Experiencing, Presencing, and Enacting Self

The Case for a Buddhist Ethical Subject

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1. *Introduction*

In the past, various attempts have been made to introduce or impose a western framework of ethics onto Buddhism. These attempts inevitably have struggled with the doctrine of *anatman*, or “no-self.” Without a self, or ethical subject, how can one be held morally accountable? How can ethics proceed from a self-less starting point? How does one draw ethical categories when all things are empty (*sunyata*)? In this paper I hope to answer these and other questions regarding the nature of ethics and the self in Buddhism. I contend that an ethical subject is possible in the Buddhist framework if properly constructed. However, this will not be possible if we insist upon searching for a fundamental subjectivity in the western understanding of it, nor will we be able to even begin if we do not abandon our expectations for just what *kind* of a self we may find. The project of understanding ethics in Buddhism must begin with a *Buddhist* ethical subject, not by pointing to the absence of a western/Judeo-Christian ethical subject. By understanding what Buddhists see as the ethical subject in their own terms, we may come to understand how ethics are possible in Buddhism, and then what kind of ethics are possible.

The issue of selfhood is significantly more complex in Buddhism because the self is not seen as a fundamental property of human existence. Rather, it is an emergent property. The notion of a fundamental, irreducible agent or essence at the center of human subjectivity is precisely what the idea of *anatman* rejects. However, we must consider how the self can be conceived of as emergent from its various components, and what this means for how the self and ethics are experienced and performed. In order to do this, I will first examine the problems we face in constructing the self in Buddhist philosophy and ontology. I will examine how we conceive of the self through our temporal experience. However, my intention is not to posit the self as simply an idea we perceive, but as a real category. It is for this reason that I will look at the self from the perspective of process ontology, and argue that the self is not a static *being* but is constantly *becoming*. From there I will look more closely at the ontology of the present, since the self is experienced principally as in the present tense. In contrast to this, I will explore the ontology of time itself, and delineate how the self does not exist *within* time but that temporality and insubstantiality are properties of the self itself. Finally, to rectify these conflicting understandings of the self, I will draw upon the ideas of Dogen and Nishida to argue that the self is not something that acts but is itself acted out, experienced, and presenced in each successive moment. I will conclude by demonstrating how ethics in the context of the goal of nirvana are participated in, experienced, and enacted by the Buddhist subject.

1. *Problems of the Self in Buddhism*

The challenges of constructing a Buddhist concept of ethical selfhood begin with the notion of *anatman.* Since there is no central hub of selfhood in Buddhist thought, we must think of the self as emergent. We can understand how it is emergent in terms of interdependent co-arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*). All things arise in a way that is dependent upon previous conditions, which are themselves contingent upon myriad other conditions in a never-ending chain of dependency. In addition, all of these conditions are interdependent upon one another. The self emerges from these relationships and dependencies within the human person; it is the sum total of a system of contingent events that mutually interact. There is no indivisible entity within it that can be identified as “I”. However, there are plenty of identifiable conditions or events that we can say contribute to the makeup of the self: its karmic history, the five aggregates, and many other entities or *dharmas* that are elaborated upon in Buddhist sources. It is for this reason that “experiential events are not simple but are invariably complex occurrences.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Therefore the first problem of the self is to explore and understand the experiential content that makes up the self.

In the sense of being a strictly contingent being, that could not have happened anywhere else in history[[2]](#footnote-2), the self has no absolute being. To use a Buddhist term, it is empty (*sunyata*). Emptiness means that the self, or anything else, does not sit above or beyond the world but is fully a part of and conditioned by the world. It is in the rejection of transcendence that we must situate our discussion of the self. The self is a process of the world, and is fundamentally of the same character—emptiness. If the self is not distinguished from the world by some fundamental property, then how can we say that it is ethical, whereas rocks, trees, and other entities are not? The second problem of the self is the relationship between the self and the universe—in discovering how it is conventionally different while still retaining the same ultimate nature.

