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Overcoming Ineffability Through Discourse on Hindu Self and Buddhist Non-Self:

Tensions Between the Study of Religion and Religious Experience

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RELG 401: Guided Research

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I woke up this morning. *I* am going to class today. *I* am going to watch a movie. It seems natural to relate to the world in the context of ‘me’ and ‘I’. For most people reality is grounded in a strong sense of self, and it is hard to conceive that there is any alternative to perceiving the world except through *I*. As Rene Descartes famously stated, “I think therefore, I am,”¹ whereby *I* is defined as the basis of existence for most of us. According to Descartes, it is through my mere ability to think that surely, *I* exist. In fact, we find comfort in knowing that there is an *I* because it validates our experience. This sense of *I* is not limited to the realm of daily experience, but extends to religious experiences as well.

Prevalent within many religious traditions is the relationship of *I* with the divine. *I* am going to pray to God today. *I* should go to church on Sunday. *I* hope that *my* sins will be forgiven. Many religious practices are oriented towards promoting, improving, or repairing an individual’s relationship with the divine, and in this way are rooted in this fundamental dualism. The classic Christian hymn, “Jesus Loves Me” by Anna Bartlett Warner demonstrates an *I-me* dichotomy when she writes “Jesus loves *me* this *I* know for the bible tells *me* so” [italics mine].² Across theistic traditions, the sense of self in relation to the divine is emphasized; however, Buddhism challenges the notion of ‘*I*’ through its teaching of *anātman* or non-self. Non-self is a distinctly Buddhist teaching that defies the sense of duality defining most Western religious thought. Duality in the most basic sense is the distinction between subject and object. Typically, the subject is *I* and the object is something separate from *I*. In the case of “*I* am going to watch a movie”, *I* is the subject and the movie is the object. This view asserts that the movie exists separately from *I*, and *I* exists separately from the movie. In contrast to this view, Buddhism

1. René Descartes, *A Discourse on Method*, trans. John Veitch (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Limited, 1953).

2. Anna Bartlett Warner, *Jesus Loves Me*, 1860.

states that the appearance of duality is fundamentally mistaken. From the perspective of Buddhist non-dualism, there is no distinction between I and the movie; both are simply mind and the duality of self and other is the projection of ignorance. Through the realization of non-self, Buddhists claim to understand that there is no real distinction between internal and external phenomena, as we believe there is based on ordinary appearance; according to later schools of Buddhist thought, all phenomenon are inherently “empty” of self-other duality.

My interest in this topic was inspired when my own understanding of self was challenged while meditating in a contemplative practice course. During an in-class guided meditation, we were instructed to look at the origin of our thoughts, our mind, and to locate precisely where that might be. Through my own practice, I could no longer locate the origin of my sense of self, and in that moment, it ceased to appear to exist all together. After the small glimpse I had in my own meditation practice of non-self, I struggled to find the words to describe my experience. The loss of my sense of self was initially terrifying for I feel such a sense of security in knowing there is an I. Every experience I have had in my life, everything that I do on a day-to-day basis revolves around me knowing that there is an I. I am attached to a sense of I, and in the brief moment when I could no longer locate it, I questioned just about everything that I have believed to be true in my life. This transformative experience was isolated from any detailed explanation of the Buddhist teaching of non-self in the course; rather, the meditation instruction was to simply explore the source and nature of thoughts. It was not until I took a Buddhism course that I was better able to contextualize that experience from what I learned about the tradition, but even then, words still failed to encapsulate the realness of my experience. Through learning about non-self in Buddhism, I was equipped with a discourse about the concept and was better able to put into words what had previously been wordless or ineffable. For this reason, the Buddhist

concept of non-self provides a unique opportunity to discuss ineffability in religious experience. Given that the study of religion relies on discourse as a basis, the inherent ineffability of religious experience poses a challenge to it, yet it is simultaneously a defining characteristic of religion. For scholars of religion, discourse and other conceptual components can be discussed, but when critically and comparatively exploring what defines ultimate reality, such as *ātman* in Hinduism and *anātman* in Buddhism, experience is at the foundation and cannot be dismissed.

The concept of non-self as taught by the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama (ca. 563-483 BCE), is said to be preserved in the *Anattalakkhana Sutta*, and practitioners continue to emphasize its highly experiential nature. Ajahn Chah (1918-1992), a Thai monk, said that “To understand not-self, you have to meditate. If you only intellectualize, your head will explode. Once you understand not-self in your heart, the burden of life will be lifted.”³ Here Chah argues not only that words fail to encapsulate the experience of non-self, but also the importance of non-self in removing “the burden of life” or suffering. This ineffability of non-self or ultimate truth in Buddhism is not limited to that tradition, but rather can be seen in accounts of religious experience across a diversity of traditions. Prevalent in Chah’s statement is the inherent tension between looking at things conceptually and the need to experience them directly. A broader conversation about ineffability in religious experience will illuminate the difficulty in conceptualizing ultimate reality, which Buddhism defines as non-self.

Many scholars across different disciplines have explored the relationship between language, ineffability, and religious experience. Among them is communication scholar Kenneth Burke, who revolutionized the field of communication by broadening views of rhetoric as

3. Achaan Chah, *A Still Forest Pool: The Insight Meditation of Achaan Chah*, ed. Jack Kornfield and Paul Breiter, (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1985), 173.

persuasion alone. He argues that rhetoric is “the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols.”⁴ Under a traditional definition⁵ of rhetoric as persuasion, rhetoric would be something used by religion whereas Burke’s definition aims to suggest that religion is itself rhetorical. While Burke is not a scholar of religion, nor is he in conversation with other scholars of religion, which is problematic in some respects, his exploration of language in religion through texts such as St. Augustine’s *Confessions* provides unique insights into ineffability. In fact, he notes the distinction between his own work being the study of logology, or “words about words,” in contrast to theology meaning “words about God.”⁶ In the forward to his book, *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology*, he asserts that religion is rhetorical and therefore is included well within his own area of study as a rhetorician:

The subject of religion falls under the head of rhetoric in the sense that rhetoric is the art of persuasion, and religion cosmogonies are designed, in the last analysis, as exceptionally thoroughgoing modes of persuasion.⁷

While Burke expands the field of rhetoric through his scholarship, he still relies on Plato’s fundamental definition of rhetoric as the art of persuasion.⁸ Proceeding with this notion that religion falls under the study of rhetoric, Burke identifies four “realms” to which words refer: words for the natural; words for the socio-political realm; words about words; and words for the

4. Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (New York, NY: Prentice-Hall, 1950), 43.

5. These traditional definitions of rhetoric as persuasion refers to the work of Aristotle, Plato, and Cicero.

6. Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1961), 1.

7. Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1961), foreward.

8. Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. James H. Nichols (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

supernatural.⁹ Divided respectively into the first three realms, the words “tree”, “justice”, and “rhetoric” are often assumed to merely be words, but Burke aims to distinguish the function of each of these words in linguistic usage. Words for the natural are those that describe that which can be seen in the world regardless of whether or not there is a word assigned to it. Words for the socio-political realm are those created that have meaning within society particularly with regard to law and politics. Words about words are those having to do with the technical aspects of words, particularly pertaining to language, etymology, and rhetoric. The first three realms of words constitute everyday experience, the mundane; however, the fourth realm, words for the supernatural, pertain to a distinct realm and are of particular relevance to this discussion of ineffability. Burke continues:

The supernatural is by definition the realm of the “ineffable.” And language by definition is not suited to the expression of the “ineffable.” So our words for the fourth realm, the supernatural or “ineffable”, are necessarily borrowed from our words for the sorts of things we can talk about literally, our words for the three empirical orders [realms] (the world of everyday experience).¹⁰

Burke states that words for the ineffable are not unique to religious experience, but rather they are borrowed from the realm of words that we already know. A common frustration of those trying to recall their religious experience is the many ways in which ordinary words fail to describe that experience, and an experience of non-self is no exception.

An attempt to find a word more suitable for the fourth realm as described by Burke can be seen in the work of Rudolf Otto. In his book, *The Idea of the Holy*, Otto identifies the word “holy” as particular to the field of religion:

9. Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1961), 14.

10. Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1961), 15.

“Holiness”—“the holy”—is a category of interpretation and valuation peculiar to the sphere of religion. It is, indeed, applied by transference to another sphere—that of Ethics—but it is not itself derived from this. While it is complex, it contains a quite specific element or “moment” which sets it apart from “the Rational” in the meaning we gave to that word above, and which remains inexpressible—or *ineffabile*—in the sense that it completely eludes apprehension in terms of concepts.¹¹

As Otto demonstrates, words like “holy” accrue meaning in the realm of religion and ethics, but at their core are attempts to describe the ineffable. In terms of Burke’s four realms, the word “holy” would be borrowed from the first three realms of words and attributed to the realm of the supernatural. In an attempt to solve this shortcoming, Otto calls for the creation of a new word better suited for the realm of the supernatural that is not borrowed from another realm of words:

By means of a special term we shall the better be able, first, to keep the meaning clearly apart and distinct, and second, to apprehend and classify connectedly whatever subordinate forms or stages of development it may show.¹²

In Otto’s call for a creation of a new term, he recognizes how the meanings of words can become ambiguous when they are not distinct from other uses of the word. For example, the use of the word “holy” in phrases such as “The Holy Bible” or “Holy Father” associates the term with the Abrahamic traditions. The special term that Otto suggests is the word *numinous*, to describe the holy devoid of a moral factor that is universal.¹³ By not limiting the conversation of “holy” to the Abrahamic traditions, Otto believes that *numinous* is more universal. Otto also speaks of a

11. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, Translated by John W. Harvey, (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2010), 5.

12. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, Translated by John W. Harvey, (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2010), 7.

13. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, Translated by John W. Harvey, (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2010), 7.

“numinous state of mind,”¹⁴ and in this way he frees the word from being limited to any one religion for states of mind are not exclusive to any one tradition. While Otto’s work makes a valiant effort to combat the failure of words to describe experience, even he recognizes the truly ineffable nature of religious experience.

Another critic lamenting the failure of language who also explores the concept of duality is Martin Buber (1878-1965). According to Buber, duality is inescapable in man’s language: “the attitude of man is twofold in accordance with the two basic words he can speak.”¹⁵ He identifies two types of word pairs, “I-It” and “I-You”. The “I-It” according to Buber is the world as experience, duality in the most basic sense: “I” being the subject and “It” being the object. On the other hand, the “I-You” word pair establishes the world of relation.¹⁶ On the nature of “You” Buber writes:

Every You in the world is doomed by its nature to become a thing or at least to enter into thinghood again and again. In the language of objects: every thing in the world can—either before or after is [*sic*] becomes a thing—appear to some I as its You. But the language of objects catches only one corner of actual life.¹⁷

The lesson from Buber, that everything will appear in the world in some form of I or you, will prove especially relevant in understanding how the Buddha teaches non-self through the five aggregates. While Buber asserts that “you” *is* a thing, Buddhism suggest that “you” is not actually the thing it appears to be. As will be discussed below, it is not that self does not appear as *I* in the world, but rather, it does not exist as it appears. If language can only capture one corner of actual life, then there must be aspects of life that transcend language. These aspects of

14. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, Translated by John W. Harvey, (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2010), 7.

15. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970), 53.

16. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970), 53

17. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970), 69.

life that transcend language are generally accounted for differently according to each religion. In this way, Buber's understanding that the language of objects only catches a corner of actual life makes a strong case for the experiential nature of concepts in religion: since language cannot capture the thing described, it must be experienced.

William James (1842-1910), a philosopher and psychologist also demonstrates the limiting nature of words in relation to the ineffable. In his twenty-lecture series, published as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James explores the notion of the ineffable as a defining characteristic of religious experience. While his lectures precede the work of Burke by sixty years, James demonstrates precisely what Burke identifies in the fourth realm of words—the limiting nature of words to describe religious experience. In his sixteenth lecture entitled “Mysticism”, he identifies four characteristics of religious experiences: ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and passivity. The first characteristic, ineffability, means that by nature religious experiences do not lend themselves to being conveyed through words. Secondly, the noetic quality of religious experiences offers a sense of insight or new state of knowledge to the person who is experiencing it. James' third quality, transiency, states that religious experiences are bound by time, according to him they last “at most an hour or two.”¹⁸ The final characteristic of religious experience is the passivity of the participant to the content of the experience; the practitioner feels as though they are not in control of their own experience. The last three characteristics of religious experience identified by James' help to explain why religious experiences are unique and why they are often deemed ineffable by those who experience them. In his description of ineffability, he writes:

18. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, 1902, 372.

The subject of [the religious experience] immediately says that it defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words. It follows from this that its quality must be directly experienced; it cannot be imparted or transferred to others.¹⁹

This notion that religious experience cannot be imparted or transferred to others complicates the concept of religion within the study of religion. Religion generally derives from at least one person sharing a transcendent experience, however that may be defined. While the individual, their experience, and their method all vary, at the heart of any religion is experience in some form or another. In the Abrahamic traditions, God shares his message through a human messenger. In Buddhism, Siddhartha Gautama had his own enlightenment experience and, through his teachings, aims to instruct others towards achieving the same liberation. Even though religious experience is generally defined as ineffable, by necessity each religion develops some form of discourse about it. Here, James suggests that to overcome the closed, singular experience of ineffability, one must experience the ineffable for themselves.

