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# *Anātmavāda*

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*Anātmavāda*, a Sanskrit term meaning “the doctrine of selflessness” refers to one of the most distinctive of Buddhist (see *BUDDHISM*) philosophical tenets: the rejection of any enduring unified self (*ātman*). Although they deny the existence of the *ātman*, Buddhists accept the existence of persons as conceptually unified aggregations of mental and physical events. Philosophically, their defense of the rejection of a self puts Buddhists at odds with rival schools of Indian philosophy, leading to over a thousand years of philosophical debate. Soteriologically, Buddhists claim that realizing the nonexistence of any enduring self (*ātman*) is a key factor in achieving liberation from *saṃsāra*, the round of rebirth and suffering.

## **The self (*ātman*) and the person**

A central doctrine of the *UPANIṢADS*, the ancient Indian scriptural sources of the Brahmanical traditions, is the existence of an innermost self (*ātman*) (see *SELF AND NOT-SELF IN INDIAN PHILOSOPHY*) which is the essence of the individual. This *ātman* is eternal, and after death it reincarnates into a new body. Versions of this position are accepted by most of the Brahmanical schools of Indian philosophy, including *NYĀYA*, *ADVĀITA VEDĀNTA*, and *SĀṂKHYA*. In contrast, Indian Buddhists claim that no such self (*ātman*) exists; its common acceptance is the result of beginningless ignorance (see *IGNORANCE AND ILLUSION IN INDIAN PHILOSOPHIES*) (*avidyā/moha*), and results in negative emotions such as attachment (*tṛṣṇā*) and anger (*krodha*), as well as the creation of negative karma (see *REINCARNATION AND KARMA*) which binds one to *saṃsāra*, the cycle of rebirth.

Although they reject the existence of the *ātman*, Buddhists do not hold the implausible view that persons are completely nonexistent. Rather, Buddhists claim that persons exist in a far different way than the ordinary person believes. What really exist are streams of causally interrelated mental and physical events: thoughts, feelings, moments of awareness, pieces of the body, and so on. Persons are conceptually constructed out of these constituents, unified by human minds in dependence on language and social customs so as to allow the conception of these plural entities as unitary. In fact, however, no unified and enduring person exists.

A common example Buddhists use to explain their position is that of a forest. Virtually everyone accepts that forests exist, but this does not mean that we are committed to holding that there is a unitary enduring object named “forest” over and above the trees that constitute it. Rather, the word “forest” is a name we give to a collection of separately existing things, including the trees, the soil, animals, and so

on. Forests come into existence as a result of something we do with our minds, using the concept “forest” to conceptually aggregate its constituents. Independent of our minds, and the concepts embedded in our language and social practices, no unified forest exists. Exactly the same is true of persons. What really exists is a causally connected impermanent series of physical and mental moments which are conceptually unified into a person. Metaphysically, however, no enduring self (*ātman*) exists.

Just as forests are composed of discrete parts such as trees, soil, and so on, persons are composed of discrete, impermanent but causally connected constituents, such as thoughts, feelings, emotions, parts of the body, and so on. Buddhists classify these constituents into five categories, which they name the “aggregates” (*skandhas*). Buddhists claim that these aggregates and their causal interactions account for all human experience. The first aggregate, form (*rūpa*), refers to the physical parts of the body, as well as external material objects. The second, feeling (*vedanā*), refers to pleasure, pain, and indifferent sensation. The third aggregate, recognition (*saṃjñā*), is a primarily conceptual factor that allows us to identify objects. Recognition, for instance, allows me to recognize the shape and color I am seeing as a flower, or the scent I smell as hot chocolate. The fourth aggregate, compositional factors (*samskāra*), includes a variety of mental factors such as various kinds of emotions, intentions, and forms of attention. The fifth aggregate, awareness (*viññāna*), refers to the five kinds of sense consciousness (sight, smell, etc.) as well as the mental awareness of the objects of consciousness like thoughts and memories.

The Abhidharma (see ABHIDHARMA/ABHIDHAMMA) schools express this position by saying that persons exist conventionally (*saṃvṛtisat*), as conceptual aggregations of these mental and physical constituents, but that they are not ultimately existent (*paramārthasat*). Independent of human language, concepts, and social conventions, there are no selves.

## Buddhist arguments against the self

Although a variety of arguments for the nonexistence of the self are formulated in the Indian Buddhist tradition, they tend to develop in a limited number of overlapping but distinguishable directions. One of the oldest and most influential is phenomenological in orientation, in that it directs our attention to the immediate contents of experience. In these kinds of arguments, long lists of mental and physical constituents of the person are examined, such as thoughts, feelings, parts of the body, and so on, with each rejected as not being a fitting candidate for being an enduring self, in that they are impermanent. An influential version of this argument is given in the early Buddhist text, *The Questions of King Milinda* (Rhys Davids 1890, book 2, chapter 1).

