

Essential Buddhist Tenets on Non-self and Comparative Concepts

Hangan Liu^{1,a,*}

¹Shenghua Zizhu Academy, Shanghai, China Shanghai Tianjiabing Secondary School International
Department, Shanghai, China

a. hanganliu0@gmail.com

*corresponding author

Abstract: This article provides an in-depth analysis of the Buddhist concept of no-self. It clarifies the essential Buddhist tenets of karma, impermanence, emptiness, and the Middle Way, underscoring that nothing in the world, created or influenced by conditions, is constant and unchanging, and that all phenomena emerge from a convergence of their respective conditions or causes. The paper subsequently analyses the significance of the five skandhas—form, sensation, perception, mental formations, and consciousness—as the aggregates that comprise an individual, and explores the five receptive yin, the non-self of humanity, and the non-self of dharma. The paramount objective is the realisation of the authentic self, juxtaposed with the repudiation of the corporeal self accentuated by the deceptive self. The focus is on the Buddhist concept of non-self, demonstrating that the self is neither any of the five aggregates nor a combination of them; this is followed by a clarification of misunderstandings about non-self, including the idea of a self independent of the aggregates, the rejection of chemotaxis theory, and the denial of the eliminative no-self theory. The thought experiment of the ship of Theseus is utilised to clarify the transformation and insubstantiality of the self, prompting individuals to move beyond the traditional conception of self and investigate the idea of non-self. The Buddhist concept of 'not-self' provides individuals with an alternative viewpoint and spiritual understanding, enabling the release of attachment to material possessions and the ego, thus promoting inner peace and tranquilly.

Keywords: Ship of Theseus, Buddhism, Five Skandha, Non-Self.

1. Introduction

Contemporary scholars have systematically categorised the fundamental principles of Buddhism across various research contexts [1, 2]. This research addresses the interpretations of Buddhism as presented through the comparative analysis of contemporary philosophical scholars and the examination of direct revelations from classical Buddhist texts. It will adhere to these two fundamental threads to effectively compare and differentiate Buddhist notions of self and no-self. This article offers a comprehensive examination of the Buddhist notion of no-self. It elucidates the significant Buddhist principles of karma, impermanence, emptiness, and the Middle Way, emphasising that nothing in the world, formed or sustained by conditions, is constant and immutable, and that all phenomena arise from a confluence of their respective conditions or causes. The paper subsequently examines the importance of the five skandhas—form, sensation, perception, mental

formations, and consciousness—as the aggregates constituting an individual. This investigates the five receptive yin, the non-self of humanity, and the non-self of dharma. The ultimate aspiration is the state of the true self, contrasted with the denial of the physical self highlighted by the false self. The emphasis is on the Buddhist perspective of non-self, illustrating that the self is neither any of the five aggregates nor a compilation of them. This is succeeded by an elucidation of misconceptions regarding non-self, including the notion of self independent of the aggregates, the dismissal of chemotaxis theory, and the repudiation of the eliminative no-self theory [3, 4]. The thought experiment of the ship of Theseus is employed to elucidate the transformation and non-substantiality of the self, encouraging individuals to transcend the conventional notion of self and explore the concept of non-self [5]. The Buddhist notion of 'not-self' offers individuals an alternative perspective and spiritual enlightenment, facilitating the relinquishment of attachment to material possessions and the self, thereby fostering inner peace and tranquilly.

The Four Noble Truths of Buddhism assert that existence is characterised by suffering, suffering has an origin, suffering can be transcended, and there exists a pathway to its cessation. The origin of suffering arises from craving and attachment, with the fixation on both the human and dharma selves being the primary source of suffering. The pursuit of liberation underscores the cultivation of wisdom, ethics, and righteousness through the comprehension of impermanence and non-self, ultimately leading to the attainment of nirvana and the discovery of the true self.

Modern philosophies of religion and Buddhist principles frequently serve varied objectives for examination [6]. These objectives are partially efforts to address the value concerns arising from external social influences and partially directed towards the classics themselves [7]. This study seeks to deliver a thorough analysis of the Buddhist notion of non-self, elucidate its inherent logical relationships with other fundamental Buddhist concepts, examine potential misconceptions that may emerge in comprehending non-self, and investigate how this significant Buddhist doctrine can be more effectively understood through pertinent thought experiments. The examination of the Buddhist notion of non-self offers a distinctive perspective on self-awareness and spiritual development, along with a means of resolution following a profound comprehension of suffering's essence.

