LAMOTTE AND THE DOCTRINE OF NON-SELF

J.W., de Jong

In the fourth volume of his Traité de la Grande Vertu de Sagesse, Lamotte devoted several pages to the doctrine of non-self. In a review of Lamotte’s work I wrote: “We are especially pleased that M. Lamotte categorically rejects all attempts at discovering in Buddhism the belief in a Vedantic ātman (pp. 2004–2005). The anātman doctrine continues to frighten the prthagjana, and one could hardly hope that the judicious remarks of M. Lamotte will put an end to the discussion on this subject” (de Jong, 1978, 168). As far as I know, in recent years no objections have been raised against Lamotte’s views by scholars. However, in the first issue of this journal, Frits Staal refers to this passage and states that Lamotte refrained from adopting a definite position in this matter: “What, finally, did Lamotte have to say on the issue? He is careful, as one would expect, if not over-cautious. After briefly referring to Frawallner, Oldenberg, de La Vallée Poussin and Bhattacharya, he emphasizes that we have no explicit statement attributed to the Buddha in which he affirms the existence of the ātman. We should therefore, says Lamotte, confine ourselves to the golden rule laid down by the Buddha himself: ‘What I have not declared, take that to be non-declared, and, what I have declared, take that to be declared’.” (Lamotte, 1976, IV, 2004–2005)

It is, alas, not possible for Lamotte to reply to the above remarks, which completely distort the position taken by him on this issue. It is therefore necessary to look more closely at the passage referred to by Staal. Lamotte introduces his quotation from Frawallner with the following words: “During the whole course of history efforts have been made to introduce into the Good Law the immanent ātman of the Upaniṣads and the Vedānta. Even to-day, some critics advance the following reasoning. The Buddha has denied that the Samskr̥ta are a Self or belong to a Self but he has not formally rejected a Self transcending the world of contingences.” He goes on to quote Frawallner: “The Buddha never ceases to emphasize that none of the five heaps (skandha), which make up the mundane

1) Frits Staal, ‘Substitutions de paradigmes et religions d’Asie’, Cahiers d’Extême-Asie 1 (1985), pp. 21–57. All references are to the original English text of section 4 (Recherche de la doctrine bouddhique originelle) which Dr. Hubert Durt, the translator of this article, has been so kind as to send me. Dr. Durt writes me that in consultation with Staal some changes have been made but that the section on the anātman has been translated without alterations. Although Staal’s article, as far as I know, has been published only in French translation, it seemed to me more appropriate to write this brief note in English because his article was originally written in English. Moreover, French scholars are generally able to read English, whereas knowledge of French in the English-speaking world is much more limited.

personality, should be taken for the I. It was far from him, however, to deny the existence of the soul.” Lamotte adds the following comments: “This argumentum ex silendo has not much weight when one considers the dialogues, which are completely similar, between Śāriputra and Yamaka (S. III, pp. 111–112) and between the Buddha and Anurādhā (S. IV, pp. 383–384) concerning the existence of the Tathāgata, a term which here designates not the Buddha but in a more general way the saint delivered from desire. It is said here that the tathāgata is not one of the five skandhas (rupa, vedanā, saṃjñā, saṃskāra, viññāna), is not found in them nor somewhere else (anyatra), is not the whole of the five skandhas, but nevertheless is not different from them. The conclusion is: Ettha ca te, āvuso Yamaka, diṭṭheva dhamme saccato thetato tathāgato anupalabbyamāno. This final sentence has been differently translated by H. Oldenberg (Buddha, sein Leben..., 13th ed., 1959, p. 296): ‘So is also, friend Yama, in the visible world the Perfect one in Truth and Essence for you not to be apprehended (zu erfassen),’ and by L. de La Vallée Poussin who interprets it as follows: ‘Therefore, my friend, even now, you do not perceive the Buddha as really, truly existing’ (Le bouddhisme, 3rd ed., 1925, p. 172) or: ‘Therefore, Yamaka, even in this world, the tathāgata is not perceived, ascertained as true, real’ (Nirvāna, 1925, p. 104). Oldenberg sees in this sentence the affirmation of a transcendent Ātman, the Ātman of the Upaniṣads; de La Vallée Poussin discovers in it precisely the denial of the Tathāgata of whom one cannot say that he disappears when he dies for the good reason that in order to disappear one must exist.”

