* is the primary source in the *Sutta Pitaka* for references to the *khandhas*.
5. *Nirvana* is a Sanskrit word, but as it has become Anglicised I will not italicise it.
6. This is most clearly stated in Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, London: Gordon Fraser (repr.) 1985, and Richard Gombrich, *Theravada Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988.
7. Rahula (*What the Buddha Taught*, chapter VI) is the *locus classicus* for a description of this.
8. *Chandogya Upanisad* 6.8ff. cf. also *Chandogya Upanisad* 3.14 and *Bṛhadaranyaka Upanisad* 2.4.6, 2.5, 4.4.13. Though the monism implicit in these references was not formally drawn out

until the later Vedanta tradition, it is nevertheless clear from the way in which the Buddha's teachings are given that it is to these key Upanisadic passages, as taught by the brahmins of the day, that he is referring.

9. *Samyutta Nikaya* (SN) I 135.
10. See *Majjhima Nikaya* (MN) I 22f; *Anguttara Nikaya* (AN) IV 178f; *Vinaya* (V) III 4, for descriptions of the Buddha's enlightenment.
11. See, for example, Steven Collins, *Selfless Persons*, Cambridge: University Press, 1982, and Peter Harvey, *The Selfless Mind: Personality, Consciousness and Nirvana in Early Buddhism*, London: Curzon Press, 1996, for two very different (both in style and in interpretation) studies in this vein.
12. cf., for example, J. Pérez-Remón, *Self and Non-Self in Early Buddhism*, The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1980.
13. The Sanskrit *karman*, Pali *kamma*, has become assimilated into the English language as karma, so it is not italicised. Literally, it means action.
14. cf. in particular the *Alagaddupama Sutta*, MN I 130ff; and throughout the *Khandha Samyutta*.
15. cf. Norman, "A note on *atta* in the *Alagaddupama-Sutta*" in K.R. Norman, *Collected Papers*, Vol II. Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1991, p.202 on this point.
16. In the *Alagaddupama-Sutta* (MN I 130ff) the word *asati* is found in connection with the self (p.136). This means 'is not', and can be used in the substantialist sense that something does not exist. But it might also mean, and in my view in this context does mean, that what is being referred to is not the case. And what is being referred to is that the *khandhas* and whatever comes within one's sensory/mental experience are not one's self. So, the text states, perceiving that this is not the case, one will not be concerned about it. My interpretation is compatible with the commentator's view that *asati* means *avijjamane*, being untrue – arising from ignorance. And it also means that this *sutta* ties in with other similar references and is not the single context in which it is explicitly stated that there is no self.
17. For example, MN I 232f: *etam mama, eso 'ham asmi, eso me atta ti*. This expression is also frequently found in the *Khandha Samyutta*, SN volume III.
18. For example at MN I 8; SN II 27: "...*aham nu kho smi, na nu kho smi; kim nu kho smi; katham nu kho smi; aham nu kho satto kuto agato so kuhimgami bhavissati ti.*"
19. This is a free translation, in order to draw out the meaning, of MN I 111f: "*cakkhu- c'avuso paticca rupe ca uppajjati cakkhuvī-nanam, tinnam sangati phasso, phassapaccaya vedana, yam vedeti tam sa-janati, yam sa-janati tam vitakketi, yam vitakketi tam papa-ceti.*" The passage is fully discussed in *Identity and Experience* (op.cit.), perhaps especially in chapter III.
20. cf. Vin I 9f. cf also: "*Samkhittena pa-c' upadanakkhandha dukkha:*" e.g. SN V 421; MN I 48; AN I 177; SN III 158: "*Katama- ca bhikkhave dukkham? Pa-c' upadanakkhandha ti 'ssa vacaniyamÓ;* and *Dhammapada* 202: "*n'atthi khandhadisa dukkhaÓ.* On the significance of *upadana* in association with *khandha*, cf. *Identity and Experience*, p.9, and R.M.L. Gethin, "The Five *Khandhas*: their treatment in the Nikayas and early Buddhism" in *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 14, 1986, pp.35-53.
21. This is discussed further in my "The 'External World': Its Status and Relevance in the Pali Nikayas". See also Lang, Karen, "Meditation as a Tool for Deconstructing the Phenomenal World" in T. Skorupski (ed.) *The Buddhist Forum* Vol III. London: SOAS, 1994.
22. I find it very interesting in this respect that the great Buddhist philosopher and teacher Nagarjuna, who claimed only to be interpreting the Buddha's earlier teaching, never uses the term *anatta* (*anatman* in Sanskrit). Rather, he focuses on dependent origination and uses the completely abstract term *sunyata* in this context.

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Since 1992, Sue Hamilton has been lecturer in Indian Religions at King's College, London, where she teaches introductory courses on Indian Religions and more specialised courses on Buddhism and Indian religio-philosophical thought. Her Oxford University doctorate, subsequently published by Luzac Oriental in 1996 as *Identity and Experience: The Constitution of the Human Being in Early Buddhism*, marked the beginning of her interest in, and on-going work on, the subject of identity and continuity in early Buddhism.

In contrast to the scholarly work of those who have focused on the doctrine of anatta in its negative sense of 'no-self', Sue Hamilton has been seeking to draw out and establish a greater understanding of how human beings were understood to function and experience cyclical existence in samsara. Working principally from the Pali Nikayas, her research has shown that the negative ontological statement implicit in the 'no-self' approach has tended to distract attention from important material relating to what one might call existential mechanics. Of particular relevance is the need to understand how the khandhas operate as cognitive apparatus, mediators of one's experience as a whole.

This is the subject of *Identity and Experience*. She has also written on the intimate correlation between identity, perception, experience, and individual continuity, and the way these are in turn correlated with what we take to be the external world around us. Her latest work, *Early Buddhism: A New Approach*, published by Curzon Press, draws together her work over the last ten years, highlighting in particular the implications of the correlated relationships mentioned above, and seeks to present it as a coherent picture of the teachings in the Pali Sutta Pitaka.

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"Anatta: A Different Approach" in *The Middle Way*, Volume 70, 1, May 1995, pp.47-60

"Buddhism: the Doctrinal Case for Feminism" in *Feminist Theology*, No.12, May 1996, pp.91-104

"Passionlessness in Buddhism" in *The Scottish Journal of Religious Studies*, Vol. XVIII, No.1, 1997, pp. 3-23.

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