Buddhism often deals with *absences* or *releases*: the absence of suffering, the absence of desire, the release of attachment, and so on. This essay will focus analogously on an absence: the absence of the conception of personhood in Buddhism. In other words, how, and *how well*, does Buddhism, respond to the ontological question “What is a person” (hereinafter referred to as the ‘personhood question’).

I will argue that the Pali canon of Buddhism offers an inadequate, ambiguous, and perhaps contradictory answer to the personhood question. I will further argue that this inadequacy can turn problematic, and perhaps lead to nihilism, when we view Buddhism through the lens of social relations. I conclude with some possible resolutions and answers to the personhood question by deriving insights from the Pali canon. This paper will deal mostly with a liturgical analysis of Buddhism, since we are dealing with a criticism not of a view, but the absence of a view.

**Personhood and the Self in Buddhism**

I will deal with the problems in how Buddhism deals with the question of personhood, by first discussing the concept of *khandha* (or aggregates) which is critical to personhood, and then progressively analyzing what each of the Four Noble Truths imply about personhood.

Prior to our investigation, it behooves us to note that the Pali canon does *not* provide an authoritative answer to key questions such as those of personhood (Thanissaro, *The Five Aggregates)*, to *samsara* (Rahula, pp. 35), or even to simple questions such as the meaning of nirvana (Rahula, pp. 38). Moreover, the Buddha explicitly emphasizes that his discourse is only about stress (or pain): Both formerly & now, it is only stress that I describe, and the cessation of stress” (*SN 22.86*). Thus, the personhood question in Buddhism is both *open-ended* and *important*, as I will demonstrate. It is precisely this open-endedness that I argue is a pernicious weakness in Buddhism’s appeal in practice.

Furthermore, the personhood question is not just relevant for its own sake. Personhood is linked to concepts such as reincarnation and nirvana. Clare Carlisle notes that *Anatta*, the belief that there is no ‘Self’, is fundamental to understanding reincarnation, since we need to know *what* is being reincarnated, and *what* retains its identity after the body has been destroyed. The Buddha held that *Anatta* meant that the Self is an illusion (or *fabrication*) and is in a perpetually “constant state of inconstancy [or flux]” (Carlisle). The question of *what retains its identity* is important not just for reincarnation, but also for the personhood question; the two are interlinked.

**Aggregate-As-Personhood and The Noble Truths**

While *Anatta* means that the Self does not exist, it does leave flexibility and ambiguity around what personhood might mean. Scholars such as Thanissaro Bhikkhu argue that we can ‘treat the *khandhas* as the Buddha’s answer to the question: ”what is a person?”’ Thanissaro argues that the Buddha perceives the individual to be a collection of five types of *bundles*, *piles or aggregates* (*khandhas*) – nothing more, nothing less. I will refer this position as the *aggregate-as-personhood argument.*

Let us analyse the background, content, and explanation of The Four Noble Truths to shed more light on this viewpoint.

**Background of the Four Noble Truths: Why are they needed?**

The Four Noble Truths (*cattāri ariyasaccāni*) were revealed to the Buddha under the Bodhi tree after intense meditation, which was in turn prompted by his encounter with the Four Sights of sick, dying, aged, and wise men, respectively (Rahula, xv). This story of the conception of the Four Noble Truths itself reveals the fundamental power of personhood and self-investigation. The Buddha does not glean the truth from speaking to the wise man in the Fourth Sight – the memory of the Sight is enough to inspire him to meditate *in isolation*. His truths are not formed in *dialogue* with the world, but in a still, solitary perception of the world; thus, classical Arendtian ideas of the Self and of personhood as being formed when men act and speak in relation with each other do not hold here.

The Buddha describes his worldview and the Four Noble Truths in the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56:11).* He presents his theory of the two extremes (of sensuality and self-affliction) as an axiom; and proceeds to use this theory as an evaluatory framework: the two extremes are unprofitable and undesirable, so we should try to find a Middle Way superior to both, since it can lead ‘to direct knowledge, self-awakening, to unbinding’. To realize the Middle Way, The Buddha posits the eightfold path, which comprises of eight attributes of “right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.” An attribute is considered *right* when it avoids the two extremes. Each attribute is progressively localized to the individual and more intense than the open preceding it.

