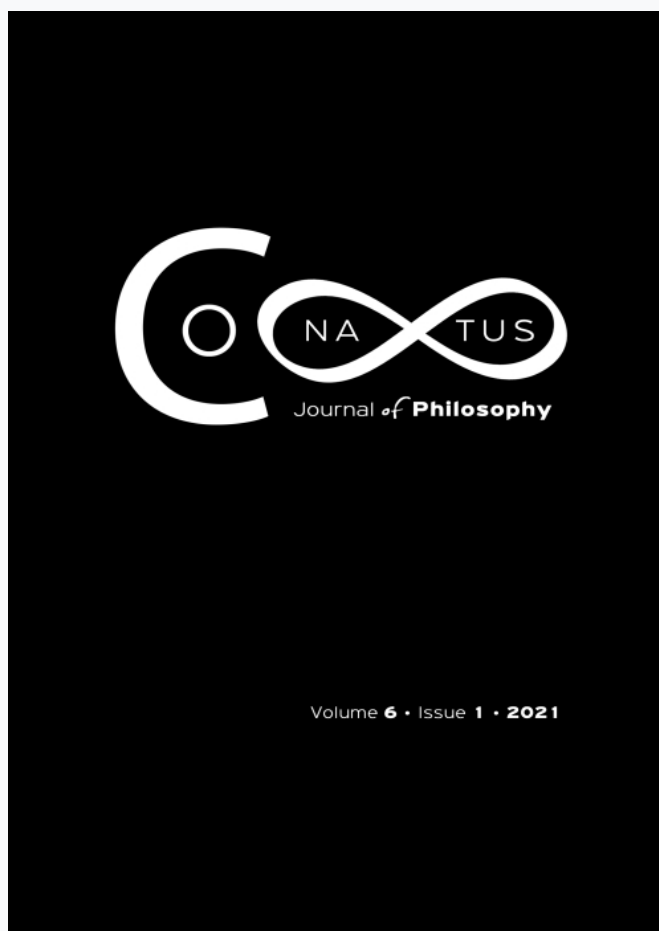


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With or Without the Self? Arguments in Favor of the Hindu Concept of the Atman over the Buddhist Understanding of the Anatman

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Abstract

As found in the Upanishads, readers come to encounter many ideas regarding the “Self” as opposed to the “self,” or the Atman versus the atman. Now, complicating matters further readers encounter the antithetical concept, of the Atman and atman, or the Buddhists understanding of the anatman as found in the Dhammapada. First, this piece will unpack the idea of both the “Self” and the “self,” or the Atman and the atman, as understood in Hindu philosophy and theology. Next, this essay will then describe the Buddhists understanding of anatman, or the absence, or emptiness of the self, or the nullification of the self, or the atman as well as even of the Self, or the Atman. Finally, this piece will resolve by arguing in favor of the Self, or the Atman as well as the self, or atman over the Buddha’s notion of the anatman.

Keywords: *comparative philosophy; Hinduism; Atman; The Upanishads; Buddhism; Anatman; The Dhammapada*

I. Defining the Self, or the Atman

As understood in the *Isha Upanishad*, readers come to find a most revealing quote describing the absolute reality that is the Self, or the Atman:

The Self is everywhere. Bright is the Self, Indivisible, untouched by sin, wise, Immanent and transcendent. He it is who holds the cosmos together.¹

¹ *The Upanishads*, trans. Eknath Easwaran (Tomales, CA: Nilgiri Press, 2007), 58.

Now, this Self, or *Atman* is that which serves to be the Godhead in the *Upanishads*.² That is because only something immanent, or within and throughout all reality can be everywhere the same, or that the Self, or the *Atman* is indeed that which binds all of existence together.³ Furthermore, one may find in this quote that the Self, or the *Atman* as transcendent, or as above and beyond everyday reality in the natural order, is truly that which cannot be subject to division.⁴

Moreover, by being above and beyond ordinary existence, one may find that this transcendent Self, or *Atman* is exempt from affectability, preserving the Self, or the *Atman* as perfect, or untouched by sin, and thus wise, for nothing can taint or restrain the expression of its goodness, or wisdom.⁵ Finally, if one considers another quote, this time from the *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* he/she may find something more revealing about the immanency of the Self, or the *Atman*. That is, let readers consider the following:

