

## Buddhist Doctrines of Identity and Impermanence in the Western Mind

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Deeply rooted in Aristotle's notion of substance, Platonic form and Judeo-Christian metaphysics, for the western mind the Buddhist doctrines of *anatman* and impermanence present a major stumbling block. And there is no quick fix. How does one reconcile the apparent continuity and connectedness of personal existence –which gives rise to the notion of the self with the idea that personal consciousness is reducible to conditionality?

In Buddhism the idea of a transcendental or eternal self is denied as non-substantial and impermanent: a non-verifiable metaphysical entity that leads to grasping, craving and suffering. Buddhism posits that things continually change, are continually reducible and recyclable, and that no inherent existence or metaphysical "self" exists but rather a series of aggregates give rise to the experience so that consciousness itself is causally conditioned. As applied to the notion of no- self the one who is reborn and the one who dies and the one who follows the path and the one who realizes enlightenment are neither the same nor different selves. With the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence an analysis of the notion of the "self" breaks down into layers to discover that the self does not exist independently at all. Because of simultaneous arising and falling of each moment the self exists as essentially empty.

Nevertheless, for many westerners, at least, the idea of a permanent self receives reinforcement through a network of various phenomena. We live as if we had a fixed continuous self, from one moment to the next, one day to the next, etc., due to our perception of constancy. This sense of ongoing empirical self is often misunderstood to mean that there exists a metaphysical self, which transcends the changes taking place in our physical and mental surrounds. But as the idea of the self becomes evident through various phenomenon like language and interdependent arising, the question of how exactly the idea of self emerges on a conventional/empirical level when it does not emerge at all on an ultimate level still begs an answer.

I live in my western skin and I meditate in western mind and I worry about how we live. In recent years much awareness has evolved concerning the philosophical issues raised by living in a growing global and multicultural world. Not just tolerance, but empathy based on philosophical understanding is increasingly essential if we are to maintain ecological sustainability and the continuation of life on this planet. For many westerners the principles and practices of Buddhism have helped to promote awareness, well-being, health, peace of mind and compassion. That so many westerners have sought solace and refuge in the teachings of the Buddha and Buddhism in general is a testament to humanity's desire to alleviate suffering. This is all very hopeful. The idea that "East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet," has long since passed. However, the road to enlightenment holds some particular and peculiar stumbling blocks for the western mind, specifically, the doctrine of *anatman*.

In western cultures, at least, we live as if we had a fixed, permanent self. We think of ourselves as the same person from one moment to the next to one day to the next. This sense of on-going self is often interpreted to mean that there exists a metaphysical self which transcends the mental and physical changes. However, Buddhism posits that things continually change, are continually reducible and reconstructable, and that no inherent existence or metaphysical self exists, but rather a series of aggregates, causally

conditioned which give rise to the waves of consciousness for which there is no need to attach “the self.” Nevertheless the illusion of self exists, in fact seems necessary. For a westerner, how does one reconcile the apparent continuity of personal existence – which gives rise to the notion of the self with the idea that the personal self is non-substantial and reducible to conditionality?

In the course of this paper I will focus on some of the underlying metaphysical assumptions and philosophical issues many westerners face in studying Buddhism: specifically, the difference between the western notions of substance and causality and the Buddhist notion of causal continuity. In addition, I intend to examine how and why the role of substantiality and self have become so intertwined in the western mind and how the Buddhist doctrine of *anatman* can facilitate movement from fixed notions of substantiality to a deeper understanding of the continuing process of sustainability and life on this planet. Before moving on to a comparative analysis of how the west understands the doctrine *anatman*, a few words on Aristotle’s notion of substance might be helpful to explain the continued fixation the west seems to have on substance.

Briefly, for Aristotle the question of Being is the question of substance. According to Aristotle things are said to have being in so far as they have reference to “some one nature”. The question of substance then, depends on the nature of this one. In the *Metaphysics* Aristotle analyzes the various senses of “being” as figures of predication. Here he establishes the category of substance as primary. Aristotle explains that substance has two senses; the ultimate subject, which cannot be further predicated by something else, and whatever has individual and separate existence. Later, in the text in BK *Zeta*, he distinguishes four further senses of substance, as essence, “what a thing is,” as universal, as genus, and as substrate. Here he states that it is substance as substrate that is primary. Substance itself is further broken down as matter, as form and as the combination. Aristotle specifies that of these three it is more truly form which is primary substance. Here he makes a crucial distinction between form in matter and pure form as separated substance.

