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TEARING DOWN THE HOUSE: THE PROBLEM OF SELF IN THEREVADA BUDDHISM

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Studies in personal identity tend toward extremes. We like to be able to draw bright lines when discussing concepts of personhood, and often these lines reflect more about our own backgrounds and presuppositions than we realize. So the question remains, can we pick out certain facts about persons which are independent of human values? Is it indeed possible to state exactly what makes up a person?

In articles like Daniel Callahan's "The 'Beginning' of Human Life," we are left with a resounding answer of "no" to that question. Callahan incorporates an anthropological view of the problem, and argues that theories of self must take into account things like culture and society. We will not find any bright lines irrespective of these influences, and we only narrow and confuse the issue of personhood by ignoring them.

It is my intention in this paper to examine the study of personal identity and to provide examples of better and worse approaches to this study. I am especially interested in how the Therevada Buddhist tradition deals with issues of self (or not-self, as the case may be). In order to do this, I will concentrate on karma and rebirth within the Therevada tradition, and how these two concepts relate to personal identity. Paul Griffiths, in his "Notes Towards a Critique of Buddhist Karmic Theory," argues that these two concepts cannot logically be a part of the same system of thought. He is foremostly interested in evaluating the truth-claims of Buddhism from the standpoint that all theories must be subject to such testing, whether or not they are a part of another culture.

Steven Collins, however, attempts to place the Therevada tradition in its cultural context for us in *Selfless Persons: Imagery and Thought in Therevada Buddhism*, so that we might see how both karma and rebirth function together. This approach takes into account the claims of Buddhist theory; however, it does not evaluate that theory without regard to its function in society. Truthclaims become more complex when adapting to the needs of those who use and follow them. What will become obvious is that no ideas of personal identity exist in a vacuum. In other words, the notion of persons is directly related to the society in which these persons are found. It may be difficult to pick out certain facts about persons independent from these societal values. I will use Griffiths and Collins to illustrate a debate between those who think the study of personal identity is mainly a treatment of truth-claims and others who see it as incorporating a larger societal view.

First of all, let us go back to Callahan's argument. Callahan does not deny that there are certain qualities of a person which most people seem to agree upon. He does, however, point out that these qualities do not exist independent of their surroundings. This view has its roots in anthropology, and Callahan brings the work of anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz into the discussion. He notes that, "For Geertz, then, it is culture which enables man to develop his innate capacities. At the same time, his innate capacities themselves have been determined by culture—it is a two-way process" (Callahan, 45). Here we have a recognition that although biology plays a part in the definition of a person, it does not play the only part. Conceptions of what a person is, then, are not one-dimensional descriptions. Rather, many factors affect what we call a person.

The idea that what we call the self is actually made up of many inter-related factors is certainly reminiscent of the Therevada Buddhist tradition, although the Buddhists go even further, claiming that one cannot nail down the exact qualities of a person because there is no "person" to speak of. In such a case, it would seem that there can be no traditional notion of personal identity, since an eternal Self is rejected as non-

existent. Therefore, no person has a lasting individual identity. In order to explain what makes up a person, the Therevada tradition presents a theory of momentariness. This states that all of existence is in a state of becoming, and nothing is permanent.

Yet, as Steven Collins points out, "'Buddhism' does not represent a unitary system of belief and practice, and 'Buddhist texts' do not display a unitary type of discourse" (Collins, 70). This is a warning to those who set out to examine and point out contradictions within the "Buddhist" tradition. Collins notes that before we argue that a system is inconsistent, we should first make an effort to understand the system, and not simply criticize from our framework.

For example, the traditional Therevada doctrine of anatta, or not-self, must necessarily at times relax its insistence on the non-existence of the Self, in order to conduct affairs on a practical level. Monks themselves, for instance, must at some point decide that becoming a monk is a way to better themselves. As Collins says, "For Buddhist thought, the existence of (for example) selfinterested merit-making is socially, psychologically, and indeed logically necessary as the raw material which is to be shaped by anatta" (Collins, 152).

Therefore, at some point Buddhists must accept some definition of a self at some level in order to carry on daily business. However, Buddhist doctrine admits this and states that, as one continues down the path to nibbana, or enlightenment, one increasingly loses such a notion as the Self. In the beginning, it may be necessary to concentrate on meditation, for instance, to *want* to do it. However, it soon becomes a natural occurrence, with no emotions attached. Thus, one comes to understand that there is nothing which is permanent, not even the Self.