The Lord dwells in the womb of the cosmos, The Creator who is in all creatures, He is that which is born and to be born; His face is everywhere.⁶

From this quote, one may find that the Lord, or the Self, or the *Atman* possesses a power that inhabits all that is, leading to the role of the Creator as that which becomes the cosmos itself.⁷ One may also find in this quote that as such a Creator of the cosmos itself, and as within all creatures, who is findable everywhere, the Self, or the *Atman* is indeed immanent, or within and throughout all life.⁸ Finally, one last implication of this quote alluding to the Self's, or the *Atman*'s immanency is that the Self, or the *Atman* is everlasting.⁹ That is because as being that which will be alive, there is the implication that its birth was prior, an instant of the past, while the Self, or the *Atman* as being that which is indeed alive is an instant of its present, and as that which will be alive one may declare that as being an instant of the Self's, or the *Atman*'s future. Hence, as being throughout all time, one may verily claim that the

² Ibid., 37-39.

³ Ibid., 58.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 165.

⁷ Ibid., 167.

⁸ Ibid., 58, 167.

⁹ Ibid., 165.

Self, or the *Atman* is not only eternal, but also immanent, or everywhere in presence the same.¹⁰

Furthermore, one may declare that this eternal and all-pervading Self, or *Atman* as that which is in all things, animate and even inanimate, by which all that is finds their common source of existence, is also that which gave way to the life of its fragments, or oneself who is a being who contains an awareness of the *Atman* by being an *atman* oneself.¹¹ In other words, the Self, or the *Atman* who manifest as the first cause, or origin point of all life, is therefore also that which emerges to be in each person and it is everyone who houses in the depths of themselves this everlasting and immortal node of all that is and is in reality and existence itself.¹² Lastly, let us further explore the idea of each of individual as selves, or *atman(s)* as understood in the *Upanishads*.

II. Describing the self, or the *atman*

As mentioned, the concept of the *atman* also refers to the individual soul, or vitality, or life-breath that all people possess the power to be knowing of, in an aware way.¹³ Now, some features of this self, or *atman* that is distinct from the absolute reality that is the Self, or the *Atman* is that *atman(s)*, or individual selves exists trapped in a more microcosmic reality, in which they undergo certain processes of which the Self, or the *Atman* is exempt. In other words, unlike the pristine and perfect reality that is the Self, or the *Atman*, people's fragmentary existence as miniscule selves, or *atman(s)* comes with the plague of desire, craving, and yearning.¹⁴

As such, people should overcome this realm of *samsara*, or the illusory world of separation and suffering, in which they live, that reel births, deaths, and rebirths, to achieve reunification with their original and absolute source, which is the Self, or the *Atman*.¹⁵ Finally, this release from *samsara* is the liberating state of *moksha*, or that permanent state of joy, or bliss achieved by living a life that uncovers levels of consciousness in a most perfect way.¹⁶ However, to reach this state of joy is no easy task, and as stated in the *Taittiriya Upanishad*, one must first peel away his/her state of being, associated with what he/she takes to be the material body, which attends only to the outside

¹⁰ *The Upanishads*, 35-37.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 159.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 6942-6943.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 241.

world.¹⁷ That is because an awareness that is only of the material body and its wants, leads to only pleasure, or a temporary state of relief from desire, craving, and yearning, which promises only a deeper state of craving once such a transient state of pleasure subsides.¹⁸ Instead, one ought to seek joy, which in Hinduism is a permanent state of awareness in which the self, or the *atman*, finds the Self, or the *Atman* within.¹⁹

Next, even if one unveils and becomes impartial to the material body, there is still the consciousness of his/her vitality, or *prana*, that he/she must also tame.²⁰ Furthermore, one is then to quiet, or still the mind in such a way that he/she may further himself/herself, or his/her *atman* to progress toward everlasting happiness, or joy, and afterwards he/she is to then uncover intuition, or *buddhi*, to alas reach such joy.²¹ Now, with this development toward joy, one should also note that he/she is doing away with karmic baggage that can delay him/her from achieving *moksha*, and that state of reunion with the Self, or the *Atman* that is the abode of living and perpetual joy.²² In fact, this *Taittiriya Upanishad* even informs us of the following:

The Self is the source of abiding joy. Our hearts are filled with joy in seeing him Enshrined in the depths of our consciousness. If he were not there, who would breathe, who live? He it is who fills every heart with joy.²³

Lastly, let readers now explore the Buddhists understanding of the *anatman*, the antithesis of the self, or the *atman* found in Hinduism, as well as the problems even the Buddha faced regarding this concept of the self, or the *atman*.

