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# **The Concept of the Self in David Hume and the Buddha**

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The concept of the self is a highly contested topic. Traditionally it belonged to speculative metaphysics. Almost every philosopher, whether Western or Indian, has tried to explore the nature of self. Generally, the self is taken as a substance which is non-spatio-temporal and eternal, having permanent existence. In some traditions, like the Hindu tradition, it is believed to take rebirth after it gets separated from the previous body at the time of death. Many Western philosophers also think that it is immortal. Undoubtedly, this conception of the self has ethical implications. Therefore it needs to be investigated in depth. For this purpose, I have chosen to discuss the views of David Hume and Gautama Buddha on the self. Astonishingly, though both belong to different traditions, their views are similar in that both are skeptical of any permanent existence of the self. This should not lead us to think that one has borrowed from the other, because the reasons given by each philosopher for the denial of the existence the self are different. So a comprehensive and comparative study of their views is not only instructive but also interesting. It is my intention in this article to analyze and compare the philosophical positions of Gautama and Hume on the self—a problem which was of central concern to both and which has since exercised a continuing fascination for philosophers, both of the East and the West.

## **Hume's Views on Self**

David Hume, an eminent empiricist, concludes that the self is merely a composition of successive impressions. Philosophers call Hume's theory of self as a "bundle theory of mind." Hume says, "I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual

flux and movement.”<sup>1</sup> Hume’s skeptical claim on this issue is that we have no experience of a simple, individual impression that we can call the self where the “self” is the totality of a person’s conscious life.

Hume also refutes the existence of all material and immaterial substances. He argued that if we can directly know, we know nothing but the objects of our sense experience (ideas and impressions), then there is no logical justification for us to assert the existence of anything other than these impressions. These impressions, for Hume, are atomic units which are causally independent of one another.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, when we have no such impression, we cannot arrive at any such idea.

Nevertheless, we do have an idea of personal identity that must be accounted for. Hume begins his explanation of this idea by noting that our perceptions are fleeting and from this he concludes that we are a bundle of different perceptions. The associative principles, the resemblance or causal connection within the chain of our perceptions give rise to an idea of self, and memory extends this idea past our immediate perceptions. A common abuse of the notion of personal identity occurs when the idea of a soul or unchanging substance is added to give us a stronger or more unified concept of the self.

While Hume examined the concept of personal identity in a rigorous manner within the boundaries of his assumptions, Buddha adhered to studied silence on such questions, and neither asserted the existence of an identical self nor concluded that it was a pure nothing. Hume’s concept of experience was “atomistic” and as such a post-reflective one. Reflective introspection revealed to Hume that the mind was nothing but a series of disjointed impressions and ideas with no “real” relations between them. Such an account of experience revealed, according to Hume, no permanently subsisting self. But we tend to think that we are the same person we were five years ago, and we ascribe the idea of personal identity. Though we have changed in many respects, we appear to be the same even now as we were then. We might start

thinking which features can be changed without changing the underlying self.

Hume, however, denies that there is a distinction between the various features of a person and the mysterious self that supposedly bears those features. According to him, when we start introspecting, "We are never intimately conscious of anything but a particular perception; man is a bundle or collection of different perceptions which succeed one another with an inconceivable rapidity and are in perpetual flux and movement."<sup>3</sup>

Hume further observes: It is plain, that in the course of our thinking, and in the constant revolution of our ideas, our imagination runs easily from one idea to any other that resembles it, and that this quality alone is to the fancy a sufficient bond and association. It is likewise evident that as the senses, in changing their objects, are necessitated to change them regularly, and take them as they lie contiguous to each other, the imagination must by long custom acquire the same method of thinking, and run along the parts of space and time in conceiving its objects.<sup>4</sup>

In Hume's view, these perceptions do not belong to anything. Rather, Hume compares the soul to a commonwealth, which retains its identity not by virtue of some enduring core substance, but by being composed of many different, related, and yet constantly changing elements. The question of personal identity then becomes a matter of characterizing the loose cohesion of one's personal experience. (Note that in the appendix to *A Treatise*, Hume said ruefully that he was dissatisfied with his account of the self, yet he never returned to the issue.)