1. *The Self and Impermanence*

In speaking about the self, we are certainly talking about an experience. It cannot be denied that we conventionally assume that we possess a certain thing we call self. The project of ethical ontology is to establish this conventional idea with ontological certainty. Or, to put it as Kennith K. Inada does, “[This experiential reality] is nothing but the ontological nature of the individual being, his entire experiential content.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Thus, in order to study the experience of the self we must study the ontology of the self.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Inada lists the concepts that characterize the unique nature of Buddhist ontology: impermanence, unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*), and *anatman*.[[5]](#footnote-5) Taken together, these three concepts illuminate our discussion of Buddhist ontology. I have already discussed the concept of *anatman* and its implications above. Unsatisfactoriness for our purposes can be collapsed into impermanence, since it is because of the impermanent nature of life’s pleasure that we find it unsatisfactory. Therefor I’d like to focus on impermanence as the key point to understanding Buddhist ontology of self.

Inada characterizes Buddhism as a process ontology. This means that it focusses not on individual entities as such, but the process by which those entities come to be. It switches the emphasis of ontology from *being* to *becoming*. “The ‘great chain of being’ is not merely a static linking phenomenon where the nature of being persists in linear fashion; rather, it is a novel creative process based on the ever-fresh dynamic nature of the links where nothing persists or endures.” [[6]](#footnote-6) It is clear how the Buddhist idea of impermanence fits into this frame. Inada goes to great lengths to describe the process of interrelated temporal becoming. He uses elaborate diagrams to demonstrate how the “flow of reality resides in the…present, but it is never left alone for it not only creates in cooperation with the past and becomes a past as well, but it also is intimately related to a potential future in the process.” It is in this moment-to-moment sense that the experience of the self unfolds.[[7]](#footnote-7) It is important to note that where Inada refers to “past,” “present,” or “future,” he refers not to those ideas as such, but to their *contents*. Thus, we are really speaking of the contents of the self evolving in a temporal manner. The constant movement of the contents of self moving into the past is what is meant by impermanence. As I will discuss in the next section, the concepts of past, present, and future are not ultimately valid.

1. *Temporality, Time, and Self*

To aid our discussion of temporality, I introduce Dogen’s concept of “being-time.” Best seen in “Uji” in his *Shobogenzo*, the concept of being-time refers to the fact that things do not exist within a thing called time. Rather, temporality is a property of existence. Beyond this, entire time is entire being; entire being is manifest in a single moment of time, for they are “penetrating exhaustively” one another.[[8]](#footnote-8) In simpler terms, this idea states that temporality is the nature of existence, not a particular existence in itself. Thus, we are brought back to impermanence. However, there is more here. Because time doesn’t exist as we experience it, then the entirety of past, present and future is contained in every moment. Further, because of the exhaustive interpenetration of all things, the content of a single entity in a moment contains the rest of the content of that moment and all moments. “Time” is merely our ever-evolving reality: “Mountains are time, and seas are time. If they were not time, there would be no mountains and seas. So you must not say there is no time in the immediate now of mountains and seas.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

What, then, is our experience of time? What is our experience in the “immediate now” if not a point in time? In the ultimate sense the notion of a point in being-time has no meaning: each point contains all other points. Being-time is not linear-time, and so our notion of the “immediate now” as a timeless fraction of the flow of time is invalid. Time as being-time is indeed in that moment, so it cannot be timeless. However, there is still room to discuss what Inada calls the “specious present”. Why is the present specious? Si nemo ex me quaerat scio; si quaerenti explicare velim, nescio.[[10]](#footnote-10) The concept breaks down when we try to comprehend it or explain it. It doesn’t correspond to the actuality of things as being-time, and thus fails to merit an ontologically sound explanation. Yet it is in the present that we find ourselves. There is no time (if I may be permitted to use the conventional sense of the word) when we are not in the present. The self is to be found here, even though its contents extend across all of being-time due to myriad contingencies and interpenetration of all things.

