

HPPH7013
THE SELF: EAST AND WEST

Assignment 1 – Essay
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Prompt:
Formulate your own essay title / question

*Is the Buddha's teaching of non-self compatible with
the teaching of karmic rebirth?*

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0. Introduction

The aim of the Buddha's message is primarily practical: the liberation of every sentient being from existential suffering (*dukkha*) by extinguishing the causes of suffering itself through the knowledge of the Four Noble Truths and the enactment of the Noble Eightfold Path (Bartley 2015, 23-33). Among the sources of suffering, there is ignorance (*avidyā*), that is a misconception on how things really are, which can be removed by knowledge and wisdom (Harvey 2013b, 61-62). Therefore, accompanying the main practical purpose, the Buddha's teaching requires a certain theoretical outlook to achieve liberation as its result.

This essay argues that two of the Buddha's fundamental teachings on human nature – those of non-self and karmic rebirth – are not incompatible as someone might contend. The first paragraph presents the basics of teaching of non-self, according to which no substantial self can be found. The second paragraph introduces the teachings of karma and rebirth, showing an apparent contradiction between these notions and the absence of a substantial self. The third paragraph explains how that apparent contradiction can be resolved.

1. Self and non-self

Along with the teachings of the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path, the Buddha's doctrine of non-self is of utmost importance in his therapeutical perspective, because wrong views concerning the self are symptoms of ignorance, which is the cause of attachment and thus suffering (Harvey 2013a, 37-39). According to the non-self teaching, we are not persistent, independent, and unchanging selves – nor is there anything in us which corresponds to these features: failing to recognise this point prevents us from achieving liberation. To understand the teaching of non-self, it could be helpful to introduce three “premises” to which the teaching is related.

Firstly, the Buddha's teaching of non-self was delivered in a historical context where contemporary competing schools were discussing several and variegated theories of the self, led by the common belief that a correct understanding of the self would have granted liberation from suffering and death (Harvey

2013a, 34-35). Some of the most prominent philosophical notions of the self were that promoted by the Brahmin authors of the *Upaniṣads*. Although these notions cannot simply be reduced to one interpretation, according to the basics of this view, the “self” or “soul” (*ātman*) is a stable, eternal essence which resides in the physical body, but survives the death of the body by finding a place in another body (Black 2012, 11-16). This view embeds a notion of self as a “substance” – that is, as an inner core of personality which is permanent, unchanging, and independent from anything else (Gowans 2003, 69-71). Thus characterised, the self is meant to be an adequate bearer of personal characters and moral qualities, as well as a vector for reincarnation, because it can transmigrate from body to body, from life to life.

The second premise is based on the early Buddhist theory of the five aggregates (*skhandas*). According to the Buddha, the human personality is composed of two dimensions: that of materiality and that of mentality. Materiality consists of the aggregate of form (*rūpa*), which is made up of elemental forces or energies, the combination of which generates the parts of a living body. Mentality consists of four aggregates: feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saṃjñā*), volitional formations (*saṃskāra*) and consciousness (*viññāna*). In short, the five aggregates are psychophysical components which are best understood as dynamic fluxes constantly flowing, whose interactions and proper organization make up a “person” intended as «a cluster of changing physical and mental processes» (Harvey 2013a, 34; see also Black 2012, 18-19; MacKenzie 2014, 198-199). On this basis, it is possible to anticipate that «the early Buddhists deny the notion of an abiding self, instead discussing human beings in a way that emphasises change and multiplicity» (Black 2012, 11; see also Harvey 2013a, 32-34).

The third premise is related to the principle of “dependent origination” (*pratītyasamutpāda*), according to which all things are impermanent, because everything arises, exists and ceases in dependence of the arising, existence and cessation of a network of several combined causes and conditions (SN 12.2). In its most general form, dependent origination is expressed by the formula: «When this is, that is. From the arising of this comes the arising of that. When this is not, that is not. From the cessation of this comes the cessation of that» (SN 12.61). This expression summarises the idea that the impermanence of things is not chaotic or random, but it is governed by causality. In this sense, the world is not constituted by independent persisting entities, but it consists of ever-

changing processes ruled by causal laws (Gethin 1998, 149-159; Williams 2002, 62-72; Gowans 2003, 83-87; Harvey 2013b).

