

PHIL 426.001/526.001

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The Self in Indian Philosophy

John Taber

An introduction to the dispute about the existence and nature of the self (*ātman*, *atta*) in Indian philosophy and its implications for Western philosophy. We will start by acquainting ourselves with the (alleged) denial of a self in early Buddhist literature (300–100 B.C.E.), reading several *suttas* (“discourses of the Buddha”) to get a feel for the subtlety and complexity (some would say “evasiveness”) of the Buddha’s statements regarding a self. In connection with early Buddhism we will also look at some passages from the Upaniṣads that advocate realization of one’s true nature as Brahman, in other words, that one’s self = Brahman, which Buddha may have been targeting. We will continue by considering various Brahmanical (i.e., Hindu) responses to the Buddhist challenge and Vasubandhu’s attempt to work out a rigorous formulation of an “orthodox” Buddhist position of No-self (5th c. C.E.), as well as some other later Buddhist “proofs” (e.g., Dharmakīrti’s) that there is no such thing as a self. We will also, for perspective and contrast, read a portion of Plato’s *Phaedo*, which is dedicated to proving the immortality of the soul (*psychē*), along with an (easy but very engaging) introduction to the problem of personal identity in modern analytic philosophy (John Perry’s *A Dialogue Concerning Personal Identity and Immortality*). We will conclude by discussing and assessing an attempt to revive—and even recommend—the idea that you do not have a self by the contemporary philosopher Jay Garfield (*Losing Ourselves: Learning to Live Without a Self*).

If by the end of the course you have actually gotten rid of your self you are assured of an “A.” Otherwise, your grade will be based on weekly study questions to the readings (still considering this) and a final paper.