III. Entering the Concept of the *Anatman*

As stated in Chapter 12 of the Buddhists text the *Dhammapada*, readers come to encounter a startling claim; namely, the concept of the *anatman*, or the “without a self” doctrine that the Buddha expounded in his teachings.²⁴

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 241-242.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 254.

²⁴ *The Dhammapada*, trans. Eknath Easwaran (Tomales, CA: Nilgiri Press, 2008), 153.

That is, one may find that the *anatman* is the opposite concept of the Hindu Self, or *Atman* as well as the individual self, or *atman*.²⁵ One reason for the Buddha's claim is that people's personalities, as impermanent, generate a logical contradiction when individuals attempt to acknowledge such inherent impermanency with both an unchanging identity, or self, or *atman* as well as with an unaffected eternal, and thus, immutable reality beyond this one, the Self, or the *Atman*.²⁶

Moreover, to complicate matters further, readers may find that Easwaran, the commentator of this writer's version of the *Dhammapada*, brings to light the argument by the Buddha that a concept like the self, or *atman*, or the Self, or *Atman*, as permanent features of reality and existence, may just be another attachment that people should overcome to seek true lasting spiritual liberation, or what the Buddha calls *nirvana*.²⁷ In other words, one may find that the notion of the self, or the *atman* and the Self, or the *Atman* cannot be everlasting.²⁸ That is because to the Buddha, the individual self, or *atman*, when instructed to seek the Self, or *Atman*, to attain *moksha* and entry into the absolute reality that is the Self, or the *Atman*, what one finds behind such instruction is at least an engagement in desire.²⁹

Accordingly, the Buddha sees it that the mistake of Hinduism is asserting such a self, or *atman* as well as a Self, or *Atman*. That is because if Hinduism seeks to extinguish desire for all to eventually join in *moksha* and thus identity and equality in the Self, or the *Atman*, then how can it be that individuals are to seek such a Self, or *Atman*, through striving for want of reunification with such an absolute reality. Would it not be the case that if one follows his/her want for reunification with the Self, or the *Atman*, then even this is merely another way in which *samsara* persists?³⁰ In the opinion of this present essayist, this is indeed the standpoint of the Buddha.

However, in this same Chapter 12 of the *Dhammapada*, readers encounter another startle; specifically, that it is pragmatic, or useful to assume the existence of the self, or the *atman*.³¹ That is because the Buddha believes that by acknowledging the self, or the *atman* insofar as allowing people to be morally and ethically responsible for their intentions and deeds, one finds that he/she can strengthen aspects of himself/herself that are integral

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 154.

²⁸ Ibid., 153 & 154.

²⁹ Ibid., 154.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 155-156.

to his/her moral and ethical well-being, such as his/her willing to do right and refraining from performing wrong.³² In other words, even though there may be no permanent self, or *atman*, it is still of worth to assume that the individual is the one who intends and performs his/her acts.³³ Finally, that is because people may further themselves on the quest to learn to unlearn, or to develop in such a way that all of this world's conditioning, goes nil, when they assume themselves to be manifesters of their reality of which they are ultimately responsible.³⁴

IV. Asserting the Certainty of the self, or *atman*, and the Self, or *Atman* over the Buddha's *anatman*

One reason as to why one may claim that the Buddhist understanding of the *anatman* pales when compared to the surety of the Hindu concept of the self, or the *atman* as well as the Self, or the *Atman*, is that if one takes his/her existence, in the Hindu illusory world of *maya*, or the Buddhists illusory realm of *loka*, it is still the case that what he/she senses in either realm, must derive from a source that can sense, or oneself, or an *atman*.