Based on these three premises, we can approach the Buddha's teaching of non-self (*anātman*, the negation of *ātman*). Some scholars have claimed that in this teaching the Buddha presented several philosophical "arguments" against the existence of a substantial self or soul (Gómez 1999, 24-29; Siderits 2023, §3; Velez ND, §3.d). However, it is important to emphasise that this teaching is delivered in the context of meditation with disciples rather than in that of a doctrinal dispute. Therefore, its goal is principally therapeutic – the liberation from suffering and achievement of enlightenment – rather than theoretical: the teaching aims at removing ignorance by dismissing wrong beliefs in a permanent self; this removal in turn contributes to the disappearing of the attachment to the idea of a stable self – along with the suffering that it produces (Gethin 1998, 146-149; Black 2012, 21; Harvey 2013a, 33-36; Ganeri 2016, 74; Nicholson 2023, 68-70).

The teaching of non-self is traditionally known as the Buddha's second sermon, which is recorded as "The Discourse on the Characteristics of the Non-Self" (*Anatta-lakkhana Sutta* – SN 22.59). One of its most famous passages assumes the form of a question-and-answer dialogue between the Buddha and five monks:

«What do you think, *bhikkhus*, is form permanent or impermanent?»

«Impermanent, venerable sir.»

«Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?»

«Suffering, venerable sir.»

«Is what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: "This is mine, this I am, this is my self?"»

«No, venerable sir.»

«Therefore, *bhikkhus*, any kind of form whatsoever, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, all from should be seen as it really is with correct wisdom thus: "This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self".»

In this passage, the Buddha focuses on material form, the first of the five aggregates. By showing the monks that form is impermanent and suffering, he urges them to acknowledge that it cannot be the self, since the self is expected to be unchanging and free from pain. According to the text, the Buddha invites the monks to apply the same method to the other four aggregates (the mental ones: feeling, perception, volitional formations, consciousness). Through this reiteration, the monks reach the same result for every aggregate: since the self is supposed to be

something permanent and free from pain, but each aggregate is impermanent and suffering, none of them is the self, or has the self, or is somehow connected to the self (Gethin 1998, 133-139; Gómez 1999, 27-29; Gowans 2003, 64-66, 78-83, 87-89; Harvey 2013a, 34-38). As a result of the Buddha's discourse, the text reports that the monks attained enlightenment. Then, as some scholars have noted, the Buddha's teaching of non-self is not merely addressed against the Brahmanical doctrines of a substantial self, but it is primarily intended to dispel some deeply rooted, illusory conceptions held about what we are. Whatever we are, we are not substantial selves: the recognition of this fact is a decisive step towards liberation (Gómez 1999, 27; Black 2012, 23-27; Harvey 2013a, 35; Bartley 2015, 37).

To this conclusion someone might object that the above-mentioned passages only show that, according to the Buddha, none of the five aggregates is a substantial self, but they do not show that the Buddha did not believe in a substantial self that is another "thing" beyond the five aggregates (Siderits 2011, 297-298; Nicholson 2023, 61-62). However, as some scholars have suggested, not only is there no textual support for that inference, but also many original sources have the Buddha extending the non-self doctrine to functions, organs, and components other than the five aggregates (Gómez 1999, 24-27; Black 2012, 20). Therefore, it can reasonably be stated that «[t]he occasionally canvassed suggestion that the Buddha accepted that there is a substantial soul as a further fact separate from the interactions of the five *skandhas* may safely be dismissed» (Bartley 2015, 34; see also Williams 2002, 56-62).

Although there is sufficient evidence to deny that the Buddha identified the substantial self with anything accessible to our experience (thus making the theories of a substantial self untenable), some scholars have suggested that the Buddha's teaching did not reject any notion of self. On the contrary, «the target of the doctrine of non-self is not all concepts of self but specifically views of the self as permanent and not dependently arisen» (Velez ND, §3.d; see also Gethin 1998, 145-146; Williams 2002, 62; Gowans 2003, 66-69; Siderits 2023, §3). This remark is important for the next paragraphs.

