



## THE PROBLEM OF EVIL FOR BUDDHISTS: DEVELOPING TRANSCENDENTAL RESPONSES

**Tyler Dalton McNabb**

*Department of Theology and Philosophy, Saint Francis University, USA  
Correspondence email address: tylerdaltonmcnabb@gmail.com*

**ABSTRACT:** Many Buddhists tend to think that the world is overall, a good state of affairs, and that life is worth living. However, Yujin Nagasawa points out that there is a mismatch between the positive value one puts on the world and the Buddhist's metaphysics. Buddhism endorses the impermanence thesis which roughly states that all things exist only momentarily. And it's the impermanent nature of reality that, at least in part, leads to significant suffering in the world. If impermanence is a fundamental feature to reality, and, if suffering is primarily linked to the impermanent nature of reality, how can one consistently give an optimistic assessment of the value of the world? In this paper, I come to the aid of the Buddhist and point to how she might develop her own response to this problem.

**KEYWORDS:** Nagasawa, Buddhism, problem of evil, transcendental, impermanence

### Introduction

Yujin Nagasawa has recently argued that atheists face a unique version of the problem of evil (Nagasawa, 2024). Roughly, the idea goes as follows: Most atheists tend to think that the world is overall, a good state of affairs, and that life is worth living. However, if God doesn't exist, the world looks more Hobbesian; it is cold, dark, and brutish. Life, for hundreds of millions of years, has been going through the unguided process of natural selection. The world has contained significant suffering, suffering that seems rather pointless. How can the value of the world be positive? There is a mismatch between the way the world is and one's outlook on the world. It seems like the atheist needs to either adjust how she views the world (i.e., no longer be optimistic about its state), or, reject her atheism in favor of theism. Why theism? Well, believing that

humans, animals, and the rest of the cosmos will be reconciled to God and obtain eternal rewards, would make the suffering in this life worth it. Life would still be good.

Nagasawa doesn't just look at the standard naturalistic picture of the world. Recently, Nagasawa has also applied this axiological problem of evil to Eastern philosophical traditions that endorse the impermanence thesis (Nagasawa, 2024). Japanese Buddhism is his primary representative. Roughly, the impermanence thesis is that all things exist only momentarily. That is, no thing is able to retain its identity from moment to moment. Any subtle change to S makes it such that S no longer exists. Instead, we can say that S<sup>2</sup> has emerged. And subtle change to S<sup>2</sup>, means S<sup>2</sup> no longer exists, rather, we have a new entity we can call S<sup>3</sup>. In this case, there is no self who continues to exist for a span of 80 years or so. The impermanence thesis is usually taken in conjunction with a thesis of interdependence. The interdependence thesis is roughly that all things are conceptually and causally dependent on other things (Burton, 2015, p. 36). This leads to the conclusion that all things are empty, that is, all things lack an intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*). There are no substances that possess intrinsic nature according to Buddhist philosophy. For a good explication of these theses see Jay Garfield's *Engaging Buddhism* (2015).

The impermanence thesis is a thesis about the fundamental nature of reality. Reality really is such that every 'thing' is constantly changing. There is no 'thing' that retains identity. I may fall in love with a human subject named Autumn, but she isn't the same subject I recall from yesterday, and she won't be the same subject I encounter tomorrow. Moreover, one day, it will appear as if Autumn doesn't exist in any form. Change is a fundamental feature of reality that causes anguish and grief. All things are in constant flux, and yet, our hearts desire permanency. This desire for the permanent is in part, why the impermanent nature of reality is so damaging. Nagasawa surveys important Japanese literature to show that there has always been a recognition that life is "transient, fragile and impermanent." Nagasawa for example, discusses horrific fires and earthquakes that occurred in Japan. It becomes evident from these stories that life and property are indeed fleeting. If impermanence is a fundamental feature to reality, and, if suffering is primarily linked to the impermanent nature of reality, how can one consistently endorse that the world is, overall, a good state of affairs, one that is worth living in?

Now, my reader may be confused as to how a worldview that denies the existence of a self is consistent with the claim that life is worth living. Baptiste Le Bihan has recently shown that eliminativism about the self is neutral to whether life is worth living and whether there is meaning in life (Le Bihan, 2019). Specifically, as it pertains to Buddhism, Le Bihan suggests that the Four Noble Truths can provide us with meaning and make life overall, worth living (Le Bihan, 2019, pp. 30-33).

Having said this, it is important that we develop a response to Nagasawa's problem. Nagasawa draws up four possible responses that some Eastern religious believer might avail herself to. The first type of response he categorizes as hermitism. Those who follow the hermit's path try to mitigate the probability of experiencing significant

suffering. One tries to detach from as many things as one can and live a simple life. The problem with this view is that while it does mitigate suffering, it doesn't address the suffering caused by death or isolation. The second style of response Nagasawa mentions tracks in the opposite direction. One might think that due to the amount of suffering that exists, one should simply try to obtain as much pleasure as one can. They should live as a hedonist. Of course, this response also fails to solve suffering that is caused by aging and dying. Moreover, as Nagasawa points out, it might inadvertently cause more suffering as it prevents one from achieving pleasure that can only be achieved in a non-hedonistic lifestyle. The third response one might take is what Nagasawa calls indifferentism. A proponent of this view simply accepts that life is suffering and impermanent and there is nothing one can do about it. As Nagasawa points out, this can also be interpreted as no response at all.