Hume's skeptical claim on this issue is that we have no experience of a simple, individual impression that we can call the self, where the "self" is the totality of a person's conscious life. Nevertheless, we do have an idea of personal identity that must be accounted for. Hume's discussion of personal identity is primarily built on the role, which imagination plays in the formation of belief in general. From this formation of belief in general, we arrive at belief in causes and continued existence, and then move on to the belief in personal identity. Hume uses the word "feign" to explain

this conception of personal identity. By reason of memory and imagination, we “make believe” in the continued existence of a “self” or identical personality during these interruptions by the same methods and for the same reasons as I feign the continued existence of the external world.<sup>5</sup>

Hume’s method of inquiry begins with his assumption that experience in the form of impressions cannot give rise to a constant self, which would give reference to all future experiences. The idea of the self is not any one impression. It is a conglomeration of several ideas and impressions. There is no constant impression that endures for one’s whole life. Different sensations such as pleasure and pain, or heat and cold are in a constant continuum that is invariable but not permanent. Hume argues, “It cannot therefore be from any of these impressions, or from any other, that the idea of self is derived; and consequently there is no such idea.”<sup>6</sup> The closest thing that Hume could compare the self with was a film or a play of one’s life. These perceptions themselves are separate from one another and there is no unifying component as a self to organize such impressions for long-term reference.

For Hume identity depends upon the three relations of resemblance, contiguity, and causation. It follows from these principles that the notion of personal identity proceeds from the “smooth and uninterrupted progress of the thought,” i.e., by its continuity. Hume thinks that the identity which we ascribe for the human mind is the same as the identity we ascribe to vegetables and animals; it is fictitious. It is only by reason of imagination that we see identity in these objects.

Hume believed that the entire contents of the mind were drawn from experience alone. The stimulus could be external or internal. In this nexus, Hume describes what he calls impressions in contrast to ideas. Impressions are vivid perceptions and are strong and lively. “I comprehend all our sensations, passions, and emotions as they make their first appearance in the soul. Ideas were images in thinking and reason.”<sup>7</sup> For Hume there is no permanent mind or self. The perceptions that one has are only active when one is

conscious. "When my perceptions are removed for any time, as by sound sleep, so long am I insensible of myself, and may truly be said not to exist."<sup>8</sup> Hume appears to be reducing personality and cognition to a machine that may be turned on and off. Death brings with it the annihilation of the perceptions one has. Hume regards passions as the determinants of behavior. Hume also appears to be a behaviorist who believes that humans learn in the same manner as lower animals; that is, through reward and punishment.

Skepticism is the guiding principle by which Hume denies the validity of metaphysics. Hume in the appendix to *A Treatise on Human Nature* sets forth his conclusions: "In short, there are two principles, which I cannot render consistent; nor is it in my power to renounce either of them, viz., that all our distinct perceptions are distinct existences, and that the mind never perceives any real connexion among distinct existences."<sup>9</sup>

Hume further deliberates on the idea of an invariable and uninterrupted existence. He confirms, there is no primordial substance wherein all secondary existences of individual existence exist. Everything in our conscious state is derived from impressions. Objects in the outer world exist as distinct species that are separable from the secondary qualities in conscious thought.

We can accept the existence of an object only when it becomes a subject of perception. Primary and secondary qualities of an object can be perceived through senses, but what we usually refer to as the "self" cannot be so perceived; hence it cannot be presumed to exist. The individual self is the sum total of such experiences as pleasures and pains, joys and sorrows, ideas and deeds, etc. We normally assume that these alternating experiences which fill up a person's life are united by an enduring principle, and call it the self. It is this idea of the unity of experience, which Hume in his model found elusive. Finding the idea of a permanent self elusive, Hume was led to deny the existence of the self and to conclude that only perceptions exist. Gautama Buddha also rejects the self as a metaphysical entity and recognizes only a flow of conscious experience.

### Analysis of Buddha's Views on Self

Gautama Buddha (563-483 BC) was separated from David Hume by more than two thousand years. He lived, grew up, and taught his message in a cultural climate, which was entirely different from that of Hume. Despite this enormous temporal, spatial, and cultural distance, it is amazing, as many philosophical writers have discovered, to find some remarkable similarities in the philosophical positions and methodologies of these thinkers.

The Buddha denies the existence of any permanent entity either physical or mental. He considers the human person as a psychophysical complex. For him all worldly things are momentary. Likewise, the self, too, is momentary. But how, it may be asked, does he then explain the continuity of a person through different births, or even through the different states of childhood, youth, and old age. Though he denied the continuity of an identical substance in humans, the Buddha does not deny the continuity of the stream of successive states that compose a person's life. If Atman is understood as a permanent entity, and *atmavada* is to believe in such an entity, then we call the Buddha's conception about the self *anatamavada*. Atman, for the Buddha, is nothing more than the composition of five *skandhas*.