I will go into further detail on the topic of anatta, but first I want to look at two related concepts: karma and rebirth. Karma is an important Buddhist tenet, and Paul Griffiths sketches out some of the more important ideas behind it. According to him, there are

> three major functions that karmic theory serves in Buddhism. The first is to act as an explanatory cosmogonic hypothesis; that is, for Buddhists what created the material universe is karma, the volitional acts of sentient beings. The second function of karmic theory is to act as an explanatory hypothesis for the varied states and conditions of sentient beings; that is, karmic theory claims to explain why you are neither a worm nor a Buddha and why worms are different from both Buddhas and you.... The third function of karmic theory, and perhaps the most important for Buddhists in practice, is that of acting as a means of social control in Buddhist societies. That is, it explains why the layman ought to support the monk and why he ought to live a moral life (Griffiths, 280).

Thus, karma acts as a sort of bridge between states of existence. It is a doctrine of action in that how one acts in a certain state of existence can produce a different state of existence. This action may have positive or negative effects.

Karma is then linked with the notion of rebirth. One's karma determines the form of one's existence in the next life. The chain of rebirth is known as samsara, and it is generally the goal of Buddhists to, at some point, end this succession of rebirth, and achieve nibbana, or enlightenment. Thus, good rebirth will result from selfless acts and consequently, good karma. Steven Collins, however, does a good job of showing that the Buddhist idea of rebirth can sometimes involve selfinterest. Before simply pointing out the contradictions involved in this, and then dismissing notions of karma and rebirth, however, it is important to look at the entire rationale for this selfinterest. Collins notes that rebirth can be

> a process of gradual self-perfection which continues until the force of merit is enough to allow a direct assault on the selflessness of nibbana. Indeed, perhaps the most widespread Buddhist goal nowadays can be seen in this light; one hopes for rebirth as a man in the

> time of the coming Buddha Metteyya specifically because at that time, it is thought, the attainment of nibbana—generally thought impossible now because of the corruption of the age—will once again become a feasible religious aim (Collins, 151).

It is interesting to notice how Collins takes what seems to be a rigid Buddhist doctrine, and shows how that doctrine plays out in the ordinary lives of Buddhist followers.

Griffiths, however, takes another tact. In his article, "Notes Towards A Critique of Buddhist Karmic Theory," he sets out to prove the notions of karma and rebirth illogical within the same system. He is working from a philosophical standpoint which sees differences between Buddhist schools of thought as a kind of weakness in Buddhism (Griffiths, 279-80). This is a very presumptuous stance to take, but Griffiths takes it, and goes on to provide examples of the contradictions found within the doctrines of karma and rebirth which, he says, include these two claims:

> P3: Each individual goes through more than one life.

and a variation of the first,

> P3': Any given caused continuum of momentary states exhibiting sentience (i.e., an 'individual') does not cease with death.

By the second claim, we see that what a Buddhist really means by an individual is a collection of momentary states. Griffiths is worried about falling into contradiction, and therefore attempts to give a Buddhist doctrine which will not do so. For him, this second claim arrives closer to Buddhism at its best. Yet Griffiths wants to claim that at times in Buddhist dialogue, the individual of the first claim is actually loaded down with very conventional notions of self: in other words, something which persists from day to day, and life to life. He states: "We may allow, I think, that P3', like P3, is not precisely self-

contradictory, though from it the following questions arise: Buddhist texts—and Buddhists— frequently talk as though they mean to assert P3 rather than P3' " (Griffiths, 283). Griffiths sees contradiction in the fact that Buddhists claim to have a doctrine of no-self, when in fact they sometimes do talk about the individual as persisting through rebirth.

Griffiths' study, we must remember, is primarily concerned with subjecting Buddhist theory to rigorous, rational philosophical testing. He does not see why a philosophical system which is in part religious should not be required to undergo this process. And so, he concludes that

> truth is truth and nonsense nonsense, whether stated in Sanskrit, Tibetan or English.... Religious conceptual systems cannot escape from this requirement any more than can scientific, economic, sociological or other systems (Griffiths, 278).

In a sense, this is true. Religious systems should certainly be examined and questioned. Yet, one needs to take care to examine in terms of a religious system, as well as one in another cultural context. Perhaps Griffiths' contradictions arise from a form of questioning which is not relevant to its subject.