For Aristotle, substance emerges, then, in two final senses, the individual thing as form and matter, and form as essence, what a thing is, existing in and of itself apart from matter. All forms therefore, are called being only in so far as they have a reference to the separated substances. Replete with Platonic elements, the entire *Metaphysics* can be said to be a doctrine of form. “Being”, the proper object of metaphysics remains for Aristotle the unchanging nature of separated substances. Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* is not concerned with particulars as such but “being as being,” so that Being itself cannot be predicated. Aristotle referring to metaphysics as the divine science is following Parmenides’ claim that Being is unchanging and one definite kind of nature. Hence the separated substances, or pure forms which exists apart from matter form the principles of motion and account for the various motions of the heavenly bodies.

All this, brings us to Aristotle’s notion of the unmoved mover(s). For many medieval philosophers this translated to the idea of a supreme mover or God which for Aristotle was the eternal source of motion, both the efficient and final cause. In the *Physics* and again in the first book of the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle analyzes four types of causality (material, formal, efficient and final). Wisdom then becomes an understanding of causes and first principles. To know for Aristotle, then is to know by means of a cause. Aristotle sought to account for change by seeking an unchanging substance behind the elements to which changing qualities could adhere. Change is a matter of causality, a movement from actuality to potentiality, based on matter, form and privation of particular things. However, in order for change itself to occur there must be distinct efficient cause. Every change, every motion requires a principle, then the world in general, the universe

itself require a prime mover. Aristotle maintains that the ultimate source of eternal motion must be an unchanging non-sensible substance. The unmoved mover or prime mover, then is the ultimate cause, simple and unitary, and is the basic ground of the order of the universe by being the source of eternal motion that provides general conditions for all other on-going processes. The prime mover's principle reality is thought, contemplative self thinking thought, or thought of thought, and thereby does not move itself, but causes motion by desire or attraction as the final cause. The unmoved mover then is both the final and efficient cause. The whole universe for Aristotle, then is substantial based and is a teleological caused, and as he says "does nothing in vain."<sup>1</sup>

One could argue that this single most important intellectual breakthrough the west could experience would be to abandon its fixation on substance and form. Indeed many disciplines in the west are proceeding along these lines precisely and breaking through traditional categories that bind us to false notions of self. Fields such as neuropsychology, physics, deep ecology and feminist philosophy are breaking out of dualistic models of thinking and appropriating Buddhist principles and practices to form a more organic and holistic approach, one not mired in rigid metaphysical assumptions. However, this habit of thought is not easily shaken. We are after all steeped in thousands of years of Greek philosophy and Judeo-Christian religions. Ever since the time of Plato, if not before, western thought has been formed by notions of the immortality of the soul, eternal forms and mind and body dualism. Even Aristotle's critique of the Platonic forms does nothing to help the situation, except to add another layer, called substance and mode of change, called causality. Aristotle's notion of substance has been accused of hindering much of the later development of what is now western science. Post Newtonian physics and neuropsychology bear little resemblance to Aristotle's basic categories and notions of form and matter, which have been shattered by sub-atomic physics. Unfortunately, this does not completely translate to everyday thinking for your average westerner who still clings to traditional metaphysical categories and western religious thought.

We are taught in the west that the Buddha's teachings on the "Middle Way" constitute a path between two extremes; eternalism (belief in an eternal subsisting reality) and materialism (belief that all life is reducible to the physical/material world). The Buddha held that whatever our metaphysical beliefs, whether the soul survives the death of the body, or whether god (s) exist/s or not, are purely speculative and non-verifiable from a standpoint of knowledge and reality. The nature of the path for Buddhist is causal, phenomenological and empirical, and requires no metaphysical assertion beyond itself. Such a path we are told is the release from suffering into liberation or Nirvana. According to the Buddhist doctrines all existence is characterized as impermanent, unsatisfactory and non-substantial. It is not that existence is "non-existent" just not self-existent. It is the metaphysical belief in self-existence that accounts for our suffering and bondage. In arguing against an eternalist position of a permanent or eternal self the Buddha posited that we are a bundle of perceptions, "a group of aggregates, not discrete and discontinuous, but connected and continuous by causality."<sup>2</sup> According to the Buddha the idea of a permanent or transcendental self was an unverifiable metaphysical entity that led to further grasping, craving and suffering. However this does not lead to complete materialism because of the continuity of the causal process and in denying the metaphysical self the Buddha did not deny re-birth or moral responsibility. The challenge, here, for the western mind, then, is to learn to think in terms of causal continuity rather than substantial causality.