This idea merits reflection. The specious present is the seat of the self because that is where the self is experienced and enacted. However, it cannot be denied that “there is every bit of the past, actually as well as potentially, within the specious present.”[[11]](#footnote-11) The same can be said of the future. Where, then, can we locate our experience to the contrary? In a very general sense, it is obvious that the mind is what experiences the passage of time. Inada again: “It is the function of the mind, after all, to conceive of time in that order [past, present, future] or indeed to give order to the nature of things.”[[12]](#footnote-12) However, “the mind is just another faculty, like other sense faculties, and it is never really aloof from or transcendent of the experiential process. Indeed, it plays a vital role in the whole process.”[[13]](#footnote-13) The mind is just another piece of the puzzle of the self; its experiences cannot be regarded as the whole picture. In order to understand that the mind is imbedded in the experiential process, Inada brings in the ideas of life-continuum or continuum of consciousness (*bhavanga*)[[14]](#footnote-14) and the continuum of being (*bhava*). Taken together, these ideas explain how being time and our experience of time exist in the same reality:

…the stream of reality has to do with process ontology whereas the stream of consciousness with epistemological process, although the latter process necessarily "rests" upon or functions within the realm of the former.[[15]](#footnote-15)

The mind is a part of the continuum of consciousness, which is just another part of the impermanent, ever-evolving, being-time of reality. Our experience of time is itself being-time.[[16]](#footnote-16) Therefore, our commonsense notion of time is a “real thing” imbedded in being-time, although it is not *ultimately* real (for ultimate reality is one thing only: emptiness, interdependent co-arising, etc.). The self is clearly situated in the specious present, and has a sense of time that is experienced as real though lacking in truth in the ultimate sense. How can we include the essential concepts of both the present and being-time in our formulation of the self?

1. *Dogen and Nishida: Presencing the Contradiction of Self*

In my last paper, I explored the idea of “many in one,” of a macrocosm residing inside a microcosm, of the individual being defined by myriad relations to others. I also discussed in that paper the idea that I have discussed just now of eternity (being-time) contained in every moment. We are confronted with the challenge of expressing this same idea while retaining the concept of the self. How can the self be aware of both the experience of time and its true nature of being-time? How can the self as centered in the specious present also be aware that it composes eternity? How can the self remain an individual and yet contain all other beings, and indeed the whole cosmos? Surely ethics in Buddhism demands an awareness of both; surely a Buddha knows the ultimate reality of things and yet understands the workings of conventional dependency, even if all things are empty.

We are clearly in the world of contradiction here, and as such it appears we need a logic of contradiction to proceed. One such logic is articulated by both Dogen and Nishida, and I hope to combine their analysis to construct the notion of self. According to Nishida, the self is composed of contradictory, incommensurable parts, such as subjectivity and objectivity, spatiality and temporality.[[17]](#footnote-17) It is by this logic that we may say that the self straddles the contradictions of eternity and present, individuality and inter-subjectivity. “This logic conceives of the religious form of life as constituted in the contradictory identity of the self and the absolute.” Now, there is some incongruity of terminology here. By “self,” Nishida refers to what I would call an “individual.” His “religious form of life” is (very) roughly equivalent to the idea of an ethical subject or self that I am trying to construct. The self is not one of the contractions in this dynamic relationship, but is what constitutes the relationship. It is the emergent property of the absolute contraction of opposites in the human individual.

Gereon Kopf develops an interpretation of Dogen that is also useful here. In discussing Dogen’s birth, death, and “presencing-of-total-working,” Kopf centers his analysis around two distinct identities: a diachronic non-duality and a synchronic non-duality. The specifics of his detailed analysis are beyond the scope of this essay; however, his development of these ideas is essential to our understanding of self. For synchronic non-duality:

[It] explicates that *context* and event are mutually dependent insofar as they cannot exist separate from each other. A person-at-the-moment does not exist in a vacuum devoid of a temporal horizon or personal content. At the same time, a person or personal content cannot exist if it is not *expressed* in an experience qua person-at-the-moment.[[18]](#footnote-18)