As Collins has shown us before, however, the doctrines of karma and rebirth need not seem like a major contradiction when taken together. Whether Griffiths has deliberately done so or not, he seems to have taken Buddhism out of its social context somewhat. Under certain conditions, it does appear as though Buddhists talk of a persisting individual, yet this is either for practical matters or to teach a lesson. Collins retells the story of a monk, Nanda, which shows us how the desire for a persisting self can lead to a higher knowledge of no-self:

> the monk Nanda was being lured back to the lay life by the charms of his ex-wife. The Buddha took him to a heaven where the female spirits were infinitely more attractive, and promised that if he practiced the religious life assiduously, he would be reborn in that

> heaven. Nanda's practice was so assiduous that he came to see the truth of the Buddha's teachings in their entirety, and attained nibbana, after which naturally he had no more desire for females, human or heavenly (Collins, 151).

Through this story, Collins is trying to point out the fact that although Buddhists sometimes talk as if the person is an actual entity, they do so only in order to achieve a higher understanding. The contradiction which Griffiths points out must be looked at in terms of how the doctrines of karma and rebirth function in Buddhist society. Upon examination, it is not irrational to speak of an individual in order to transcend the very idea of an individual. How else could one go about the process?

As Collins says, much of Therevada doctrine uses concepts of the individual in order to initiate the process of learning, as well as to communicatr with others, both past and present. This usage is certainly a form of "selfishness." Yet, "without fetters there would be no liberation" (Collins, 153). For a Buddhist, it might be impossible to lose the concept of self if one does not take care to understand the many manifestations of self in everyday life.

For Griffiths, though, who has denied the legitimacy of the statement, "Each individual undergoes more than one life," a huge problem results in that Buddhists talk of an individual when in fact their doctrine cannot allow any stronger statement than that each life is merely causally connected. He says,

> Even for a Buddhist, a particular continuum (i.e., 'individual') has certain characteristics in a given life (the same body, continuity of memory and so on) which are lacking after that continuum has been interrupted by death. The events in the continuum after death (i.e., 'the reborn person') lack so many of the characteristics of the events in the continuum before death (i.e., 'the person in his previous life') that it is very much a moot point whether it makes any

> sense to refer to the continuum before death and the continuum after death as 'the same' except in so far as they are causally linked (Griffiths, 284).

Yet this would seem to be exactly what Buddhists do argue. Although continuity of memory may be a separate issue, since some Buddhist followers (i.e., those who achieve enlightenment) can indeed remember their past lives, it does not threaten the Buddhist doctrine of rebirth to claim that the body does not remain the same after rebirth. The very idea behind rebirth is that of a causal connection based on karma and nothing more. The statement, "Each individual undergoes more than one life," is misleading in the sense that in order to talk about rebirth, it is sometimes necessary to use language in a way that followers are familiar with. The individual is really nothing more than a collection of causes and effects.

For Buddhists, this is a way to a middle path between eternalism and annihilation. The Buddha rejected both the idea that the nature of existence is permanent and the notion of traditional "death." Instead, a chain of existence is posited in which momentary states arise and cease. Griffiths, then, does not seem to have a clear argument in this instance, and looks for a contradiction, when in fact he is helping to elucidate the Buddhist argument for karma and rebirth without personhood.

At this point, it might be helpful to discuss Collins' use of Buddhist imagery in order to better grasp the misunderstanding which I think occurs in Griffiths' analysis of Buddhist personal identity, and also to learn more about anatta. One such image is that of the house. The body can be seen as a house: "A monk is recommended to accept alms-food for the maintenance of his body, just as the owner of a decaying house uses props for its maintenance," as well as the mind: "When a house has an ill-thatched roof, rain enters and soaks the roof-beams and walls; in the same way, it is said, when a mind is 'undeveloped' or 'unguarded,' desire enters, to penetrate and saturate all actions, whether of body, speech, or mind" (Collins, 167). Thus, individuals can be seen as houses, or dwelling places of the individual.

Yet, the ultimate goal of Buddhist doctrine is to leave this house. In order to find enlightenment, one must transcend the elements which make up the house. The house, then, is a useful metaphor for understanding the nature of one's material existence, but one must eventually realize that the house is empty. As Collins points out,

> the act of 'leaving home' has three stages: first, one must leave home physically by abandoning household life for the monkhood. Then, one must abandon home psychologically, by destroying desire for and attachment to the present 'individuality.' Third and last, one must—at the death of the 'body-house'—leave home ontologically by abandoning forever the village of samsara (Collins, 171).

