Challenging the Buddhist Conception of ‘No-Self’

Introduction:

Let me first start off by saying that I have used this opportunity to explore something which, when I started, I knew absolutely nothing about. Please understand, I am not a philosophy major, a specialist on the ‘Self’, nor am I a Buddhist, so there may be times when I fall flat on my face tonight or perhaps even leave huge holes in my argument. For those times, I apologize. In addition, I would like to apologize if my discussion of a religious topic is distasteful to anyone. Please remember that I am trying to view Buddhism as a philosophy more than as a religion. In that discussion, however, I hope to do justice to a belief system which is nearly 3,000 years old.

Aside from that, I became interested in this topic as a result of several of my history classes. Were you to be in a room where I was discussing history, you would quickly learn that most of my theories surrounding acts in the past deal with two words: Identity and Agency. Suffice to say by now, there are several people within the department who know this, and I get a good ribbing from time to time because I hold these beliefs. Lately, however, my interests have changed slightly. Because of a few conversations with my housemates, I began to be interested in Buddhist philosophy. However, I soon found out that much of Buddhist philosophy did not quite jive with my focus on Identity and Agency. In fact, most Buddhist scholars outright reject the belief that there is anything such as the ‘Self’ much less an entity which can have an identity or enact its desires.

This is a problem for me. If there is a philosophy that I enjoy and can understand which does not include the concepts of Self, Identity, or Agency, what, then, does that mean for the rest of my beliefs? Suffice to say I initially rejected what these scholars said as some misinterpretation of ancient literature. From my readings, I had understood that Buddhists
saw the Self and Identity as building from an ever-changing list of experiences and introspection. Imagine my surprise, then, when I was shown a passage where the Buddha irrevocably discusses the concept of a ‘Non-Self’. I was thoroughly disheartened. However, even when coming from the Buddha’s own lips, I found this concept hard to digest. To be honest, this question has engaged me to such a degree that I am, frankly, thankful for this evening so that I may put the debate to rest in my own mind. In the end, while I have read and reread the arguments, my belief remains the same. The more I read Buddhist literature, the more I come to fundamentally disagree with the ‘No-Self’ theorists and believe that Buddhism does contain a conceptualization of the Self, and, furthermore, sees this Self as essential to attain Enlightenment.

**The No-Self Theory:**

Let us begin with the ‘No-Self’ theorists. The ‘No-Self’ theorists are a philosophical group who base themselves predominantly on the writings of Hume, and in particular Book I of *A Treatise of Human Nature*. In this book, Hume writes what would become the essential proof for all ‘No-Selfists’, stating:

> For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never catch myself at any time without perception, and never can I observe anything other than perception.

These two simple sentences have given rise to the three assertions that 1) “The self is not present in consciousness”, as Falk so eloquently stated, 2) that the idea of Self is simply a linguistic construct and has no real place in philosophical thought and 3) that the teachings of Hume were, essentially, the westernized version of Buddhism. Indeed, to meld the two philosophies together, those believing in this theory overlay Hume’s thoughts with the
Buddha’s teachings on impermanence and interdependence. While I will discuss what these concepts are more in depth shortly, a brief discussion should suffice for the moment. In essence, impermanence is the idea that nothing will ever last and interconnectedness is the notion that we are all interwoven and dependant in some ways upon every other thing, living or dead on Earth.

Though the third of these three points concerns me little and the second I believe to be completely false and completely irrelevant to the discourse, the first is indeed intriguing. Arthur Falk in his article “Consciousness and Self-Reference” argues that there can be no Self because what our essence is as humans is consciousness mixed with perception and experience. For Falk, thoughts and desires spring randomly from within the mind and cannot derive or be controlled by any kind of entity which may be considered the Self. Additionally, Falk tries to use the Buddhist concept of interconnectedness to undermine the Self. In this way, Falk attempts to deconstruct the idea of the Self as being almost commonplace. If we are all interconnected, we cannot be separated and thus are not unique. If we are not unique, then we have no Self. This argument, towards its latter end, begins to posit that there is no such thing as existence, but rather what we believe to be existence is simply the perception of our mind. How Falk can blatantly undermine existence while still supporting the presence of a ‘mind’ truly astonishes me.

