

# The buddhist no self doctrine philosophy essay



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The Buddha taught that there were no persisting identity and there are no permanent stable identities. We are just a complex experience streamed through time. We are just short lived, temporal, historical beings in the process of becoming. There is no difference between you and your life: you are your life history. thoughts were the thinker and experiences were the experiencer

The Buddha taught Ksanika-vada which is an anti-substantial doctrine that the world is in a continuous flux and is impermanent. There is nothing more than movement and change in the world (Anitya). There are no fixed or permanent, absolute or independent substances. The Buddhist universe is the same as Heraclitus simile of a river as you cant step twice into the same river due to the constant changing of water. The phenomenology of reality, objects, events and self are not what we think they are. They are in fact a temporary interconnected stream of some fundamental elements. This is the Buddhist ontology that everything occurs through causes and effects. All these things we believe to be persisting entities, including self, are just a stream of events. The effect doesnt exist when the cause existed and the cause stops existing when the effect comes to exist. This results in everything in the world having a cause and nothing existing unconditioned.

The idea of Atman is the metaphysical self or soul which is everlasting. The Hindu religion uses this idea of the soul thus they adopt the Eternalists view. This is that the soul is immaterial, infinite and immortal so it will continue to exist for ever. Atman has various meaning such as soul, self, being, ego or personality. This is what Buddhism rejects, a persisting and enduring entity in humans. The doctrine of Nairatmya-Vada teaches us that to recognize

ourselves as a persisting entity is an illusion. We are actually a phenomenon of human experiences (dharma) so we are temporal being (Ksanika). What we call the self is actually a temporary interconnected stream of thoughts and desires.

So why do we believe we have a self and why do we cling onto the idea of a self? The early Buddhist believed individuals were an arrangement is a composition of five aggregates (skandha). None of these phenomena contain an actually sense of self:

The body (rupa)

Feelings of pleasure and pain (vedana)

Sense-based perceptions of objects (vijnana)

Conceptual thoughts (samjna)

Volitions, inherited dispositions and habits (samskara)

To clarify, conceptual thoughts are not the mind but just the thoughts themselves. They are not a substance or an enduring self. Also consciousness is not found in these five aggregates as the Buddha rejected the idea. Rather consciousness is named by the cause. It is dependent on all five and it cant exist without them. For example the eye gives visibility which gives rise to visible consciousness. This is a mental consciousness.

Consciousness is always an effect of the aggregates and always in flux. .

The self is not actually real as none of these five aggregates show that there is a persisting and enduring identity in humans. What gives rise to

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individuals feeling of self” is just the aggregate of these factors replacing each other. For example, a body touch a red hot poker, this will give rise to a feeling of pain, this will give rise to a thought of pain and the memory of what it felt like. It is a conventional designation for a becoming compound of the five aggregates that gives rise to the feeling that we are selves.

Descartes believed that I think therefore I am, whereas the Buddha taught that I am because I think. Therefore Buddhism is an impersonalist teaching showing us that the self doesn't actually exist so we are not what we think we are, we don't matter.

Nagasena explains this concept in Question of King Milinda through a conversation between Menander (a king) and Nagasena (a monk). Nagasena asks the king if the axle, wheels, chariot body, flagstaff, yoke, reins or goadstick is the chariot. Also he asks if all of these are the chariot. All of these were answered negatively. Thus the chariot is not the same as the parts and is not the parts conjointly. He concludes that the word chariot is only a name for the parts in a certain way formation. He applies this to self and postulates that his name is just a construction of his five aggregates but not actually a self:

As the various parts, the different adjuncts of a vehicle, form, when united, that which is called a chariot; so, when the five khandas are united in one aggregate, or body, they constitute that which is called a being, a living existence.'

The Buddhism doctrine of Pratiya- Samutpada, often translated as dependent arising taught that thirst or desires, attachments and

commitments are causally related to suffering (duhkha). This is where the Buddha explains the process where enduring world phenomenon arises. Even though cause and events (dharmas) are separate in Buddhism they are still interconnected and this is the same for the continuous cycle of rebirth (samsara). It is just like a flowing river or an ever turning wheel. There is no need for the self, all phenomena, our experiences, substances and events, can be explained by cause and effect. Life is one causal sequence made of Twelve Links of Dependent Origination (nidanas). This shows that no beings exist independent of any other beings. Therefore it describes one enduring identity from birth to death and also reincarnated lives:

1. Ignorance
2. Volitional Actions
3. States of Mind
4. Name and Form
5. Sense Sources
6. Contact
7. Feelings
8. Attachment
9. Grasping
10. Becoming

## 11. Birth

## 12. Aging and Death

Yet again this process shows us that nothing can exist by itself. This is because the Buddha taught that if something has a dependent origination then it can't be independent:

If something is fundamentally dependent then it must be devoid of having a nature that is independent of other phenomena, of existing independently. Anything that is dependently originated must in fact be empty.

Everything that we experience is a result of a cause and the nature of them is being dependent. This means that all of our phenomena are empty of having an independent self.