2. *Karma and rebirth*

In addition to the non-self doctrine, two other teachings characterise the Buddha's understanding of human nature: the idea of karma and that of rebirth. The complexities of these

ideas in the Buddha's message cannot entirely be reported here, but it is helpful to provide a summary of them both.¹

As some scholars have noted, the way the Buddha conceived the notion of karma is a novelty against the conceptual framework of his time (Bronkhorst 1998, 13-16; Williams 2002, 72-74). The word *karma* or *kamma* literally means "action" or "deed", which in the Buddha's contemporary culture referred to "ritual action". But in the Buddha's teaching "karma" denotes specifically "volitional action", whose ethical quality is determined by the person's volition or intention. This means that the morality of an action is determined by the person's mental attitude: «From a technical standpoint, kamma denotes wholesome or unwholesome volition (*cetanā*), volition being the factor responsible for action» (Bodhi 2012, 200; see also Bronkhorst 1998, 13-14; Bodhi 2005; Bartley 2015, 31). Moreover, the doctrine of karma is not only related to the moral quality of intentional actions, but also to their effects: wholesome actions will produce results that improve the person's well-being, whereas the consequences of unwholesome actions will diminish the person's well-being. For instance, it is intentional sincerity that will bring happiness and intentional insincerity that will bring unhappiness. The relationship between the person's intentions and the results of her actions is causally determined by the principle of dependent origination: the law of karma ensures that «willed deeds produce their effects in accordance with their ethical quality just as surely as seeds bear fruit in accordance with their species» (Bodhi 2012, 200; see also Gowans 2003, 104-106).

Nevertheless, we can note that sometimes virtuous people suffer by living and dying in misery, while wicked ones prosper and enjoy success until their deathbed. Consequently, if death were the termination of the person's story, then the doctrine of karma would not make sense, because in many cases the person's actions would not bring their results according to previous intentions during the person's lifetime. However, if we posit a working «principle of moral equilibrium [...] between our actions and the felt quality of our lives» (Bodhi 2005), then there is a need for postulating rebirth – or some sort of survival after death – so that the causal results of actions driven by (un)wholesome intentions in this lifetime can eventually ripen their corresponding beneficial or harmful "fruits" in future lifetimes (Gowans 2003, 110-112; Bodhi 2005; Lin & Yen 2015, 2-4). For this reason, although some scholars

¹ For a deeper introduction to these concepts, see Becker 1989, 108-119; Werner 2008, 29-34; Bodhi 2012; Harvey 2013c, 32-49; Chakrabarti & Lethonen 2020, 26-60; Siderits 2023, §4.

have contended that formally the teachings of karma and rebirth are logically detachable, so that they can be endorsed independently (MacKenzie 2013, 195-196), other scholars have acknowledged that in the Buddha's message the doctrine of karma is primarily intelligible in connection with that of rebirth: they have been defined as «twin teachings» (Bodhi 2005) which cannot easily be disconnected (Lin & Yen 2015, 4-5). In a sense, they constitute one teaching, that can be called «doctrine of karmic rebirth» (Finnigan 2022).

The Buddha's teaching of karmic rebirth presupposes a complex cosmology, where not only do physical, chemical or biological events constitute the fabric of the universe, but also moral events are at work with their causally efficient power (Gowans 2003, 115; Bodhi 2005; Harvey 2013c, 39-40; Siderits 2023, §4). According to this worldview, the type of life each of us is living now is the causal consequence of the actions we committed in innumerable previous lives, that we recursively spent in several planes of existence – be they human, more-than-human, or less-than-human realms. Unless we diligently and successfully apply the Buddha's teaching of the Noble Eightfold Path, so that we can escape this continuous round of rebirths which generates suffering based on ignorance (especially misconceptions on the true nature of the self), we are destined to be born again and again as human beings or other-than-human entities experiencing different level of well-being according to the law of karma. As reported by the early Buddhist sources, the Buddha attained the knowledge of the reality of karma and rebirth during the night of his enlightenment, so that some scholars infer that the Buddha did believe in karmic rebirth (Gowans 2003, 104-106; Bronkhorst 1998, 16). In short, we can conclude that the Buddha accepted and taught both the doctrine of non-self and the doctrine of karmic rebirth, the former being an “antidote” for the endless cycle of rebirths.