When applying this metaphor of the house to our debate over karma and rebirth, new insights arise. It is certainly possible to live one's life inside a house. One might conceive of one's individuality as being a constant, eternal thing. Yet, in order to train and educate followers, the Therevada tradition attempts to help them understand that such an individual does not exist. To do this, the doctrines of karma and rebirth are introduced, which state that one's state of existence is constantly changing. Thus, in order to persuade someone to leave their house, Buddhists attempt to show that the house does not really stay the same over time, and, ultimately, does not even exist. In order to do so, however, the everyday language of the house, or individual, must be used.

Is it, then, a contradiction to state that "Each individual undergoes more than one life" in Therevada Buddhist thought? I advance that in the sense that unless one is able to escape samsara, one must continuously leave one house only to move into another, yes, there does exist a kind of contradiction. But this is not the full story. The goal is to escape samsara, and leave the house completely. It is then that one sees one's previous houses as mere bunches of causes and effects.

Another way to apply this discussion of house imagery is to say that Griffiths, and other personal identity philosophers like him, seems to be interested in building up the house, and finding which parts don't quite seem to fit together in that scheme. As we have seen, however, the Therevada tradition is only interested in building up the house in order to tear it down again. Therefore, when Griffiths examines this tradition, he sees two beams which will not fit together in order to hold up the house. What he does not seem to take into account, however, is that ultimately there is no house to be supported, and so the beams must be looked at separately from the concept of the house.

Collins makes the distinction between "conventional" and "ultimate" truth, and I think this is a useful one. In effect, this means that when looking at how Buddhism is practiced in South Asian Therevada communities, and specifically how the issue of personal identity is dealt with, one must recognize the differences between the practice of a "virtuoso" and that of an ordinary lay monk. By virtuoso, I mean the monk who is able to understand complex philosophical issues, as well as put them into practice. Dwelling in a house and passing from one life to the next in samsara is a necessary stage for the ordinary monk. Conventional truth, then, must apply to this monk's idea of personhood, and persisting sense of his/her individuality. The ultimate truth, however, is that no such individual exists, and the virtuoso recognizes this.

Collins does recognize arguments like Griffiths', however, and admits that

> For Buddhism categorically to assert the distinction between conventional and ultimate truth is, of course, not enough. The questions which arise from its acceptance of the samsara/karma belief system, and its simultaneous denial of a permanent self or person are legion, and King Milinda asks many of them, for example, 'Who is reborn?' Nagasena replies 'name-and-form'; not in the sense that it is the reborn unchanged, but in the sense that 'one does a good or

> evil deed with (one) name-and-form, and because [or 'by means'] of this deed [instrumental case] another name-and-form is reborn' (Collins, 185).

This exchange between King Milinda and Nagasena helps to explain the causal system behind the notions of karma and rebirth. It does not make sense to ask who it is that is reborn if the individual does not ultimately exist. In conventional terms, or name-and-form, the 'individual' is the subject of experiences which give rise to that 'individual' being reborn. Yet, ultimately that name-andform is simply a link on a causal chain. Just as the flame on a match transfers to a candle, one set of experiences gives rise to another. There is no need to ask what happened to the flame on the match, it simply created another flame, and then went out. Thus, Collins answers the questions of Griffiths by noting the causality argument as well as the fact that both conventional and ultimate truths play a part in the Therevada scheme of karma and rebirth.

Conventional and ultimate truths make for a unique picture of personal identity, especially when one is looking for bright lines. Griffiths' statements of P3 and P3' are a fine example of this. The first, which deals with the notion of an individual undergoing more than one life, might be an example of conventional truth. P3', however, goes a little bit beyond the first statement in that it omits the word individual and uses 'continuum of momentary states' in its place. While P3' does not deal with what happens upon reaching nibbana, it does show a higher understanding of Buddhism's ultimate goals.

Even setting aside the question of rebirth for the moment, we can see how meditation helps the monk to partially realize the doctrine of anatta in this life, and to become less attached to the idea of the self. This blurs the line between conventional and ultimate truths even further. By seeing present existence in terms of momentary states, it becomes easier to understand the notions of karma and rebirth. The picture, then, which karma and rebirth play in the life of a follower may be affected

by many factors, including how much that follower has focused on the idea of anatta.