2. Fundamental Principles of Buddhism and the Underpinnings of the Non-Self Doctrine

The concepts of karma, impermanence, emptiness, and the Middle Way require clarification initially. The Law of Karma serves as a fundamental tenet of Buddhism, elucidating the principle governing the birth, death, and transformation of all entities in existence. Life operates in accordance with karma, and our existence is contingent upon numerous conditions. Comprehending karma enables an understanding of the cycle of life and death, thereby facilitating the path to liberation.

The law of karma and the karmic foundation of the non-self perspective can elucidate the fundamental Buddhist conception of the self. Buddhism regards karma as the fundamental principle governing the birth, death, and transformation of all entities in the world. All entities arise and cease to exist due to the convergence of associated conditions or causes. Consequently, although the processes of birth and death are enabled by conditions, representing the law of increase, the dissolution of all entities that emerge from conditions embodies the law of decrease. Consequently, within the processes of birth, death, and transformation, nothing exists independently and permanently, nor can any existence dictate all occurrences of birth, death, and change. Upon recognising the karmic essence of existence, individuals will perceive life's fluctuations with the insight of emancipation, thereby transcending the afflictions associated with the cycle of birth and death. This has constituted the fundamental stance of Buddhism since its inception.

This fundamental stance naturally leads to an understanding of impermanence and further elucidates the transient nature of the self. The transience of all phenomena is one of the Three Dharma Seals of Buddhism, signifying that nothing in the world, shaped or influenced by conditions, is

constant or immutable; this is a truth the Buddha discerned through empirical observation. The Buddhist perspective on impermanence is grounded in karma, asserting that the transience of phenomena is neither accidental nor arbitrary, but rather contingent upon specific conditions and transformations. The concept of 'impermanence' entails perceiving the dynamic process of change inherent in all things in the world.

3. The Buddhist Perspective on Emptiness and the Non-Self

3.1. Fundamental Concepts

The Buddhist concept of 'emptiness' signifies that all entities lack an inherent, immutable existence or essence, meaning they do not possess solidity. While entities do not possess an inherent, immutable existence, this does not imply that nothing exists; rather, the existence of all entities fluctuates based on associative conditions, coalesces and flows in accordance with these conditions, and ultimately dissipates and ceases under specific circumstances.

The Middle Way represents the profound understanding of the Dharma, which is genuinely pertinent to the world's reality and facilitates accurate comprehension of it [8]. The differences articulated by Buddhist classics through relative terminology are merely linguistic and do not reflect the true nature of reality. The concepts of existence and non-existence merely represent linguistic constructs and fail to accurately depict or elucidate the true nature of reality. A glass of water is spilt on the ground and subsequently becomes imperceptible. To assert that this glass of water is absent or nonexistent is inaccurate. The three states of matter are solid (ice), liquid (water), and gas (water vapour). The evaporation of this cup of water into gas does not imply the essence has ceased to exist; however, it is unreasonable to assert that the water still exists, as the liquid has entirely evaporated. This indicates that the relative concepts of existence and non-existence, although seemingly extensive, are insufficient for elucidating the three states of matter, much less the swiftly evolving phenomena of all entities in the world. The Middle Way does not signify a compromise by adopting a midpoint between two opposing sides; rather, it embodies a dynamic process of change that acknowledges the world as it exists. This approach entails transcending habitual rigidity in thought, which is characterised by relative differences, and adhering to the law of karma to comprehend the transformative processes of all phenomena in accordance with their interrelated conditions, thus reflecting the true nature of reality.

In Buddhism, the five skandhas are form, sensation, perception, mental formations, and consciousness, which collectively constitute an individual's existence. The five skandhas, as a compilation of personal constitutive elements, are essential for comprehending self-knowledge. Buddhism employs the Five Aggregates not only to depict the composition of the individual but also to elucidate the fundamental components of phenomena in the world. Colour denotes material phenomena with form, correlating to material constituents such as the individual; Reception encompasses feelings or sensations, categorised into three types: suffering, pleasure, and non-suffering; Thought involves the imagination of objects and the formulation of concepts or ideas; Intention signifies the expression of will or emotion; and Consciousness pertains to the distinct and cognitive functions of awareness. The five receptive yin stem from attachment to the five skandhas, resulting from our excessive reliance on and attachment to them.

3.2. Self-Attachment and Dharma-Attachment

Human egoism is the fixation on the colours, emotions, thoughts, actions, and sensations, perceiving the five aggregates of body and mind as the true self. The 'human self' denotes the concept of 'I' in everyday existence, encompassing the entirety of an individual's subjective feelings, thoughts, emotions, and physical being.

Dharma-ego denotes the attachment to external entities, phenomena, and concepts as possessing independent and immutable essence. Human egoism originates from dharma egoism; due to attachment to these illusory entities, individuals erroneously perceive the existence of the concept of 'I', thereby engendering 'human egoism'. Consequently, if human egoism exists, then dharma egoism must also exist; however, the presence of dharma egoism does not necessarily imply the existence of human egoism.

