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Self-Concept on the Vision of Madhyamika Buddhism

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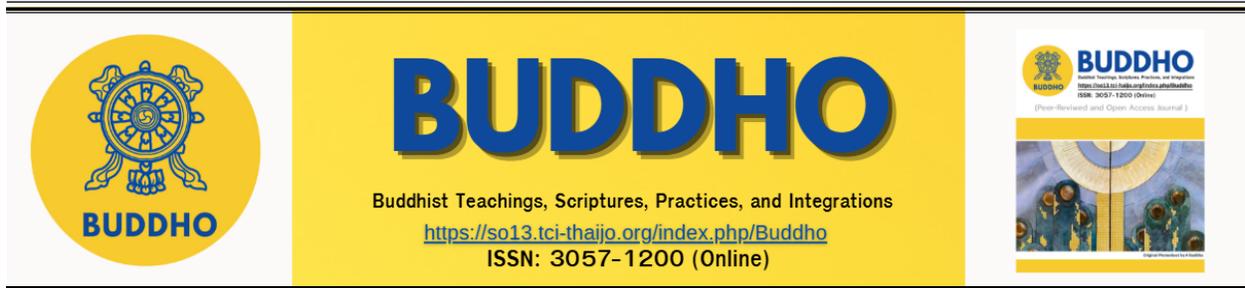
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Abstract

The concept of self has long occupied a central position in both Western philosophical inquiry and Eastern contemplative traditions. This study examines the notion of self-concept through the lens of Madhyamika Buddhism, one of the most influential schools of Mahāyāna thought, and critically engages it in dialogue with dominant Western psychological theories of identity. While Western frameworks often conceptualize the self as a coherent, developing, and measurable psychological construct, Madhyamika philosophy radically deconstructs any notion of inherent selfhood through the doctrine of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) and dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*).

The findings reveal that Madhyamika does not merely deny the self but reframes it as a conventional designation arising from relational and contingent processes. This perspective challenges essentialist and substantivist assumptions embedded in many Western models of identity formation. By analyzing classical Madhyamika texts alongside contemporary psychological theories, this study demonstrates that the Buddhist account provides a dynamic, process-oriented understanding of personhood that aligns with emerging constructivist and relational approaches in cognitive science. The body of knowledge gained from this research lies in articulating a cross-cultural philosophical synthesis that expands the conceptual horizon of self-concept studies. It proposes that Madhyamika's non-essentialist framework offers critical resources for rethinking identity, reducing ego-centered cognition, and contributing to contemporary debates on subjectivity, mental well-being, and intercultural philosophy. This interdisciplinary dialogue opens new avenues for integrating contemplative insights into modern psychological and philosophical discourse.

Keywords: Self-Concept, Madhyamika Buddhism

Introduction

The concept of the self has been a longstanding inquiry in philosophy and psychology. Western traditions generally perceive the self as a stable entity, often aligning with Cartesian dualism (Descartes, 1641/1996). In contrast, Madhyamika Buddhism, founded by Nagarjuna in the 2nd century CE, challenges the very foundation of a substantial self. This article examines the Madhyamika interpretation of self-concept, its implications for personal identity, and its potential contributions to modern psychological discourse.

The nature of the self has been a central topic in both philosophy and psychology, with diverse perspectives shaping our understanding of personal identity. In Western thought, René Descartes' 17th-century philosophy posits a dualistic view, distinguishing between the mind and the body as separate entities (Descartes, 1641/1996). This Cartesian dualism suggests a stable, enduring self, rooted in the mind's capacity for thought and consciousness. In contrast, Madhyamaka Buddhism, established by Nāgārjuna in the 2nd century CE, offers a radically different perspective by denying the existence of an inherent self. Nāgārjuna's teachings emphasize the concept of śūnyatā, or emptiness, proposing that all phenomena, including the self, lack intrinsic nature and exist only through dependent origination (Garfield, 1995). This article explores the Madhyamaka interpretation of self-concept, its implications for personal identity, and its potential contributions to contemporary psychological discourse.

