Buddhist Self or No Self, Kant’s Thing-in-itself and the Quantum Mechanical Wave Function

George S. Wang
Teacher at Mindless Mt. Zen Monastery, 7F, #192, Chung-kung 2nd Rd., Taichung City, Taiwan

And

Hui-chin Wang
Nobel Education Institute, 1, West Duarte Rd., #D.E.F, Arcadia, California, USA
Table of Contents

1. Introduction (p.4)
2. Buddhist Non-Self (p.4)
   2-1. Buddhist Hinayana doctrine says: Non-Self or Non-Personality (p.4)
   2-2. Most contemporary Buddhists and scholars claim: Non-Self (p.5)
   2-3. Practical searching of self (p.5)
3. Buddhist Holistic Self or Personality claimed by the Nirvana Sutra (p.6)
4. Traditional Buddhist Explanation by the Surangama Sutra (p.6)
   4-1. The story of an old king (p.6)
   4-2. An explanation for no contradiction between Non-Self and Self (p.7)
5. A metaphorical illustration: √2 on a real number line (p.8)
6. Western Philosopher Kant’s Thing-in-itself and Buddhist Self (p.9)
   6-1. Kant’s Thing-in-itself (p.9)
   6-2. Kant’s Thing-in-itself and Buddhist holistic self (p.10)
7. Quantum Mechanical Wave Function, Thing-in-itself and the Buddhist Self (p.10)
   7-1. Quantum Mechanical Wave Function Ψ (p.10)
      (1). Brief account of Wave Function Ψ (p.10)
      (2). Only properties P observed, not the system Ψ itself (p.11)
   7-2. Wave function Ψ and Kant’s thing-in-itself (p.12)
   7-3. Wave Function Ψ and Buddhist Self (p.12)
   7-4. Brief summary of the section (p.13)
8. Discussions (p.13)
   8-1. Chao Fa-shih’s verse (p.13)
   8-2. Does Buddhism really deny the existence of soul and self? (p.14)
      (1). Resolving the “No Self, No Soul” problem (p.14)
         a. Analytical (p.14)
         b. Synthetical (p.14)
         c. Brief conclusion (p.15)
      (2). Resolving the “unchanging substance” problem (p.15)
8-3. Consistency of Hinayama and Mahayama (P.15)
   (1). Three proofs of Hinayana being consistent with Mahayana sutras (P.15)
   (2). A tree as an analogical illustration (P.16)

9. Summary and conclusion (p.17)
   9-1. Summary for Self or Non-self (p.17)
   9-2. Brief Conclusion (p.18)
1. Introduction

Chao Fa-shih (384-414 A.D.), when facing execution under the Yao Ch’in emperor in ancient China, uttered the verse:[1]

“No master have the four elements,
Unreal are the five skandhas,
When my head meets the white blade,
’Twill be but slicing the spring wind.”

Here in Buddhism the four elements denote the physical body of a person while the five skandhas refer to a person’s whole mental life. Being a Buddhist monk, clearly Chao Fa-shih had the concept that for any a person there is no Master, Ego, Self or Personality, that is considered as an independent and self-contained character. Then with respect to him there is no self to be executed. Whether he truly had no Self as he claimed will be left for discussion later.

This concept of no self is now almost widely accepted in Buddhist societies. However, Buddhist Sutras such as the Nirvana Sutra and the Surangama Sutra explicitly hold that there is a Personality, true self, or more precisely holistic self for any person. Thus whether or not the self exists remains a puzzle for thousands of years. If there existed no self then the Buddhist religion would be as not expected because in any religion is expected the existence of self, soul and gods. The theme of this paper is mainly to resolve the puzzle in a systematic and academic way.

We proceed first to state the status of Non-self or Non-personality (Section 2). Then we describe the holistic self based on the Nirvana Sutra (Section 3). And we follow with the Surangama Sutra to give a traditional Buddhist explanation (Section 4). To illustrate how the true self exists in a hidden way and can not be found in phenomenal realm we present a metaphorical example using the irrational number $\sqrt{2}$ (Section 5). All above are essentially traditional Buddhist explanations. Philosophically Kant’s thing-in-itself for a living being is compared and proposed to be equivalent to the Buddhist true self and to support the concept “existing but not findable” (Section 6). Scientifically, the Quantum Mechanical Wave Function $\Psi$ for a living being is compared and proposed to be equivalent to the Kant’s thing-in-itself and the Buddhist true self, confirming the important concept “existing but not findable” (Section 7). Prior to Summary and Conclusion (Section 9) we give informative Discussions (Section 8), including interesting topics such as “A tree as an analogical illustration”.

2. Buddhist Non-Self

2-1. Buddhist Hinayana doctrine says: Non-Self or Non-Personality

The three signs or proofs of Hinayana are well known within Buddhist societies.
These proofs are non-permanence, non-personality and nirvana.\[^{2}\] Our focus now is on the second proof, the non-personality. Its significance is plainly no ego, no self and no personality. To be more specific for the second proof, the Hinayana <Dhammapada Sutra> says: “Everything that is, is without self”.\[^{3}\]

We should now make our terminology clear that while ego, self or personality used here is of individual (or phenomenal) existence, ego is always individual but self or personality may be either holistic or individual depending on the context. We also use true self or holistic self or holistic personality for the transcendental or noumenal existence.

