

THE IDEA OF SELF IN BUDDHISM

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'According to the teachings of the Buddha, the idea of the self is an imaginary, false belief, which has no corresponding reality, and it produces harmful thoughts'. (Walpola Rahula). I evaluate these criticisms of the idea of the Self in Buddhist teachings.

*"OM. How mistaken is the view which dualises subject and object,
When the expanse of reality is free from conceptual elaboration!
How deluded we have been by our grasping at characteristics!
...*

*How debilitating is the view which dualises objects and mind,
When the Buddha-body of Reality is free from individuated distinctions!
...*

*Since we have failed to understand the nature of uncreated truth,
How tormented is this intellect of a bewildered being,
Which apprehends the uncreated truth in terms of 'I' and 'mine'!"*

Tibetan Book of the Dead

The idea and sense of self has been the subject of almost infinite philosophical and religious debate for millennia.

In this essay I will briefly introduce the origins of Buddhism, before going on to take a more detailed look at its teachings and some of the key philosophical tenets. Specifically, I will explore the Buddhist attitude to the idea of self. In the final section, I will put forward some evaluative conclusions in an attempt to more narrowly articulate a Buddhist conception of self.

Buddha – the Awakened One

In general, 'Buddha means the 'Awakened One', someone who has awakened from the sleep of ignorance and sees things as they really are. A Buddha is a person who is completely free from all faults and mental obstructions.

Rupert Gethin explained that 'we can know very little of the historical Buddha with any degree of certainty. Yet within the bounds of reasonable historical probability we can form a quite clear picture of the kind of person the Buddha was and the main event of his life.' [1998:9]

Buddha, who is the founder of Buddhism, was named at birth Siddharta Gautama. He was born into a relatively wealthy family in around 485 BC (precise dates of his life are uncertain [Gethin,1998]) in northern India, in the town of Kapilavatthu, in what is now Nepal. At his birth, seers told his father, Shuddhodana that his son would either be a royal king, governing over millions and overseeing great territory or that he would become a saintly figure that would achieve enlightenment. Siddharta lived a very secluded life in the palace, away from worldly sufferings, until he made a decision to renounce the secular world and to leave his family in order to 'seek questions concerning the existential nature of the human lot: Why is human existence as it is? Why is it characterised by disease, aging, and death? Is it inevitable that it is like this? Can one do anything about it? Can one, indeed, escape such an existence' [Hamilton, 2001:42]. After cutting off his hair and giving away his garment he ordained himself as a monk and dressed himself in saffron robes.

He experienced ascetic life and various religious practices, but did not find what he sought - enlightenment. After training in meditation for many years whereby he focused his attention on the ultimate nature of all phenomena, he realised that he was close to attaining full enlightenment. Placing himself under an *asvattha* tree, he was determined to reach his goal. Devaputrea Mara, the chief of all demons, tried to disturb Siddharta's concentration by conjuring up many fearful apparitions. However, all Mara's efforts seemed futile, his raging fires appearing to Siddharta as a rain of flowers. Continued concentration brought success eventually, 'he had an experience which

affected him profoundly, convincing him that he had come to the end of his quest' [Gethin, 1998:15] By removing the final veils of ignorance from his mind, he was awakened, as a fully enlightened being. He was able to see the past, the present, and the future; developed great, impartial compassion for all living beings without discrimination, and most of all gained understanding and freedom from the suffering of birth, aging, sickness and death.

Buddha's Teachings – Buddhist world view

Two and a half millennia ago, the desire to overcome the basic human sufferings of birth, aging, illness and death motivated Buddha to abandon his princely rank and undertake a search for truth. Buddhism originated with his enlightenment, which revealed the ultimate law of life as the foundation of the universe and the inner human cosmos. Over the course of ages, Buddhism travelled southward from India to Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand and Cambodia. In its northward movement, it passed through Central Asia, China and the Korean Peninsula to reach Japan.

'In its long history, Buddhism has used a variety of teachings and means to help people first develop a calmer, more integrated and compassionate personality, and then "wake up" from restricting delusions: delusions which cause attachment and thus suffering for an individual and those he interacts with. The guide for this process of transformation has been the "*Dhamma* (Skt *Dharma*): meaning the eternal truths and cosmic law-orderliness discovered by the Buddha(s), Buddhist teachings, the Buddhist path of practice, and the goal of Buddhism, the timeless *Nibbāna* (Skt *Nirvāṇa*). Buddhism thus essentially consists of understanding, practising and realizing *Dhamma*.