Moreover, even if one peels away this self, or *atman*, as does the Buddha, he/she may claim that this too is an err on part of the Buddha. That is because one still must admit that when he/she is dismantling the self, or the *atman* even if it is for the sake of emptying, or voiding oneself, to be the clearest channel for raw consciousness to come forth, as akin to the beliefs of the Buddha, he/she must still admit that he/she is untangling something rather than nothing. In other words, one major flaw of the Buddhist idea of the *anatman* is that if there were genuinely no self at all, then how can it be that what one takes to be his/her perceptions are indeed his/her own? At the same time, an even more pressing flaw of the Buddhist idea of the *anatman* is how can it be that one ought to empty oneself for clarity of mind, while nevertheless failing to acknowledge that there must be a self, working toward its own emptying, that is previous to an emptied self, for that self to be emptiable?

Also, the idea that a perpetually abiding Self, or *Atman*, as being, in fact, impermanent, and hence defying the very truth of a Self, or an *Atman* cannot be the case either, thus defying the Buddha's assertion of the *anatman*. That is because in Hinduism although individuals may find that even the natural order and all of reality is impermanent, it is permanently impermanent, or that it is the very essence, or nature of the Self, or the

³² Ibid., 156-158.

³³ Ibid., 155, 159.

³⁴ Ibid., 159-160.

Atman to renew itself through the periodic clearing away of all that is only for the reemergence of itself after such episodic conflagrations.³⁵

One need only look to the idea of *Brahma* as that which creates all life, and *Vishnu* as that which sustains all life, and *Shiva* as that which is the destroyer of all life, that is, the Hindu Trinity itself, to know that these three guises of the Self, or the *Atman* calls forth change in a way that is everlasting. Thus, there is not a true *anatman* that can ever come to be, for, even the Self, or the *Atman* despite appearing to undergo change, is verily that which causes and ensures the eternity of existence through its self-regulating nature. In other words, and as the philosopher Leibniz once wrote “... the universe which will be changed but not destroyed,” the Self, or the *Atman* alike may alter the cosmos, as effects of its nature, but it itself will eternally and unchangingly be.³⁶

Also, readers may further challenge the Buddha’s take on the self, or the *atman*, as well as the Self, or the *Atman*, by debasing the notion that if one strives for permanent joy and enlightenment for the sake of entering an eternal and absolute reality one is, in fact, pleasure seeking and attached to this world of delusion.³⁷ Now, the mistake of the Buddha here is that there cannot be a teleological story compatible with the Hindu *Upanishads*, for the Self, or the *Atman* is infinite and eternal, as stated above, and because of this the Self, or the *Atman* is immune from beginnings or ends, and thus it is already self-sufficient, and in no need of a purpose to fulfill.³⁸ Finally, if individual people are fragments of the Self, or the *Atman* as selves, or as *atman(s)*, then how can it be that each possesses a purpose that each must fulfill, if the power to uncover the Self, or the *Atman* is within, and thus not an external goal that he/she must strive for, in a way that necessarily renders him/her attached and craving of spiritual liberation as well as reunification with the Self, or the *Atman*?

Hence, if one understands the *Upanishads* as a story of how he/she can uncover himself/herself, or *atman* to find the Self, or the *Atman* within, instead of a quest for achieving reunification with the Self, or the *Atman* in a purely desiring way, that situates itself with reaching a source outside of us then the Buddha is not indubitably correct about the accuracy of his concept of the *anatman*. That is because the process of self-discovery, of the self’s, or the *atman*’s effort to raise to an awareness of the inner Self, or *Atman* within, is not an effort to attain something totally unique, or distinct.³⁹ Instead, the

³⁵ *The Upanishads*, 310-311.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 310-311; G. W. Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, trans. Daniel Garber, and Roger Ariew (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1989), 207.

³⁷ *The Dhammapada*, 154.

³⁸ *The Upanishads*, 58, 165.

³⁹ *The Dhammapada*, 154; *The Upanishads*, 165.

self's, or *atman*'s inner journey toward the Self, or the *Atman* is something individuals already harbor and although it is for us to come to realize, or recognize, it is still something that connects us all to the same common origin point that is the Self, or the *Atman*.