2-2. Most Contemporary Buddhists and scholars claim: Non-Self

Most contemporary Mahayana and Hinayana Buddhists and scholars claim non-self or non-personality. One rather popular book “What the Buddha taught?” explicitly says “No Self, No Soul”.\[^{4}\] The reason for its claim mainly stems from the so-called “Conditioned Genesis”, which is based on the twelve nidanas or the twelve links of Buddhism.

2-3. Practical searching of self

Practically one may realize what the Non-Self really means via the following way. A person may think his own physical body as his self. However, when he is further asked which part of his body is his self, he simply cannot find out the self. For example, if he considers his physical “heart” being his self then a surgeon may replace his heart with another’s heart without changing his self. So his heart and therefore his any part of physical body are not his self. Obviously his heart and his any part of body, just like his house or car, are only “his”, not “he” nor his “self”. The conclusion is that his self can not be found in his physical body.

Can one find his self mentally? Suppose a person sits there and thinks that his self is just his mental or spiritual state, or the state of mind existing as what he is being. However, if he wants to confirm the “self” by asking “Who am I?” then there appear two selves: one is that who was being asked and the other is that who asked. Now the question is: “which one is the true self?” It seems that the latter (the one who asked) is the true self. Clearly, he can go still further to ask ‘Who was the one asking “Who am I?” ’? Then he has three selves. Thus he can never find out the last self because the process of asking can be repeated indefinitely. Hence our conclusion is: although the last self may exist it can not be found directly! (Similar searchings of self in vain by Ananda and the solutions for the existence of true self given by Buddha Sakyamuni will be described in Section 4)

However if indirect method is employed like that in the derivation of the No-Two State of Mind, the last true self or holistic self can be traced into the transcendental realm and is there transformed from an individual self into a holistic self or personality through a mental phase transition.\[^{5}\]
3. **Buddhist Holistic Self or Personality claimed by the Nirvana Sutra** [6]

Mahaparinirvana Sutra claims for Nirvana the **four virtues**: Permanence, Bliss, Personality, and Purity in the transcendental realm. These four virtues may be alternatively expressed as the eight flavors: Permanence, peace, no growing old, no death, purity, transcendence, unperturbedness and joy. For instance the content of permanence meaning no change in time, could contain the flavors no growing old, no death, transcendence and unperturbedness. It also means “Complete extinction of individual existence” or “Non-ego” because any Individual Existence or Ego will destroy Permanence. This is due to the fact that any activities of Individual Existence or Ego are not permanently existing without any change in time. It is also clear that Permanence in time is beyond the scope of Causality of our phenomenal world because Causality always evolves some changes in time. Bliss denotes the transcendental joy in the sense that it does not subject to change in time. Purity also is a transcendental state, which can be more quantitatively described as that of the No-Two State of mind. [5]

Our main subject **Self** here is referred to the Personality of the four virtues. Since the Personality is actually the State of mind that experiences the taste of Permanence, Bliss and Purity and the eight flavors the Personality is not an Individual Existence or Ego and therefore is called the true self or formally the Holistic Self. We note again that the Personality of the four virtues or the Holistic Self is just the No-Two State of mind. [5]

Considering the Non-Self of Section 2 and the Holistic Self here there seems to appear a contradiction of Non-Self or Self. If looking into the situation carefully we find no contradiction or inconsistency. In the following is a traditional Buddhist explanation from the Surangama Sutra.

4. **Traditional Buddhist Explanation by the Surangama Sutra** [7]

In the end of Volume 1 of the Surangama Sutra there are two important topics: Ananda’s seeking for the self over 7 places in vain and Buddha Sakyamuni’s pointing out 10 cases where the holistic self exists. In the former Ananda expressed to the Buddha that he knew where the basic substance of seeing or his Self existed. Then Buddha asked him to find out. When Ananda claimed, e.g., that the Self lies within his body, the Buddha refuted. Trying in this way for seven places Ananda were all refuted by the Buddha. Ananda was feeling sad, desperate and exhausted. He then begged the Buddha to show out the existence of the true self. The Buddha illustrated over 10 cases the true or holistic self, which is an eternally non-creating non-annihilating ontological existence. Now we cite the 3rd case with some explanation below. [8]

4-1. The story of an old king

A person or any a living creature will eventually become old and exhausted as his age increases. This process of becoming old and exhausted will unavoidably lead to death. There was an old king of age 62. He asked Buddha Sakyamuni if anything of an old
exhausted man could be left in an eternally non-exhausting way when and after he dies. [8] The answer from Buddha was “yes”. He said to the king: “The very basic original thing by which you can see things is neither becoming old, nor exhausted, nor annihilating.” We should have no problem to agree that there exists in an observer some basic original thing or the true self for seeing things. According to the Buddha, this very original thing or the true self itself is not to become old, exhausted, nor to die with the physical body of the observer.

To understand this, we may look at the lines in the palm of one of our hands. For the 62 years old king very possibly his palm lines could not be clearly seen by him because he would suffer from presbyopia at his age. That is, he would feel fuzzy when looking at very fine lines. This would make an observer feel his original thing or the true self weakened due to aging. To the surprise the Buddha said that the original thing or the true self never becomes weakened. Let us very simply explain his statement in the following.