The Buddha's concept of experience was "pre-theoretical," akin to the radical empiricism of William James. His "middle way" was the same as "radical empiricism," with the help of which he escaped all the dualisms and dichotomies of his times such as eternalism and annihilationism, being and nonbeing, Brahman and the Atman, subject and object, knower and the known, the self and the not-self, permanence and impermanence.

According to the Buddha, the self, *citta*, is always changing. It is in a state of flux; whatever exists in the world is subject to change. Rhys Davids in his book *Early Buddhism* says, "According to [the] Buddhist, there is no being, there is only becoming, the state of every individual being instable, temporally, sure to pass away."<sup>10</sup> The self is the stream of consciousness which has origin, existence, and termination. As different senses produce

different types of sensations, so thought is excited by the contact of the mind with a mental object. "Sometimes consciousness (*citta*), mind (*manas*), and intellect (*vijana*) are [the] object. *Manas* is regarded as the intellectual function of consciousness. *Vijana* is the sense response. *Citta* is the subjective aspect of consciousness. Three degrees of consciousness are recognized: the subconscious, the conscious, and the superconsciousness."<sup>11</sup>

About this conception one question arises: how does such a view of the self account for personal identity and personal freedom? Gautama had something original to contribute to both these problems. Since what we designate as the self is a continuous flow of psychophysical processes; it is futile to look for exactly the same entity (atman) within them. Even if one postulated such an entity, it would be theoretically difficult to explain its relation to the ongoing flow of these processes.

A number of analogies are used to illustrate the Buddhist philosophy of process. The most popular metaphor for expounding the Buddhist doctrine of no-abiding self is that of the bundle of fire-sticks. According to the Buddha, all of our senses and thoughts are on fire with lust and desire. Although there is no abiding self or soul, we cannot deny the reality of our experiences. Thus, the Buddha provided a fivefold classification of what he thought was really going on when we experience something. He described these as the five bundles, marking one of the earliest attempts at a definite analysis of what it is to experience something. They are:

1. *Rupa*: Material Form—It is the corporeal aggregate which includes the body, the sense organs, the sensible objects, and sensations.
2. *Vedana*: Sensation—It comprises of three kinds of feelings: pleasure, pain, and natural feeling. Feelings are caused by sense contacts.
3. *Samjna*: Cognition—It is the determinate perceptions of objects which have names. It includes all our articulate knowledge of objects.



4. *Samskara*: Disposition—It includes all mental states which involve previous experience and memory, and all kinds of instinctive activities and sentiments.
5. *Vijnana*: Consciousness—It includes all kinds of objects and the self-awareness of the six sense organs (*indriya*).<sup>12</sup>

“Human” is only a conventional name of a collection of different constituents, and human existence depends on this collection and it dissolves when the collection breaks up. The soul or the ego denotes nothing more than this collection.<sup>13</sup>

Identity for the Buddha is to be found in the cumulative continuity of the processes themselves. Identity or sameness involves the mistaken assumption of a permanent element or substance that supposedly persists throughout an ever-changing process. The series is not one of perishing, discrete particulars; otherwise memory and moral effort would be inexplicable. On the contrary, it is governed by the “law of dependent origination” which says, “There is a spontaneous and universal law of causation which conditions the appearance of all events, mental and physical. This law (*dharma* or *dhamma*) works automatically without the help of any conscious guide. In accordance with it, whenever a particular event (the cause) appears, it is followed by another particular event (the effect); ‘on getting the cause, the effect arises.’ The existence of *everything* is *conditional*, dependent on a cause. Nothing happens fortuitously or by chance. This is called the theory of dependent origination.”<sup>14</sup> This cumulative continuity, so the Buddha thought, has room for personal freedom and moral initiative. It is not a causally tight and determined series. Any notion of rigid determinism flatly contradicts our experience of putting forth moral effort in the face of temptation.

Buddhists believe in rebirth but do not accept that there is any substantial entity of self (*atman*) being reborn in this process—there is simply the process itself. For the various Hindu schools *samsara* is like a pearl necklace. The succession of lives are a series of pearls held together by a singular connecting thread—the *atman*. By contrast, Buddhist philosophical texts tend to represent

rebirth using analogies of dynamics and ever-changing processes, such as the flowing of a river or the flickering flame of a candle.