The Madhyamika Perspective on Self

Madhyamaka philosophy, founded by Nāgārjuna in the 2nd century CE, presents a profound critique of the notion of an independent self. Central to this school of thought is the doctrine of emptiness (śūnyatā), which posits that all phenomena, including the self, lack intrinsic existence. Nāgārjuna systematically deconstructs the concept of a permanent self, asserting that it arises solely through dependent origination (pratītyasamutpāda). This perspective aligns with the Buddhist doctrine of non-self (anatta), which denies any enduring, unchanging essence. In his seminal work, the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, Nāgārjuna elucidates that phenomena do not possess inherent nature (svabhāva); instead, they exist interdependently, contingent upon various causes and conditions (Garfield, 1995). This interdependence implies that the self is not a fixed entity but a dynamic process, continuously shaped by and shaping its interactions with the world. Nāgārjuna emphasizes that understanding the emptiness of the self is crucial for attaining liberation, as clinging to a false notion of self leads to suffering.

The Madhyamaka view challenges the reification of the self by employing *reductio ad absurdum* arguments to demonstrate the contradictions inherent in believing in an independent self. By deconstructing such essentialist views, Madhyamaka philosophy guides practitioners toward a realization of the true nature of reality, free from delusion and attachment (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2010). This deconstruction has significant implications for personal identity. Recognizing the self's emptiness fosters a more fluid and adaptable sense of identity, reducing attachment to rigid self-concepts and promoting mental flexibility. Such an

understanding can alleviate psychological distress arising from clinging to a fixed self-image, thereby contributing to mental well-being.

In contemporary psychological discourse, the Madhyamaka perspective offers valuable insights into the nature of self-concept. It encourages a shift from viewing the self as a static entity to understanding it as a dynamic, interdependent process. This paradigm shift can inform therapeutic practices that aim to reduce self-related suffering by addressing the root causes of attachment and aversion linked to a misconceived self.

Dependent Origination and Self-Identity

The concept of dependent origination suggests that what we perceive as "self" is a collection of interdependent factors rather than a fixed entity (Siderits, 2007). According to Madhyamika, the self exists only as a conventional designation, much like a chariot, which is merely a sum of its parts and not an independent reality (Garfield, 1995). The Buddhist concept of dependent origination (*pratīyasamutpāda*) offers a profound framework for understanding self-identity. It posits that all phenomena, including what we conventionally term the "self," arise due to a complex web of interdependent causes and conditions, lacking any intrinsic, independent existence. This perspective challenges the notion of a permanent, unchanging self, suggesting instead that self-identity is a dynamic and contingent construct.

In the Madhyamaka school of Buddhist philosophy, founded by Nāgārjuna, this understanding is further elucidated through the doctrine of emptiness (*śūnyatā*). Nāgārjuna asserts that all entities are empty of inherent existence because they come into being only through dependent origination. This implies that the self is not a singular, autonomous entity but a mere conceptual designation arising from the aggregation of various interdependent factors (Garfield, 1995). A classic illustration of this concept is the chariot analogy, which appears in texts such as the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* and is further discussed by later philosophers like Chandrakīrti. In this analogy, a chariot is analyzed to determine its true nature. Upon examination, it becomes evident that the chariot does not exist independently of its parts—wheels, axle, frame, etc. The term "chariot" is simply a convenient label we apply to this specific assembly of components arranged in a particular manner. Similarly, the self is understood as a conventional designation for the assemblage of physical and mental constituents, without an inherent, independent essence (Siderits, 2007).

This deconstruction of the self has significant implications for personal identity. Recognizing that the self is not a fixed entity but a fluid construct can lead to a more flexible and compassionate approach to oneself and others. It encourages the understanding that personal identity is not static but evolves in response to changing conditions and experiences. This perspective can reduce attachment to rigid self-concepts and alleviate the suffering associated with clinging to a false sense of permanence. In contemporary psychological discourse, integrating the Madhyamaka view of dependent origination and self-identity can offer valuable insights. It aligns with certain therapeutic approaches that emphasize the fluidity of self-concept and the importance of understanding the relational and contextual nature of personal identity.

By acknowledging the interdependent and constructed nature of the self, individuals may cultivate greater psychological flexibility and resilience.