If an old man can not clearly see his palm lines he may get a pair of well-fitted presbyopic glasses for his presbyopia. Then he can see fine lines as clear as he was young. This implies that his “original thing” or “the true self” has not been weakened due to his old age. If his original thing or the true self has ever been weakened, the well-fitted glasses cannot cure the weakened because an externally arranged mechanical device (glasses) can not solve the problem of the inner “original thing”. In other words, if the inner original thing is deteriorated, no matter whatever you do to the outside, it is still deteriorated. Therefore the original thing or the true self has not become weakened due to aging.

Buddha Sakyamuni continued to argue like the following. As you grow old and your physical conditions become weakened, the original thing bestowed to you is not to be weakened as just shown. Since it has not been weakened it is not to change with time. As it is not to change with time it can not annihilate. This is the non-annihilation part. For the non-creation part, we may ask when did the original thing or the true self start to occur? The answer is that we can not say the occurrence at any finite time because, as just mentioned, it (the original thing or the true self) can not change with time. That is, it can not occur or be created at any finite time, because otherwise it has to change with time which violates the above mentioned statement.

4-2. An explanation for no contradiction between Non-Self and Self

The original thing or the true self mentioned in the story, which is neither to be created nor to be annihilated, is actually the No-Two State of mind. [5] The reason of Ananda’s seeking for the self over 7 places in vain is that his seeking is within the phenomenal world or realm, which is of dependent origination, featured by continuous creation and annihilation. On the other hand the Buddha’s pointing out the existence of the true self over 10 cases is beyond the phenomenal realm. That is, the true self is in transcendental realm and is the holistic self, featured by non-creation and non-annihilation, not of dependent origination.
Consequently, as indicated by the story of the old king, the holistic self does exist at all times in a hidden way with its effects or functions behaving like an individual self or an acting self within the phenomenal realm. By hidden we mean that the individual self or the acting self may feel vaguely about his existence but can not be found out in this phenomenal realm as stated in the subsection 2-3. On the other hand in the transcendental or noumenal realm the individual self or the acting self transforms itself into the holistic self or the No-Two State of mind via the mental phase transition.5

Briefly speaking, the holistic self is existing but not findable. Then the “not findable” is generally misinterpreted as “no self”, implying no existence of the Self. The misinterpretation should be removed because the holistic self or the true self, though not findable in phenomenal realm, is always existing there in transcendental realm with its effects or functions behaving like an individual self or an acting self or the Master of a person within the phenomenal realm.

5. A metaphorical illustration: √2 existing but not findable

We have just cited the Surangama Sutra to illustrate the peculiar feature of a person’s holistic self, i.e., existing but not findable. Because of the importance of the feature we now give a metaphorical illustration via the irrational number √2.

√2 (≈1.4142------) seems to exist or exists in a hidden way in the decimal fractional number (rational number) system but can not be explicitly found in the system. To show its hidden existence we observe: 1.414 ≤ √2 ≤ 1.415. That is, √2 seems to exist or should exist between the interval (1.414,1.415) of the decimal fractional number system. To show that the √2 cannot be found in the rational-number system, we use the decimal fractional numbers of the rational-number system to approach the √2 point on the real-number line. As depicted in the Figure no matter how small the interval is chosen, e.g., 0.1, 0.01, 0.001, 0.0001,---, we simply can not meet the irrational number √2 on the real number line though we may pass over it. Thus √2 can not be found in rational-number or decimal fractional number system, and in this sense we say it exists in a hidden way in the decimal fractional system.

To show its exhibition or appearance in the (higher realm) real-number line we draw the point √2 on the horizontal real-number line as shown in Figure 1. To do so we first find out the unit length 1 of rational-number system on horizontal and vertical real-number axes respectively and then form the square of unit lengths. Clearly the length of the diagonal of the square is √2. Now using a compass we make an arc intercepting the horizontal real-number line and obtain the point √2 as drawn in the Figure. Thus √2 exists in a hidden way and can not be found in the decimal fractional number system (lower realm) but it exhibits or appears itself in the real-number line (higher realm).
Like the metaphorical example of $\sqrt{2}$, a person’s holistic self exists in a hidden way and can not be found in the dependent-originated phenomenal world (lower realm). For this part some Buddhists claim Non-Self. But based on above statements our interpretation of Non-Self is:

“Non-Self should not mean no existence of self. It means that only the true self can not be found in the (lower) phenomenal realm. In other words the holistic self or the true self exists in a hidden or an implicit way like the metaphorical example of $\sqrt{2}$. It can certainly be found in the (higher) transcendental realm as stated above in the Nirvana Sutra and the Surangama Sutra.”

Consequently, we propose to say that the existence of holistic self or the true self is always valid in the sense that the existence is hidden or implicit in the phenomenal realm while in the transcendental realm the existence is explicit.

6. Western Philosopher Kant’s Thing-in-itself and Buddhist Self

The above are essentially traditional Buddhist explanations for the existence of holistic self. In the following we employ an academic support from the Western Philosopher Kant. The basic feature of the holistic self is that it exists but can not be found. This feature will be also that of Kant’s Thing-in-itself.

