

Is Non-Self A Problem for Buddhist Ethics?

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The Meaning of Non-Self

Early Buddhist teachings deny the concept of the self. In the context of Brahmanical tradition from which Buddhism originated, Buddhism presented a clear break. Brahmanism preached that adherents might eventually be able to reach release from the cycle of samsara through ritual sacrifice and the realization that the soul (atman) is one with the divine. Buddhism disputed this, saying that there was no self (anatman). This idea left much for the rest of Buddhist thought to explain. If there is no self, then why be ethical? If there is no self, then what is reincarnated, and why should one care about the fate of one's future incarnations? If there is no self, then what is it that can reach nirvana? Buddhism has partial answers to these questions, but they are not satisfying. In a very real way, however, they are not really meant to be.

Observers of Buddhism are intended to be surprised by the concept of non-self. In the dialog between Nagasena and King Milinda, the king asks Nagasena's name. After giving it, Nagasena says that it is "but a denotation, appellation, designation, a current usage, for Nagasena is only a name since no person is got at here" (Milinda 34). Milinda is confused. How can there be no Nagasena, when he is clearly looking at Nagasena? Nagasena replies by asking Milinda to show him his chariot. "Is the pole the chariot, sire?" Milinda says that no, the pole isn't. Nagasena goes through each part of the chariot, and for each Milinda denies that it is the chariot (Milinda 36). So then, where is the chariot?

The chariot is a metaphor for the idea of the five aggregates, or skandhas, which appears throughout the tradition: form, feeling, conceiving, volitional forces, and consciousness. Like the parts of a chariot, none are the self; but what we think of as the self reduces down into the five aggregates, and nothing more. Form is likened to a "ball of foam," devoid of substance; feeling to a "bubble;" conceiving to a "mirage;" volition to trying to find heartwood in a banana tree; and consciousness to an "illusion." One should aim to see them as they really are: "empty, quite worthless" (Sayings 220-22).

Nagasena accuses Milinda of "lying" when he said he arrived by chariot (Milinda 37). Nagasena is not saying this because he is genuinely upset at the king, but rather to prove a point. Nagasena appears to not have much of a quarrel with referring to the self in ordinary parlance, and admits "it is well" to do so, but that the "highest meaning" denies the self. However, it is telling in the conversation that Nagasena does refer to Milinda personally in the

common way. Buddhism has not invented a new kind of language that denies the self, nor does it need to.

Thus, in Buddhism, it is not exactly that the self is denied. It is rather claimed to be purely *instrumental* for purposes like everyday conversation: simply a “current usage.” If one really investigates the self, it appears that there is none. The concept might be useful, but it is ultimately false.

A problem for Buddhist Ethics?

Non-self poses a problem to many of Buddhism’s other teachings. For one, it appears to implicate Buddhist ethics. Why should one exercise right speech, action, and thought if there is nobody who is affected by them? Buddhism borrowed the concept of karma from Brahmanism, and teaches that bad deeds will result in bad consequences for one’s future self, and good deeds will result in good consequences. If there is no self, how can one have a future self to worry about? How can one even be reincarnated at all? Who exactly reaches nirvana when becoming a Buddha or an arhat?

Nagasena himself recognizes this contradiction, asking, “is there, Nagasena, any being which passes on from this body to another body?” Nagasena denies that there is, and this confuses Milinda. Nagasena explains:

“If a man should steal another man’s mangoes, would he deserve a thrashing?”

“Yes, of course!”

“But he would not have stolen the same mangoes as the other one had planted. Why should he deserve a thrashing?”

“For the reason that the stolen mangoes had grown because the others were planted. Just so, your majesty, because of the deeds one does, whether pure or impure . . .one is linked again with another life and is not freed from one’s evil deeds.” (class slides)

Nagesena is arguing that although the self does not exist, one is still causally connected with one’s future self, including through cycles of rebirth. This allows for karma to function as expected, and provides a justification of other Buddhist teachings. As such, the teachings imply that causal connections resolve the paradoxes inherent in non-self.

This justification, however, raises more questions than it answers. Nagasena does not explain why causal connections should make one concerned with the welfare of the future beings with whom one is causally connected. Suppose a traveler spits a sunflower seed beside the road, and months later it sprouts into a sunflower. The traveler planted the seed, and is causally connected to the sunflower. But for what reason should they care about that sunflower, rather than any other sunflower on the side of that road? No reason is provided.

It may not make sense to take the mango analogy very seriously as a real attempt to logically reconcile seemingly contradictory concepts. Rather, it appears that it may serve to merely *seem* to provide an explanation, a way out for those who do not wish there to be a contradiction. If this is so, it is easy to see the justification as flimsy and the contradiction as damning. Neither are true.

The Buddha himself does not shy away from making fairly dramatic declarations about what, exactly, his teachings are intended to accomplish. This is most apparent in the metaphor of the raft (Sayings 72), where the Buddha compares his teachings with a raft that is used to cross a river. Once the river is crossed, the Buddha says, it would not make sense to continue holding the raft, just because it was once useful.

