

A Tale of Two Enlightenments

Even though it is well accepted that the “West” did not meet the “East” until relatively recently, it appears that despite this history of separation, both developed concepts within philosophy that are similar. One such area is that of epistemology or knowledge. More pointedly, Buddhism in general espouses, if not requires, a particular form of epistemology that was common in philosophy just a few decades ago. While the wording may be different, the concept is the same: true knowledge becomes a “view from nowhere”—reality unfiltered—and is achievable by imperfect humans. Included with this view from nowhere is the doctrine of no-self—that there is no subject-object relation because neither exists. With these brought to the front, Buddhist philosophy is barely different from the Enlightenment that begin with Descartes. The critique of that Enlightenment will also be valid for the Buddhist enlightenment and Buddhist philosophy will be a self-contradiction, unable to support its own claims. Although this will make Buddhism a set of absurdities, the Buddhist lay people will be completely unaffected as there is a major disjunction between Buddhist philosophy and Buddhist practice.

In other words, Buddhist epistemology is a conglomeration of the West's Enlightenment, especially in the phase of German Idealism, and the denial of a self. This mixture causes a volatile tension between self and no-self and borders on the absurd, but the Buddhist lay people never notice

because their practice is totally separate from Buddhist thinkers. To put a Western face on it, it is no different from the majority of academic Christian theologians who are separated from the practicing Christians and even the pastors and preachers in the (American protestant) Christian tradition: very few theologians know (or care) about some of the famous pastors (e.g. John MacArthur, Joel Osteen) and very few lay Christians and preachers know about some of the prominent theologians (e.g. Friedrich Schleiermacher, Rudolf Bultmann).

2. Enlightenment and Reality

If Buddhism were a goal-oriented Forbes 100 company, it would proudly proclaim its niche in enlightenment. Since Siddhartha's awakening under a tree 2500 or so years ago, Buddhism has sought to bring people towards enlightenment. It is possibly the strongest tie between the different paths and groups of Buddhism. The various Buddhist traditions ascribed different paths to enlightenment where some took many lifetimes of slow refinement until one finally reaches the point of first awakening. These are called "stream-winners" in that they have reached the stream that leads to full enlightenment. Other traditions reduce the requirement to reach nirvana to something attainable within one's own lifetime. Yet, it is agreed that once one reaches the stream, one cannot change course and will reach full enlightenment within a time frame that varies according to the tradition. After that, again the traditions diverge in that some believe that one can

stop at the final moment before reaching escape velocity in order to help others towards enlightenment. Other traditions do not see this as either wise or possible. Regardless, though, this belief is reflected in the traditions outlook on community: those that believe in “waiting” have a greater focus on community while those that do not have a greater focus on the individual. The community-oriented traditions see enlightenment and the subsequent nirvana as a group project in which all should attain it. Because these divergent views of that *path to* enlightenment, discussion will remain limited to the actual concept of enlightenment that is agreed upon by most, if not all, of the divergent Buddhist traditions.

The main result of one's enlightenment, whether it be partial (as in the case of the “stream-winners”) or complete (as in the case of the “non-returners”), is attaining a view of ultimate reality. This comes in the form of a “view from nowhere” in that one who has this ability has no subjective influences in one's viewing. In other words, the enlightened one sees things as they truly are. Enlightenment is considered an awakening as it entails this becoming aware of ultimate reality. This is based upon the belief that reality and truth have two separate levels: ultimate and conventional. Conventional reality is that in which one experiences and knows the ordinary and is the “regular” or “default” level of experience. It is where we are currently situated. Ultimate reality, on the other hand is where things truly are, and as such, is only observable to the people enlightened by the

dharma. Ordinary people, lay people, and the unawakened masses don't have access to this ultimate reality. Buddhist thought relates it to a parable attributed to Siddhartha in which a tadpole is trying to explain "dry land" to a school of fish: it is something so utterly foreign that only those who have experienced it can understand it.

In defense of the Buddhists, ultimate reality is more of a meta-physical¹ reality and conventional reality is an imaginary one created by one's desires, cravings, dis-ease, and ignorance. This can be seen in the process of dependent co-arising. The process works much like Yoda's succession of fear and anger: ignorance causes mental formations that cause a "consciousness." This "consciousness" brings about a sense of mind and body and it is here that conventional reality emerges. From this point comes the senses, then (physical) contact, emotional responses and feelings, desire, and more attachments. These funnel into the creation and becoming of a self, which ignites into the cycle of re-birth. Re-birth then restarts the process as it produces (more) ignorance. Enlightenment is seen as the cessation of this process in which conventional reality gives way for the ultimate. By removing the process of this cycle, one detaches from conventional reality and thus being freed from those hindrances that are symptomatic of a life stuck in the cycle of death and rebirth. It may be already noticeable that one of the main problems central to one's fallen state

¹ "Meta-physical" is to be understood as something *beyond* the physical and necessarily not as the subfield of philosophy, metaphysics. In other words, *super-natural*.

is one's own mis-perception that there is a self. Buddhism rejects this notion at the level of ultimate truth in order to bypass difficulties related to enlightenment of the self.