With regard to the interpretation of the term anupalabbyamāno Lamotte refers to de La Vallée Poussin’s position but does not state his own position. However, it is not difficult to discover Lamotte’s own opinion which, on this matter, is completely identical with the one adopted by de La Vallée Poussin. Lamotte remarks in a note: “I have often translated and will continue to translate nopalabhyate by ‘does not exist’. Here too I have the pleasure to be of the same mind as the honorable Miss Horner who in her Middle Length Sayings, I, p. 177, n. 3, explains: ‘anupalabbhamāne, either: not to be known, or, not existing’.” (Lamotte, 1976, IV, p. 2146, n. 1).

Referring to Bhattacharya’s L’Ātman-Brahman dans le bouddhisme ancien, Paris, 1973, p. 67, Lamotte remarks that Bhattacharya shares the views of Oldenberg and Frauwallner. He not only points out that, as Staal wrote, “we have no explicit statement attributed to the Buddha in which he affirms the existence of an ātman,” but adds that “the Sūtras do not cease to say and to repeat that all things without exception, conditioned or non-conditioned, are not an Ātman (sarve dharmā anātmanah), and that the most fateful ignorance, whatever forms she may take, is the Satkāyadṛṣṭi.” Lamotte repeats the golden rule laid down by the Buddha: “What I have not declared, take that to be non-declared, and what I have declared, take that to be declared.” After quoting this golden rule Lamotte makes the following important remark which Staal completely ignores: “It is in conformity with this golden rule and by trying to realise by themselves the profound meaning of the doctrines of the Blessed one that, for twenty-five centuries, many monks have found in the doctrine of the non-self the appease-
ment of the spirit and the joy of heart.”

An unbiased reader of Lamotte’s work will certainly come to the conclusion that “Lamotte categorically rejects all attempts at discovering in Buddhism the belief in a Vedantic Atman.” This is no surprise for anyone who is familiar with his works because Lamotte has consistently maintained the same position, as can easily be shown by a few quotations. In 1947 J.G. Jennings tried to show that the Buddha, just as the Vedântins, believed in the existence of a supreme Self, a paramâtman, a transcendent Brahman reducing the multiplicity of existences to unity. Lamotte firmly rejects Jennings’ view and briefly summarizes the doctrine of the Buddha: “His doctrine can be summarized in a few lines. There is no âtman, no individual Self . . .” (Lamotte, 1947, p. 162). Eleven years later Lamotte refers to several texts which seem to refer to the existence of an âtman and remarks: “However, these passages which to all appearances are aberrant and which must be interpreted in the light of the intentional teachings of the Buddha are drowned in the mass of other passages in which the non-existence of the âtman is formally affirmed” (Lamotte, 1958, p. 57). In a lecture on the message of Buddha Śâkyamuni Lamotte stated: “The soul, the person, does not exist; it is only a name given to a collection of changing formations. . . . But in fact the soul, or person, does not exist as a separate entity in itself” (Lamotte, 1961, p. 15).

In a note in which it pleases Staal to accuse me of one-sided specialization, jealous intolerance and smugness, he remarks: “Though prthagjana is a designation for laymen that only a Buddhist sage is in a position to correctly apply, de Jong applies it simply to all non-Buddhologists, a group in which he obviously includes Oldenberg and Frauwallner. Such moves give unexpected support to my present thesis: just as Vedic culture is too important to be left to the Vedists (cf. R.E. Schulzes’ Foreword to Wasson, 1972; AGNI, I, xxxii), Buddhism is too important to be left to Buddhologists.” If Staal had read the Buddhist scriptures, he would have known that my remark on the prthagjana was nothing more than a reference to what is taught in them. Here again, it may suffice to quote from Lamotte’s works: “The profane man (prthagjana) who has not entered the way, is bound by ten bonds (samyojana) which bind him to the round of rebirths: 1. Belief in the personality (satkāyadrśti)” (Lamotte, 1958, p. 51); “Left to his own devices, the ordinary man (prthagjana) will be unlikely to admit that pleasure is vain, that joys are suffering and his ‘I’ is an illusion” (Lamotte, 1961, p. 23).

REFERENCES

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