Another kind of argument is given an influential formulation by NĀGĀRJUNA (Nāgārjuna 2013, 18:1) and is developed by his commentators, including ĀRYADEVĀ and CANDRAKĪRTI. If the self were to exist, the argument begins, it must be either the same as or different than the aggregates. However, both alternatives are unacceptable. If the self is the same as the aggregates, then since there are a plurality of

aggregates, the self must also be plural, and since the aggregates are impermanent, the self must be as well. This is impossible, however, since by definition the self is unitary and permanent. But if the self is different than the aggregates, then we can give no account of it whatsoever. The self then becomes a mysterious entity we can say nothing about. The implied claim here is that if this were the case we would have no reason for accepting the self's existence.

A more epistemologically focused argument, formalized by Vasubandhu, takes the unobservability of the self as a premise, and adds to it the claim that we have no good reason to infer the self's existence. Since we cannot infer the self's existence, Vasubandhu argues, and since we cannot observe it, we have no evidence of its existence and should reject it (Vasubandhu 1988, chapter 9; Kapstein 2001, 93–96). The success of the argument largely depends on how well Buddhists defend the second premise by providing plausible accounts of person-related activities and features that seem to require a self, like memory and karmic continuity. We turn to a selection of these objections and responses in the next section.

### Objections against the no-self view

In response to Buddhist arguments for selflessness, their philosophical opponents claim that the denial of an enduring self is incompatible with various aspects of human experience and shared religious tenets, such as karma and rebirth (see REINCARNATION AND KARMA). How, for instance, can the Buddhist claim persons and their karmic heritage take rebirth after death if they deny the existence of an enduring entity that can travel from one body to the next? The general Buddhist response is to claim that even though no enduring being takes rebirth, the causal continuity of the aggregates is sufficient to account for karmic continuity between lives. The early Buddhist text *Questions of King Milinda* provides an influential image to explain this initially counterintuitive position. Just as one can light a candle wick from a lit candle, without any entity traveling from one candle to the next, just so the aggregates at the moment of death can causally give rise to the new set of aggregates of the future life. Specific Buddhist schools give somewhat different accounts of how the actual process of rebirth occurs: for instance, schools differ as to whether an intermediate being (*antarbhāva*) composed of mental aggregates travels from one life to the next, or whether rebirth is immediate. All accounts, however, are committed to a dualism between the mental aggregates, whose causal continuity continues to the next life, and the body, which simply decomposes.

It is this causal independence of the mental aggregates which the Cārvāka school (see CĀRVĀKA) challenges in its critique of the Buddhist account of rebirth. As materialists, the Cārvāka claim that consciousness is an epiphenomenon which manifests in dependence on certain arrangements of the bodily elements. Consciousness cannot exist independently of these material elements, and therefore mental events, psychological dispositions, and so on, cannot survive death to unite with a future body. The sixth-century CE Buddhist philosopher DHARMAKĪRTI provides an influential argument in response to the Cārvāka critique of rebirth. The basic idea behind

the argument is that mental events, such as thoughts and feelings, are of a different ontological kind than those of the physical body. Moreover, at least some of the causes of an event must be sufficiently similar to the effect. This entails that physical events alone cannot bring about mental ones, due to their lack of similarity. At least some of the preceding causes of mental events like thoughts and feelings must be mental themselves. Therefore, since thought cannot wholly depend on the body, there must be a preexisting mental continuum that gives rise to the first moment of consciousness in a new life.

To strengthen the argument, Dharmakīrti must also show that mental events are not dependent upon a physical basis, allowing for a separation from the body at the moment of death. To do this, he asks us to imagine a person who had lost the functioning of all five of his senses. This person, Dharmakīrti reasons, would still be able to think. Conversely, in a body with undamaged sense organs but no mental awareness, the senses would be unable to function. Mental awareness, then, does not depend upon the physical senses for support; rather, the dependence relation runs the other way. This entails that the destruction of the body at death does not result in the ending of the stream of mental continuity, and therefore rebirth of the mental continuum can take place (Hayes 1993; Arnold 2008).

A second set of objections leveled by the Buddhist's opponents allege that ordinary features of experience and social life are inexplicable without an enduring self. In the *Questions of King Milinda*, the Buddhist opponent argues that basic features of religious life, such as requesting alms and student–teacher relationships, are impossible without enduring selves to teach, study, and so on. In response, Buddhists emphasize that persons are not wholly nonexistent; all that is denied is an enduring unified self that constitutes our identity. Persons do exist as collections of mental and physical events which are conceptually unified for convenience. In the later Abhidharma period, this is expressed by saying that persons exist conventionally (*saṃvṛtisat*), but have no ultimate existence (*paramārthasat*).

As the philosophical traditions in India increased in sophistication, more technical versions of these kinds of objections were leveled at the Buddhists by their opponents. An important concern was the question of memory. If one accepts the existence of the self (*ātman*) who acts as an innermost experiencer, then it is quite literally the same self who has the original experience, and then remembers it at a later time. Without such an enduring center of experience, the Buddhist's opponent argues, memory cannot be accounted for. Likewise, Buddhists share with most of the non-Buddhist philosophical schools an acceptance of the doctrine of karma, the position that actions done in the present will ripen into good or bad events in the future. If an enduring self exists, it can be understood as the carrier of karma both within and between lifetimes. The Buddhist, however, must somehow explain how karma functions within a stream of radically impermanent mental and physical events.