And on diachronic non-duality:

My act of writing on the typewriter completely *presences* who-I-am as a person, as a socio-historical entity, in the same sense that what I do is historically determined and could not have happened anywhere else, and as a being, without however, diminishing or…obstructing the *presencing* of who-I-am in my “past” activity of playing the piano. Dogen thus stratifies a conception of the self (qua awareness event) which celebrates the uniqueness and irrevocability of the individual experience, without, however, rejecting a common ground between cognizer and cognized, self and other, individual and society.[[19]](#footnote-19)

There is much to break down here. “Person-at-the-moment” corresponds to my previous discussion of the self as experienced in the specious present. Kopf expresses exactly how the self is maintained as both a present event and a collection of past events. He also delineates how the content of the self is dependent upon its context, and yet needs to be expressed by the self in the specious present.

Kopf relates one final idea that brings our discussion of the self to a close: the notion of *presencing*. The self must be presenced in the moment despite its diachronic nature. It is something that is *enacted*, *performed*, and *experienced*. Nishida explains this same idea as the self as a predicate. The self as “that which is enacted in the moment” is a predicate statement, as opposed to subject statements like “the self is the ‘I’ that thinks. ‘I think, therefore I am.’” It is here that we have finally discovered the full notion of the Buddhist ethical subject, or perhaps better said, the ethical predicate. The self is a performed contradiction between individual and universal, temporality and eternity. It is what it enacts to be. It may be compared to Nietzsche’s statement that the lightning does not flash, it *is* the flash. In order to conclude, I offer one last quotation from Nishida that thoroughly recapitulates the themes of this essay:

The self is a dynamic spatial-temporal vector: it is *creatively active* as a self-determination of the absolute present. By transcending the merely transcendental forms of space and time, it exists in the paradox of its *actively reflecting* the world. This has the form of a contradictory identity, the dynamic equivalence of *knowing* and *acting*.[[20]](#footnote-20)

The project of being an ethical subject in Buddhism requires presencing the self as awareness of both parts of its contradictory natures. Thus, *knowing* what you are and *acing* what you are become the same process.

1. *Drawing Ethical Categories*

One may reasonably be perplexed at this point that I have spent so much time in working towards the idea of a self, and yet I have done nothing to demonstrate that this self is an *ethical* self. The place for ethics in Buddhism lies in the fact that the self is acted out or *presenced*. It is in the *presencing* of ethics that we may consider the self ethical. Damien Keown in *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics* lays out a detailed analysis of where ethical categories can be found in Buddhist sources, and how we can look at them from a western perspective. The project I have undertaken with this paper could be seen as a justification for Keown’s premise that ethics in Buddhism is possible. The project of identifying what kind of ethics that will be is the task of people like Keown who undertake comprehensive studies of Buddhist scriptures and make systematic comparisons to western models. I do not undertake to overshadow that project, but to provide a perspective on how the category of self fits into it.

Keown’s understanding of Buddhist ethical categories is quite consonant with the above analysis. He breaks down the cultivation of *sila* and *panna* in order to argue that while one begins with *sila*, they are both necessary to the realization of *anatman*. “We may say that *panna* is the cognitive realization of *anatta* while *sila* is its affective realization.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Keeping in mind that *anatman* refers to the ontological category of self, and not the ethical subject we are looking for, we can see that for Keown, ethics is a cultivated realization of one’s true nature, both intellectually and affectively. The whole self is involved in the practice of enlightenment.

Keown argues that ethical categories can be drawn from this understanding via the concept of *kusala*, or “those things which are to be pursued if enlightenment is to be achieved.”[[22]](#footnote-22) However, these are not a means to nirvana but are a part of it and constitute it. “Nirvana is the good, and rightness is predicated of acts and intentions to the extent which they participate in nirvanic goodness.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Goodness is *participation* in nirvana; realization of the ultimate reality is undertaken by *enacting* that reality itself. Thus we are brought back to Dogen: “In the Buddha-Dharma, practice and realization are one and the same.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Once again, we see that the process of enacting the ethical self consists in awareness of the ultimate reality of things while enacting that same reality within the conditioned and impermanent realm of selfhood.