However, one might simply stop here, and ask whether the axiom of two extremes, the Middle Way, and the means to attain the Middle Way *viz*. the eightfold path, can form a sufficiently coherent and comprehensive worldview, and by implication, a morally sound code of conduct. Seemingly tangentially, one might wonder whether the Buddha lapses into a concrete conception of the Self when he speaks about *self-awakening*  in the context of the Middle Way. Interestingly, the second question answers the first. We can interpret *self-awakening* not as the awakening of the Self to Knowledge (with a capital K), but instead as the ‘direct knowledge’ that the self is an illusion, leading us to the *aggregate-as-personhood* view; the knowledge that a person holds lies in the person’s aggregates*.* If that is true, then the basic Noble Truths of the human condition also lie in the aggregates.

However, one question remains: if how can constant knowledge be imparted to ‘persons who are simply inconstant aggregates? Unlike aggregates, knowledge (in the sense of basic truths) is unitary, permanent, and indivisible. This tension between aggregates and knowledge, permanence and impermanence, nirvana and nirvana, the Self and the not-Self, permeates throughout the underpinnings of the Four Noble Truths.

**The Noble Truths: ‘Clinging-Aggregates are Stressful’**

The Four Truths are best seen through the lens of aggregates. The first noble truth, commonly interpreted as ‘the world is full of suffering’, is explained by the Buddhas as “the five clinging-aggregates are stressful.” Contrary to the common interpretation, suffering is internally wrought, not externally driven; it lies not in the world, but in the person (through the clinging-aggregates). The Buddha later explains that the clinging-aggregates are the result of taking attachment, sustenance, passion and pleasure in the aggregates of form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness (*DN 22*).

What is the nature of these five-clinging aggregates? The Pali canon is extremely ambiguous here. However, we find a rare Socratic discussion about them in MN 109, which involves intense questioning of the Buddha by his monks. Here, the Buddha clarifies that the five clinging-aggregates are rooted in desire, and that the clinging is a consequence of passion and delight in the aggregates. Frustratingly for the novice, when the monk asks the Buddha about the nature of the aggregates, the Buddha responds with a forward-referencing definition:

*[T]he monk… asked him a further question: “To what extent does the designation ‘aggregate’ apply to the aggregates?”*

*“Monk, whatever form is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: That is called the form aggregate …*

(*MN 109)*

The Buddha repeats the same definition for the other four aggregates as well; and this discourse does not lead us further. However, another monk then asks the Buddha how a person could lapse into the ‘self-identification’ view, i.e. how can they fall into the illusion that a Self exists? The Buddha responds by saying that:

An uninstructed run-of-the mill person … assumes form to be the Self, or the self as possessing form, or form as in the self, or the self as in form

(*MN 109)*

As earlier, the Buddha repeats the same for the other four aggregates. We form an illusion of the Self when we associate themselves with our form (their body), our feelings (emotions, ambitions), perceptions (cognition and attitude), fabrications (intentions), and consciousness. Frustratingly again, when the Buddha is asked what a non-self-identification view would entail, he responds with simply a negation of self-identification, i.e. that enlightened beings do *not* associate themselves with their aggregates; they are dispassionate about their aggregates.

However, beyond a description of the delusions of personhood, we still do not reach any resolution about what personhood *means.* Consider this: Consciousness, perception and fabrication are key aggregates. Our personhood is the collection of the aggregates. Suffering is a result of clinging to these aggregates. Compassion for other beings should arise since suffering is common to all. However, animals arguably do not possess consciousness and perception, or atleast do not possess it in the same way as humans do; do they not suffer? If so, how is one to set up a compassionate framework for being which do not suffer, or suffer differently?

In fact, there seems to be a form of fundamental ambiguity about whether personhood, in the sense of a stable, permanent sense of identity, really exists in Buddhism.