Nevertheless he is not alone in his beliefs. In an article written for the Journal of Religious Studies, A. H. Lesser contends that “since a person is nothing more than the illusion of permanence combined with consciousness, and since the Self, in the sense of permanence, is the subject of consciousness, cannot be identified with consciousness, then the Self cannot exist”. Here Lesser uses Buddhist thought against itself. If nothing is ever permanent, he contends, how can we construct an idea wherein each individual defines himself or herself through something which is supposed to be relatively unchanging
throughout life? While Lesser also comes close to outright rejecting the possibility of our existence, he is less forward than Falk. His argument focuses more on trying to reason why people construct a ‘Self’ when in his mind, Buddhism completely thwarts that notion. Drawing further on Buddhist teachings, Lesser illustrates his point with the story of a monk, Nagasena. While the story is a rather long one, I will do my best to abbreviate it while giving it its due.

One day Nagasena was called to the throne room of the king of his country. The king had been struggling with the question of existence and wanted Nagasena’s opinion on the constant turnings which were happening within his mind. He first asked Nagasena if he was matter and the monk replied, “O no sire”. Hearing this, the king was astonished and continued asking Nagasena questions to determine what defined him and what makes him a living, sentient being. To all of these questions Nagasena calmly responded, “O no, sire”. Finally, the king was so infuriated and frustrated with these replies that he threatened to kill the monk. He believed that since there is nothing to define the entity which he perceived to be Nagasena standing before him, then the monk must be lying and ridiculing the king. Remaining as calm and collected as ever, the monk simply responded by giving the example of the chariot. Would you characterize the chariot as wheels, pole, wood, etc. or as a chariot, he asked? The king replied rather grumpily that the entity would be known as a chariot and not as the summation of its various parts, yet those parts would still exist. Thus, Nagasena compared himself with the chariot saying that even as there was nothing to characterize him, he still existed. Yet, because he had no definition for himself, nor anything to define who he was in life, he had no Self.

Though I truly enjoy this particular story, there are many holes in it; principally that Nagasena is completely defined throughout the story by his adherence to Buddhism. Essentially, even though he is calling himself selfless for his inability to define himself, he is
actually defined by Buddhism itself. While I will talk more about this later, this is a perfect example of the two levels of Buddhist thought.

James Giles adds to the work of Lesser by asserting, in a much more pragmatic way, that the Self may be discredited through scientific research and linguistic analysis. Fundamental to his contentions is the fact that all things decay and renew themselves. For instance, every cell in the human body is replaced over the course of a seven-year period. You may say that I, as a 22 years old, am practically a new born, but that is beside the point.

From this, Giles expands his thesis, combining scientific study with Buddhist philosophy. If we are ever-changing physically, he states, how can we even think to begin to define ourselves-it is a faulty effort. However, he does concede that there seems to be a drive in every individual to self-refer and self-define (much to the chagrin of Falk, I should think). This desire to self-define is what caused the Self, an impossible concept in his opinion, to be created through the medium of speech. Speech, for him, is the creator and perpetuator of the Self misperception; it was created as a way to create ownership, define oneself, and differentiate oneself from another. However, in Giles mind this is a façade and absolutely futile as there is no Self to define.