Contrasts with Western Theories of Self

Western psychological theories often conceptualize self-identity as a structured and relatively persistent construct. Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory, for instance, posits that individuals navigate through eight distinct stages across their lifespan, each characterized by specific challenges that contribute to the formation of a cohesive identity (Erikson, 1950). Similarly, self-schema theories suggest that individuals develop cognitive generalizations about themselves, derived from past experiences, which guide the processing of self-related information (Markus, 1977). These models emphasize a stable and enduring sense of self, grounded in personal history and social interactions.

In stark contrast, the Madhyamaka school of Buddhist philosophy, founded by Nāgārjuna, fundamentally rejects the notion of an ontological self. Central to Madhyamaka is the doctrine of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), which asserts that all phenomena, including the self, are devoid of intrinsic existence and arise only through dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) (Garfield, 1995). This perspective implies that the self is not a fixed entity but a transient aggregation of interdependent factors, continuously in flux.

The divergence between these viewpoints is profound. Western theories often focus on the development and maintenance of a consistent self-identity, viewing it as essential for psychological well-being and social functioning. Erikson, for example, emphasized the importance of resolving identity crises at various developmental stages to achieve a coherent sense of self (Erikson, 1950). In contrast, Madhyamaka philosophy encourages the realization of the self's emptiness, suggesting that clinging to a false notion of a permanent self is a source of suffering. By recognizing the self's lack of inherent existence, individuals can attain liberation from attachment and aversion, leading to a state of equanimity and freedom from existential distress (Garfield, 1995).

This contrast highlights differing approaches to self-identity: one that seeks to build and fortify a stable self-concept, and another that aims to deconstruct the very notion of self to transcend suffering. Integrating these perspectives could offer a more nuanced understanding of self-identity, acknowledging the functional aspects of a coherent self-concept in daily life while recognizing the potential psychological benefits of embracing the fluid and interdependent nature of existence.

The Implications for Modern Psychology

The Madhyamaka philosophy's approach to selfhood, emphasizing the concept of non-self (*anatta*), offers profound implications for modern psychology, particularly in cognitive science and psychotherapy. By challenging the notion of an intrinsic, unchanging self, Madhyamaka insights have informed contemporary therapeutic practices, fostering psychological flexibility and reducing attachment to rigid self-narratives. One significant application of these insights is

evident in mindfulness-based interventions. Programs such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) integrate principles of non-self, encouraging individuals to observe their thoughts and emotions without attachment. This practice cultivates a more fluid sense of self, enhancing psychological flexibility and resilience. Research indicates that mindfulness-based interventions can improve self-compassion and overall well-being among healthcare professionals, suggesting their broader applicability in various populations (Durkin et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the integration of self-compassion into therapeutic modalities aligns with Madhyamaka's emphasis on the emptiness of a fixed self. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), for instance, incorporates mindfulness and self-compassion to promote psychological flexibility. Studies have found that self-compassion is significantly correlated with psychological flexibility processes, including mindful acceptance and cognitive defusion, which are associated with enhanced emotional well-being (Marshall & Brockman, 2016).

The Madhyamaka perspective also offers valuable insights into addressing identity crises, anxiety, and existential distress. By recognizing the self as a dynamic, interdependent process rather than a static entity, individuals may experience reduced attachment to rigid self-concepts, leading to decreased anxiety and existential concerns. This shift in understanding can alleviate psychological distress associated with clinging to a fixed self-identity.

In summary, the Madhyamaka approach to selfhood enriches modern psychological practices by challenging traditional notions of a fixed self. Its integration into mindfulness and self-compassion therapies fosters psychological flexibility, reduces attachment to rigid self-narratives, and addresses various forms of psychological distress. As contemporary psychology continues to evolve, incorporating these ancient philosophical insights may enhance therapeutic outcomes and promote holistic well-being.