Each of the above scholars, among others, have acknowledged the complex nature of words, particularly in discussions of ineffable experience, but this topic is not limited to the philosophers of history. In his book *Ineffability: The Failure of Words in Philosophy and Religion*, contemporary scholar Ben-Ami Scharfstein takes a particular interest in ineffability across many different traditions, Buddhism among them. Scharfstein devotes a chapter of his book discussing “word-devaluers,” which he defines as “religious thinkers who devalue words because, they believe, words miss the profound objects of faith.”²⁰ Scharfstein’s use of the phrase the “profound objects of faith” takes different meanings in dualistic and non-dualistic traditions.

19. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, 1902, 371.

20. Ben-Ami Scharfstein, *Ineffability: The Failure of Words in Philosophy and Religion*, (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1993), 85.

For dualistic traditions, these “objects of faith” may be considered actual objects, whereas in non-dualistic traditions the “objects of faith” may refer to the experience itself, such as the experience of non-self. Favoring the non-dualistic perspective, “word-devaluers” are religious thinkers who devalue words because they believe that words miss the true nature of experience. Among the word-devaluers that Scharfstein discusses are Taoists as well as Buddhists of India, China, and Japan. In regard to Buddhist philosophers, Scharfstein states that they “argue that words are inherently misleading.” According to Scharfstein, the most renowned and compelling word-devaluer is Mahayana Buddhist philosopher, Nāgārjuna (ca. 150-250 century CE).²¹ Nāgārjuna asserts that when it comes to the analysis of emptiness, the attempt to use words to describe it will fail:

When an analysis is made through emptiness,
If someone were to offer a reply,
That reply will fail, since it will presuppose
Exactly what is to be proven.²²

Nāgārjuna’s understanding demonstrated in this passage values the direct experience of emptiness as the only way to understand the concept of emptiness. The concern of a word-devaluer is that the listener might take words too literally and therefore miss the meaning of what they were trying to convey. While the complete devaluation of words may be effective in some circumstances, it would be problematic for a religion to forego words all together. Scharfstein writes:

21. Jan Westerhoff, *Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka: A Philosophical Introduction* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), 5.

22. Nāgārjuna, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjunas Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, trans. Jay L. Garfield (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1995), 13.

In order to escape the bonds of conceptuality, the Buddhists propose a hierarchical series of meditations by means of which one is supposed to be able to rise beyond words and into the ineffable state of “emptiness”.²³

The challenge that ineffability poses to religion is combatted by Buddhism in its highly experiential nature through the tradition’s emphasis on meditation. Upon his enlightenment, the Buddha does not attempt to describe his ineffable experience in terms of the things he saw and felt, for words would fail to capture his experience, instead he used words to his benefit, specifically through metaphor to create a path that could be followed by others. In the final chapter of his book, Scharfstein offers an insightful definition of the ineffable:

The term *ineffable* is used to protect certain cherished experiences from being explained or, rather, explained away. So used, the term is a declaration that one judges other things in the light of these cherished experiences, and not the opposite. The ineffable is then the experiential criterion that one refuses to judge in terms that one feels are alien to it and contradict its finality.²⁴

This understanding of the ineffable proposed by Scharfstein allows one to understand not what ineffability fails to do (articulate the precise nature of experience) as philosophers such as James and Otto have been concerned with, but rather he recognizes what ineffability does. In this way his definition privileges experience, and he argues that understanding experience as ineffable protects it from the limits of language. If words were completely devalued, then there would be no discourse in religion and the spread of religious ideas would become virtually impossible.

Had the Buddha decided that there was no way he could attempt to use words to describe his experience, there would have been a profound impact on the development of Buddhism as a religion. It is one thing to acknowledge the lack of precision in words but another to discredit

23. Ben-Ami Scharfstein, *Ineffability: The Failure of Words in Philosophy and Religion*, (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1993), 86.

24. Ben-Ami Scharfstein, *Ineffability: The Failure of Words in Philosophy and Religion*, (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1993), 185.

them altogether; each religion offers a unique approach to the obstacle of ineffability. Therefore, Scharfstein's definition of ineffability that simultaneously privileges experience while not discrediting words completely allows for a more optimistic approach to language in the discussion of non-self. Total skepticism towards the power of words to communicate would limit religions themselves. Through this analysis of the failure of words to describe religious experience, one must concede that words remain the best available means to make sense of ineffable experiences. Even Nāgārjuna had to use words in order to devalue them. As we know, words play a critical role in creating, understanding, communicating, and defining religion.

Defining Religion in the Study of Religion

When discussing terms that find their meaning in religion, it is necessary to define exactly what we mean by the word "religion". It might seem that because things are defined as religion (i.e. Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc.) that there is a distinct definition, yet because so many things are considered "religious" and many vary greatly from one another, it makes the task of defining religion quite complex. Even locating religion as a field of study is complicated because for the majority of human history, religion was not considered something separate from other aspects of culture. As a result of thinkers such as German philosopher Immanuel Kant, religion came to be identified as something distinct after the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment.²⁵ Among those who have attempted to define the term are psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists, historians, and philosophers. Each attempt to define religion, regardless of its success, reveals insight into how people think about religion.

25. Jeffrey Brodd, Layne Little, Bradley P. Nystrom, Robert Platzner, Richard Hon-chun. Shek, and Erin E. Stiles, *Invitation to World Religions*, 2nd ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 4.

While there has been a plethora of definitions of religion over history to choose from, those below have been selected specifically to illuminate their shortcomings in relation to the discussion of non-self in Buddhism.

Particularly problematic for a discussion of non-self would be adopting too narrow a definition of religion. For example, take William James' definition of religion as "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine."²⁶ According to James' rather narrow definition of religion, his emphasis on an individual's relationship to the divine cannot account for the Buddhist teaching of non-self and thereby limits the possibility of its analysis. His definition is dualistic by emphasizing the self in relation to the divine and therefore excludes traditions that are not theistic, never mind not based in dualism, such as Buddhism. James' definition is also particularly problematic for non-self because non-self asserts that there is no truly existent individual that stands in relation to the divine, which also does not truly exist according to Buddhism. While his definition attempts to be inclusive by stating "whatever [the individual] may consider the divine" instead of naming a specific divinity such as God or Allah, the definition still excludes non-dual traditions, thus a more inclusive and yet more precise definition of religion is necessary.