The Buddha seems to clearly suggest that many of his teachings are instrumental. Buddhism is a raft, or a path: it is not a set of truths that always obtain logically. While some Buddhist teachings may be useful for crossing the river, that does not mean they are ultimately true. The Buddhist embrace of instrumental teachings provides a striking parallel with Nagasena's acceptance of the "current usage" of the self. Just as the self is merely a useful fiction for expressing ideas, so too might be the idea that we personally may reach a state of nirvana or suffer pain as a result of immoral actions.

The concept of non-self may be giving a glimpse of the "other side of the river": the truth that there was nobody crossing it after all. Like the raft, the notion of the self can be discarded once one has cultivated the proper virtues; before one does so, karma provides a useful justification restraining those who have not yet. The mango tree is, crucially, the bridge that prevents the discontinuity of abandoning the self from being too jarring. It too is simply a raft that allows one to smoothly cross from one side of the river (belief in the self) to the other (denial of the self).

If this interpretation is correct, it may seem to be damning to Buddhism for it to declare contradictory teachings that essentially "cover the bases" of differing levels of devotion towards Buddhism. However, the importance of logical validity is itself denied by the Buddha, who says:

"...you should not go along with something because of what you have been told, because of authority, because of tradition, because of accordance with scripture, on the grounds of reason, on the grounds of logic, because of analytic thought, because of abstract theoretical pondering, because of the appearance of the speaker, or because some ascetic is your teacher. When you know for yourselves that particular qualities are unwholesome, blameworthy, censured by the wise, and lead to harm and suffering when taken on and pursued, then you should give them up..." (Sayings 252)

The Buddha has anticipated the analytic tendency of some (such as those writing papers for Yale University classes) to find contradictions and try to prove theories. He denies that logic will lead to the correct theory, and thus logic has no potency against the teachings of Buddhism. An analytic argument against this teaching is making a category error: logic cannot be used against something which claims to be beyond logic. Whether or not anything can truly be beyond logic is a topic too expansive to discuss here.

Note also that the Buddha does not state here that unwholesome qualities lead to harm and suffering “for oneself,” rather simply that they lead to harm and suffering. This provides further evidence for the claim that many Buddhist concepts are merely a vehicle for delivering ultimate truth. The expected order seems to be something like the following. Initially, one needs to reduce immoral and unethical actions, which do in fact result in negative outcomes. In order to do this initially, some notion of the self is useful, as it keeps one afraid of negative outcomes in future lives and hopeful for positive outcomes. As one progresses, one learns (by obtaining direct knowledge) to avoid harm and suffering in themselves, rather than because they have a particular effect on oneself. At this point, the self can be discarded.

Mahayana Buddhism takes these ideas further, by starting with the assumption that people can be immediately persuaded to help others through compassion, rather than simply to help themselves. It encourages self-sacrifice: “whatever harm you have brought upon others, out of self-interest, now bring it upon yourself in the interest of other living beings.”

The Mahayana tradition, like the older tradition, teaches karma and reincarnation. However, unlike the earlier tradition, it does not try to reconcile non-self with karma through mysterious analogies. Rather, it uses a rather analytic argument:

“[I]f you do not try to remove the suffering of others because you reason ‘this suffering does not oppress me,’ then why should you try to avoid the pains that will afflict your body in a future life?” (How To Be A Bodhisattva, 428)

The point is that one should *not* care especially about one’s future life, just because it is causally connected to oneself now. Rather, one should care about *all* suffering, in *all* beings, regardless of connection to oneself (though not exactly: there is no concept of “oneself” and it is being used here only as a “current” usage). This is a logical conclusion of the denial of the self. It is interestingly the same way the paradox is resolved far later by Derek Parfit, in his 1984 work of analytic philosophy *Reasons and Persons*. The key is that the denial of the self does not reduce the ills of suffering, but rather denies that what matters is that it is bad *for someone in particular*.

Concluding Thoughts

It is tempting to comb through Buddhist Thought looking for contradictions. But different adherents may believe different teachings at different times. Humans can easily hold contradictory beliefs, and this does not necessarily defeat them, especially if their contradictions are not laid bare or are superficially covered up.

Buddhism, as we have seen, is an explicitly instrumentalist school of thought: its teachings can be interpreted as being useful towards an end (the cessation of suffering). Truth is a secondary consideration. That said, it appears as though non-self is the deeper and less instrumental position of Buddhism, while ideas of the punishment of future selves may simply be instrumental towards the ethical behavior needed to hate suffering in itself.

The intermediary instrumental step is in fact less emphasized by Mahayana Buddhism, which teaches the elimination of suffering and the renunciation of the self from the beginning. This makes for a more logically consistent theory; but for a tradition beyond logic, the importance of that is ambiguous.