[Harvey, 1990:2] Harvey explains 'as "Buddha" does not refer to a unique individual, Buddhism is less focussed on the person of its founder than is, for example, Christianity. The emphasis in Buddhism is on the *teachings* of the Buddha(s), and the "awakening" of human personality that these are seen to lead to.' [Ibid, 1990:1]

Buddha's quest to find answers for his unhappiness and for that of humankind's was central in his search. He realised that humans lack the power and wisdom to solve their problems. Buddhism teaches that all individuals innately possess infinite power and wisdom, and it reveals the process whereby these qualities can be developed. It not only focuses on how to eliminate suffering and problems, which are understood to be inherent in life, but also on how people should cultivate the potential that exists within each one of us.

Buddha rose from meditation after his enlightenment, and he taught the first Wheel of Dharma, which includes the *Sutra of the Four Noble Truths*. The second and third Wheels of Dharma, which entail the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* and the *Sutra Discriminating the Intention*, are the source of Mahayana, or Great Vehicle, of Buddhism. Buddha explains how to attain liberation from suffering and how to attain enlightenment. Buddhism, or Buddhadharma, is Buddha's teaching and the inner experiences or realisations of these teachings. Buddha gave eighty-four thousand teachings, which along with the inner realisations constitute Buddhism.

Buddhism describes four universal sufferings: birth, aging, sickness and death. In Sanskrit, suffering is called *duhkha*, which implies a state filled with difficulty and hardship, a state contrary to human wishes. This condition originates from the fact that all phenomena are transient. Youth and health do not continue forever, nor can our lives themselves. 'In fact everything in the world, everything we experience, is changing moment by moment....everything is impermanent (anitya / anicca).'[Gethin, 1998:61] According to Buddhism, here lies the ultimate cause of human suffering. 'For Buddhist thought suffering is simply a fact of existence, and in its general approach to the problem, Buddhist thought suggests that it is beings themselves who must take ultimate responsibility for their suffering.'[Gethin, 1998:69]

The four noble truths are:

- *the truth of suffering*
- *the truth of the origin of suffering*
- *the truth of the cessation of suffering*
- *the truth of the path to the cessation of suffering*

The *truth of suffering* is that all existence in this world entails suffering.

The *truth of the origin of suffering* states that suffering is caused by selfish craving for the pleasures of the world.

The *truth of the cessation of suffering* is that the elimination of this selfish craving ends the suffering.

The *truth of the path to the cessation of suffering* is that there exists a path by which this eradication can be achieved.

That path is traditionally explained as the discipline of the eightfold path, which is composed of:

- right views based on the four noble truths and the correct understanding of Buddhism
- right thinking, or command of one's mind
- right speech
- right action
- right way of life, based on purifying one's thoughts, words and deeds
- right endeavour, to seek the true Law
- right mindfulness, always to bear right views in mind
- right meditation

The four noble truths and the eightfold path were directed to those disciples who had rejected secular life. They reflect the basic approach and emphasis that characterises Buddha's early teachings. An emphasis underlined by the need to awaken people, first to life's harsh realities and then to the spiritual experience of Nirvāṇa. The fundamental solution to human worldly suffering lies in the elimination of earthly desires. By following Buddha's teachings, people could allegedly sever their ties to the cycle of birth and death, and achieve a state whereby rebirth into this world was no longer necessary and they could attain the state of Nirvāṇa.

Buddhist view of life also includes the concept of the Ten Worlds, the first six derive from the idea of the six paths, an ancient Indian paradigm concerning transmigration: the worlds of hell, hungry spirits, animals, anger, humans and heavenly beings. It was thought that the particular world into which unenlightened people were born was determined by the things they had done in past lifetimes, and that people endlessly repeated the cycle of birth and death in these six worlds. Even if born into the highest world, Heaven, one could not stay there for long; when good fortune ended, one would fall back into a lower state of existence, a lower world.

People in ancient India disliked the thought of this endless cycle that implied an unstable world and longed to rid themselves of the effect of karma. Buddha offered solutions with the four noble truths and with the eightfold path. Buddha first taught that people could escape from this cycle of birth and death by extinguishing both desire and suffering itself.