Thus, according to the *Questions of King Milinda*, to talk of either 'identity' or 'difference' between lives is inappropriate.<sup>15</sup> Rebirth is, therefore, not transmigration, i.e., the migration of the same soul into another body; it is the causation of the next life by the present. One important result which follows from the two Buddhist doctrines of soullessness (*anatma*) and *skandhas* is that there is nothing like a permanent substratum underlying the phenomena of the universe, both material and mental. This doctrine denies the existence of not only spiritual substance—the atman or soul—but also material substance.

In short, the Buddha's approach to all these conceptual problems regarding self and identity was to follow the experiential middle path and to avoid the philosophical puzzles arising from espousing extreme conceptual positions. Buddhists use the phrase 'dependent origination' as a scheme which explains the dynamics of existence from life to life and moment to moment without the necessity of positing a persisting agent or "possessor" of experience. This rejects the heresy that he who experiences the fruit of the deed is the *same* as the one who performed the deed, and also rejects the converse one that he who experiences the fruit of a deed is *different* from the one who performed the deed, and leaning to neither of these popular hypotheses, holds fast to nominalism.<sup>16</sup>

### **Comparative Evaluation**

There is a seeming resemblance between the positions of the Buddha and David Hume on the problem of the self. The Buddha as well as Hume denied the existence of a permanently and identically enduring self in the flux of experience. But there is a world of difference in the motivation for dealing with the problem of the self, in the treatment of the subject matter, in their respective assumptions regarding the nature of experience, and, consequently, in the quality of the conclusions reached. There is also a radical

difference in the mood which characterized their personalities as a result of their respective inquiries.

The difference between Hume and the Buddha is most evident in the motivation for dealing with the problem of the self. Hume's interest in the self was purely intellectual. Having accepted Locke's theory of experience, Hume was led by sheer logical consistency to inquire whether there was any "impression" corresponding to the commonsense idea of the self as a self-identical entity. The Buddha's theory of the self arises from two motifs of great relevance. The first is the basic metaphysics of impermanence. The Buddhist looked at the self as a non-existent imaginary entity. The second involves the axiological concerns relating to the postulation of the pervasive predicament of the human condition and the ubiquitous suffering and the means of overcoming it. These two are linked together in the no-self theory (*anatmavada*). According to de Silva, "In general, the Buddha did not push the questions like the body-mind issue towards the obtaining of theoretical finality. While drawing clear distinction for the purpose of conveying his message concerning the alleviation of human suffering, the Buddha had a practical and pragmatic approach to problems. He steered clear of metaphysical traps. He considered the communication of ideas as a pragmatic and linguistic issue which should help the individual to follow the Buddhist experimental path and discover the nature of 'things as they are.'"<sup>17</sup> In short, while Hume's interest was intellectual, the Buddha's was ethical. Consequently, while Hume, led by logical consistency, proceeded towards obtaining theoretical finality, the Buddha did not push the questions of identity and self towards their theoretical finality.

Since his motivation was purely intellectual, Hume did not share the Buddha's ethical task of liberating humankind from attachment to a permanent self, and of mitigating anxiety and suffering. Buddha realized that "suffering is caused by attachment, clinging and grasping to the dictates of the mind and body due to ignorance. The mistaken view of a changeless, enduring and permanent self is the ground condition and primary source of

attachment and clinging. Therefore, the realization and correct understanding that no enduring, changeless self resides in us is a necessary condition in the process of eradicating suffering, the stated goal of Buddhist striving.”<sup>18</sup> The teachings of the Buddha were positive and constructive. But in course of time the negative and analytic view came to prevail, and as a consequence of it, Buddhism gradually became thoroughly monastic in character. The Buddha’s emphasis is throughout on dharma in its ethical sense. It is described as “the lamp of life,” and signifies perfect conduct or godly living, not a mere code of dogmas as it came to do afterwards.<sup>19</sup>