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle's *De caelo*, A4, 271a 33.

<sup>2</sup> David Kalupahana, *Buddhist Philosophy, A Historical Analysis* (Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press: 1976), 39.

Of course, as the Buddhist say, when one makes the cause the effect is there, may or may not be the case with Aristotle depending on how one understands efficient causality. While Aristotle's four types of causality blend into the final cause which itself is spiritual and spherical in effect there is no higher order of causal thinking unfolding into a matrix of conditionality. Aristotle's causality tends to be linear, temporal and horizontal, meaning it passes through time but does not pierce it. Causality is not vertical or conditional, and not seen as existing independently of a first/final cause.

This notion of causality operating through independently existing things has predominated much of the western methodology in the philosophy, science, health and medicine and psychology for many centuries. For the western mind the Buddha's notion of causality can be very liberating, especially, understood in the context of alleviating the fixation on substance. The primary difference being that in Buddhism causality is explained as causal continuum, a matrix, and not as transcendental realm or as something adhering to substance. With the Buddha's denial of substance, reality is explained by causal relations and the western mind is left with a huge gap/emptiness in understanding.

In Buddhism, the law of causality and conditioned phenomenon is a radical vision unlike anything presented in western philosophy. It goes beyond a linear understanding of causality and posits a causal continuum. The universe as a causal network implies that all given phenomenon are dependent not on one isolated or immutable cause, but upon innumerable casual factors and conditions, every one of which joins in the production of the sum total of what is. All becomes relative and conditioned. There are no individual substances just a series of interwoven matrixes of conditioned phenomena that give rise to existence. According to David Kalupahana the aspect of conditionality is most essential to the causal continuum in that it provides for causal uniformity and allows for a coherent explanation of the life process without subscribing to any metaphysical theories of essentialism. The causal process is sufficient to explain the continuity of a thing or being without positing a self or substance. In the Buddha's "Discourse on Causal Relations," he maintains that everything in the world can be explained by the law of causality, its conditioned phenomena and the relationship existing between them. This notion of causality refutes any theories of self causation, external causation and any combination of the two.

Causality, for the Buddhist explains the arising and passing away of all things and therefore all things are under the corollaries of impermanence, unsatisfactory, and non-substantiality. Impermanence is an empirical account of change and synonymous with arising, passing away, birth and destruction. Because of impermanence it follows that all things are unsatisfactory. Because of our desires we crave satisfaction and suffer because no things offer permanence or permanent happiness. While the average westerner can certainly grasp the cause and effect relationship of desire to suffering as impermanence and non-satisfaction, the third corollary, non-substantiality, does not fit in with their metaphysical predilections and challenges our assumptions about the causation of the human personality.

However, on what one would call a conventional or empirical level, the self seems necessary to survive and seems in every moment of sensory, ephemeral perceptions. Language exemplifies the conventional necessity of the self with words like "I" which are *sin qua* non of grammar. The common western belief in a subsistent reality holds that the self consists of an unchanging structure or nature that has various experiences and persists though time (and maybe beyond), although at no point can we actually point to anything that exists independently. David Hume captures this notion when he says "when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*... I never catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but perception." The only way to understand

this act of observation is not by attaching it to a self but by understanding that nothing about it remains constant. What we call the “self” can never be extracted out from the process of perception/experience. Nevertheless the illusion of a permanent self receives reinforcement through a network of phenomena all part of the human experience.

One of major points stemming from a Buddhist analysis of the self is that the Buddha’s denial of a permanent identity was not a denial of continuity. The “self” is analyzed in terms of aggregates, material form, feeling, perception, disposition and consciousness. The illusion of the “self” often comes as mistaking one of these five aggregates as permanent and unchanging. These aggregates themselves, however are causally conditioned, including consciousness. The Buddha’s reject of a metaphysical entity or permanent self is based on the assertion that consciousness itself is causally conditioned and contingent. In arguing against self or external causation the Buddha emphatically denied the existence of a causal agent. “Rejecting the idea of a permanent consciousness that functions as the subject or agent, the Buddha insisted that he has in many ways spoken of consciousness as being causally produced and that apart from causes there would be no arising of consciousness.”<sup>3</sup> All cognitive events, physical and non-physical result from the aggregates’ causal interplay. In replacing the agent or cognizing “I” with a play of causal factors resulting in momentary cognitive events, the Buddhist tradition treats the cognizing agent as merely another way of referring to the embodied and dynamic functioning of the five aggregates. Consciousness exists from one moment to the next, from one lifetime to the next by a series of causal links. What is carried over from one moment to the next, from one lifetime to the next is a causal pattern, the stream of consciousness or the stream of becoming. “This unconscious mental process constitutes the stream of becoming and maintains continuity between two lives without interruption... but itself exists in a state of flux.”<sup>4</sup> Our experience of the world thus takes shape not through a unified permanent self or causal agent but through the bundling of the continually changing aggregates and conditioned processes. Because of the simultaneous arising and falling of each moment the self exists as essentially empty, i.e., non-substantial.