Buddhism identifies three further worlds between the six lower ones and Buddhahood: the worlds of learning, realisation and bodhisattvas. Beyond these nine worlds, which are innate in all common mortals, lies the highest state of life, that embodies the four enlightened virtues: eternity, happiness, true self and purity. This is Buddhahood, a state that exists only as a potential in people's lives unless they develop it through the practice of Buddhism. When this potential is realised, the nine life-states of common mortals are not eliminated, but fall under the influence of Buddhahood contributing, in their various ways to the construction of happiness for one and for all. In short, Buddhahood is a state of absolute and indestructible happiness that is unaffected by circumstantial change or difficulties.

Buddhism explains that nothing and no one exist in isolation. Each individual entity shapes its environment, which affects all other existences. All things are mutually supportive and interrelated, forming a living cosmos described by Buddhism as *dependent origination*. Meaning that the Buddhist understanding of causation takes into account human existence and directly addresses uncertainties.

The idea of karma predates Buddhism and had already permeated Indian society well before Buddha's time. However the pre-Buddhist view of karma contained an element of determinism. It urged people to accept their lot in life. Buddhist teachings developed further this idea of karma. Buddha taught that what makes a person noble or humble is not birth but actions taken, therefore the Buddhist doctrine of karma is not fatalistic. Karma refers to potentials in the inner, unconscious realm of life created through one's actions in the past or present, which, respectively after being activated by external stimuli, manifest as results in the present or future.

According to Buddhism, life takes on no physical entity after death, nor does a 'soul' or 'spirit' continue to exist as a fixed entity. There is no fixed self that lives on as an unchanging entity. Buddha concluded that it is karma itself that continues. The influence of our actions carries on from one existence to the next, transcending the life and death of any human being.

Buddhism views human beings as the temporary union of five components: form, perception, conception, volition and consciousness. Buddhism states that these five aspects, also known as the five aggregates or *Skandhas* in Sanskrit, unite temporarily to form an individual living being. All life carries on its activities through the interaction of these five components and their workings are affected by the karma.

Form, with which one perceives the external world, represents the physical aspect of life whereas the other four components represent the mental or spiritual aspects.

Perception is the function of receiving external information through the sense organs.

Conception is the function of creating mental images out of what has been perceived.

Volition is the will that acts on conception and motivates action.

Consciousness is the function of discernment that integrates the constituents of perception, conception and volition.

The idea of Self

Gethin expounded 'the nature of the mind itself, for it is here that the secret of the arising of the world, the ceasing of the world, and the way leading to the ceasing of the world is to be found'. [1998:133]

According to Buddhism, attachment to the idea of self as the whole of existence is limited and even dangerous. Buddhism teaches that liberation from suffering lies in our awakening to a far broader life beyond the finite self. Our worldview is shaped by our consciousness of self. Buddhism teaches that our lives are not limited to what we ordinarily perceive as the self but encompass other people, the world and even the universe.

Buddhism views the self to be in constant flux, just like our bodies and all other phenomena in the world. Because instinctively, through consciousness, we are attached to our self or ego, we sense it as somehow constant.

Buddhism teaches that attachment to this fleeting self becomes problematic when we mistake it for a changeless entity and stop searching for what is truly changeless and profound. This attachment can breed arrogance, egotism and insecurity but we fear that in abandoning this self we are negating our existence. Buddhism regards selfish or self-seeking behaviour as a 'lesser self'. Buddhist philosophy focuses on breaking confinement to the lesser self and revealing the infinitely expanded true self.

Richard King observes that all Hindu schools 'agreed that sentient beings were subject to an incessant cycle of rebirths, that this was a largely unsatisfactory state of affairs and that there was a way out – the attainment of liberation (mokṣa)' [King, 1999:78]. Hindus believed that an essential self (ātman), an immaterial substance transmigrated from life to life which: 'established a fixed identity throughout the fluctuating changes of the mind-body complex, like a thread holding together a pearl necklace' [Ibid, p78].

As King explains further, various Buddhist practices opposed this idea stating that it is 'unverifiable metaphysical postulate'. Buddhist believed in the no-abiding-self (anātman) and expounded '...succession of rebirth does indeed occur but there is no substantial or essential self which persists or "passes through" this series. The Buddha explains this in term of the doctrine of *inter-dependent-origination* (pratītyasamutpāda). This is a scheme which explains the dynamics of existence from life to life and moment to moment without the necessity of positing a persisting agent or "possessor" of experience.' [Ibid, p. 78] In summary, according to Buddhist understanding, there is no persisting self across lives, only a succession of causally shaped, mental and physical processes that survives until full enlightenment is achieved.