Conclusion

The Madhyamika Buddhist vision of self-concept challenges conventional understandings of personal identity by deconstructing inherent existence and emphasizing interdependent arising. By bridging Madhyamika philosophy with contemporary psychology, a more fluid and adaptable understanding of selfhood emerges, fostering well-being and resilience. The Madhyamaka perspective on selfhood presents a radical departure from the Western notion of a stable, intrinsic identity. By deconstructing the self through the principles of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) and dependent origination (*pratīyasamutpāda*), Nāgārjuna and later Madhyamaka scholars challenge deeply ingrained beliefs about personal identity. This philosophy highlights that the self is not an independent, permanent entity but a fluid, interdependent process. This insight not only aligns with Buddhist teachings on non-self (*anatta*) but also has far-reaching implications for psychological well-being, particularly in addressing identity crises, anxiety, and existential distress. The contrast between Madhyamaka and Western theories of self underscores different approaches to understanding identity—one that builds and fortifies a structured self-concept and another that dissolves the very notion of self to alleviate suffering. Integrating these perspectives could offer a more comprehensive view of selfhood, balancing

functional identity formation with the psychological benefits of embracing impermanence and interdependence. As modern psychology continues to evolve, the insights from Madhyamaka philosophy can enrich contemporary therapeutic models, fostering greater psychological resilience and well-being.

Recommendations

1. **Integration into Psychological Therapies:** Psychological interventions should consider integrating Madhyamaka insights, particularly in cognitive and behavioral therapies that emphasize mindfulness, self-compassion, and cognitive restructuring. Mindfulness-based interventions like MBCT and ACT already incorporate some aspects of Buddhist thought, but a deeper engagement with the philosophy of emptiness could enhance therapeutic outcomes.

2. **Further Research on Self-Concept in Buddhism and Psychology:** Empirical studies should explore the psychological benefits of adopting a Madhyamaka-inspired view of self. Future research can examine how reducing attachment to a fixed identity influences mental health, emotional regulation, and interpersonal relationships.

3. **Interdisciplinary Approaches:** Collaboration between Buddhist scholars, cognitive scientists, and psychologists can create a more holistic understanding of self-identity. Comparative studies between Madhyamaka philosophy and contemporary neuropsychology could yield valuable insights into the nature of consciousness and self-awareness.

4. **Educational and Public Awareness Programs:** Introducing concepts of dependent origination and selflessness in educational settings can help individuals develop a more flexible approach to personal identity, reducing stress and anxiety related to rigid self-concepts. Such programs can also be incorporated into leadership and organizational psychology to foster adaptability in professional settings.

5. **Application in Artificial Intelligence and Consciousness Studies:** The Madhyamaka view of self as an emergent, interdependent construct can contribute to discussions in AI and cognitive science regarding the nature of self-awareness and machine consciousness. Philosophical insights from Buddhism may provide novel perspectives on whether artificial systems can develop a sense of self.

Body of Knowledge

1. **Comparative Analysis with Neuroscience:** The Madhyamaka doctrine of emptiness parallels findings in neuroscience that suggest the self is a construct arising from neural networks rather than an inherent entity. Studies on brain plasticity and the default mode network (DMN) align with the Buddhist notion that identity is fluid and continuously reconstructed.

2. **Psychological Flexibility and Resilience:** By challenging the notion of a permanent self, Madhyamaka philosophy promotes psychological flexibility, a crucial factor in resilience. This aligns with contemporary research on cognitive flexibility and the ability to adapt to change without excessive distress.

3. Madhyamaka and Existential Psychology: The Madhyamaka rejection of an intrinsic self resonates with existential psychology's exploration of meaning, identity, and the confrontation with nothingness. The philosophical implications of emptiness could further inform existential therapies that address fear of death, purpose, and human suffering.

4. Influence on Contemporary Mindfulness Practices: The rise of mindfulness-based interventions owes much to Buddhist philosophy. However, many mindfulness practices focus primarily on present-moment awareness without explicitly addressing the deeper philosophical implications of non-self. A more comprehensive integration of Madhyamaka teachings could provide a richer, more transformative experience for practitioners.

5. Ethical and Social Implications: The Madhyamaka perspective encourages an ethical worldview based on interdependence, which can influence social and environmental responsibility. Recognizing the self as relational rather than autonomous fosters compassion, reducing conflicts that arise from ego-centered perspectives.

By bridging ancient wisdom with modern psychological science, the Madhyamaka perspective offers a transformative understanding of self-identity. Its implications extend beyond personal well-being to broader philosophical, ethical, and scientific inquiries, paving the way for a more interconnected and adaptable worldview.

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