6-1. Kant’s Thing-in-itself

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) distinguished between matter and form in an appearance. While matter is that given in sensation form is that being ‘in the mind’. Kant further maintained that what we intuit in appearance are not the things as they appear in themselves but only things as they appear to us in virtue of our mode of experiencing them. Things-in-themselves can not be known. They are the non-sensible causes of what we intuit. He calls the thing-in-itself a ‘transcendental object’ or noumenon. And therefore Kant’s philosophy is sometimes called ‘transcendental idealism’.

Bertrand Russell has a brief statement on the features of thing-in-itself: “Things in themselves, which are the causes of our sensations, are unknowable; they are not in space or time, they are not substances, nor can they be described by any of those other general concepts which Kant calls ‘categories’.”

Based on these the features of “thing in itself” may be itemized as:

1). the cause of our sensation,
2). unknowable,
3). not in space or time,
4). not substances,
5). nor can it be described by any of those other general concepts which Kant calls ‘categories’.
6). noumenal rather than phenomenal,
7). non-sensible and non-intuituable.

These features are to be discussed or compared with those of the Buddhist holistic self and Quantum Mechanical Wave Function below.

**6-2. Kant’s Thing-in-itself and the Buddhist Holistic self**

Following Kant if a “Matter” object possesses a Thing-in-itself then a person or a living creature must also possess a Thing-in-itself because they all have appearance. Since a person has both Matter and Mind his Thing-in-itself should be of higher quality to include the mental part, which may be called his Thing-in-himself.

We notice that under careful studies the holistic self stated in previous sections is in conformity with all the 7 features listed above. The key points are that the Holistic self like the Thing-in-itself, though existing, can not be explicitly found in phenomenal realm and that it is transcendental and exhibiting itself in noumenal realm. In short, we propose that Kant’s Thing-in-itself or the Thing-in-himself is equivalent to the Buddhist Holistic self for a living being.

It is interesting to note the successive development of the culture of mankind on the holistic self. Religiously, Buddha Sakyamuni discovered the Holistic self in the form of Nirvana, which is very difficult to understand and to share with other religion. Then Philosophically about 200 years ago Kant independently and intuitively claimed the existence of the Holistic self in the name of Thing-in-itself, which is still very difficult to understand and to share with other people because he did not say any more content of it. At last Scientifically about 100 years ago Quantum Mechanics started its development, resulting in a representation of the Self in the form of Quantum Mechanical wave function, which is a mathematical complex function but is readily to be understood and shared with all people if they want to.

To conclude the Section we follow B. Russell’s comment on Kant about how to recognize Kant’s great importance. We think Kant’s great importance would be his Philosophical recognition of the noumenal Thing-in-itself, which could lead to the Religious Buddhist holistic self.

**7. Quantum Mechanical Wave Function, Thing-in-itself and the Buddhist Self**

**7-1. Quantum Mechanical Wave Function \( \psi \)**

**1. Brief account of Wave Function \( \psi \)**

Suppose we consider a cup of liquid water. Macroscopically the water is a liquid. As we all know, its microscopic basic substance is the molecule H₂O, of which various properties can be observed by using appropriate arrangement of scientific equipment. The theory, which describes a microscopic system comprising material particles, is the
Quantum Mechanics of modern physics. A very important feature of the theory is the existence of a Quantum Mechanical Wave Function. To be more specific, corresponding to any a given physical system there exists a Quantum Mechanical Wave Function, which is usually designated by $\Psi$. \[^{15}\] For H$_2$O, it may be typically designated as $\Psi_{H_2O}$. The detail expression of $\Psi_{H_2O}$ would be rather complicated. It can be worked out, or may be looked up in literature. In the present high-speed computer era, a wave function $\Psi$ of three-particles like the H$_2$O system, should be easily calculated. For any other large and complicated physical system its wave function does exist and can be calculated at least in principle.

It is quite interesting that $\Psi$ can be regarded as the noumenon or the thing-in-itself of a physical system. The reason is due to the following two features of $\Psi$: \[^{15}\]

{1} The wave function $\Psi$ for a physical system describes the system completely,

{2} All the physical properties of the system can be derived out from its $\Psi$.

These two strong features of $\Psi$ suffice for $\Psi$ to represent a physical system. This is so not just for the H$_2$O molecular system, it is so also for any other system.

(2). Only properties $P$ observed, not the system $\Psi$ itself

It is important to note that the feature {2} above can be mathematically expressed as the following equation: \[^{16}\]

$$P = \int \Psi^* \mathcal{P} \Psi \, d\tau$$  \hspace{1cm} (1)

where $P$, $\Psi^*$, $\mathcal{P}$, $\Psi$ and $d\tau$ denote respectively a physical property $P$ to be observed, the complex conjugation of $\Psi$, $\mathcal{P}$ derived from $\Psi$, the operator $\mathcal{P}$ associated with the physical property $P$, the wave function of the physical system $\Psi$, and the differential spatial volume $d\tau$ over which the mathematical integration is to be performed.