For example, in the *Atthi Raga Sutta*, the Buddha starts by describing four nutriments for ‘beings who have come into being or for the support of those in search of a place to be born.’ This implies that yet-unborn beings (i.e. dead beings) retain the same physiological and psychological needs as those who are born; what essential property, if not the Self or personhood, is retained after death? The Buddha goes on to explain that passion and craving for the nutriments leads to consciousness, and so on, and finally results in “birth, aging and death together with sorrow, affliction, and despair.” In his classic fashion, he explains the negation as well – where there is no passion, there will be no consciousness, and so on, and thus no sorrow, affliction and despair. He summarizes this with a metaphor, where he imagines a ray of sunlight (symbolizing *sorrow*) which enters the windows of a roofed house and posits that if there were no wall, ground or water beyond the window (symbolizing passion, consciousness, and so on), then the ray would not land (i.e. the sorrow would not take root). He means the metaphor to denote that a man without a sense of Self or passion will not be sorrowful. However, what does the *roofed house* symbolize, if not a solid sense of Self, or of personhood? If there is no ground beyond the window, then what is the house resting on? The Buddha seems to lapse into a permanent notion of personhood-as-Self here.

The same lapse occurs in Rahula’s *What the Buddha Taught*, where Rahula deals with the same question as Carlisle, i.e “if there is no permanent, unchangingentity or substance like Self or Soul, what is it that can re-exist or be reborn after death?” Rahula attempts to answer this conundrum by appealing to a metaphysical concept of ‘energy’: “when a physical body is no more capable of functioning, energies do not die with it, but continue to take some other shape or form.” He uses the popular candle flame metaphor to explain reincarnation as a cycle of a candle flame being used to light another candle, ad infinitum, where the ‘energy’ retained is the continuum of the flame. However, the notion of ‘energy’ and the flame still requires some essential property of that which is reborn; we still do not know whether this property forms the underpinnings of personhood.

**Consequence, and Resolution**

Now that we have demonstrated sufficient ambiguity in how Buddhism deals with the personhood question, we consider the impacts of this ambiguity, and possible resolutions to it.

I argue that Buddhism’s notion of the inconstancy of the aggregates, its lack of a clear sense of personhood, and its intense focus on meditation as a cure for the illusion of the Self, can result in nihilism, and inward-looking social outlook for the modern individual, like the protagonist Elizabeth in the movie *Eat Pray Love*.

As Thanissaro and Rahula point out, the Buddhist canon relies heavily on new language constructs in Pali to explain its novel concepts. However, these constructs might not translate efficiently into modern languages. For instance, it is possible that the question “What is a person” might register differently in third century Pali; the difference in objectivity of ‘what’ and ‘who’, and the meaning of ‘person’ versus ‘self’ is central to the ambiguity we have demonstrated above.

Furthermore, languages are closely inter-twined with culture and circumstance; Elizabeth from *Eat Pray Love* is immersed in a capitalist world where one cannot seek monks on the street for instant guidance, nor is it culturally or financially attractive to become a monk in Manhattan. In a culture where identity is increasingly popular *as* a worldview, and in a world of rapid change, Elizabeth seeks stability and re-discovery. It is easy to see why Buddhism’s confused notions of self-identity and of the self-as-flux might not help Elizabeth; in fact, Buddhism might question what Self there is to re-discover in the first place. If there is no firm conception of the Self, the modern Cartesian can no longer answer questions of purpose, ambition, motivation, and happiness. In the 21st century, where people relate to each other through self- and group identification via common nationhood, gender, race, or other subcultures, it is hard for a self-as-flux worldview to thrive and be capable of fostering complex and fruitful social relations.

How can we resolve the ambiguity in Buddhism’s answer to the personhood question? We can marry Rahula’s notion of the retained ‘energy’ as a continuum or process, and Foucault’s notion of the Self as a process, except that we can refashion Foucault’s self-as-a-process to mean person-as-a-process. This view resonates with Thanissaro’s exposition of the use of the five aggregates as a tool for self-improvement, and of Buddhism’s emphasis on the life-long journey of the devotee toward *nirvana*. In sum, we can conceive the ambiguity of Buddhism on the personhood question as an open-ended process of personal discovery for the modern Elizabeth.

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