3. Self? Inconceivable!

One of the main points in Buddhist epistemology is the doctrine of no-self. This doctrine is attributed to Siddharta Gautama himself, even though it is believed that he refused to answer questions as to whether or not a “self” existed. For him, it was a case of missing the point to believe that “I have a self” or to believe that “I have no self.”² The self is to be understood solely in terms of particularities and “suchness.” It is a convenient term to refer to the set of causes and effects that make up an individual person, but this is not some kind of entity that exists throughout ages and re-births. “Self” is to be conceived of as an amassing of foam on the ocean: a *temporary* collection of and thoroughfare for the various waves and currents of the water. In contrast, the doctrine of no-self is impacted by the concepts of enlightenment and realities and also impacts them.

In most connotations, enlightenment also entails the realization that there is no self in ultimate reality. This means that as one awakens, one must realize that one does not really exist in any kind of “permanent” sense. The popular movie *The Matrix* doesn't quite get the full force when the main character realizes that there is no spoon because Buddhist epistemology

² Robinson, Richard, Willard Johnson, and Thanissaro Bhikku, *Buddhist Religions: A Historical Introduction* 5th ed (2005 Wadsworth: Belmont, CA), 28.

goes even further to say that there isn't even a "me." The belief in the self ultimately leads to selfish concerns, which is something one should avoid. Enlightenment aims to reveal both this fundamental selfishness as well as the conditions that cause it, dependent co-arising. Early texts suggest that enlightenment is the seeing of dependent co-arising. As one sees that, one sees Dharma itself. As such, one who awakens is able to see both the cause and the solution to human suffering. The solution is to become self-less by becoming (a very nihilistic sense) nothing. Yet, it would be inaccurate to describe the process of the solution as a *becoming* because that implies that there is a self to become. It may be better to see it as realizing it as one may realize that one is standing in a burning building. Buddhists believe this is primarily done through removing one's attachments and any other hindrances via the eightfold path.

It is also noticeable that the doctrine of no-self also reciprocates back into the concept of enlightenment and impacts it. Through no-self, enlightenment becomes a total negation of the unchanging self. The view of ultimate reality implies that nothing is permanent, that everything is temporary. There cannot be anything but a sea of changing currents, nexuses, and nodes. Enlightenment itself becomes a process of removing oneself and one's conditions in order to see ultimate reality. Through attaining this vision of the ultimate, one (in the conventional sense) can see more of the ultimate and remove more of oneself. In effect, it is a call for

emptiness. Yet while the doctrine of no-self is important, it is still a case in missing the point. For Siddhartha, the question of whether or not a self exists is itself the problem. By seeking any answer to the question, one has already failed to fully understand the situation. A common image Siddhartha used was that of a poisoned arrow that is stuck in a man's leg. To question or ponder anything about the arrow, such as where it came from, why it is there, is to fail to realize that it needs to be removed—and quickly! As such, Siddhartha contends that the truly enlightened mind has broken free of “all views about the self.”³

4. The other Enlightenment

All of this ideology, these concepts and beliefs, can be found in Western philosophy as well. It is somewhat ironic (or intentional) that Buddhist epistemology is reflected in the philosophy of the Enlightenment era, particularly that of Kant and Hegel. Although Plato first made the case for a meta-physical reality, it is Kant who truly championed the cause. In Kantian thought, there is a divide between *noumena* and *phenomena*. The noumenal realm is where things truly are and we humans can never access. It is the phenomenal world where we live and thrive. While Kant does not go so far as to suggest a theory of no-self, he does posit that if one *could* access the noumenal, one would experience and see everything as they truly are without any kind of degradation by outside influences. Hegel continues the

³ Gethin, 161.

similarities by saying that it is possible to reach ultimate reality—Absolute Knowledge for Hegel—by a process of integrating contrary ideas into a single one. In other words, by removing dualities, one can attain ultimate truth.

It is precisely this notion of a “view from nowhere” that both Enlightenment philosophy and Buddhist epistemology fail. The possibility of such a position requires a rejection of the self that is more radical than what Buddhism can allow. In fact, it requires a rejection on such a massive scale that it delves into nihilism. As nihilism now in the guise of some big Other—namely, religion—enlightenment collapses upon itself as there is no escape from nothingness. Buddhism then would have to accept that enlightenment as an escape from the cycle of death and rebirth is not only to see the cycle for what it really is (nothing), but also to see that there is no escape because there is nothing (i.e. no self) to escape and nothing from which to escape. Enlightenment, then, is nothing more than accepting the void as reality. Not only is there no spoon, but also there is no ultimate reality: it has become a plastic facade. Buddhism is then left with nothing more than a preference towards certain rituals and practices that have no value beyond the this-worldly niceties. Yet these rituals remain in cognitive dissonance because they are empty reminders that the people partaking in them do not exist in any sense of the world. Not only is all the world an illusion, but so is everything else. This cannot be reconciled with anything experienced in any

realm of existence because the very existence of an experience—whether real or supposed—contradicts the nothingness of everything.