It is important to note that $\Psi$ for any system is complex (a complex-numbered function) \[^{17}\] and is therefore not observable, nor measurable. \[^{18}\] We also note that the property $P$ on the left-hand side of Eq.(1) will certainly be observable or measurable (a real-numbered result) whereas the factors $\Psi^*$ and $\Psi$ in the integrand are complex and therefore not observable. The operator $\mathcal{P}$ for property $P$ may be either real or complex. Suppose we want to observe, for example, the linear momentum $mv$ of a particle with mass $m$ and velocity $v$, then the property is $P=mv$. The corresponding operator $\mathcal{P}$ for the property $P$ is explicitly given by \{(-ih/2 $\pi$ ) (d / dx)\}, which contains the imaginary number $i=(-1)^{1/2}$, the Planck constant $h$, and the differential operator $d / dx$. \[^{16}\] The point is that while all quantities $\Psi^*$, $\Psi$ and $\mathcal{P}$ in the integrand are distinctly and clearly defined and are complex-numbered and therefore not measurable, the property $P$ on the left hand side of the equation is always real-numbered and therefore measurable.
according to the formulation of Quantum Mechanics.

Thus we have arrived the physical result that, due to the complex-numbered feature of \( \Psi \), what we observe is only its property \( P \), not the system \( \Psi \) itself. This is quite similar to Kant’s “Thing in itself”, which means as aforementioned that although the phenomenal properties of an object can be observed there is a “thing in itself” or “noumenon” of the object, which cannot be observed.

### 7-2. Wave function \( \Psi \) and Kant’s thing-in-itself

To compare Kant’s thing-in-itself with quantum mechanical wave function \( \Psi \) we recall the 7 features of the thing-in-itself listed in Section 6. We have similarly listed the 7 corresponding features for the quantum mechanical wave function \( \Psi \) and compared them. We find they are in agreement, but we omit the detailed comparisons here.\[18]\]

In addition to the agreement in the comparison, the complex-numbered wave function \( \Psi \) contains all the physical properties of the system as demonstrated by Eq.(1). Furthermore, \( \Psi \) can be explicitly found out in mathematical form and is calculable at least in principle by solving the Schrodinger’s equation.\[16]\] Thus although \( \Psi \) may be regarded as an equivalent of Kant’s thing-in-itself, \( \Psi \) is all transparent against the misty notion of the noumenon of Kant’s. In other words while Kant only claimed the existence of the unknowable noumenal thing-in-itself for a system the Quantum Mechanics of Modern Physics gives wave function \( \Psi \), which completely describes the system with all physical properties but cannot be observed, like the thing-in-itself, due to its complex numbered nature.

In the recent book “The Dancing Wu Li Masters” the complex-numbered wave function \( \Psi \) is plainly called as the form of the thing-in-itself. The author says: “Using the Schrodinger’s equation we can calculate the form of this thing-in-itself, this coherent superposition of possibilities which we call a wave function, for any given time.”\[19]\] We agree this treatment although the mathematically expressed wave function \( \Psi \) may be just one form, not the form, of the noumenal thing-in-itself of Kant.

### 7-3. Wave Function \( \Psi \) and Buddhist Self

As stated in Sections 4, 5, the Buddhist Self can be classically understood as existing but not findable in phenomenal realm although it will reveal itself as the No-Two State of mind in the noumenal realm. Now we give a modernized academic description of it in the light of Quantum Mechanical Wave Function.

Since any physical system possesses a wave function \( \Psi \) a living being must also possess a wave function \( \Psi \) because a living being is also a physical system except that the \( \Psi \) should contain at least an extra factor for the mental part of the living being. Furthermore the equivalence of the Holistic self to the thing-in-itself has been described in 6-2. Based on the statement that the thing-in-itself can be described by a Quantum Mechanical Wave Function the Holistic self of a person or a living creature can be
similarly associated with a Wave Function $\Psi$.

The key point is that the $\Psi$ for any system has to be a complex-numbered function because of the complex nature of the basic Schrödinger equation. The complex feature of the $\Psi$ insures that the Holistic self of the living being exists but can not be found in phenomenal realm like the $\Psi$.

Also to be emphasized is the concept of Eq.(1) in 7-1(2): “What we observe is only its property $P$, not the system $\Psi$ itself”. When applying Eq.(1) to the Holistic self the statements in subsection 2-3 on Practical searching of the Holistic self in vain are mathematically justified.

**7-4. Brief summary of the Section**

To conclude the Section we summarize some important results we claim:

1. $\Psi$ can be regarded as the noumenon of a physical and mental system due to the following two features of $\Psi$:
   a. The wave function $\Psi$ for a physical system describes the system completely.
   b. All the physical properties of the system can be derived out from its $\Psi$.

2. $\Psi$ is complex, and is therefore not observable, nor measurable, but calculable in mathematical form.

3. $\Psi$’s properties $P$ are observable, measurable, and calculable as given by Eq.(1).

4. $\Psi$ is a Scientific form of Kant’s Philosophical noumenal thing-in-itself though the latter is quite obscure and the former is transparent.

5. $\Psi$ is also a Scientific form of the Religious Buddhist holistic self as viewed in phenomenal realm with $i = (-1)^{1/2}$ of $\Psi$ indicating that $\Psi$ is noumenal and not observable in phenomenal realm.

6. $\Psi$, thing-in-itself, and holistic self are of different academic category. All the three, existing but not findable in phenomenal realm, tend to describe the noumenon of a system in different cultural depth as human knowledge progresses.