To be enlightened is to take away the first link of ignorance and be aware that all our phenomena are empty and once we are aware of this we will become enlightened. This is becoming aware that we aren't actually what we think are. Our self or personality is a constitution of feelings and attachments to objects which is what causes our process of becoming. This is the aim of Atman, to escape from this dissatisfaction that the phenomena of the persisting self causes. When we grasp an object we want we may feel happiness but this never lasts and even if we get an object we want we always crave for more or are scared of losing it. We need to become enlightened that these are not actually real and are only a product of our phenomena. The four noble truths teach us that you can realise your true self and aspire to a higher living. When you understand that ignorance,

volitional action, attachment and feeling and grasping are empty then you will let escape the circle of birth, suffering, death and rebirth (samsara) and find peace in nirvana.

As we have seen, early Buddhism analysed experience into five aggregates but later schools developed the process of reduction analysis. The Abhidharma, a later reduction analysis text, develops some of the fundamental teaching of the Buddhism. The Abhidharma analyses phenomenon and experiences, reducing them into minute essentials (dharma) by complex lists. This rejects the sustainable self as an independent entity because it is actually a changing construction dependent on complex connection of mental and material components. The Sarvastivada Abhidharma doctrine teaches that only impartite entities truly exist. If atoms make up an object then the object doesn't exist as it is just an aggregate. The impartite entities in phenomenon (dharma) have a permanent identity of their own (svabhava) and exist in the past, present and future. Each dharma has its own essences or intrinsic nature (svalaksana). This idea is Atomism, where the basic constituent ingredients for all mental thoughts and physical materials are all reducible to this. Yet again this breaks down our habits of attachment as we are just a mass of material elements and just as the Lotus flower will fade and die so will us. As the dharmas which have no cause and effect don't include the self, this must mean that all aspects of our experiences are impermanent and dependent on many causes and effects which arise and pass. This ontology of dharmas shows us that the world we live in is not what we think it is. Hence our attachments, commitments and desires for objects of this world are false:

Try to grasp the world... and it runs through one's fingers.

The Abhidharma lists conditioned realities (samskṛta) which are made from temporary fluxes. These phenomena are conditioned:

1. Material phenomena
2. Mind
3. Mental phenomena
4. Elements which are neither material nor mental

The mind is conceived as a complex cognitive process consisting of a succession or related momentary mental states. Mental states arise dependent on its cause therefore forming a mental flux. The mind is always rapidly changing, streams of consciousness is made up of streams of awareness. Every moment of cognition relates to a particular object therefore intentionality and consciousness are inseparable. Our phenomenon of consciousness is therefore a stream of immaterial and impersonal events; it is associated with the body in life but will come to exist dependent on another body after the death of the body. This is not a persisting self but an impersonal series of mental events. Our reality is made up of a connection of momentary events. So mind and matter are not substance but events, and mental and material events interact in a flux.

The Sautrantika teaching are different from the Abhidharma teachings as it rejections dharma as actual reality. The Abhidharma introduced the idea of permanence in the world through dharmas and the Sautrantika rejects this



unconditional reality. This is because the Abhidharma dharmas go against the Buddhist principle of impermanence (anitya). They retain the notion of dharma but eliminate the notion of svabhava. They believe that our basic reality is just flashes of momentary energy (svalakshana). Therefore all things momentary exist only in the minute when they are produced. This is a radicalisation of impermanence as everything is instantaneous and has no duration. All materials are also impermanent as all things decay. Decay needs no external causes as it is a self destruction of the material. So there is only ever a present, there is no past or future as everything is instantaneous. An enduring and persisting self can certainly not exist as there is only momentary existence. Thus consciousness actually is just a flux of momentary flash of energy hence there is no need for a conscious self with a past, present and future.

The doctrine of sakaravada teaches us that we are never in contact with the material world but only perceive an aspect based upon the sense organs and sense consciousness:

It asserts the mediated character of cognition, the recognition that perception apprehends its object through the mediation of a mark left by the object on consciousness.

Therefore reality is not what we think it is as there is a gap between our minds and what is actually occurring. It is not a self being confronted by a world of objects. It is actually our sense consciousness taking on the form of the sakaravada. Before there was a need for a self for something to be

consciously perceived by the senses but in this theory there is no need for this as we are not in direct contact with the world (bahyartha-pratyaks).

The Nyaya- Vaisheshika taught that the world had an objective structure, that we are permanent, that there were persisting entities and they were substances. Dignaga, a Buddhist scholar believed that these categories that have been discovered in reality are just imposed by the workings of the mind and don't actually exist in reality. Through the process of our imagination (kalpana) is what we are giving words to. It is our language that imposes structure of reality. The mind groups svalakshana together. So words for generalities, for classes, for types, for qualities and words for individual substances all would seem to have repeatable properties are just our interpretation of the world and not actually real. Our minds are linking together different particulars and imagine them as an enduring and persisting entity. We forget that we are part of a process and talk in terms of us being stable observers not matter or quantum self, however we are not except from processes. Thus the belief of the self is just a word invented by the mind for the different processes in flux.

Yogacara, another School of Buddhism, rejects the Sautrantika and Abhidharma idea of there being a reality independent of the mind. These ideas are interconnected and give rise to other ideas whilst being self illuminating. The unenlightened believe they have a self or they are conscious but this actually arises from a stream of conscious self illuminating ideas. This is because these self-conscious ideas may wrongly believe they have a self when actually they are part of a flux. It is the mind-set that makes us have this belief as this establishes how we perceive the world.

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Even though the world is mind only, the ideas cast themselves as external resulting in the misconstrued belief that we have a self. People dont feel individual because of the external world but because of the certain habitual mind-set they have, their feelings and moods.