

Philosophy 438: Indian Buddhist Philosophy

Buddhist Views of the Self

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Spring term 2002

1 Course description

The most distinctive feature of Buddhist philosophy, especially in India, was the doctrine of non-self (*anātman* in Sanskrit, *anatta* in Pali). We shall begin by examining pre-Buddhist views of the self. Then we shall examine passages in early Buddhist scriptures in which the doctrine of non-self is first taught and introduced as a topic of meditation. We shall then see how two very influential Buddhist scholastics—Nāgārjuna (ca. 150 C.E.) and Vasubandhu (fifth century C.E.)—treated the doctrine of non-self.

In modern times, both Buddhist monks and academic scholars of Buddhism in Asia and the West have reflected on the meaning of the doctrine of non-self and how it can be reconciled with the doctrines of karma and rebirth and the Buddhist call for ethical responsibility. We shall look at two Western academics, Steven Collins and Peter Harvey, one of whom is a Buddhist and one who is not. Then we shall look at two writings by a modern Thai Buddhist monk who has written extensively on this topic, namely, Bhikkhu Buddhādāsa. Taking a position that is in some important respects diametrically opposed to Buddhādāsa is the modern American Buddhist monk, Thanissaro Bhikkhu. We shall read his influential essay “Mind Like Fire” and then finish the course with several short essays on Buddhist meditation on the theme of not-self written by Thanissaro Bhikkhu and a modern German Buddhist nun, Ayyā Khemā.

2 Assignments

There will be four assignments in this course.

Historical assignment On the basis of the lectures and readings done through February 7, outline what you see as the key issues that distinguished the teachings of the Buddha from the teachings of other religious philosophers in ancient India. Approximate length of essay: 1000 words. *Due February 7.*

First critical review Write a critical analysis of an argument of your choice from either the *Questions of King Milinda* or Candrakīrti's *Lucid Exposition of the Middle Way*. First state the author's argument as you understand it, then state what you see as the principal strengths and weaknesses of the argument. Approximate length: 1250 words. *Due March 5.*

Second critical review Write a book review of the passages we have read from either Steven Collins' or Peter Harvey's book. State what you see as the principal strengths and weaknesses of the writing you have chosen to review. Approximate length: 1250 words. *Due April 2.*

Persuasive essay Considering all the writings we have studied in this course, which author that we have studied gives what is in your opinion the most satisfactory exposition of the teachings of the Buddha on the self? State why you find the author you have chosen more satisfactory than others. Approximate length: 1500 words. *Due May 2.*

Assignment	Date due	Pct
Historical assignment	Feb 7	20%
First critical review	Mar 5	25%
Second critical essay	Apr 2	25%
Persuasive essay	May 2	30%
		100%

3 Office hours

I can be found in my office (Humanities 553) on Tuesdays from 2:00 until 3:00pm. If that time is inconvenient, please make an appointment by contacting me just before or after class.

4 Weekly schedule of lectures and readings

Dates	Topic	Readings
Jan. 15,17	Background: Pre-Buddhist views of self; Upaniṣads and Jainism	
22, 24	Hindu views of self: Sāṃkhya and Nyāya	
29, 31	The Buddha's teachings	Connected Discourses and Gradual Sayings (Ch. 1 and 2 of course packet)
Feb. 5, 7	The Buddha's teachings	Middle-length Sayings and Long Discourses (Ch. 3 and 4)
12, 14	Milinda's Questions	Rhys Davids (1990, pp. 17–63)
19, 21	Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti	"Self-existence" in Sprung (1979)
26, 28	Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti	"Self and the way things really are" in Sprung (1979)
Mar. 5, 7	Vasubandhu	Stcherbatsky (1976)
19, 21	Steven Collins	Collins (1982, pp. 87–153)
26, 28	Peter Harvey	Harvey (1995, pp. 17–63)
Apr. 2, 4	Bhikkhu Buddhādāsa	"Me and Mine" in Swearer (1989)
9, 11		"Dependent Origination" in Swearer (1989)
16, 18	Thanissaro Bhikkhu	<i>Mind Like Fire</i> (Part III of course packet)
23, 25		<i>Mind Like Fire</i>
30, May 2	The practical dimension	Thanissaro & Ayyā Khemā (Part II of course packet)

The readings from Rhys Davids, Sprung, Stcherbatsky, Collins and Harvey are found in the coursepack after Part III. The full bibliographic information of those published references, which you should cite in your essays, is given below.

Works Cited

- Collins, Steven. *Selfless Persons: Imagery and Thought in Theravāda Buddhism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.
- Harvey, Peter. *The Selfless Mind: Personality, Consciousness and Nirvana in Early Buddhism*. Surry, UK: Curzon Press, 1995.
- Rhys Davids, T.W., editor. *The Questions of King Milinda*. Volume 1 . New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 1990.
- Sprung, Mervyn. *Lucid Exposition of the Middle Way: The Essential Chapters from the Prasannapadā of Candrakīrti*. Boulder: Prajñā Press, 1979.
- Stcherbatsky, Theodore. *The Soul Theory of the Buddhists*. Delhi: Bharatiya Vidya Prakashan, 1976.
- Swearer, Donald K., editor. *Me and Mine: Selected Essays of Bhikkhu Buddhādāsa*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989.