While Giles’ article was certainly the most interesting to read (and I encourage you all to if you find anything I am saying tonight interesting), there are holes in it. In fact, for a group of theorists who seem to feel that they have closed the book on the Self, there are lots of holes in their theories. Nevertheless, the No-Selfists ground nearly all of their arguments on the marriage between Hume’s ability to see only perception and not himself, and the Buddha’s teaching on impermanence. While it makes some logical sense, I hope to demonstrate that they are misappropriating and misunderstanding the concepts of impermanence and interrelatedness. In finding the true nature of the Buddhist arguments, we will find the Self, even if that Self may not be what we traditionally call the Self.
The Buddha’s Teaching:

When the Buddha looked at the world, he saw something marvelous—he saw a slowly turning wheel which was played out until such a time when everything would disappear as it had once appeared. In the spinning of the wheel there was beauty and peace. However, there was something which blocked all sentient beings from being able to reach this perfect state of peace: suffering. To combat suffering, the Buddha taught the alleviation of suffering and the attainment of perfect knowledge through understanding the two concepts of interdependence and impermanence. The metaphor of the wheel was used to explain this. For the Buddha, all things were part of one whole. Nothing on Earth existed completely disconnected or isolated from anything else. Additionally, nothing on Earth would ever last. While the Wheel of the Dharma would turn, creating a long chain of death and rebirth, eventually all things would attain perfection and the world would cease. It is this idea of impermanence brought the Buddha into this debate.

To teach impermanence to his followers, the Buddha created the Five Aggregates. These five elements, form (or body), sensation (or experience), perception (or cognition), mental formations (or attitude), and consciousness were supposed to completely represent each sentient being, especially humans. By including the fact that consciousness is impermanent, the Buddha allowed his own beliefs to be misinterpreted by people thousands of years after his death.

These people forget that there was yet another aspect of the Buddha’s teachings which may explain this contradiction to the Self: the notion of two types of understanding. Much like any philosophical or spiritual leader, the Buddha often related his ideas through parables. In these parables, however, there were always two levels of understanding. Depending where you were upon your Path toward Enlightenment, the parable would speak to you in various ways. The first level was that of base understanding. In the first
level, the Buddha tried to encapsulate his ideas and make them appear applicable to a new practitioner’s life. At this level, the Buddha generally used strong language to set up a ‘right’ and a ‘wrong’ way of thinking. So, for example, the most famous of these teachings is perhaps that a Buddhist must rid himself or herself from all desires. On the other hand, there is a second level of understanding for those who may be more experienced practitioners. These people understood that nothing the Buddha said could fully be categorized as ‘right’ or ‘wrong’; within each parable or idea there was always a more subtle argument. Thus, the Buddha did not actually propose that humanity eliminate desire. As the current Dalai Lama relates, “to cut out Desire is to diminish any chance at reaching Enlightenment. We must desire the Enlightenment”. Yet to tell a young monk this would be counterproductive to his or her long-term path. Relating his teachings as more stringent and less fluid than they truly were and are created in the Buddha’s practitioners a certain attitude and state of mind which made them more receptive to the actual teaching after several months or years of practice.

The Middle Way or Path which the Buddha advanced as the means to eliminate suffering and to attain perfect knowledge is, essentially, a very personal one. Buddhists spend time meditating upon the world and upon themselves. While Buddhists gather to discuss philosophy or meditate together, an adherent to the above teachings must come to his or her own conclusions. Thus, while our attitude towards the world around us helps to foster a more beneficial attitude within ourselves, it is still this introspective understanding and tuning which is at the core of Buddhism. Especially in more recent Buddhist writings, the idea of Mindfulness is extremely prevalent. This teaching seeks for the Self to be present and mindful in every second. Buddhism, thus, supports the notion that everything is impermanent and that the Self has the possibility to change from moment to moment. Thus, one must focus on each moment and shelve in the “store consciousness” an almost
infinite amount of momentary experiences. How then, is it possible to say that there is no Self in Buddhist thought when it is the Self which is at the center of all Buddhist thought.

Synthesis:

I understand that these are circular concepts and that I may not be making myself as clear as possible, but stay with me for a few more minutes. And let me say here also that I am not trying to assert that I have attained Enlightenment or that I have a higher than base knowledge- I simply want to demonstrate that there are a multitude of ways to understand or comprehend Buddhist philosophy. Now, there are three extremely important elements to keep in mind at this stage: 1) That everything is interconnected. This means that to Buddhist scholars, while I am here in my own bodily form, and you are here in yours, we are all interconnected and ultimately a part of each other in some sense. Yet at the same time I think that we can agree that we are completely unique in many respects. 2) We must keep in mind that the Buddha taught at two levels. I would contend that most No-Self theorists take the words of the Buddha at face value, mistaking the base representation of Buddhist philosophy for its actual teaching, and 3) That Buddhism is essential a personal path.