The goal of Buddhist ethics may be seen as *full participation of the self in the ultimate good*. In order to have the absolutely contradictory natures of self in full opposition to one another, they must both be fully present in the self. The self must be aware of both of its natures, and so must cultivate awareness of the truth, on the one hand, and must cultivate the *presencing* of nirvanic participation, on the other. But we may collapse these two ideas into one another in Buddhist ethics. To offer an example, I refer to Keown’s discussion of emotions and morality. He quotes Finnis as saying, “True, a participation in these goods which is emotionally dry and subjectively unsatisfying is still good and meaningful as far as it goes. But these goods are not participated in fully unless they are *experienced* as good.”[[25]](#footnote-25) Thus knowing the good and acting it out (participation) are one in the same (i.e. Nishida).

*VII. Conclusion*

I contend that ethics and the self are not wholly separate in the Buddhist conception, except insofar as they are separated by our inability to *presence* them with each other. Or perhaps it is better said that the goal of Buddhist ethics is the unification of self with the teleological goal of nirvana. The self as the emergent ethical category of contradictory natures is *presenced* by awareness and practice. It is *enacted* by the individual acting as a momentary, impermanent being who simultaneously *experiences* the ultimate reality of his or her being-time. It is conventionally different from other entities because of its awareness, or rather, its *presencing* and experience of its contradictory identity. It is in this sense of contradiction that must be the point of departure for discussing the nature of Buddhist ethics.

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1. Inada, Kennith K. “Time and Temporality: A Buddhist Approach.” Philosophy East and West, Vol. 24, No. 2, Time and Temporality, p. 174 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Because the conditions would be entirely different and thus the self would not be the same but a different self. In addition, since there are countless other entities that are contingent upon the existence of the self, it is not possible to remove this contingency and still have the same conditions, or indeed, the same world. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Inada, Kennith K. “Problematics of the Buddhist Nature of Self.” Philosophy East and West, Vol. 29, No. 2, p. 146 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This is not to say that the self as I use it in this paper is an *ontological* category. Buddhism rejects an ontological self. Rather I am searching for the *ethical* category of self. Nonetheless, we can still study the ontological properties that underlie the emergent ethical subject. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., Inada uses the more conventional translation of *dukkha* as “suffering.” I have used “unsatisfactoriness” to stress its connection with impermanence as well as the non-physical/mental suffering that is contained in *dukkha*. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., p. 146-147 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. To elaborate: one present moment fades into the past only to have a future potentiality take its place. That potentiality becomes concrete in a new moment which then fades into past existence. However, the past isn’t left behind; indeed, the present and even the future depend upon it. This mutual dependency of past, present, and future is what characterizes Buddhist ontology of time. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Dogen, Kigen, trans. Norman Waddell, and Masao Abe. *The Heart of Dogen’s Shobogenzo*, p. 53 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., p. 56 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. “I know well enough what it is, provided that nobody asks me; but if I am asked what it is and try to explain, I am baffled.” Augustine, *Confessions*, book 11, chapter 14 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Inada, “Problematics” p. 150 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Inada, “Time and Temporality” p. 172 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. This is the life of an individual, but doesn’t constitute the self. The self is an ethical category, whereas the continuum of consciousness is an ontological one. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Inada, [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Dogen, p. 53. *c.f.* footnote 31 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Nishida, Kitaro; David A. Dilworth, trans. *Last Writings: Nothingness and the Religious Worldview*, p. 82 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Kopf, Gereon. “Personhood as Presencing.” in *Beyond Personal Identity: Dōgen, Nishida and a Phenomenology of No-self*, p. 242 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid., p. 243 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Nishida, p. 84, emphasis is mine. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Keown, Damien. *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, p. 112 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid., p. 116 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid., p. 177 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Dogen, p. 19 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Finnis in Keown, p. 225 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)