

Relationship of Nonself and Karma

Safeer Ahmed

The Self

In most people's everyday life, the concept of a personal identity that persists over time is common sense. The belief is that every person is differentiated by something that maintains itself beyond their physical changes as time progresses. One person has a "self" while another person has an "other self." A person losing their limbs or cycling dead cells does not change their self under this belief. Moreover, a person has this self from birth to death – or even in an afterlife. However, such a concept raises a metaphysical puzzle that lacks a general consensus among most philosophers. Therefore, the puzzle to first tackle is: Do people or things have a self that is an "essential core that is solid and unchanging?" (Appendix 2, 182). Buddhism offers a compelling response to the puzzle. The Buddhist stance on the puzzle is that no self exists. The appendices to "The Way of the Bodhisattva" identify that the distinction between the "self" or "I" and an "other self" is entirely "illusory" (Appendix 2, 183). Not only does this response satisfy the puzzle by rejecting the existence of a self, but it also provides important groundwork for an increase of good Karma. An argument against the self's existence will be outlined in further detail prior to delving into the benefits obtained by individuals and communities through Karma. Certain aspects of the Karma discussion will rely on anattā (doctrine of non-self), such as Skandhas, so the nonself argument must be critically analyzed first to better understand their relationship.

Buddhist Nonself Argument

Critically analyzing the Buddhist Argument from Impermanence assists in solidifying anattā while establishing the groundwork for the Karma discussion to be had. In Buddhist philosophy, there is the notion of Skandhas. Skandhas means aggregates or simply person parts. Such parts construct a whole person. The five Skandhas are rupa (form/body), feeling, perception, volition, and consciousness. The Argument from Impermanence utilizes the Skandhas to form an argument against the existence of a self. Therefore, extracting the Argument from Impermanence from the Buddha to his five companions is as follows:

1. The five aggregates are each impermanent.
 2. If there were a self, it would be permanent.
 3. If the self existed, it would be an aggregate. (exhaustive)
- IP. [There is no more to a person than the five Skandhas.]
- C. Therefore, there is no self (Siderits, 52).

The argument pivots on premise two. Recall that the idea of a self revolves around it persisting throughout one's lifetime – or into the afterlife depending on the stance taken on life after death. Regardless of one's afterlife stance, this understanding of the self would require it to be permanent. Thus, premise two reflects this thought. Yet, the Argument from Impermanence above directly clashes with a permanent self because the implicit premise (IP) affirms that a

person consists of *only* the five Skandhas which must be impermanent. A proponent of the self needs to argue that the aggregates are not necessarily always permanent or add a premise stating that the self is the only permanent aggregate. The same proponent also needs to argue that there is more to a person than the five aggregates – where the self is an addition to the previously stated five Skandhas.

Combatting the proponent of the self's counterarguments further ensures why nonself is so compelling to the initial puzzle and beneficial to bettering individuals and communities. Without the self, there is no selfishness which will later be shown to assist in bettering life alongside good Karma. When opponents of nonself can reconcile that there actually is no self, positives will ensue. It can be argued that the five Skandhas already mentioned *are* impermanent. The body is scientifically proven to be impermanent because it physically changes as cells die/mutate/etc. Additionally, since one can argue from a physicalist point-of-view that feeling, perception, volition, and consciousness rely solely on the body, and the body clearly is impermanent, then all five aggregates are impermanent. Physicalism relies on everything in the universe being physical, so feeling, perception, volition, and consciousness would be physical. For instance, many physicalists believe that the neural system of a body dictates the latter four aggregates. Removing one's brain removes such aggregates, so they must be impermanent if the brain is impermanent. Nevertheless, Buddhists do not need to be physicalists, but physicalism is just one route illustrating that the five aggregates are impermanent. Because the five aggregates can be argued as impermanent, it weakens the counterargument any proponent of the self would make.

Furthermore, under their counterargument, the self has to become the only permanent aggregate. Such a premise would only be eligible if they first tackle the other necessary component of whether or not there are more than five aggregates in every person. This is necessary to combat the implicit premise (IP). Even if a proponent of the self was able to form an argument for a person consisting of more than the five Skandhas, a Buddhist can deter such an argument. The Buddhist can take the route of asserting that the self would still not be necessary to construct a person. They can feasibly claim that taking away the self can still yield a whole person. For example, assume that the self exists, and the self is the sixth aggregate that has the exception of being permanent. Imagine a person, call him/her Person A, with these six aggregates. The Buddhist can simply state that separating the self from Person A will not alter the existence of Person A or any function Person A can commit to himself/herself or others. All functionality of this person will remain constant without the permanent self; therefore, the implicit premise (IP) still holds.

Overall, as discussed, the Argument from Impermanence is very solid and requires rigorous counterarguments from opponents of the nonself doctrine. It blurs the line between the "self" and an "other self" because there is no self at all. When more individuals believe in nonself, they will detach from their selfish desires and shift toward actions causing good Karma.

Karma with the Nonself

Since the Buddhist argument for rejecting a permanent self is firmly established, the topic of Karma can be highlighted with its benefits with respect to the nonself. Karma in Buddhism refers to the actions of someone that yield future consequences. Recall the five essential aggregates. Each individual person, insofar as they exist, is a result of causal interactions between the mentioned aggregates. Although interactions between people occur, the causal interactions which occur are between the aggregates of each person involved. The point of nonself in Buddhism is that the gap between aggregates of a single person and multiple people is an illusion because the boundary can be expanded arbitrarily. Since the previous section emphasized an argument where no self exists at all, Buddhists can suppose a boundary that indefinitely extends.

An important aspect of this indefinite expansion of aggregate boundaries is that it benefits every person involved when individuals perceive there is no self. It was hinted at earlier that selfishness is tied to the permanent self. When individuals tie an arbitrary self to the aggregates that form their person, they act in favor of their self. A common issue due to the existence of a self is the exploitation of others. The conflict between “the self” and an “other self” leads to selfish desires where individuals do not look out for each other. These negative intentions result in negative consequences and, therefore, bad Karma that can carry over to rebirthed lives according to Buddhist philosophy. The cycle of suffering continues this way as the self is a coping mechanism against suffering through perceiving benefits for oneself selfishly as a way to evade suffering. However, the acceptance of the nonself argument dissolves such selfishness between individuals. The selfish desires and battles people have among themselves are an aspect of suffering that can be alleviated by the nonself position. The nonself framework carries with it the notion that every person is equal in sharing the same types of impermanent aggregates without a differentiating permanent self. Shantideva eloquently describes that people will aid and benefit one another, “for they are living beings, like my body” (94).

Communities consist of individuals, and when individuals conform to the idea of no permanent self existing, the community will benefit from positive mutual interactions. Referring to it as a community is for simplicity’s sake; though, a community is actually just the aggregate boundary being expanded to a specified point. Buddhists allow this boundary to be indefinite, so every individual can reach the benefits of the nonself, not just those in specific communities. There ends up being a mutually positive outcome for *all* people when nonself is accepted. The upshot is that the nonself route ensures people work together to reduce pain among each other, resulting in good for all and enlightened society. This leads to good Karma eventually ending the chain of suffering that results from attaching a permanent self to aggregates in life.