A better example may be that of Bruce Lincoln, a professor of divinity at the University of Chicago. While the main objective of Lincoln's book *Holy Terrors* is to discuss the ways in which religion is thought about post-9/11, he identifies the need for a proper definition of

26. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience; a Study in Human Nature*, (New York, NY: Longmans, Green, 1922), 31-32.

religion itself. According to Lincoln, the dominant definition that preceded his own is that of Clifford Geertz, which is presented in *Religion as a Cultural System*:

(1) A system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.²⁷

In the development of Lincoln's definition, he is responding to Talal Asad's critiques of Geertz's definition of religion. The first of Asad's main critiques that Lincoln examines is that Geertz's definition is too focused on the interiority of religion through his use of words such as "symbols", "moods", "motivations" and "conceptions".²⁸ Asad's second critique of Geertz is similar to Otto's critique of the word "holy," there can be no universal definition of religion because the term cannot be separated from the "history of discursive processes."²⁹ While Lincoln aims to combat Geertz's first shortcoming, he recognizes that all language is the historical product of discursive processes, but this "hardly renders futile all efforts at definition, however, particularly when one understands these as provisional attempts to clarify one's thought, not to capture the innate essence of things."³⁰ Lincoln's understanding of the process of defining religion is a similar approach to that of the Platonic dialogues where in the process of defining something, the true essence of the term might be revealed. Lincoln's definition must be understood in the same way that he understands Geertz's: as an effort to clarify his own thoughts about religion rather than asserting exactly what religion is. It is through this analysis that

27. Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion* (New York, NY: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1966), 4.

28. Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking About Religion After September 11th*, 2006 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 1.

29. Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking About Religion After September 11th*, 2006 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 2.

30. Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking About Religion After September 11th*, 2006 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 2.

Lincoln proposes his own definition consisting of four domains, each of which must be present to constitute religion.

- (1) A discourse whose concerns transcend the human, temporal and contingent, and that claims for itself a similarly transcendent status.
- (2) A set of practices whose goal is to produce a proper world and/or proper human subjects, as defined by a religious discourse to which these practices are connected.
- (3) A community whose members construct their identity with reference to a religious discourse and its attendant practices.
- (4) An institution that regulates discourse, practices, and community, reproducing them over time and modifying them as necessary, while asserting their eternal validity and transcendent value.³¹

This broadly inclusive definition of religion provides room for a discussion of non-self in Buddhism while still outlining structured parameters of what constitutes a religion. When considering ineffability as an obstacle to religion, it is interesting that the first domain Lincoln identifies in religion is discourse, something that requires words whether they be spoken or written. Religious discourse can be understood as the attempt to make the ineffable effable. This identification of discourse as a domain of religion allows for the composition and study of texts, such as *suttas* in Buddhism. In his discussion of the second domain, Lincoln writes:

Religious practices, which generally divide into the ritual and the ethical, render religious discourse operational, moving it from the realm of speech and consciousness to that of embodied material action.³²

This bridge from the realm of speech to action may be an opportunity to overcome the distance of the ineffable through direct experience, similar to what Ajahn Chah meant when he said that one must meditate to understand not-self. Religious practices indeed mobilize discourse, yet Lincoln fails to state *how* they mobilize discourse through the nature of experience. It is one

31. Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking About Religion After September 11th*, 2006 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 5-7.

32. Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking About Religion After September 11th*, 2006 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 6.

thing for a religion to promote practices; it is another for those practices to be utilized and experienced. Would Buddhism still be considered a religion if it recommended a set of practices for meditation, but these were not utilized by Buddhists? According to Chah, one cannot understand non-self, and thus Buddhism, without meditation.

The Buddha as the Destroyer of Houses

The origins of Buddhism date back to the historical Buddha, Prince Siddhartha Gautama (ca. 563-483 BCE), who was born in what is now Lumbini, Nepal into the ruling, Kshatriya class of Hinduism.³³ According to his hagiographies, upon leaving the protection of the palace in which he was raised, he sees the “four omens”: an old man, an invalid, a corpse, and a monk. After seeing the first three demonstrating the reality of suffering, it is the omen of the monk that gives Siddhartha hope that there might be an end to suffering. He then adopts the lifestyle of a Hindu ascetic and leaves the palace in what is called the “great renunciation.” During this period of intensive practice, he realizes that extreme asceticism is also a form of suffering and so cannot accomplish his goal. He thereby realizes the Middle Way that falls to neither extreme of asceticism nor indulgence, then makes the journey to what would become known as the Bodhi tree to attain enlightenment. According to one of the first complete and prominent biographies of the life of the Buddha that was composed in the 5th century CE, *The Account of the Beginning* (*The Nidanakatha*) the first words spoken by the Buddha after his enlightenment were highly metaphorical:

Seeking the builder of the house I sped along many births in Samsara but to no avail; ill is birth again and again. O builder of the house, you are seen. Do not build the house again!

33. Edward A. Irons, *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, 2008 (New York: Facts on File, Inc.), *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*, EBSCOhost.

All your beams are broken, and the ridgepole is shattered. The mind that has gone beyond things composite has attained the destruction of the cravings.³⁴

Further analysis of this metaphor reveals some of the most fundamental teachings in Buddhism. The builder of the house can be understood to be *karma*, and the house that is built is *samsara*. Without a builder (*karma*), there is no house (*samsara*) and in order not to build the house, one must destroy what supports the house: the beams and the ridgepoles. Just as a house must be supported by beams and ridgepoles, *karma* is sustained by craving and ignorance. Here lies the importance of non-self in the Buddha's enlightenment metaphor because in Buddhism, ignorance is believing that the self exists due to the appearance of the five aggregates. By breaking the ridgepoles and the beams through the recognition of non-self, one can then stop the house from being built again. This metaphor is instrumental in Buddhism, early Buddhism especially, and provides the foundation for the Buddha's teaching of the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. Following his enlightenment, he goes to Sarnath, India to deliver his first teaching called *Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion (Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta)* on the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path to a group of Hindu ascetics who had previously been his companions.

Another fundamental doctrine from the Buddha's enlightenment are the three marks of existence: impermanence, suffering, and non-self. Each of these marks can be understood individually; however, their meaning is not independent from one another. Conceptually, through understanding that all things are impermanent, and that suffering is the driving force of *samsara*,

34. Wendy Doniger, Donald S. Lopez, Jr., and James Robson, *The Norton Anthology of World Religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism*, ed. Jack Miles, vol. 1 (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014), 840.

one will come to realize non-self, or that self does not truly exist. As Tibetan Buddhism scholar Reginald Ray writes:

[The Buddha] taught that all ordinary existence is suffering, that this suffering results from our own karma, and that this karma is created through the defiled nature of our own minds. Defiled mind, he said, comes from our clinging to a notion of individual self or ego... In this context “the path” means counteracting the clinging to a notion of ego or self.³⁵

Through the Buddha’s teachings of karma and suffering, the goal of the Buddhist path is the realization of non-self and to break down the metaphorical house. As Ray demonstrates, one cannot just overlook non-self in the Buddhist tradition; it is fundamental in Buddhism as the nature of ultimate reality.