Hindu schools see the succession of lives as a pearl necklace, held together by a sole link – the ātman. As opposed to Buddhist understanding which views the series of lives as flowing rivers that change all the time. Identity or difference is explained in *Questions of King Milinda*:

'He who is reborn, Nāgasena, is he the same person or another?'

'Neither the same nor another.'

'Give me an illustration.'

'In the case of a pot of milk which turns to curds, then to butter, then to ghee; it would not be right to say that the ghee, butter and curds were the same as the milk but they have come from that so neither would it be right to say that they are something else.'

Milindapañha chapter 2, translation in Pesale, 1991;10

King concludes, 'thus, Buddhist have generally accepted that there is causal continuity throughout our physical and mental lives but deny that this means that there is an underlying *identity* holding the process together.' [Ibid, 82] He continues his observations that 'for the Buddhist philosopher the notion of a "subject" or "agent" of experience is an illusion. The personal self (*puḍgalātman*) is a second-order entity that can be reductively analysed into the interpedently arising *skadhas*. The overwhelming emphasis within Buddhist thought, therefore, has been to conceive of objects and entities as compositions (*samskāra*) made up of more basic realities (the *dharmas*)' [Ibid, p. 82]

But what of the person? Is there no person who is talking, listening and doing? In day-to-day language people use the general term 'she' or 'he'. Considering the above Buddhist view, what are they referring to? King's response to this is that the Buddha's use of such conventional terminology made everyday teaching and discussion possible, but when he wanted to be precise in describing the no-abiding-self, he did not use the personal pronouns. 'Language and the fact that experiences are somehow connected fools us into thinking that there is an "I" apart from and behind changing experiences – apart from the fact of experiences being connected. In reality, for Buddhist thought there is only their "connectedness" – nothing besides that. The fact that experiences are causally connected is not to be explained by reference to an unchanging self that underlies experience, but by examining the nature of causality.' [Gethin, 1998:139] Buddha does not want to renounce that there are people whom he is teaching, he only wants to deny 'annihilatoinism' – a tenet that describes nothing existing beyond the physical being – and also rejects 'eternalism' – a principle that physical being require atman. This means that he chooses a middle way, which suggests something personal and spiritual that goes beyond the physical body yet is not eternal.

The essence of the Buddhist concept of self is: 'it cannot be denied that there is a complex of experience going on; this can be conveniently analysed by way of the five aggregates. But where precisely in all this is the constant, unchanging self, which is having all these experiences? What we find when we introspect, the Buddha suggests, is always some particular sense datum, some particular feeling, some particular idea, some particular wish or desire, some consciousness of something particular. And all these are constantly changing from one moment to the next; none of them remains for more than a mere moment. Thus, apart from some particular experience, I never actually directly come across or experience the "I" that is having experiences. It is something entirely elusive.' [Gethin, 1998:138]

But can somebody exist without a self? Buddha answered this question with the famous chariot metaphor: What makes a chariot what it is? If we take it apart, there is no chariot any longer. There is no such thing as chariot in itself, there is no essence to a chariot. Although this analogy holds profound truth, one may disagree in arguing that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts and that the chariot is not only its constituents. Hence a person may be greater than what makes him up, a chariot is reducible in precisely the way the self is not.

The Buddha's teaching is that there is no underlying and unifying self, but only a series of states of awareness. 'According to Buddhist analysis a person should be seen as five classes of physical and mental events that arise dependently at any given moment in time and also over a period of time. What this means then is that the causal connectedness of events is such that events occur in certain quite specific clusters and patterns. From this perspective a "person" is a series of clusters of events (physical and mental) occurring in a "human" pattern.' [Gethin, 1998:142]

Buddha explains characteristics of personhood, like separateness from others, in the above-mentioned doctrine of *interdependent origination*. All things spring in terms of other things, each state of awareness occurs as a consequence of a previous state and contains within it the potential to be the cause of a following one. Thus, each state of awareness is an effect and a cause forming a link to give rise to continuity, which is sufficient in Buddhist view as features of personhood. Buddhism argue that a concept of person created out of passing states of awareness is satisfactory to explain all the aspects that a person have. 'The Buddhist say that there is nothing more to the self than egoity. It is a temporary manifestation of interacting factors that people refer to when thinking or talking of themselves, and nothing is left.' [Ram-Prasad 2005:71]

Buddhists state that although the person exists but only empirically and not transcendentally. Personhood, explains Ram-Prasad, is constructed by the mind, which is subject to desire and illusion hence creating suffering. He translates the Buddhist view thus: that a person's challenge is to move away from a selfish concept of person as a separate entity and via meditation to empty oneself towards the attainment of the ultimate Buddha nature. This