Finally, there is what he calls the transcendental response. The proponent of this view argues that the key to overcoming the problem of impermanence is to transcend impermanence. One needs to awaken and enter a realm that is permanent. According to Nagasawa, the problem with this response is that for Buddhists at least, the impermanence thesis applies to all things. There is no realm to transcend that which is impermanent. Nagasawa argues, "Buddhism affirms impermanence through and through. It is not merely that our current realm or our bodily existence is impermanent; absolutely everything is impermanent" (Nagasawa, 2024, p. 226). One might be tempted to argue that nirvana transcends the impermanent but many Buddhists understand nirvana to simply be the "blowing out" of the flame in the cycle of rebirth (Nagasawa, 2024, p. 227). It isn't so much a positive state but an escape from samsara. The Buddhist lacks resources to fix her mismatched axiological assessment. Perhaps, Nagasawa argues, she can utilize resources from Hinduism to help her,<sup>1</sup> but she needs to look somewhere else if she plans to continue to have a positive view of the world.

In this paper, I want to come to the aid of the Buddhist and address how she might develop her own transcendental response. My first two responses do not require her to look to any other traditions for aid. The last response might require assistance from a theistic tradition, but it can be endorsed while remaining fully and consistently committed to her fundamental Buddhist doctrines.

### **The Pudgalavāda Response**

It is typically argued that Buddhism rejects the existence of a permanent self. While it is standard in almost all Buddhist traditions to reject the existence of a self, there are a couple of traditions that do not. While no longer a living tradition, the Pudgalavāda tradition is famous for endorsing, *contra* the 'orthodox' traditions, that the self [pudgala] exists (Priestley, 2005; Duerlinger, 2006). In fact, postulating the existence of

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<sup>1</sup> Hinduism is generally taken to endorse the existence of a permanent reality, namely Brahman.

the self is necessary, at least, so proponents of this tradition argued. It is the best answer to the problem of karma.<sup>2</sup>

It's important to note that the self is not seen as reducible to its aggregates but rather it possesses aggregates. In explaining the *Sāṃmitīya-nikāya-śāstra*, L.I. Titlin states that, "[...] pudgala is perceived as a self based on a particular set of aggregates, which is present in this birth. The treatise clearly states that pudgala is a concept: Although the self exists, it is conceptual; the self is not substantial. However, the text notes that pudgala is not identical with aggregates, although not different from them" (Titlin, 2014, p. 109). Nonetheless, Titlin notes, "The self is one who was someone in a past life and will be someone else in the future" (Titlin, 2014, p. 109).

In explicating the views in *Kathāvatthu (The Topics for Discussion)*, Titlin states, "Pudgalavāda, on its part, offers a completely new three-part ontology: the 'real and ultimate' level, conventionally real and the third - pudgala, which is known as 'real and ultimate', but at the same time is not a dharma" (Titlin, 2014, p. 108). The Pudgalavāda tradition compares the relationship between the self and aggregates to the relationship between fuel and fire. There is a sense in which the fire depends on the fuel just like the self depends on aggregates. In another sense, though, fire is distinct from the fuel. The self is said to underlie the aggregates in an inexplicable and mysterious way (Duerlinger, 2006, pp. 143-144).

Back to the main issue we are addressing. The Buddhist needn't apply impermanence to the self. The self transcends impermanence. Perhaps coming to recognize that the self is permanent, that it does not lose identity, and perhaps, that it keeps on existing even after death, one is able to say that reality is still ultimately good. There is no-mismatch between what one's worldview says and one's own outlook on reality.

### **The Positive Nirvana Response**

Let's say that endorsing the existence of a self is too unorthodox. Perhaps my Buddhist reader would reject her positive outlook on reality before she endorses the existence of a self. Is there something that is still transcendent in Buddhism? While Nagasawa is right in thinking that many philosophical Buddhists see nirvana as simply the privation of suffering, not all Buddhist traditions have taken this interpretation of nirvana.

Keith Ward argues that the *Dhammapada* describes nirvana positively. Nirvana is said to be peaceful and it is described as infinite joy. Ward seems to think there are hermeneutical reasons to interpret nirvana as pure bliss or consciousness (Ward, 1994, pp. 163-167). For example, verse 202 tells us that, "There is no ill like the aggregates. And no bliss higher than peace (Nibbana)." What is important to note is that nirvana

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<sup>2</sup> The problem of karma goes something like this: If there is no self, who is collecting karma?

is described as peaceful. The following verse describes nirvana as “the highest bliss.” We read in 218 that, “One who is intent upon the ineffable (Nibbana), dwells with mind inspired, and is not bound by sense pleasures – such a man is called ‘One Bound Upstream.’” Nirvana is described as unknowable. Finally, in verse 383, we read, “Knowing the destruction of all conditioned things, become, oh holy man, the knower of the uncreate (Nibbana) (Buddharakkhita, *Dhammapada*).”