However, one of the problems raised against the combined acceptance of these two doctrines is that they seem incompatible: if there are no substantial selves, how can karmic rebirth be possible? If we are not permanent selves, how can we experience the results of our actions in the future – in this life or a subsequent one – and what does it mean that we will be reborn? (Gethin 1998, 140; Gowans 2003, 106-108). As noted in this regard, «the most troublesome philosophical difficulty is the fact that the doctrines of kamma and rebirth seem to presuppose the existence of selves» (Gowans 2003, 68). This supposed logical tension between the teaching of non-self and those of karma and rebirth is clearly expressed in the Buddhist text called *Milindapañha* (Mil II.1.25), where a Greek

sovereign, being taught by a venerable sage that proper names do not denote any substantial entity, addresses the sage thus:

If, most reverend Nāgasena, there be no permanent individuality (no soul) involved in the matter, [...] who is it who lives a life of righteousness? Who is it who devotes himself to meditation? Who is it who attains the goal of the Excellent Way? [...] And who is it who [...] commits any one of the five sins which work out their bitter fruit even in this life? If that be so there is neither merit nor demerit; there is neither doer nor causer of good or evil deeds; there is neither fruit nor result of good or evil Karma.

In other words, seemingly if we endorse the non-self doctrine, we must undergo some logical absurdities related to the teachings of karma and rebirth (Nicholson 2023, 62-65; see also Kumar & Sethy 2021, 206-208). Apparently, we are caught in a logical dilemma: either there is no substantial self as the Buddha teaches, but in this case the teaching of karmic rebirth is undermined by the absence of someone who is born again due to accrued karma; or the teaching of karmic rebirth is correct, but in this case there must be someone who will experience the results of actions in this life or the next ones. Consequently, if one of these doctrines is true, the other one is necessarily false; hence it seems that the teaching of non-self and that of karmic rebirth are incompatible.

If this quandary were proven correct, it would constitute a serious challenge for the Buddha's path of liberation attained through the cessation of the causes of suffering, because the correct outlook required to extinguish the first cause of suffering – ignorance – would be flawed by inconsistencies. How can karmic rebirth be compatible with the absence of a substantial self transmigrating from life to life? The next paragraph will show that there is a way of answering this question.

3. Person and continuity

As mentioned above, the Buddha's denial of the identification of the substantial self with anything detectable in our experience does not entail the denial of the existence of any notion of self. Indeed, some scholars have argued that the Buddha accepted a notion of self that is not substantial – that is, not characterised by permanence in time and independence from anything else. For instance, it has been argued that the Buddha's teachings presuppose an idea of selves as "processes" rather than "substances" (Gowans 2003, 69-72) or selves as

“conventional, empirical entities” rather than “metaphysical ones” (Harvey 2013a, 35-37).

These arguments are grounded on a more fundamental Buddhist conceptual distinction between the notion of a self (*ātman*) and the notion of a person (*pudgala*). Generally, the person is intended as the psychophysical whole constituted by mental and bodily elements with their mutual dependencies and interactions, whereas the self is considered as the core part of this whole, which would be the human essence or soul (Siderits 2011, 298; Ganeri 2012, 64-68; Nicholson 2023, 65-68). As the early Buddhist sources explain (e.g., MN 28, 109), the elements which arise and cease in dependence on each other are the five aggregates of mentality and corporeality, which then should be regarded as «interdependent components of a causally and functionally integrated psychophysical (*nāma-rūpa*) system or process (*skandha-santāna*, an ‘aggregate-stream’ or ‘bundle-continuum’))» (MacKenzie 2014, 198-199). Granted that nothing substantial can be found among the aggregates that constitute us, what we call “person” is a complex configuration of events whose existence from arising to cessation depend on a web of interrelated causes and conditions governed by the principle of dependent origination (Gethin 1998, 141-143; Werner 2008, 36-37; Siderits 2011, 298-299; MacKenzie 2014, 198-199; Bartley 2015, 34-36). In this context, «the personhood concept is a useful fiction» (Siderits 2011, 302), because the term ‘person’ is «a convenient shorthand expression for talking about a causally connected sequence of events» (Bartley 2015, 36).