**8. Discussions**

8-3. True Self still existing underlying Chao Fa-shih’s verse

In our introduction we cited Chao Fa-shih’s verse. It seems that with respect to him there is no self to be executed. Whether he truly had no Self as he claimed is to be considered here.

Although his verse says no self there still existed an underlying master, agent or consciousness in him, that possessed the concept of no self. As stated in sub-section 2-3 he could not directly find the underlying master or self until he could eventually enter
the transcendental realm via the mental phase transition. [5]

Thus the underlying master or true self, though could not be found by him in phenomenal realm, still existed!

8-2. Is “No Self, No Soul” really true?

In subsection 2-2 we mention that most contemporary Buddhists and scholars claim the concept of non-self or non-personality. Also we cite from a book the statement “No Self, No Soul”. The book specifies the Self as that “in man there is a permanent, everlasting and absolute entity, which is the unchanging substance behind the changing phenomenal world”. [4] Now we proceed to discuss and resolve the basic problems.

(1). “No Self, No Soul” not really true

a. Analytical

For the “No Self, No Soul” the author of the book gives two reasons: an analytical and a synthetical. The analytical reason is to analyze the Five Aggregates (Five Skandhas) of a person. As a result he can not find “I” or Self of unchanging abiding substance in him. This then leads to “No Self, No Soul”.

Actually this analytical approach is similar to our “Practical searching of self” in subsection 2-3. Indeed we can not find the Self in the phenomenal realm or the dependent originated world. But the Self still exists in a hidden way in the phenomenal realm like the metaphorical illustration of $\sqrt{2}$ in Section 5, which is existing but not findable. The existence of the Self is further justified by the fact that it will exhibit itself as the No-Two State of mind when entering into the transcendental realm. [5] Consequently “No Self, No Soul” is not really true.

b. Synthetical

The author’s synthetical approach is to employ the so-called “Conditioned Genesis”, based on the twelve nidanas or the twelve factors: ignorance, actions, consciousness, mental and physical phenomena, six faculties, contact, sensation, thirst, clinging, process of becoming, birth, and decay and death. [4] Since each factor of these is conditioned as well as conditioning they are all relative, interdependent and interconnected and nothing is absolute or independent. [4] Then he claimed there is no soul or self with unchanging abiding substance.

Now it should be noticed that the realm, within which the Conditioned Genesis is valid, is the phenomenal realm. That soul or self can not be found is just as expected because the true self with unchanging abiding substance exists in a hidden way and can not be found in the phenomenal realm. However one can possibly realize the true self by proceeding in the reverse order of the twelve nidanas and go beyond the realm of Conditioned Genesis after making a breakthrough over the “ignorance” factor. This is actually the way towards the full enlightenment that Buddha Sakyamuni first achieved via the twelve nidanas. Then at the breakthrough a person’s individual self suddenly becomes the holistic self that explicitly exists in
the transcendental realm.

c. Brief conclusion

So we have the following conclusion from (1) and (2) above. The self or soul always exists in the sense that it exists in a hidden way and not findable in the phenomenal realm. Instead, the true self exists explictly as the holistic self in the transcendental or noumenal realm. Consequently “No Self, No Soul” is not valid.

This conclusion is also clear from Section 4, the traditional Buddhist Explanation by the Surangama Sutra. [7] If Buddha had not pointed out the existence of true self over 10 cases then when Ananda’s seeking for the self over 7 places was in vain, he might claim “no self, no soul” although the true self does exist!

(2). The “unchanging substance” always exists

As mentioned at the beginning of this section the book specifies the Self as that “in man there is a permanent, everlasting and absolute entity, which is the unchanging substance behind the changing phenomenal world”. [4]

To justify the existence of the unchanging substance we may simply recall Section 4 about the old king’s story and the followed explanation. He asked the Buddha just the same question about whether there exists a permanent, everlasting and absolute entity, which is the unchanging substance behind the changing phenomenal world. Buddha demonstrated that the original thing of seeing or the true self of a person does not become weakened due to aging and is a non-creating and non-annihilating entity existing with him at all times. In terms of our “tree” illustration below in subsection 8-3(2) the unchanging substance or true self of a person is like the root of a tree, which exists with the tree at all times.

So the existence of the unchanging substance in a person is justified and “no self, no soul” is not really true.

8-3. Consistency of Hinayama and Mahayama

Some contemporary Buddhists and scholars may think that inconsistency exists between Hinayama and Mahayama, such as the Non-self or Self issue. The three signs or proofs of Hinayana are non-permanence, non-personality and nirvana. [2]

On the contrary the Nirvana Sutra of Mahayana says the four virtues: Permanence, Bliss, Personality, and Purity. Apparently Hinayama and Mahayama are not in consistency on the Non-self or Self issue. Our focus now is to clarify the question and show their consistency.

(1). Three proofs of Hinayana being consistent with Mahayana sutras

The three proofs are also given as the three characteristic marks of all Hinayana sutras: the impermanence of phenomena, the unreality of the ego, and nirvana. [22] We note here that the unreality of the ego does not so rigidly deny the existence of Self as the Non-ego or Non-personality. To be more specific for the three signs or proofs the Hinayana <Dhammapada Sutra> says: “Transient are all compound
things”, “Everything that is, is without self”. “Nibbana is supreme say the Buddhhas”. [3]

To clarify the question we should make clear to which realm the statements are made. We first consider the phenomenal realm. The first proof of Hinayana is Non-Permanence or “Transient are all compound things”. Actually Mahayana sutras claim the same. For example, in the end of the Mahayana Daimond Sutra Buddha Sakyamuni said the stanza: [22]

“All phenomena are like
A dream, an illusion, a bubble and a shadow,
Like dew and lightning
Thus should you meditate upon them”.