3.3. The Journey Towards the Perspective of Non-Self

Human beings lack an inherent self; they are constituted by the illusory amalgamation of the five aggregates, and there is no subjective self that is consistently autonomous and self-governing. Dharma: All dharmas arise from karmic harmony, are perpetually in flux, and lack a permanent sovereign. The selflessness of individuals and the selflessness of dharma are crucial to our comprehension of self-knowledge. They enable us to comprehend that the self is a dynamic process and that no immutable entity exists. Rather than exhibiting excessive attachment to the self, we ought to perceive ourselves and the world with an open and tolerant mindset. Only through this method can we eliminate greed, anger, dementia, and other concerns, thereby achieving inner peace and tranquilly.

3.4. Authentic Self and the Inauthentic Self

The true self denotes the enduring and immutable essence that surpasses both the human and dharma selves, commonly referred to as Buddha nature. The true self, referred to as the 'great self,' is the authentic self devoid of self-bias and egocentrism, having achieved a state of freedom and unobstructedness. All instances of the self referred to in the world are neither self-existent nor permanent; only Buddha-nature and Nirvana, representing the Buddha's essence, possess the attributes of permanence and self-existence, constituting the true self. Consequently, a profound comprehension of the notion that human beings possess no true selves is essential for grasping the authentic selves in the world.

Consequently, a profound comprehension of human selflessness and the selflessness of dharma can assist us in our quest for the true self. The entity referred to as 'I' is essentially a corporeal construct composed of five aggregates, representing merely a sequence of causation and consequence, and is termed 'false self' in contrast to the true self. Buddhism refutes the notion of 'I' as an autonomous entity, yet it acknowledges the existence of the persona 'I', which is widely recognised in society as a pseudonym. That is the designator that would be utilised for convenience. The self serves as a practical designation—a beneficial construct for managing everyday existence, yet it does not signify a lasting, autonomous entity. Does the concept of selves exist? The response is negative. Only the "components" of a self exist: physical attributes, distinct emotions, individual instances of awareness, etc. When Buddhists discuss selves and employ individuals' names, they are merely engaging in a descriptive level that is pragmatic, rather than articulating the ultimate reality or truth.

4. Articulating Non-Self through the Lens of Impermanence

The Buddhist perspective that impermanence constitutes suffering is highly significant in the doctrine of non-self. The transient nature of the five skandhas is a fundamental attribute, and this transience results in hardship and suffering. Ageing and physical ailments (colour), emotional fluctuations (receptivity), mental confusion (thought), behavioural loss of control (action), and cognitive limitations (awareness) all contribute to suffering. The five skandhas are transient; therefore, the self constructed upon them is likewise transient. A transient self induces suffering, which opposes the concept of a perpetual, self-sufficient self. Consequently, the perspective that associates

impermanence with suffering refutes the notion that the five aggregates constitute the self in terms of suffering, or that the self is merely a compilation of the five aggregates or any subset thereof.

Suffering should not be regarded as the self, as Buddhism posits that the self is an eternal, unchanging entity capable of governing one's destiny. If the five skandhas constitute the predominant self, we should be able to discern their changes and patterns at will; however, this is not the case. The alterations of the five aggregates are not entirely within our control; they are perpetually in flux and engender various forms of suffering. Consequently, 'suffering is not the self'; thus, the five skandhas of suffering cannot be regarded as the self.

5. Further comprehension of the concept of no-self in relation to self-identity

Locke posits that our psychology, comprising experiences, thoughts, and memories, constitutes our essence. According to Locke, our existence is contingent upon the persistence of our psychology. Human sensations do not encompass a distinct perception of the self. We are merely a collection of specific, transient sensations [9].

Buddhist psychological attributes are in a state of perpetual flux, indicating that no singular assemblage of these attributes endures over time. Furthermore, there is no underlying element that consolidates these diverse psychological characteristics into a singular entity.

5.1. Misconceptions Regarding the Concept of Non-Self

Although it has been demonstrated that the self is neither one of the five skandhas nor a compilation of them, it has also been contended that the individual exists independently of the five skandhas, suggesting the existence of a disembodied self. Premise: presume the existence of the eternal and immortal self. I am the aggregate of the individual's constituent elements, as I represent the fundamental aspect of the individual. The components of an individual are exclusively the set of the five aggregates, namely, all the elements of the individual whose five aggregates have been depleted. Each of the Five Aggregates is mutable and not eternal. Consequently, none of the five aggregates can be equated with my identity. Consequently, I do not exist, which contradicts the initial premise. An indirect argument demonstrates the nonexistence of the eternal and immortal self.