Accordingly, readers may begin to see how it is that the Buddha commits a straw man fallacy against the Hindu concept of the self, or the *atman* as well as the Self, or the *Atman*. For, the Buddha by understanding and claiming that those driven by purpose, to attain absolute reality, mistakenly takes this to be a desire for grasping to something that is separate, other, or estranged from oneself, when Hinduism instead expounds that absolute reality is that which one finds from within.⁴⁰ Lastly, readers should now consider other reasons as to why it is that the Buddha's teaching of the *anatman* is not as justifiable as it may appear to be to some, and instead, let us assert the concept of the self, or the *atman*, and the Self, or the *Atman* all the more.

Furthermore, readers may claim that the very concept of the *anatman*, or one who is without a self, or *atman*, defies the very concept of the enlightened, or The Awakened One, or of a Buddha himself/herself. In other words, if one acknowledges one who achieved Buddhahood as being a Buddha, then how can anyone ever establish the quality of Buddhahood characterized by a permanent state of bliss, clarity of mind, and beyond all conditioning?⁴¹ That is, if people are truly *anatman*, or without a self, or absent of an *atman*, then why should they strive for Buddhahood if that too is merely a label and not a descriptive feature of permanent selves, or *atman*(s)?

Consequently, if readers embrace the notion of the *anatman*, as related to Buddhahood, then we are illogically asserting that one who is without a self, or an *atman* is now one who mastered himself/herself in such a way that that individual is free from all conditioning that person underwent, as a self, or an *atman*. In other words, the problem of the *anatman* and Buddhahood is how can it be that one who is without a self, or an *atman* can build such a self, or an *atman* that leads to an everlasting state of being that is Buddhahood. Finally, to further explicate this matter, readers must consider if it can be the case that an input that shares no likeness to its output, or the *anatman* as connected to Buddhahood, can ever produce such an output so different from itself.

Next, another problem that arises from the idea of the *anatman* when compared to the idea of the self, or the *atman*, as well as the Self, or the *Atman* is why should it be that we are to seek *nirvana*, if there is truly no self, in the eyes of the Buddha.⁴² In other words, if one seeks a state of liberation from all conditioning that is permanent and unaltering, or *nirvana* itself, should it

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ *The Dhammapada*, 169-171.

⁴² Ibid., 153.

not be so that everyone is already in a state of *nirvana*, if the conditioning that all understand as their own is instead just another mere illusion?⁴³

As such, why should one attempt to achieve *nirvana* if there is no self to attain or experience such a state of undying spiritual emancipation? At least in Hinduism, although everyone ought to uproot the self, or the *atman* to reach, or disclose *moksha* and the Self, or the *Atman*, there is still a self, or an *atman* performing such a task that promises with it spiritual liberation for those who adhere to the *dharma*, or the spiritual laws, in this case of Hinduism, in a perfectly pure way.⁴⁴ Finally, this absence of a self in Buddhism, or the *anatman* only leads to questions that serve to be not completely resolvable which appears as bypassed in Hinduism by the affection, or embrace of the self, or the *atman* and the Self, or the *Atman*.

V. Conclusion

As stated in this present essay, readers encountered the Hindu and especially the Upanishadic understanding of the self, or the *atman* as well as the Self, or the *Atman*. Furthermore, readers also read an explanation of the Buddhists concept of the *anatman* and its appearance, as well as aporias as found in the *Dhammapada*. Moreover, this article concluded with challenges, to help debase the idea of an *anatman*, and therefore to assert and secure that the Hindu concept of the self, or the *atman* and the Self, or the *Atman* possesses more validity and a greater degree of justifiability than its Buddhists opposite. Finally, it is the sincere intention of this present writer that this article helps to fuel the ongoing debate regarding the notions of a core identity, inherent to each individual as opposed to a lack thereof, in both Eastern and Western philosophical circles alike.

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The Upanishads. Translated by Eknath Easwaran. Tomales, CA: Nilgiri Press, 2007.

⁴³ Ibid., 130-132, 153.

⁴⁴ *The Upanishads*, 241-243.