Yet, dharmas emerge. Dharma, Sanskrit for what holds together, bear or sustain, can refer to several things in Buddhism. In terms of the question of self it refers to the way things arise. “At rebirth one dharma arises, while another stops, but the two processes take place almost simultaneously. Therefore the first act of consciousness in the new existence is neither the same as the act of consciousness in the previous existence, nor is it another.”<sup>5</sup> Each dharma depends on the conditions of the dharma which preceded it, and those conditions themselves originated interdependently based on the five aggregates. Thereby emerges karma, the idea that that all phenomena arise in dependence on the conditions which cause and proceed them, and give rise to another series of conditions. This arising of events adds to the growing sense that phenomena exist in opposition. No matter how well we may understand the Buddhist logic of no-self, the notion of self still arises. We come to understand that the self and the no-self somehow co-exist. Something and nothing occur simultaneously.

The principle of interdependent co-arising informs us that in order for something to exist it must participate in a relationship. One reaches nirvana by understanding the illusionary nature of *samsara*. It follows then that nirvana and *samsara* form two parts of the same whole. These parts could not exist separately from one another, nor could each

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<sup>3</sup> David Kalupahana, *Causality: The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1975), 119.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>5</sup> Trans. Conze, Edward, “The Questions of King Milinda,” *Buddhist Scriptures*, (New York: Penguin Classics, 1959).

exist merely as a conjunction of the individual parts. The two parts form a continuum that manifests more at one extreme than another, but never as only one extreme. This explains why Buddhism continually emphasizes the ever-present Buddha nature (potential for enlightenment or understanding truth) which exists not in opposition to non-enlightenment but in conjunction with it. Hence the self, necessarily exists in order for no-self to exist, albeit on different levels, but the two participate in the same whole. The explanation of why there is no-self comes from a level of ultimate reality while the necessity for self emerges on a conventional level. Ultimate reality refers to the five aggregates and the ideas that no self underlies them whatsoever, while conventional reality refers to linguistic designations which make it appear as if there is a corresponding reality which actually exists. Buddhists neither wholly reject nor wholly deny one reality over another, but acknowledge that both exist in human life. Both the acceptance of self and the rejection of self prove inextricable from the co-existing realities in which they occur.

The self which exists on a conventional level in such a way that various perceptions seem to reside in a stable abiding entity can be accounted for in Buddhist terms by inter-dependent arising of the five aggregates through causal connectivity. While some western philosophers and scholars like Hume can logically explain why the self does not exist, the Buddhists go beyond the theoretical to actually practice staying within the flow of experience. As James Giles points out “self awareness can be called a secondary phenomenon, for the object of self awareness is not part of the basic fabric of experience.”<sup>6</sup> Still, no matter how much the illusion of the self becomes evident through various phenomenon like language and interdependent arising, the question of how exactly the idea of self emerges at all still remains unanswered.

In the west, we can answer how for the Buddhist the conventional self exists or asserts itself, but we can not answer how it exists. In the way that our consciousness as human beings has something to do with our sensory perceptions, and the content of our sensory perceptions presents itself to us through physiological systems, we might look at the brain for an answer. However, in spite of all the recent advancements in the fields of neuroscience and neuropsychology, especially in terms of brain functions, the question of how self-awareness or self-consciousness arises from the workings of physiological systems still needs to be answered. Neuroscientists and Buddhists alike have pointed out our mental capacities as given factors in our perceptions of the world without wholly explaining how those factors function as they do. We can certainly imagine the concept of self-changing according to perceptual content. As Hume argued that our sense of self comes from changing perceptions in a rapid succession so Katigiri explains that we conceive of and continuous and permanent abiding self and environment because of our misconceptions of time. To understand that “there is nothing for the mind to hold onto”<sup>7</sup> is to understand that the self by existing in impermanence does not exist. Here I can not help but ask; what mind? What does not exist? Even though the details that constitute the self can be seen as impermanent and non-substantial the fundamental idea of self still persists.