The general answer Buddhists give to these kinds of objections will be the same as the one summarized above in response to the question of rebirth: causal continuity

between the aggregates is robust enough to account for memory, karmic continuity, and so on. Nevertheless, pressure from their philosophical opponents provides a strong impetus for Buddhists to explain in clearer detail how this causal continuity functions. In the period of Abhidharma (see ABHIDHARMA/ABHIDHAMMA) thought that begins several centuries after the death of the Buddha, a number of Buddhist philosophical schools develop that give diverging responses to concerns about causal continuity within the stream of aggregates. A powerful but controversial view was developed by the Sarvāstivādin (see SARVĀSTIVĀDA) school, whose proponents claimed that momentary events maintain a kind of partial existence after their destruction. The existence of these past events is then claimed to be sufficient to enact an effect in the present. The competing Sautrāntika (see SAUTRĀNTIKA) school uses metaphors such as planting seeds and perfuming as a way of expressing causal efficacy within an ontology of radically impermanent events. The idea behind these metaphors is that the stream of mental and physical events that constitute the person is subtly modified when committing certain actions or undergoing some experiences, so that the causal structure of the entire stream is altered. Good or bad deeds “perfume” the stream in this way, so that even in the absence of an enduring entity, good or bad consequences will ripen in the future. Likewise, certain vivid events subtly modify the stream so that even though no literal memory trace endures, the memory of the event can arise in the future (Waldron 2003, chapter 2).

By contrast, the Mahāyāna YOGĀCĀRA Buddhist school posits a subconscious layer of awareness called the storehouse consciousness (see ĀLAYAVIJÑĀNA) which acts as the carrier of karmic seeds and memory traces which ripen into good and bad results, or manifest as memories in the future (Waldron 2003, chapter 2 and 3). Storehouse consciousness itself is not a single enduring entity, but rather a causally connected stream of moments of subtle awareness into which karmic and memory traces are deposited, where they are reproduced until they resurface in the future. Finally, the Pudgalavādin, or “Personalist” school – which came to be widely judged heretical – introduces an enduring person which they claim is neither the same as nor different from the aggregates. This person (*pudgala*) undergoes rebirth, and acts as the bearer of karmic continuity and memory. Most other Buddhist schools reject the Pudgalavādin view as being too close to the acceptance of an eternal self (*ātman*).

This summary of Buddhist responses to the challenges caused by their rejection of self illustrates how their commitment to an initially unintuitive position provides a strong philosophical impetus for developing powerful theories that can account for continuity in the absence of a self. Moreover, Abhidharmic schools build upon early Buddhist tenets, and in particular dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*), in developing their philosophical positions. The sophisticated philosophical theories of the giants of the Buddhist intellectual tradition, such as Vasubandhu and Dharmakīrti are in many ways defenses of the foundational early Buddhist tenet of selflessness (*anātman*), and thus develop in much greater detail the equally important early Buddhist tenet of dependent origination (see PRATĪTYASAMUTPĀDA).

## Soteriological implications

Although I have focused on philosophical tensions arising from the Buddhist commitment to the doctrine of selflessness, in conclusion it is important to acknowledge its importance in Buddhist soteriology. The goal of Buddhist practice is liberation (see LIBERATION IN BUDDHISM) from suffering and the round of rebirth, the cause of which is craving and ignorance (see IGNORANCE AND ILLUSION IN INDIAN PHILOSOPHIES). Ignorance is most primordially the superimposition of unity and endurance upon a fragmentary and impermanent world, and its most pernicious form is the reification of the stream of impermanent aggregates into an enduring and unified self. Removing this error radically restructures our psychology, eliminating negative emotions like craving (*tṛṣṇā*) and anger (*krodha*) which create suffering and fuel karma which binds us to rebirth. Understanding selflessness, therefore, is the key piece of intellectual insight which liberates us from *saṃsāra*. Buddhists claim that an initial intellectual understanding of selflessness can be developed through philosophical reasoning, such as by the arguments surveyed above. Ultimately, however such an understanding must be deepened into a nonconceptual direct experience of the selflessness of all existence. This is done through the development of meditational skills which are a primary point of emphasis in many Buddhist texts.

**See also:** ABHIDHARMA/ABHIDHAMMA; ADVAITA VEDĀNTA; ĀLAYAVIJÑĀNA; ĀRYADEVA; BUDDHISM; CANDRAKĪRTI; CĀRVĀKA; DHARMAKĪRTI; IGNORANCE AND ILLUSION IN INDIAN PHILOSOPHIES; LIBERATION IN BUDDHISM; NĀGĀRJUNA; NYĀYA; PRATITYASAMUTPĀDA; REINCARNATION AND KARMA; SĀMĀKHYA; SARVĀSTIVĀDA; SAUTRĀNTIKA; SELF AND NOT-SELF IN INDIAN PHILOSOPHY; UPANIṢADS; VEDA; YOGĀCĀRA

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