5. A discourse on irony

With the primary line of thought in Buddhist epistemology broken, where does this lead Buddhism? It appears that there is only one option for Buddhist thinkers: rejecting some portion of the above, most notably, the doctrine of no-self. Miri Albahari writes that the doctrine of no-self “should be regarded less as a metaphysical doctrine and more as a practical strategy for disidentifying with elements of conditioned existence.”⁴ This resonates better with the belief that Siddhartha remained silent on the matter and saw seeking answers for it in any direction as misdirected thoughts. In fact, it would even support the general consensus that Siddhartha regarded any philosophical or metaphysical discussion as unnecessary. David Montalvo seems to agree with this: “when one treats these religious doctrines [no-self and self] as identical to propositions...one is taking a philosophical position, the implications of which lead one far from established views.”⁵ Yet this does not mean that Buddhists should begin accepting the belief of a self. It should still be accepted that the self is impermanent, but also does exist in the same sense that a cup of coffee 'exists' (however temporary that may

4 Albahari, Miri, “Against No-Atman Theories of Anatta,” *Asian Philosophy* 12.1 (2002), 5.

5 Montalvo, David, “On the Propositional Treatment of Anatmavada Early Buddhism and Atmavada in Hinduism,” *Asian Philosophy*, 10.3 (2000), 210.

be). Impermanence should not be seen as proof of non-existence as much as existence should not be taken as proof of permanence. In between those two poles, Buddhism can find a happy home. It can even be considered yet another iteration of the middle path. As Albahari concludes:

*The Buddha urges one to end suffering by removing those aforementioned biases [personal, cultural, etc] from the mind. In this context, the suttas on anatta function as practical imperatives, discouraging the mind from projecting ideas of selfhood, permanence and non-suffering onto what is inherently non-self, impermanent and suffering.*⁶

It may be noticeable that moving from *no*-self to *not*-self changes the focus to a practical and communal level. By focusing on selflessness, one may be more inclined to help others and have compassion for the others. It would be an exercise in one (and arguably the greatest) part of the eightfold path: compassion.

The irony, though, lies in the fact that the lay Buddhist has always been given a similar message. It may well be that the message given to the unenlightened laity is closer to Siddhartha's original teachings than what was produced by the many monks and scholars within Buddhism. The laity have been continuously reminded that they are too far away from enlightenment to concern themselves over the “deeper” issues, especially the doctrines of

6 Albahari, 17.

no-self and dependent co-arising. As such, they are taught to lead “good” lives, practicing charity, compassion, etc. It is in this message that the idea of selflessness and not-self are implied, and it is this purposely vague implication that Siddhartha's earliest message and rejection of all metaphysical-philosophical discourse can be found. Yet there is a double meaning to all of this: Siddhartha's rejection of metaphysical discourse can also be seen as an implicit focus towards the community. This fits in well with his call to com-*passion* for all as it is inherently community-focused. While the more enlight-ened and enlightenment-focused monks grapple with heady metaphysical and epistemological issues that may ultimately be unanswerable, it is the laity who have remained true to Siddhartha's rejection of metaphysical discourse. It is the monks who, in an attempt to remain close to the rejection of metaphysical discourse, unknowingly created the very thing they were rejecting. By taking a contrary stance to the philosophies of their time, the monks have created yet another philosophy: one that is unstable and self-defeating which they then labeled as “unsafe for laity” because of its own hidden dualities. It is that very attempt to keep the laity from “the hard truth” that the laity has been protected from a poisoned well.

However, this lauding of the laity has some difficulties. First of all, it is one that may not be as accepted in Theravadin traditions because there is greater stratification between the laity and the monks. For instance,

Robinson et al. write that the Theravadin traditions maintained that “although lay people could attain arhatship, lay arhats had to ordain or else die within seven days after their attainment, for the lay state could not support an arhat's purity.”⁷ A second difficulty is that this may cause a strong(er) separation between the laity and the monks because it does drive a wedge between the ordained, enlightened monks and the lay, unawakened laity. This can result in ill feelings from one to the other, which is not something Buddhist traditions have ever encouraged as it is seen as a sign of one's lack of compassion.

To summarize these strands of thought, Buddhist monks and scholars have regularly associated Siddhartha's lack of response to question about the existence of a self with a negative answer (i.e. there is no self). Yet this brings about difficulties, many of which are shared with the West's Enlightenment. As such, the responses to the Western Enlightenment can be reflected into Buddhist enlightenment. A better response—one that may be truer to Siddhartha than the common one—is to reject the question as a philosophical doctrine and, instead, see it as a basis for common practices, particular those centering on compassion. Instead of thinking in terms of *no-self*, it would be better to see it in terms of *not-self* or selflessness. The irony in this is that it is exactly what has been taught to the lay Buddhists since the very beginning of its traditions, but it has been dressed in other reasons:

7 Robinson et al, 58.

to keep the laity from the “deeper” issues with which they should not concern themselves. It is through the rejection of forming any philosophical answers that Buddhism can return to the humility and compassion in even greater was than it has in recent times.