The Buddhist psychology is mainly concerned with the transitory mental phenomena with no presupposition of a self or mind as a substantive agent behind them. It analyses personality into groups of flowing and passing sensations, feelings, thoughts, tendencies, conations, and awareness, and quite like Hume in modern times, it repudiates the existence of any enduring entity called the soul or the self. Buddhist psychology is purely empirical and non-metaphysical, although it admits the continuity of the phenomenal personality beyond death and the operation of the law of karma throughout life, including the past, present and future. The law of causation, which was repudiated by Hume, is the most fundamental principle of mental life according to Buddhism. Buddhism like Hume accepts the no-self theory, but it does not refute causation. So Buddhist theory becomes quite different from that of Hume and also more accurate and coherent than Hume, as Buddhists still believe in Karma-theory and Rebirth, but for this they do not rely on a permanent self. By assuming the existence of a permanent self, the person is not able to detach himself from so that Nirvana is not possible. This is why the Buddha propounds the theory of no-self. Refutation of self by the Buddha has ethical reasons, whereas Hume’s reasons are merely epistemological.

Though their starting points and motivations were different, both Hume and the Buddha arrived at the same conclusion: there is no permanently and identically enduring self in the flux of experiences. This conclusion, however, is erroneous. It is true that

we cannot perceive the self as an object or verify it. But we cannot deny the existence of a substratum of our experiences, an abiding self that gives unity to the successive sensations. We cannot dismiss as an illusion our experience or awareness of the self that gives unity to the successive experiences.

As Chennakesavan argued: There is nothing of which we are more certain than our own experience. Hence, this experience, which is a conscious experience, must be described as being self-luminous. It reveals itself. The ultimate principle of knowledge, viz., the self as consciousness always knows itself. This immediate character of self-awareness is not a thing that can be denied, for then we will be denying our own experiences. It is this self-awareness that makes possible all concentration and contemplation. The objects of such concentration may be either external or internal. But in all these we are aware of ourselves as the object [subject] of experience .... Therefore, the self which is the basis of all knowledge, cannot be perceived as an object.<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, affirming the need to acknowledge the existence of the self, Suresh Chandra notes: "Some philosophers have attacked the recognized criteria of personal identity, memory and physical continuity with the help of thought experiments .... It is possible that the recognized criteria of personal identity are not satisfactory; these criteria require a revision. However, the fashion in which they have been questioned by the philosophers of our time is also not satisfactory."<sup>21</sup> Chennakesavan and Suresh Chandra are emphasizing the same idea: our self-awareness that makes possible all concentration and contemplation and gives us the sense of identity is not a bundle of transitory experiences. Beyond the transitory experiences there is a self which is self-luminous. Its existence cannot be denied, for then, as Chennakesavan argues, we will be denying our own experiences.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 252.

<sup>2</sup> Suman Gupta, *The Origin and Theories of Linguistic Philosophy* (New Delhi: Intellectual Publishing House, 1983), 64.

<sup>3</sup> Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature*, 252.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 636.

<sup>5</sup> Fuller, B. A. G., *A History of Philosophy* (Oxford: C & IBH Publishing Co., 1989) and also in *Treatise*, 254.

<sup>6</sup> Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature*, 252.

<sup>7</sup> Antony Flew, ed., *Hume on Human Nature and the Understanding* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 176.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>9</sup> Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature*, 636.

<sup>10</sup> Jagat Prakash Atreya, *Mind and Its Function in Indian Thought* (New Delhi: Classical Publishing Company, 1985), 21.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 19-20.

<sup>13</sup> Dutta & Chatterjee, *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy* (Kolkata: University of Calcutta, 1984), 138.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>15</sup> D. C. Mathur, "The Historical Buddha (Gotama), Hume, and James on the Self: Comparisons and Evaluations," *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 28, no. 3 (1978), 253.

<sup>16</sup> Richard King, *Indian Philosophy: An Introduction to Hindu and Buddhist Thought* (New Delhi: Maya Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1999), 79-80.

<sup>17</sup> Padmasiri de Silva, *An Introduction to Buddhist Psychology* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 2000), 145.

<sup>18</sup> K. Ramakrishna Rao, "Theories of Self/Person in Classical Indian Thought," in *Relevance of Philosophy in 21st Century*, Ed. K. R. Rajani (Ambala Cantt.: The Associated Publishers, 2006), 16.

<sup>19</sup> M. Hiriyanna, *The Essentials of Indian Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2005), 74.

<sup>20</sup> Sarasvati Chennakesavan, *Concept of Mind in Indian Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publisher Pvt. Ltd., 1991), 141.

<sup>21</sup> Suresh Chandra, *Identity and Thought Experiment* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, 1977), 81.

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