No-Self, Not-Self, and Non-Self

Thus far, this paper has referred to the third mark of existence in Buddhism as non-self. It is important to note that while this is a literal translation of *anātman* (Sanskrit) or *anattā* (Pali), there is some variance when translating this term into English. I am not a scholar of Sanskrit or Pali, so the objective here is not to debate the literal translation of the word, but it is important to note that in some sources *anātman* or *anattā* takes on alternate translations such as non-ego, no-self, or non-soul.³⁶ Despite their seeming similarity, this difference in translation can have a profound impact on how the concept is understood; no-self, not-self, and non-self all convey

35. Reginald A Ray, *Indestructible Truth: The Living Spirituality of Tibetan Buddhism*, (Boston, Mass.: Shambhala, 2002), 367-368.

36. Non-ego, no-self, non-soul respectively:
Christmas Humphreys, *A Popular Dictionary of Buddhism*, 1962 (London: Arco Publications), 32.

Edward Conze, *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development*, 1951 (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer LTD.), 18.

Ward, *Buddhism: Volume One- Hinayana*, 75.

something distinct. For example, “no-self” might mean that self does not appear at all. If the self does not appear at all, as no-self might suggest, how would one explain our experience of it? As will be considered below, the Buddha makes a clear distinction that the five aggregates, or what we think of as self, does indeed appear as self to the individual—but only as a persistent and mistaken concept. Therefore, the term no-self is problematic. “Not-self” suggests that if it is not self, then it must be something else, and thereby implies that that something else *is* self. If I was to say I know what something is not, then by means of negation, I must know what it is. This becomes problematic philosophically, and further demonstrates the need for a careful selection and analysis of the term. Finally, in contrast to no-self or not-self, both of which suggest the complete negation of self, the translation of *anātman* as “non-self” validates the mere appearance of self but can also imply that this self does not exist as it appears. Difficulties in the translation of this term are even seen in the Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism’s definition of *anatman*: “in Sanskrit [*anātman* means], “no self” or “nonself” or more broadly “insubstantiality,””³⁷ which is more interpretive than literal. Each of these examples demonstrate how the meaning of the concept changes depending on the selection of the English translation.

A closer look at the etymology of the term also reveals discrepancies in translation. The prefix *ān* is itself a negation, therefore, *anatman* is the exact negation of *ātman*, the Hindu principle of the ultimately existent “self”. Looking at the term etymologically, one can see the direct development of Buddhism’s *anātman* from Hinduism’s *ātman*.³⁸ In order to gain insight

37. Robert Buswell and Donald Lopez, *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 42.

38. Robert E. Buswell, *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, 2004 (New York: Macmillan Reference USA/Thomson/Gale), 18.

into the Buddha's teaching of non-self, a closer look at the concept of *ātman* in Hindu texts and thus its historical context is helpful.

From Hindu Self to Buddhist Non-Self

Religions typically develop in response to other traditions present at the time. Even the most revolutionary ideas of religious thought tend to find their foundation in existing concepts.

As Paloutzian writes:

Our current events, including the formations of religions, do not emerge in a causal vacuum. The present is affected by the past. Thus, the longer view of the “sweep of history” in which our own lives and circumstances are embedded should be kept in view.³⁹

The sweep of history that must be kept in view in this discussion of non-self in Buddhism is the development of *ātman* in Hinduism. Prior to discussing their differing views of *ātman*, it is imperative to understand the ways in which the traditions' beliefs remain in dialogue with one another.

Both Hinduism and Buddhism share belief in *karma*, the direct relationship of cause and effect, and *samsara*, cyclic existence. Cyclic existence asserts that there is continuous cycle of birth and death that is only broken through liberation. Through this shared belief in cyclic existence, each tradition offers different understandings of *what* is reborn and *how* liberation from cyclic existence is achieved. According to Hinduism, *ātman* is what is reborn, and *moksha* is liberation from cyclic existence. As a henotheistic religion where there are many gods but one is of a higher status, Hindus vary in their belief about *Brahman* or ultimate reality and *ātman*, but among the majority of Hindus is the belief that *moksha* is achieved through the realization that

39. Raymond F. Paloutzian, *Invitation to the Psychology of Religion*, 3rd ed., 2017 (New York, NY: Guilford Press), 30-31.

ātman is *Brahman*. In this case, *ātman* is instrumental in achieving liberation whereas in Buddhism, attachment to *ātman* binds one to cyclic existence. According to Buddhism, it is just *karma* that is reborn so to speak, and *nirvana* is liberation from cyclic existence. This critical difference of what is reborn in each tradition informs the development of *ātman* and *anātman*.

The task of locating *ātman* in Hindu texts requires a further categorization of Hindu literature. Hindu texts can be divided into two categories, *shruti* and *smriti*.⁴⁰ *Shruti* is “that which is heard” and do not have a human author but are divinely revealed to sages. *Shruti* includes scriptures such as the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads*. *Smriti* on the other hand means “tradition” and has a human author, such as the *Bhagavad Gita*. In order to get a diverse view of *ātman*, this section will look at *ātman* in both *shruti* and *smriti*, specifically in the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* and the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Upanishad literally means “sitting down near [a teacher].”⁴¹ *The Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* and the *Chandogya Upanishad* are the two earliest Upanishads and date to roughly the seventh to sixth centuries BCE.⁴² It is in the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* that the monistic concept that all reality is ultimately one, *ātman* is *Brahman*, first arises. This understanding that the self (*ātman*) is divine reality (*Brahman*) becomes instrumental in understanding Hinduism, but also informs how later concepts arise from this early depiction of *ātman*. While *ātman* is given many explicit definitions in the Upanishads, the nature of *ātman* is complex. In his introduction to the Upanishads, Sanskritist Patrick Olivelle notes:

40. Jeffrey Brodd et al., *Invitation to World Religions*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 106.

41. Jeffrey Brodd et al., *Invitation to World Religions*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 107.

42. Patrick Olivelle, *The Early Upanisads: Annotated Text and Translation* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 12.

In [the Upanishads], the term most frequently used with reference to a living, breathing body is *ātman*, a term liable to misunderstanding and mistranslating because it can also mean the spiritual self or the inmost core of a human being, besides functioning as a mere reflexive pronoun.⁴³

Ātman as the spiritual self, breath, and a reflexive pronoun are some of the distinct characteristics of *ātman* in the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad*. In an attempt to avoid misunderstanding or mistranslating *ātman*, as Olivelle cautions, selected excerpts from the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* will be examined in order to reveal something about each of the three characteristics of *ātman*.