Given this scenario, how can karma operate within a person’s life in the absence of a persisting self? As the *Visuddhimagga* explains (Vism XVII, 167), there is neither absolute identity nor total diversity between two subsequent stages of an individual life. Today I am not the very same person when I was a child even though, at the same time, I am not entirely different: there is continuity between the present “me” and the past “me.” However, this continuity does not depend on the permanence of a substantial self, but on the existence of causal connections among the mental and bodily events in the bundle of the five aggregates. The continuity of the bundle – and hence its unity over time – is granted by the causal connectedness within the aggregates and between them, which constitutes a sequence of processes, which is so tight that gives the illusion of something permanent – and thus of a substantial self (Bartley 2015, 33). Nevertheless, there is no self beyond the dynamic system composed of the aggregates and their interactions over time. Therefore, karma can operate within a single life because volitional actions are linked to their

corresponding results through the causal connections between psychophysical phenomena that unite the subsequent phases of an individual life (Gowans 2003, 106-107).

If the notion of a person as a continuous stream of causally dependent mental and physical phenomena can explain how karma functions *within* a single life, someone might cast doubts on the functioning of karmic rebirth – that is, the activity of karma *between* subsequent lives. Indeed, seemingly one of the most challenging problems faced by the continuity of the psychophysical bundle of processes called “person” is constituted by death (*maraṇa*). Apparently, death is not simply a deep discontinuity between two stages of the person’s psychophysical stream, but it seems the definitive interruption of that stream due to the dissolution of the five aggregates (Werner 2008, 28-29). If this were the case, the causal process initiated by intentions and producing moral actions would be interrupted permanently without producing its due results.

Undoubtedly, the Buddha regards death as a serious matter, because – among other events – it determines the termination of the aggregate of the body (SN 12.2). In this case, death seems to prevent physical continuity between this life and the next one. However, this does not preclude *any* continuity. As some scholars have noted (Becker 1989, 112-115; Gowans 2003, 107-108; Bodhi 2005; Harvey 2013b, 63-64), the Buddha recognizes that the individual stream of consciousness (*viññāna*) is the bridge between the old personal existence and the new one. More specifically, consciousness works as «the channel for the transmission of kammic influence from life to life across the sequence of rebirths» (Bodhi 2005), since karma is generated through volitions within a person’s stream of consciousness, which carries the karmic energies into the new person, who will experience the karmic results (Bodhi 2005). In this way, it can be claimed that «a morally significant stream of information and dispositions (*saṃskāras*) continues after the death of what has been considered as a person» (Bartley 2015, 26). Accordingly, the event of death is completely reinterpreted: «[D]eath then is not an interruption in the causal flow of phenomena, it is simply the reconfiguring of events into a new pattern in dependence upon the old» (Gethin 1998, 144). Consequently, from the Buddha’s perspective, even in this case the question whether the reborn person is the same as the person who died does not make sense, because they are neither totally identical nor completely different, but there is causal continuity between the two beings. The continuity between lives is ultimately granted by the flux of consciousness, which continues flowing as a vehicle for karma by causally linking volitions and intentions

with their effects (Gethin 1998, 143-144; Williams 2002, 69; Bartley 2015, 34- 38; Lin & Yen 2015, 5-7).

4. Conclusion

In summary, if the “human individual” is not interpreted in a substantial way, but in a more complex, dynamic and interactive way – that is, as a “person” constituted by a dependently originated, integrated bundle of constantly changing psychophysical phenomena – then there is no need for positing an unchanging self accruing karma and migrating from life to life. It is the continuity of the stream of impermanent events causally originating each other which suffices to carry the collected karma throughout stages of a single life and across phases of subsequent lives. Hence, the logical dilemma between the doctrine of non-self and the doctrine of karmic rebirth can be resolved. The Buddha’s two teachings are compatible with each other, thus providing a coherent understanding of the human being.

The theoretical compatibility between these two doctrines reveals that there is logical consistency at the heart of the Buddha’s message. In my opinion, this point is of great significance for the therapeutical purpose of his teachings aimed at the liberation from suffering, because it contributes to the abandonment of ignorance, which is the first cause of suffering. On one hand, freedom from ignorance is granted by a correct understanding of our nature as devoid of self; on the other hand, it is accorded by a right comprehension of karmic rebirth not requiring the existence of a self. In this sense, the acknowledgement of compatibility between non-self and karmic rebirth constitutes one decisive step into the path culminating with spiritual awakening.

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