Buddha nature characterises the true nature of all beings, 'allows the person to lead a proper life of selfless engagement with everything in the world'. [Ibid,85]

Hamilton, in expounding Buddha's view relating to metaphysical investigation and ontological debates about the self and the world, writes: 'that all one has access to one's own subjective cognitive process. One cannot get outside of this to see or check what might be the case external to it, but one can nevertheless understand how it works. This involves understanding how it is involved in the structuring of the way we experience the world about us.' [2001:53] She goes on to explain 'that if the focus lies in understanding the nature of knowing as opposed to the nature of things, as it were, independent of our knowing faculties, then it follows that nothing one knows is one's self. Whatever might be its nature or ontological status, a knowing subject cannot objectify itself in order to be known by itself.' [Ibid,p.54]

Peter Harvey in *The Selfless Mind* explores the question of what a true Self would be like if such existed knowing that all phenomenon in Buddhist view is not-Self? He reasons that as Buddhist teachings explain that if anything which is ephemeral and suffering can not be Self, so Self would have to be permanent and without suffering but with the aspect of bliss and happiness. The acceptance of non-attachments can lead to the recognition that everything is not-Self which in turn makes the way to Nibbāna. 'There is no "I" there to feel threatened by anything. Such a person cannot be fathomed by those who can only think of a person as centred on some I-identity. Those who destroy views on Self/I know the nature of an enlightened person, though; for at Stream-entry they see and fathom the timeless Dhamma, *nibbāna*, which is his nature.' Harvey summarises 'When an enlightened person, Buddha or Arahāt, dies, all conditioned features of him finally pass away, but his unconditioned nature, *nibbānic* discernment, timelessly exist. Being beyond the conditioned, this does not lead on to any further rebirth, as normal discernment does. But nor is it destroyed. It exists as timeless *nibbāna*: blissful, *dukkha*-less, unborn, deathless, and unconstructed. It must be seen as beyond anything which could individualise it, for there cannot be more than one timeless, unconstructed state. It is discernment, which has transcended its normal limited state by abandoning all objects, even *nibbāna* itself, so as not to be dependent on anything at all.' [Harvey, 1995:250]

Redefined Idea of Self

The Buddha understood that humans never experience an unchanging self, which helps lead to a less than full perception of the world. This belief in the self springs from delusion or ignorance and is characterised by craving and attachment. He observed that people crave to be particular kinds of persons and, coupled with a strong personal identity, that this can, in the Buddhist view, result in suffering. 'We all become rivals in the fruitless struggle of trying to find something in the universe which we can grasp and call "mine". Selves thus cause problems for all concerned, and the aim of Buddhism is therefore to realize selflessness, both metaphysically and ethically; or, to borrow the title of Steven Collins's comprehensive study of the teaching of no self, the goal of the Buddhist path is to become a truly "self-less" person.' [Gethin, 1998:147]

While Buddha's teachings may be applicable to monks and nuns, they are difficult for lay people to follow. Ordinary people, even if they want to reach nirvana, find it very hard to abandon all earthly desires. They have families to support, jobs to carry out and other everyday affairs that require their attention. However Buddha's compassion and wisdom still reaches the lay people, and help to ease the many problems that they lack the means to solve. He inspired and still inspires people, gives them hope and encouragement so that they could overcome their sufferings and enjoy the prospect of a greater future.

Buddha's teachings were in radical contrast with all the various ontological stances taken by others, especially the teachings of the dominant Brahmanical group. His teachings were always directed towards helping others to attain insight in order to gain liberation from the hardship and difficulties of human existence. Hamilton explains, that the Buddha did not want to undermine the authority of the Brahmins for political reasons, rather 'he considered their dependence on tradition for how they claim things are, rather than drawing on their own individual experiential understanding, too deeply unreliable, to the extent of being inherently self-invalidating: he saw no reason why anyone should believe a teaching given by someone who has never experienced what they are making claims about.' [2001:55] Buddha's teachings and his

acceptance of karma, rebirth and comprehension of self were based on his own experience.

Finally, I find that the true Buddhist emphasis is not indeed on denial, but on acceptance. The self is not so much rejected as redefined. The overwhelming and only singular enduring reality lies in a universal, cosmic matrix of influence, Karma. This influence and design is the continuum flux that harbours infinite bundles of experience – chance and transient coincidence of aggregates – that we collectively perceive as life, and comfortably and limitedly as our own self-experience.

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