We are now in a position to see why scholars like Ward see something more to nirvana than purely the cessation of suffering. It’s ultimately that which is unknowable and the uncreated, and yet, it is considered the highest bliss and peaceful. The aforementioned verses seem to support the positive nirvana hypothesis.

But, perhaps, you don’t follow my intuitions here. Maybe the evidence simply seems underdetermined. All things being equal, I think that’s enough to argue that the Buddhist can be rational in appealing to *Dhammapada* in order to make a case that there is that which transcends the impermanent realm. But Ward isn’t the only one who has made this suggestion. There are Buddhist traditions that have made this claim.

In fact, as Leonard Priestley points out, the Pudgalavāda tradition understood nirvana in this more positive sense. And it was the Pudgalavāda tradition’s refusal to see a sharp separation from the self and Nirvana that enabled the self to be permanent (Priestley, 2005). Of course, one needn’t follow the Pudgalavāda tradition on this point in order to think that nirvana is infinite joy and bliss as I have already established. If we are to understand nirvana as something positive and permanent, then once again, we can say that the Buddhist has resources, from her own tradition, to develop a transcendental response. She can say that though all things are impermanent, nirvana awaits us and makes reality, ultimately good.

### **God is No-Thing Response**

Perhaps the Buddhist is not satisfied with either of the responses sketched out above. Maybe she is determined that nirvana in its classical and most traditional understanding is simply a release from samsara. There is no positive bliss or joy that awaits; there is simply a lack of suffering. Must the Buddhist deny what is central to her faith and instead opt for another religious tradition, one that doesn’t endorse the impermanence thesis? McNabb and Baldwin have recently pointed out that while impermanence applies to things, God, as neo-Platonists and Thomists understand Him, is beyond all things (McNabb & Baldwin, 2021). God is rather, no-thing (Pseudo-Dionysius, 1987), and the grounding of all things. He instead is understood to be Existence itself, or, even beyond existence.

In this case, the Buddhist can endorse the impermanence thesis while also endorsing that which transcends impermanence.<sup>3</sup> Nagasawa is right in that, if we understood God to be a thing, then impermanence would apply to God as well, and hence there is no escape from our present problem. McNabb and Baldwin argue that many of Buddhism's criticisms of theism assume that God is a thing among other things (2021). If God is no-thing, that is, He is not an entity among other entities, the critiques fall flat.

In their latest work, "The Stigmata, Rainbow Bodies, and Hume's Argument Against Miracles," McNabb and Baldwin argue that if the Buddhist is still convinced that the Buddha's teaching entails that we must apply the impermanence thesis to God, the Buddhist who wants to be a theist has another card up their sleeve (McNabb & Baldwin, 2024). The Buddhist can appeal to the Buddhist hermeneutic known as the skillful means (O'Leary, 2010, pp. 163–183). The skillful means hermeneutic was developed to help Buddhists in the Mahayana tradition explain away what appeared to be contradictions between new teaching and the teachings of the past. Past teaching was seen merely to be expedient teaching.

Inspired by a pluralist interpretation of *The Lotus Sutra*, McNabb and Baldwin argue that one can concede that the Buddha taught that impermanence applied to God or even that God does not exist but, nonetheless, argue that the Buddha did this because his followers were only able to conceive of God as a thing among other things. That is, their view of God would be anthropomorphic and would hurt their ability to become enlightened if they had believed in Him.

McNabb and Baldwin compare what the Buddha was doing to a teacher who gives her students metaphors and who tells her students half-truths in order to explain a complicated scientific theory. The teaching would only be considered as expedient. When the student matures, the student is able to know more of the full truth. In the same way, it might be the case where we are now ready to grasp the truth about God and that truth consists of the fact that impermanence does not apply to Him. And like nirvana, it is what we ultimately aim for. In fact, God and nirvana might not be so distinct after all.

All this to say that if the Buddhist can consistently believe in theism, then the Buddhist has another way of developing a transcendental response to the problem of evil. With God, life ultimately is good, and it is ultimately worth living. There is no need to have a pessimistic outlook on the value of our world.

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Tillich thought the primary difference between Buddhism and Christianity was with respect to Christianity being oriented to the personal and Buddhism being oriented to the transpersonal. Using Tillich's own conception of God where God is no-thing, I think Tillich's is wrong to say that Christianity is oriented toward the personal as God doesn't fit under any genus; He transcends all univocal categories (Boss, 2009, p. 263).

## Conclusion

In this paper, following Nagasawa's work, I first set up the problem of evil for Buddhists. Roughly, the problem is that a fundamental feature to reality is impermanence, and it is impermanence that leads to suffering. And yet, some Buddhists tend to have a positive outlook on reality. There is a mismatch in how their religion values the world and how the Buddhist personally evaluates the world. I argued that Buddhists can develop a transcendental response to this problem by appealing to her own tradition's resources and/or by co-opting a general theistic outlook. The Buddhist then doesn't need reject the impermanence thesis in order to retain a positive axiological view. The world is good for there are a number of reasons to think that there is permanence to reality, or at least, that which is beyond reality.

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