The basic function of *ātman* as the reflexive pronoun “I”, can be seen in the following:

In the beginning this world was just a single body (*ātman*) shaped like a man. He looked around and saw nothing but himself. The first thing he said was, "Here I am!" and from that the name "I" came into being. Therefore, even today when you call someone, he first says, "It's I," and then states whatever other name he may have.⁴⁴

As this passage demonstrates, there is clearly the unproblematic existence of *ātman* as “I” in Hinduism. Here too, the text reveals that *ātman* has taken the shape of man since the beginning of time. This passage also asserts that the first thing man said (“Here I am!”) recognizes the innate existence of the self. It is through this fundamental belief in “I” or *ātman* according to this Upanishad that humans originate.

Ātman as the spiritual self insinuates the complexity of *ātman*; it is not just “I” or “self” in the ordinary sense, but rather it is something extraordinary. This can be seen in Chapter 4 Verse 8 of the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad*:

This innermost thing, this self (*ātman*)—it is dearer than a son, it is dearer than wealth, it is dearer than everything else. If a man claims that something other than his self is dear to him, and someone were to tell him that he will lose what he holds dear, that is liable to

43. Patrick Olivelle, *The Early Upanisads: Annotated Text and Translation* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 22.

44. Patrick Olivelle, *The Early Upanisads: Annotated Text and Translation* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 45.

happen. So a man should regard only his self as dear to him. When a man regards only his self as dear to him, what he holds dear will never perish.⁴⁵

In this assertion that *ātman* is “dearer than everything else” it shows just how highly regarded *ātman* is in this tradition; self is something to care for and appreciate. Considering that the Upanishads were reserved for people of higher castes, this verse is remarkable considering the fact that it instructs the reader that self is more valuable than any amount of wealth. From this recognition of *ātman* as most precious, one can understand how the concept of *ātman* as *Brahman* develops.

In the beginning this world was only *brahman*, and it knew only itself (*ātman*), thinking: “I am *brahman*” As a result, it became the Whole. Among the gods, likewise, whosoever realized this, only they became the Whole. It was the same also among the seers and among humans. Upon seeing this very point, the seer Vamadeva proclaimed: “I was Manu, and I was the sun.” This is true even now. If a man knows “I am *brahman*” in this way, he becomes this whole world. Not even the gods are able to prevent it, for he becomes their very self (*atman*).⁴⁶

The monistic quality of *ātman* as *Brahman* is evidenced here because it shows the unification of God, *ātman*, and the world that occurs when one understands *ātman* as *Brahman*. Not only is the self something of great importance, but as this text instructs, the self literally is God and simultaneously the world. As the text states, the thinking “I am *brahman*” results in *ātman* and *Brahman* becoming whole. The concern in the last sentence that the gods might be jealous is dismissed because the result of this thinking (“I am *brahman*”) is the deification of the self through the oneness of *ātman* and *Brahman*. By this understanding the gods would not be jealous because self is ultimately the divine. The oneness of *ātman* as *Brahman* informs the idea that *ātman* is eternal, which is a defining characteristic of *ātman* as described in the *Bhagavad Gita*.

45. Patrick Olivelle, *The Early Upanisads: Annotated Text and Translation* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 49.

46. Patrick Olivelle, *The Early Upanisads: Annotated Text and Translation* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 49.

The *Bhagavad Gita*, literally “The Song of the Lord,”⁴⁷ is an epic poem that focuses on the quest of the mythical warrior, Arjuna. According to scholars, the *Bhagavad Gita* was composed between the second century BCE and the second century CE,⁴⁸ which dates it anywhere from four to nine centuries after the earliest Upanishads. While *ātman* appears in the Upanishads as demonstrated before, the *Bhagavad Gita* is renowned for popularizing ideas about this essential concept. Prior to the *Bhagavad Gita*, the content of sacred texts was reserved only for those of the higher castes, but through the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna opens *bhakti* or devotion⁴⁹ to all. People of lower castes were no longer excluded because they did not have enough money to offer or because of karmic impurity. Instead, Krishna asserts that the intention one offers in devotion is more important than any amount of money or any relative karma. The *Bhagavad Gita* takes the form of a conversation between the warrior Arjuna and the God Krishna,⁵⁰ beginning with Arjuna expressing his concern to Krishna about fighting in the battle:

I see
perverse omens;
and before me
I see no good
in killing
my people
in battle,
Lovely-Haired Krishna! (1.31)⁵¹

Arjuna states his fear of seeing his family and friends die in battle and it is precisely from this fear that Krishna outlines distinct characteristics of *ātman*. Krishna’s argument is that if Arjuna

47. Jeffrey Brodd et al., *Invitation to World Religions*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 110.

48. Laurie Patton, *The Bhagavad Gita*, (London: Penguin Classics, 2008), xxv.

49. *Bhakti* devotion is a form of Hindu devotion. In *bhakti*, the practitioner will typically select one deity to worship in order to combat ignorance through detachment of their individual concerns and instead realize the true nature of reality.

50. Krishna is an embodied manifestation or *avatar* of the Hindu God, Vishnu.

51. Laurie Patton, *The Bhagavad Gita*, (London: Penguin Classics, 2008), 11.

only knew the distinction between body and self, he would not be afraid to fight because he would know that the self will not perish. In this way, Krishna urges Arjuna to fight because he has nothing to lose; death is not the end of the self. Krishna says:

These bodies
have an end;
but they are said
to belong to the eternal
embodied self —
that which is never lost
and cannot be measured.
So fight, Son of Bharata! (2.18)⁵²

It is on the grounds of belief in an eternal self or *ātman* that Krishna urges Arjuna to fight. Krishna concedes that the body has an end, but the self does not, and for that reason Arjuna should not be fearful to fight or even to die. Krishna does not stop at simply stating there is a self but proceeds to list its many qualities. In the following twenty-one verses, Krishna describes the attributes of the self: “...this self does not kill, nor is killed” (2.19),⁵³ it is “...unborn, eternal, continuing from the old, the self is not killed when the body is killed” (2.20),⁵⁴ and “the self is not to be pierced, nor burned, nor drenched, nor dried; it is eternal, all-pervading and fixed—unmoving from the beginning” (2.24).⁵⁵ Each of these qualities reinforce the understanding of the true self or *ātman* as eternal. In this way, the *Bhagavad Gita* instructs people to be fearless because of the eternal nature of the self. It also reaffirms the relationship between *ātman* as *Brahman*, because in order for the self to be *Brahman* or ultimate reality it must be eternal by definition. Through this teaching of self as eternal, it instructs the practitioner to take comfort in the permanent nature of true self.

52. Laurie Patton, *The Bhagavad Gita*, (London: Penguin Classics, 2008), 21.

53. Laurie Patton, *The Bhagavad Gita*, (London: Penguin Classics, 2008), 21.

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55. Laurie Patton, *The Bhagavad Gita*, (London: Penguin Classics, 2008), 24.