The fact that the idea of the self must exist due to the nature of *samsara*, language, succession and perceptions does not satisfy the original question: How does one reconcile the apparent continuity and connectedness of personal existence with the idea that consciousness is reducible to transitory events? In coming full circle back to our question we may realize that our only solution is to accept our inability to know and to realize in our grasping for a specific answer we seek something outside the moment. Our grasping

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<sup>6</sup> James Giles, “Hume, Buddhism and Personal Identity.” *Philosophy East and West* 43 (1993): 175-200.

<sup>7</sup> Dainin Katigiri. *Each Moment is the Universe* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2007), 9.

indicates the belief in a self capable of experiencing the satisfaction of knowing an answer. This seeking/grasping affirms our false belief in the illusion of self and demonstrates our lack of presence in the reality of impermanence

As a good westerner, all I can say is “forgive me my impermanence, forgive me my humanity.” What the western mind has difficulty grasping is actually what Buddhist practice in being present to the fullness of the moment, not just understanding but experiencing our inter-dependence, our fluidity, our connection to what is. This is been most beneficial in so many areas in the west in helping overcoming the rigidity and adherence to substance and categorically thinking. The Buddhist teachings have helped the western mind to move beyond the dichotomized thought of being and non-being to a more holistic and organic understanding of the self and the world. It is no accident then that in the west that many disciplines and interdisciplinary movements have started shaping a new paradigm. One possible solution to our stuckness as emerged from both feminist perspectives and deep ecology.

One of the more meaningful points that has arisen from a feminist perspective and analysis of Buddhism has been the emphasis on interconnection. Given the anti-metaphysical nature of the Buddha’s teachings on non-atman and non-attachment, one does find the insistence on the supremacy of the self with its accompanying social schisms of gender inequality and domination. As Anne Klein said: “This is partly because epistemology and ontology have become quite separate fields in the West, a rift which has been recently criticized by feminists. Buddhism tends to unite epistemological and ontological concerns in the process of developing categories of subjectivity. The individual is not framed *ex nihilo*, nor is it dispatched *ad nihilam*, but merges within a matrix in which it is viable and effective without exaggerated self-sufficiency.”<sup>8</sup>

This would seem to suggest that incorporating the Buddhist ideals would provide a basis for eliminating western notions of supremacy and subjectivity. Indeed, many feminists have argued that Buddhism, because of its core teachings on independent co-arising with the understanding of the dynamic between ultimate and relative truth see this understanding of self as relationship, of interconnection as a way of healing and bridging many of the problems associated with our western understanding of individual autonomy within a social matrix. The feminist maintain that this cuts the debate regarding social constructions and notions of the self. In a truly Buddhist fashion the notion of interconnection and co-emergence is the middle way towards shaping a sense of identity and self in relation to the social world and the world of nature. The Buddhism in its teachings on emptiness, *sunyata*, empty all categories of relative difference. The Buddhist teachings would not therefore ultimately distinguish between self and other, culture and other, self and environment/nature. For the Buddhist, I believe, what separates us is ultimately no separation.

The notion of interconnectedness shared by many western feminists in their analysis of Buddhism focuses on relation identity and interdependence of all existence. Ecological interconnections and inter/co-dependencies similarly form a philosophical foundation for the ecological and eco-feminists movements. Indeed contemporary environmental activists and eco-feminists around the world are proceeding along these lines precisely. In this way the feminist movement and environmental movements are themselves a synthesizing agent utilizing the Buddhist notion of interconnection to break through our western boundaries, notions of substantiality and destructive practices moving us from substantiality to sustainability.

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<sup>8</sup> Rita Nakashima Brock, Paula Cooley and Anne Klein, “The Questions that Won’t Go away: A Dialogue About Women in Buddhism and Christianity,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Fall 1990, 95.

Here the Buddhist doctrine of *anatman*, which denies the distinction between self and non-self underscores the oneness of the universe and provides us with an ethical principle for sustainability. According to the Buddhist principle of interconnection, diverse individual appearances and phenomena are all interconnected in the unity of existence. All beings, animal, plant, and minerals exists interdependently. Our interconnection with our environment ought to instill in us respect, humility, mindfulness and compassion. The Buddha taught that our attachment to the notion of a fixed, permanent substantial self prevents us from attaining spiritual liberation. This attachment illustrates the obstacles in our way for caring for the earth. By breaking out of the bonds of our illusory self we can become with the environment and mindful of our inter-being with all that exists.