Clearly this stanza bears the same meaning of the first proof or characteristic mark of Hinayana and there is consistency between Hinayana and Mahayana for the first proof. The second proof of Hinayana says Non-personality, “Everything that is, is without self” or the unreality of the ego. Mahayana sutras also claim the same concept that the individual self or ego is void or empty. For instance, in the first Chapter of Perfect Enlightenment Sutra Buddha says to Bodhisattva Manjusri that an ordinary person wrongly recognizes the four elements of body and six gunas of mind being his self. [24] Actually this is the same concept, with which the Mahayana monk Chao Fa-shih uttered the verse in our Introduction Section when he faced the execution. Thus again there is consistency between Hinayana and Mahayana for the second proof. Of course we still emphasize that although the individual ego being void in the phenomenal realm the true or holistic self exists in a hidden way and will exhibit itself in the transcendental realm as stated in subsection 8-1.

For the third proof of Hinayana, the Nirvana, which is characterized by its four virtues including the non-creating and non-annihilating permanence, we should consider the transcendental or noumenal realm. The state of Nirvana may be described as the No-Two State of mind and is basically the same for both Hinayana and Mahayana. [5] Thus there is no inconsistency between them.

Consequently, all the three proofs of Hinayana doctrine are consistent with Mahayana sutras. However, if we discuss the Hinayana Non-self versus the Mahayana Self without distinguishing which realm we are talking about, we find inconsistency between them. Similarly, if without distinguishing which realm, we may find even contradiction between Non-self (phenomenal realm) and Self (noumenal realm) within the Mahayana doctrine.

It is also a common practice to overlook the existence of nirvana and lose the connection or relation between the phenomenal and noumenal realms. This common practice of overlooking nirvana may lead to a “No Self, No Soul” Buddhism, which is not expected as aforementioned. To emphasize the relation between phenomenal and noumenal realms we give an analogical illustration via a...
tree below.

(2). A tree as an analogical illustration

The doctrine of either Mahayana or Hinayana may be analogized as a tree. In general a tree has flowers, leaves, branches, a stem above the ground (in the air phase) and a root below the ground (in the soil phase). The tree of Mahayana may have more flowers than the tree of Hinayana. The flowers, leaves, branches and the stem above the ground are analogized as the 1st and 2nd proofs of Hinayana in the phenomenal realm whereas the root is analogized as Nirvana or the holistic Self or the 3rd proof of Hinayana. The air phase and the soil phase are analogized as phenomenal and noumenal or transcendental realm respectively.

When we are in the air phase (the phenomenal realm), if we want to find out the root (the true Self) it can not be found. Then some people claim No Root at all. But we should not say No Root (Non-Self) at all. In fact, the effects and functioning of the Root do exist in this air phase. Therefore we say that the Root (the true Self) exists in a hidden way and not findable in the air phase (the phenomenal realm) but the Root (the true Self) will exhibit itself in the soil phase (the transcendental realm).

Some Hinayana devotees claim Non-self due to overlooking the existence of true Self. This is just like people watching a tree’s flowers, leaves, branches, stem on the ground but overlooking its root under the ground. Similar is the situation for Mahayana devotees, like the monk Chao Fa-shih who gave the verse discussed in Section 1 and subsection 8-1.

One function of root is to support the flowers, leaves, branches, and stem with nutrition. Likewise the true Self supports a person for his living. For instance, in subsection 4-1 we mention the story of an old king in which the “original thing” or the true Self has not been weakened for a person’s whole life. He could not see anything if without the “original thing” or the true Self.

When you want to look for the root in the air phase you have to go down along the stem. At first you might wrongly think the stem (Ego) being the root (true Self). You keep going down until meeting the air-soil boundary. Then you subject to the air-soil phase transition (the phenomenal-noumenal mental phase transition). Finally you find the root (realize the true Self, the No-Two State of mind, or the state of nirvana).

9. Summary for Self or Non-self and Brief Conclusion

9-1. Summary for Self or Non-self

Our claim is the existence of the true or holistic self. Non-self should be better interpreted as: Self not findable but existing in a hidden way. We summarize our main results in the following:

(1). An ancient monk had the concept of no Master, Ego, Self or Personality and
therefore felt easy to face the execution. However, careful study reveals that he still had underlying Master or true Self, that possessed the concept of no Master, Self or Personality

(2). Statements for non-self are:

a. The three proofs of Buddhist Hinayana doctrine holds non-self. To be more specific the Hinayana <Dhammapada Sutra> says: “Everything that is, is without self”. [3]

b. Most contemporary Mahayana and Hinayana Buddhists and scholars claim non-self or non-personality. The popular book “What the Buddha taught?” explicitly says “No Self, No Soul” with reasons from the “Conditioned Genesis”, which is based on the twelve nidanas of Buddhism. [4]

c. Practical searching for self, both physically and mentally, can not directly find out the self.