I contend that Buddhism, even though it fashions itself as trying to rid the individual of Self, actually relies upon it. Consider if you will the metaphor of the Buddhist Path and the journey to Enlightenment. Everything about the metaphor of a journey evokes the Self and Agency. What propels us down a path? It is the desire, perhaps, to know what is at the end; maybe it is the desire to reach a certain end; or even it may be simply how the journeyer wishes to spend his or her time. In each instance, the Self is present. The Self is what strives to know what it cannot see, to desire and want to accomplish a goal, or to decide how best to appropriate time. These decisions are not simply fleeting mental sparks
which affect change and movement within the physical world, they are the deliberate actions of an entity. Finally, Agency! My heart is warmed.

And the Path is certainly created by the Self. While Buddhists may gather to support one another, no two paths are the same. Now, to stay within the Buddha’s teachings, we must concede that all things are interconnected and impermanent—truly the foundational concepts within the philosophy. Unfortunately, they appear, at first glance, to firmly bolster the ‘No-Selfists’ argument by implying that there can be absolutely nothing which actually defines what the concept of ‘I’ is. However, I think there may be more here. The concept of the Self, I believe, is not simply there or not there in the Buddha’s mind. Rather, it both exists and does not exist.

Stay with me now. To stay on the Path and to be mindful requires there to be an entity to walk down that path. That entity is kept on the path by a sense of desire or agency and the purpose of completing the path, which creates identity. When agency and identity meet, that is where I find, and I also believe the Buddha would not refute this, the Self. Thus the Self exists, yet as an unchanging way of defining oneself, it does not. Impermanence teaches us that nothing lasts, thus there cannot be an unchanging definition of an individual. Instead, this Self exists in the infinitesimally small moment. It is in each moment where the Self imposes its agency and identity. Herein is the foundation for Thich Nat Hanh’s notion of mindfulness and the need to be present in each specific moment to stay upon the Path. In this way, the Self is a fluid concept. Existing, it changes, perhaps imperceivably, in each moment. Yet even with these changes does it continue to lead our thoughts and define (at least in Western society) who we are.

Conclusion:

Frankly, I feel as though Donald Mitchell summed up my beliefs the best: “The Buddha always affirmed that persons have an empirical selfhood constituted by a body,
and a mind; but he also claimed that the various constituents which made up these two elements were impermanent”. Finally, a sentiment which I can support! With these words neither Mitchell nor the Buddha ever fully disproved the existence of the Self. Though the Self may be fluid and impermanent, this does not fundamentally contradict the notion that the Self exists within the moment, nor that this momentary Self has Agency and Identity within that brief moment.

Perhaps in making this argument, the Buddha would say that I am trying to hold on too dearly to the concept of selfhood and that to be free from suffering I must first cast off this desire to see history (and by extension, life) as being constantly concerned with Agency and Identity. Yet, he even encouraged his monks to not take his words as a form of gospel, but rather, to meditate upon them and come to their own conclusions. Even though there is much discourse in Buddhist literature dealing with selflessness and the rejection of the desires of the Self, there is an equally valid concept which encourages the practitioner to push the Self towards Nirvana. While, as we have seen, the Self cannot be permanent in any sense of the word, that in no way negates its existence. With our consciousness we must perceive a fluid Self which, in each an every moment, possesses an Identity, and, which enacts its Agency upon its environment. If this Self were not to exist, there would be no Path for the Buddhist and this entire argument (as it has been in my mind now for nearly two months) would simply be one gigantic wheel-maybe even a dharmic wheel-turning until the end of time.