Griffiths does not see these statements in terms of conventional and ultimate truths, however. Rather, he finds them problematic when taken together. The origins of this approach come from the fact that Griffiths wishes to evaluate Therevada truth claims from an objective standpoint. He sees the claims of karma and rebirth as failing because they do not conform to a uniform standard. Yet, as we have seen, uniformity is not necessarily the best way to go about achieving enlightenment, in any sense of the word. Different approaches to truth must be utilized in order to understand such a deep and layered tradition as Buddhism.

Collins, on the other hand, states in the introduction to his chapter on personal identity that an attempt will be made

> to connect the philosophical and psychological doctrines I shall be dealing with to wider patterns of cultural perception, to quite simple and unsophisticated imaginative pictures of society, psychology, and cosmology (Collins, 148).

By taking this approach, Collins helps us to see personal identity as something which is molded by the features of human communities. His examination of the Therevada community has taken into account not just the intellectual approach to personal identity, but the wider societal one as well.

This is exactly the sort of study which leads to greater understandings not only of a society's ideas, but the origins of those ideas. Such an understanding is also not simply fascinating, but imperative if one is serious about presenting the philosophy behind personal identity in any culture. Failure to do so results in two distinguishing marks of the final product: (1) the author has not presented the philosophy according to its own terms, and (2) we learn more about the author's own framework than the one he/she attempts to flesh out. N. J. Allen, in an article which considers both the philosophical and

anthropological visions of self ("Category of Person in Mauss"), addresses these faulty attempts at disconnecting personhood from society, and points out that

> No doubt, insofar as the philosophers suppose themselves to be working a priori, purely by means of reasoning from first principles, they exemplify the characteristic error of nonsociologists who, unaware of the history and pre-history of the fundamental notions with which they operate, naively regard them as natural (Allen, 30).

In other words, the prospects of intellectually reasoning out fundamental notions of what it means to be a person in any given society look dim. It appears that we are going to have to consider the subject of the person as wrapped up in its socio-historical context in order to do justice to its complexities.

The example provided by Steven Collins, however, is an encouraging one. His use of imagery from the Therevada tradition is particularly insightful in giving a picture which probes deeply into the culture from which the philosophy originated. It is clear that Collins begins his investigation of the Buddhist individual within the framework of his subject, and not from a position of looking for a certain aspect which he finds important in that subject. The image of the house is extremely valuable in providing examples of how the textual tradition plays out in larger society.

Within this framework, Collins is able to better approach the study of personal identity. In making his conclusions, he accepts the fact that there is no one way to spell out the conception of a person, both within a particular tradition itself, as well as the anthropological study of that tradition. The study of personal identity might subsequently seem fruitless to some, but Collins notes that

> We have seen, however, both through modern anthropological research and through the ideas of Buddhism itself, that the ideas of the canonical

> tradition, and related practices derived from it, in fact co-exist in society with a differing but complementary religious system (Collins, 264).

In looking at the ways in which Buddhist conceptions of anatta play out in terms of both the religious virtuoso and the ordinary monk, then, we see that bright lines cannot be drawn in terms of how the individual is discussed. Yet when we take these sometimes differing conceptions together, we often get a better picture of the factors which make up the subject of personal identity. Perhaps the need for bright lines actually inhibits the ability to see the individual not as isolated, but as a part of a cultural group.

As Collins finally recognizes, the dimming of the self in Buddhism has consequences which do not only affect the fate of the individual. It can be beneficial to the community as a whole if the members of that community do not think of themselves as isolated individuals. Thus, when the monk attains a knowledge of anatta, this means that "as well as being indifferent to sense-pleasures and 'having nothing' he remains 'engaged in the practice of mercy and compassion for (all) living things' " (Collins, 190). Here we have a good example of why Griffiths' approach to the study of personal identity is ultimately inadequate. The goals of anatta, or the dissolution of the self, reach farther than simply how it affects the life of the individual Buddhist follower. By trying to pick out a "representative" doctrine of Buddhism, and analyzing it for philosophical contradiction, Griffiths has pigeon-holed and constrained a tradition which is extremely diverse and complicated. Anatta stretches out to reach an entire community, and provide a rationale for the interconnectedness of all things. By focusing less on the self, and more on relationships with all similarly momentary life, a sense of compassion is developed. When we look for a coherent theory of personal identity, then, we must take care to acknowledge the goals which Buddhist doctrine has for all of the society in which its followers live.

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