(3). Statement for self is mainly from the Nirvana Sutra, which claims the four virtues including the transcendental Personality or the true self, or more formally the holistic self.

(4). Explanation for the Self or Non-self issue is traditionally given in the Surangama Sutra via Ananda’s searching for self and the story of an old king. The former demonstrated that no self can be found in phenomenal world or realm. The latter showed via Buddha’s answer to the king that the true self always exists and functions there in the transcendental or noumenal realm. Thus the issue is resolved: Non-self should mean “Self not findable in phenomenal realm” and the true self always exists there in a hidden way in the transcendental realm.

(5). To make the fact “existing but not findable” easily understandable we give a metaphorical illustration of $\sqrt{2}$, which exists between 1.414 and 1.415 but not findable in the decimal fractional system or realm.

(6). Philosophically the feature “existing but not findable” appears in the form of Kant’s Thing-in-itself, which is proposed as equivalent to the true or holistic self.

(7). Scientifically the feature “existing but not findable” appears in the form of the Quantum Mechanical Wave Function $\Psi$, whose complex-number property makes it not findable. $\Psi$, the Thing-in-itself, and the true or holistic self are essentially equivalent to one another.

(8). The true or holistic self is analogized to the root of a tree, which is not findable in the air phase (the phenomenal realm) but exists in the soil phase (the noumenal realm) and functions to support the life of the stem, branches, etc. (the ego, etc.) of the tree.

9-2. Brief Conclusion

We have fully explained and resolved the issue over self or non-self. The
significance of assurance of the holistic self would be the following:

a. Buddhist true self, philosophical thing-in-itself, and the scientific quantum mechanical $\Psi$ have been compared and synthesized, resulting in ascertaining the existence of the ontological ultimate noumenon (the true self) for human being.

b. A religion with “no self, no soul” would not be expected as a normal one. Now the “no self, no soul” concept has been shown as invalid within the Buddhist religion, which should be normal as expected.

c. Contrary to the “no self, no soul” concept the existence and the availability of the holistic self provides the ultimate home or reality with unparalleled transcendental joy for an individual being. Significance, direction of efforts, destination, etc., of a person’s life would be more meaningful and interesting should the holistic self be taken into consideration.
Buddhist Self or No Self, Kant's Thing-in-itself and the Quantum Mechanical Wave Function
George S. Wang

References:


[6]. Same as [1], p.328; also [5].


[13]. Ditto, p.53
[16]. Ditto, p.145.
[18]. Same as [10], P.28.
[21]. (In Chinese): The Complete Enlightenment Sutra, 1st Chapter. (<圓覺經>第一品)
Figure 1. Showing the feature of $\sqrt{2}$: existing but not findable.
Abstract

The aim of this writing is to fully discuss and thereby to resolve the issue over Self or Non-self in Buddhism. Our result is confirmation of the existence of the true or holistic self.

We start consideration with a verse uttered by an ancient monk, who had the concept of no Master, Ego, Self or Personality and therefore felt easy to face the execution. However, careful study after our full discussion reveals that he still had underlying Master or true Self that possessed the concept of no Master, Self or Personality.

For the non-self part, the 2nd of the three proofs of Buddhist Hinayana doctrine as well as the Hinayana <Dhammapada Sutra> certainly holds non-self. Besides, most contemporary Mahayana and Hinayana Buddhists and scholars claim non-self or non-personality. The popular book “What the Buddha taught?” explicitly says “No Self, No Soul”. In fact practical searching for self, both physically and mentally, can not directly find out the self.

Statement for self is mainly from the Nirvana Sutra, which claims the four virtues including the transcendental Personality or the true self, or more formally the holistic self.

Explanation for the Self or Non-self issue is traditionally given in the Surangama Sutra via Ananda’s searching for self and the story of an old king. The former demonstrated that no self can be found in phenomenal world or realm. The latter showed via Buddha’s answer to the king that the true self always exists and functions there in the transcendent or noumenal realm. Thus the issue is resolved: Non-self should mean “Self not findable in phenomenal realm” and the true self always exists there in a hidden way in the transcendent realm.

To make the fact “existing but not findable” easily understandable we give a metaphorical illustration of $\sqrt{2}$, which exists between 1.414 and 1.415 but not findable in the decimal fractional system or realm.

Philosophically the feature “existing but not findable” appears in the form of Kant’s Thing-in-itself, which is proposed as equivalent to the true or holistic self. And scientifically the feature “existing but not findable” appears in the form of the Quantum Mechanical Wave Function $\Psi$, whose complex-number property makes it not findable. $\Psi$, the Thing-in-itself, and the true or holistic self are essentially equivalent to one another.

The true or holistic self is analogized to the root of a tree, which is not findable in the air phase (the phenomenal realm) but exists in the soil phase (the noumenal realm) and functions to support the life of the stem, branches, etc. (the ego, etc.) of the tree.

A brief conclusion is that, contrary to the “no self, no soul” concept, the existence
and the availability of the holistic self provides the ultimate home or reality with unparalleled transcendental joy for an individual being. Significance, direction of efforts, destination, etc., of a person’s life would be more meaningful and interesting.

------------------------------------------------

【Ps. This paper is published in 〈Hsi Lai Journal of Humanistic Buddhism〉