The Buddhist perspective on non-self may be readily misconstrued as a theory of personification. Nonetheless, the Buddhist perspective on non-self markedly contrasts with the theory of the contract of transfiguration. Contractualism posits that the individual or self is composed of more fundamental elements, such as mental and physical states, rendering the self a secondary or derivative entity. The Buddhist notion of non-self underscores that the five aggregates lack a permanent essence, and that the self is a fluid, non-material construct governed by the principles of origination, impermanence, and emptiness. For instance, while the hue of the five aggregates can be examined at the material level, it is inherently transient and its essence is devoid of substance. Consequently, the Buddhist perspective on non-self does not merely deconstruct the self into its fundamental components, such as the Five Aggregates. It underscores that the self exists in a dynamic, relative state within the process of karmic harmony, fundamentally differing from the perspective of the theory of elimination.

5.2. In opposition to the eliminative theory of non-self

Some individuals may misconstrue the Buddhist perspective on non-self as an eliminative no-self theory. The Buddhist perspective on non-self neither claims the existence of an eternal self (common view) nor denies the existence of self entirely (categorical view); instead, it represents a middle way approach. Through the examination of the five aggregates and the rejection of the self at various levels, it encapsulates a dynamic self-awareness that surpasses definitive existence. When we assert that the Five Aggregates do not constitute the self, we are not denying the existence of the self; rather,

we contend that the self is not a static and immutable entity, but rather a dynamic process that continually evolves in response to karmic conditions.

6. The Ship of Theseus Thought Experiment

The Ship of Theseus is a renowned philosophical thought experiment that elucidates the Buddhist notion of non-self. The narrative of the Ship of Theseus is as follows: there existed a vessel whose components were perpetually substituted as it navigated. Subsequently, all components of the vessel were replaced entirely once. Is the vessel still the same vessel? From the Buddhist perspective of non-self, this inquiry parallels the essence of the self. Similar to the continual replacement of the components of the Ship of Theseus, the five skandhas are likewise perpetually transformed. The human body (the coloured skandhas) deteriorates, succumbs to illness, and ultimately perishes over time, analogous to the components of a ship that wear out and fail. An individual's emotions (receptivity), thoughts (cognition), volition (action), and cognitive faculties (awareness) continually fluctuate in reaction to alterations in the external environment and internal conditions, analogous to the replacement of various components of a boat in accordance with differing circumstances. While the ship's appearance may retain some similarities, it is no longer the same vessel it originally was. Likewise, while we may perceive ourselves as retaining some aspects of our original identity, the self has indeed transformed alongside the alteration of the five skandhas, illustrating the non-substantial and mutable essence of the self. Rather than perceiving the self as a permanent and immutable entity, individuals should recognise that the self is a condition of being that exists in a dynamic and relative state within the framework of karmic harmony.

7. Conclusion

This article has examined the intricate relationship between the Buddhist notion of non-self and fundamental Buddhist principles, including karma, impermanence, emptiness, and the Middle Way. The analysis of the Five Aggregates and the Five Sufferings elucidates the origins of suffering and delineates the path to discovering the true self. Simultaneously, potential misconceptions regarding the concept of non-self are recognised, encompassing the notion of a self distinct from the aggregates, the theory of transformation, and the theory of the eradication of non-self. modified.

References

- [1] Siderits, M. (2017). *Buddhism as philosophy: An introduction*. Routledge.
- [2] Garfield, J. L. (2014). *Engaging Buddhism: Why it matters to philosophy*. Oxford University Press.
- [3] Garfield, J. L. (2015). *Buddhism and modernity*. In *The Buddhist World* (pp. 294-304). Routledge.
- [4] McMahan, D. L. (Ed.). (2012). *Buddhism in the modern world* (p. 160). New York: Routledge.
- [5] Wagner, A. G. (2022). *The Zen of Theseus: Language and Reality from a Buddhist Philosophical Perspective*. In *Playing with Reality* (pp. 118-125). Routledge.
- [6] ESSLER, W. K. (2020). *Neither Identity nor Diversity Contribution to the Early Buddhist Concept of a Person. Identity? Metaphysical Approach*, 33.
- [7] Paulouskaya, H. (2016). *An Attempt on Theseus by Kir Bulychev: Travelling to Virtual Antiquity*. In *Our Mythical Childhood... The Classics and Literature for Children and Young Adults* (pp. 346-361). Brill.
- [8] Kalupahana, D. J. (1979). *The early Buddhist notion of the middle path*. *The Eastern Buddhist*, 12(1), 30-48.
- [9] Balibar, É. (2013). *Identity and difference: John Locke and the invention of consciousness*. Verso Books.