In contrast to *ātman* as eternal and permanent in Hinduism, Buddhism states that the first mark of existence is just the opposite: impermanence. Since the nature of all things without exception is impermanent, the notion of an eternal self as presented in the *Bhagavad Gita* is refuted. In Hinduism the self is defined as single, permanent, and independent of causes and conditions, whereas in Buddhism the self is precisely its opposite: as comprised by the five aggregates, it is multiple, impermanent, and dependent on causes and conditions, and thus not truly existent. The introduction of the three marks of existence among core Buddhist beliefs deliberately and explicitly negates the Hindu notion of *ātman* by introducing *anātman* or non-self, its inversion. This revolution of *ātman* to *anātman* can be understood through recognizing the preeminence of suffering in the Buddha's teachings.

Due to its ineffable nature, *anātman* is often misunderstood to mean that the self is nothing at all, or even that nothing exists at all, as is the case in nihilistic thought. Buddhism argues that *anātman* is not a complete absence of self but rather that “self does not exist as it appears.”⁵⁶ The following section will look at the Buddha's teaching on non-self in the *suttas*, the first of the three-fold classification of Buddhist texts, specifically the *Anattalakkhana Sutta* and his teaching on the five aggregates in the *Mahahatthipadopama Sutta* and the *Sattatthana Sutta*.

Suttas are considered to be the spoken words of Siddhartha Gautama and comprise the foundational teachings of Buddhism. The tradition and scholars have varying views on when exactly these discourses were written: according to tradition they were collected shortly after the death of the Buddha, but scholars assert that these teachings were passed down orally for

56. Daniel Hirshberg, “Buddha's Remedy, The Antidote to Ignorance: Selflessness” (lecture, University of Mary Washington, Fredericksburg, VA, January 30, 2018).

anywhere between one to three centuries after the death of the Buddha before being committed to the page, with many emerging centuries later.⁵⁷

Arguably the most influential *sutta* on the teaching of non-self is the *Anattalakkhana Sutta*. The *Nikāyas* are the collection of the Buddha's discourses.⁵⁸ The *Anattalakkhana Sutta* comes from the *Samyutta Nikaya* meaning the "grouped collection", the third of the five *Nikayas*. This *sutta* takes place in Varnasi, India where the Buddha addresses a group of five monks. To proceed with a discussion about non-self in the *Anattalakkhana Sutta*, it is first necessary to define what "self" is actually comprised of according to Buddhism. The five aggregates or *skandhas* in Buddhism are what embodies "self." The five aggregates are (1) forms, (2) feelings, (3) perceptions, (4) [mental] fabrications, and (5) consciousnesses.⁵⁹ The Buddha first begins by stating that each of the five aggregates are not self:

Form, monks, is not self. If form were the self, this form would not lend itself to dis-ease. It would be possible [to say] with regard to form, "Let this form be thus. Let this form not be thus." But precisely because form is not self, form lends itself to dis-ease. And it is not possible [to say] with regard to form, "Let this form be thus. Let this form not be thus."

Feeling is not self...

Perception is not self...

[*Mental*] fabrications are not self...

Consciousness is not self. If consciousness were the self, this consciousness would not lend itself to dis-ease. It would be possible [to say] with regard to consciousness, "Let my consciousness be thus. Let my consciousness not be thus." But precisely because consciousness is not self, consciousness lends itself to dis-ease. And it is not possible [to say] with regard to consciousness, "Let my consciousness be thus. Let my consciousness not be thus."⁶⁰

57. Robert E. Buswell, *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, (New York: Macmillan Reference USA/Thomson/Gale, 2004), 18.

58. Bhikkhu Bodhi, *In the Buddhas Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pāli Canon* (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2015), ix.

59. Daniel Hirshberg, "Buddha's Remedy, The Antidote to Ignorance: Selflessness" (lecture, University of Mary Washington, Fredericksburg, VA, January 30, 2018).

60. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, "Pañcavaggi Sutta: Five Brethren (aka: Anattalakkhana Sutta: The Discourse on the Not-self Characteristic)," Access to Insight, accessed April 13, 2018, <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn22/sn22.059.than.html>.

The first aggregate, *form*, comprises all material objects comprised of the “four properties,” which the Buddha defines in the *Mahahatthipadopama Sutta* as the elements of earth, water, fire, and wind.⁶¹ The earth property is comprised of things both “internal and external that are hard, solid and sustained,”⁶² such as, hair, nails, teeth, skin, bones, organs, etc. The water property is “whatever internal, belonging to oneself, is liquid, watery, [and] sustained,” such as, bile, blood, sweat, tears, etc. The fire property is “whatever internal, belonging to oneself is fire, fiery, [and] sustained: that by which [the body] is warmed, aged, [and] consumed with fever...”⁶³ Finally, the wind property is “whatever internal, belonging to oneself, is wind, windy [and] sustained: up-going winds, down-going winds, winds in the stomach, winds in the intestines, winds that course through the body, in-&-out breathing, or whatever else internal, within oneself is wind, windy, & sustained,”⁶⁴ such as the breath. All of these properties compromise the first aggregate, form, understood here as all the things which comprise the body.

In the *Sattatthana Sutta*, the Buddha divides the second, third, fourth, and fifth aggregates even further into the six senses: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and the mind. The addition of the sixth sense, the mind, is distinctly Buddhist. Each of these further divisions of the aggregates show just how explicit the Buddha is in recognizing what appears to be self. While all of these

61. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, "Mahahatthipadopama Sutta: The Great Elephant Footprint Simile," Access to Insight, accessed April 13, 2018, <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.028.than.html>.

62. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, "Mahahatthipadopama Sutta: The Great Elephant Footprint Simile," Access to Insight, accessed April 13, 2018, <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.028.than.html>.

63. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, "Mahahatthipadopama Sutta: The Great Elephant Footprint Simile," Access to Insight, accessed April 13, 2018, <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.028.than.html>.

64. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, "Mahahatthipadopama Sutta: The Great Elephant Footprint Simile," Access to Insight, accessed April 13, 2018, <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.028.than.html>.

classifications may seem tedious, the thoroughness of each distinction is actually quite informative for the practitioner. In the practice of locating “self” one might claim that they have located self because of the appearance of the five aggregates, similar to Descartes’ logic of “I think therefore, I am”. Descartes asserts that because the fourth aggregate of [mental] fabrications appears, the self must exist, however, this is fundamentally flawed because as the Buddha states in the *Anattalakkhana Sutta*, “[Mental] fabrications are not self...”⁶⁵ According to the Buddha’s teachings, in each of these distinctions one should see them with right discernment that ‘This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am.’ Therefore, it is through each of the aggregates that the practitioner will understand non-self.

After identifying each of the aggregates as not self in the *Anattalakkhana Sutta*, he engages with the monks in a period of questions and answers. He first asks if each of the aggregates are constant or inconstant, to which all reply “inconstant”, indicating impermanence as the first mark of existence. He then proceeds to ask if “that which is inconstant easeful or stressful?” to which they all reply “stressful, lord” indicating suffering as the second mark of existence. Here one can see how the first two marks of existence, impermanence and suffering, play a role in understanding the third mark, non-self. As the Buddha demonstrates in his teachings, knowing that the five aggregates are inconstant (or impermanent), and that this impermanence leads to stress (or suffering) will then lead one to see with “right discernment as: ‘This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am’”, or the third mark of existence: non-self. As a result of understanding this “right discernment”, the *sutta* states that the monks become disenchanted with each of the five aggregates. Following this disenchantment is dispassion and:

65. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, "Pañcavaggi Sutta: Five Brethren (aka: Anattalakkhana Sutta: The Discourse on the Not-self Characteristic)," Access to Insight, accessed April 13, 2018, <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn22/sn22.059.than.html>.

Through dispassion, he is fully released. With full release, there is the knowledge, “Fully released.” He discerns that “Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.”⁶⁶

This passage shows just how essential the teaching of non-self is to enlightenment. The *sutta* concludes with the enlightenment of the five monks through their realization of non-self. The conclusion of the monks achieving enlightenment because of their own realization through the Buddha’s teaching shows the value of experience within the tradition. This teaching of non-self is critical to the Buddhist path and the cessation of suffering. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, a monk and the translator of this particular text, emphasizes the need for the realization of suffering in relation to non-self when he writes:

In this sense, the *anatta* teaching is not a doctrine of no-self, but a not-self strategy for shedding suffering by letting go of its cause, leading to the highest, undying happiness. At that point, questions of self, no-self, and not-self fall aside. Once there’s the experience of such total freedom, where would there be any concern about what’s experiencing it, or whether or not it’s a self?⁶⁷

As understood by Thanissaro Bhikkhu and the *Anattalakkhana Sutta*, the teaching on non-self is a strategy by which one lets go of suffering and strives for *nirvana*, the third of the four noble truths. The use of the term “strategy” here signifies the highly experiential nature of non-self. Both the *suttas* discussed as well as the metaphor of the house, all demonstrate the Buddha’s role as a teacher and how he uses discourse to overcome the ineffable nature of experience.

Contemporary scholar of Tibetan Buddhism Reginald Ray writes:

... If we examine our experience, we discover five different kinds of experiential events (*dharmas*), but no solid, stable “I” or “self.” The five [aggregates] show us that we can

66. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, "Pañcavaggi Sutta: Five Brethren (aka: Anattalakkhana Sutta: The Discourse on the Not-self Characteristic)," Access to Insight, accessed April 13, 2018, <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn22/sn22.059.than.html>.

67. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, "No-self or Not-self?" Access to Insight, accessed April 13, 2018, <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/notself2.html>.

view and explain the totality of our experience without any need for the additional category of a “self.”⁶⁸

According to Ray, it is through experience that one will see each of the aggregates that appear to comprise “self”. As these *suttas* have asserted, attachment to a sense of “self” contradicts the first two marks of existence and therefore, it should be realized that self does not exist as it appears.

The importance of experience through meditation is critical according to the three primary trainings of Buddhism, wisdom, conduct, and meditation. Just as Ajahn Chah said that “To understand not-self, you have to meditate,”⁶⁹ the teachings from *sutta* discourse are expected to be complemented by meditation practice. As Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rimpoche states in *Progressive Stages of Meditation on Emptiness*, “Meditation without listening and reflecting is blind, but listening [studying *sutta*] and reflecting without meditation is like having eyesight and no legs.”⁷⁰ In this way, it is through the unification of the three trainings that absolute truth can be realized. In his instructions, Rimpoche states that relative truth is comprised of the Buddha’s teachings “because it gives a proper understanding of what is to be abandoned and what is to be cultivated.”⁷¹ As seen in the *Anattalakkhana Sutta*, one should abandon the thought that the five aggregates are “self” and cultivate the understanding that “This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am.” This rich understanding of the relationship between meditation and discourse in many ways aims to combat the challenges posed by ineffability. Had the Buddha

68. Reginald A. Ray, *Indestructible Truth: The Living Spirituality of Tibetan Buddhism*, 2002 (Boston, Mass.: Shambhala), 373.

69. Achaan Chah, *A Still Forest Pool: The Insight Meditation of Achaan Chah*, ed. Jack Kornfield and Paul Breiter, (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1985), 173.

70. Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rimpoche, *Progressive Stages of Meditation on Emptiness*, trans. Shenpen Hookham (Oxford: Longchen Foundation, 1988), 13.

71. Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rimpoche, *Progressive Stages of Meditation on Emptiness*, trans. Shenpen Hookham (Oxford: Longchen Foundation, 1988),

been defeated by the failure of language to describe experience, a whole religion might have been lost. Instead through his use of metaphor, he encouraged his followers to see reality through their own experience, or in other words, to experience the ineffability of enlightenment.

Conclusion

“I can’t even explain it!” “Words just don’t do it justice!” “You’ll just have to experience it yourself!” These statements demonstrate the struggle of explaining religious experience due to the ineffable nature of experience. Arguably one of the greatest challenges posed to religions is ineffability, yet it is often the ineffability of religious experience that has captivated scholars across time and disciplines. In the academic study of religion, discourse provides a way to study concepts in the context of the traditions from which they arise. I found that taking a critical approach to non-self in Buddhism helped me to better understand my own experience.

A year ago, I had a rather transformative experience in my meditation class and if I had let the inability of words to perfectly articulate experience stop me from speaking about my experience at all, I would probably not be concluding my undergraduate career with a paper about non-self in Buddhism. After my experience last spring I did not want to meditate again, but my academic pursuit of religion kept me engaged with the practice and with the nature of my experience. Through further exploration of Buddhist discourse about non-self, I was able to better understand parts of my own experience. Part of what scared me about my experience was that I might not exist like I thought I did. I have lived my whole life creating an identity of “Christina” and as a result of my experience, my own beliefs about who I was were challenged. Through this process, I no longer fear the concept of non-self because through Buddhist discourse I have seen that I do indeed appear through the five aggregates and for me that is good

enough to proceed with living my life as I understand it. I do not feel the need to reject my whole sense of self, as I might have thought was initially required from the nature of my experience, but rather I can use what I understand about non-self in a productive way. Non-self has helped me to look closer at the nature of my own experiences and react in more skillful ways. These reasons have lead me to argue in favor of an experiential component of religion. At the end of the day, texts such as the *Bhagavad Gita* or *Sutta*, remain literary documents until they are given meaning by the reader. I think that the study of religion interests people precisely because there is more than what appears, something that words cannot capture, and direct experience is a way to transcend those limitations. In conclusion, I do not think that religion must be separate from experience in order to be studied or that experience should be separated from religion but rather they are insightful when brought into conversation with one another.

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