

TITLE: David Hume on the Concept of No-Self: A Buddhist Critique

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Abstract

The philosophical subjects of epistemology would be substantially different than they are today if there had been no David Hume. Hume challenged traditional philosophical beliefs in ways that shocked the readers of his day and have demanded the attention of philosophers ever since. According to the standard interpretation of Hume on personal identity, he was a Bundle Theorist, who held that the self is nothing but a bundle of interconnected perceptions linked by relations of similarity and causality—or that our idea of the self is just the idea of such a bundle. He argued that all our ideas are derived originally from sense impressions and that since our beliefs are based not on reason but on imagination they can not be rationally justified.

Hume was considered as the founder of the notion that all ideas are grounded in sensory experience, moving even further away from the possibility of absolute

certainty of knowledge derived from all perception into ideas and impressions. Hume also argued that we can only have knowledge from the “relation of ideas” and believed that all our knowledge is limited to what we experience namely sensory impressions.

In Buddhist philosophy, we can gain knowledge through: wisdom acquired by learning; wisdom acquired by thinking; and wisdom acquired by meditation (*bhāvanāmayapaññā*). However, Hume was an empiricist who insisted that knowledge can be perceived only from direct experiences through our five senses. Buddhist philosophy has presented the authentic knowledge in Buddhism in terms of its fundamental teachings: the four noble truths; dependent origination; and the three characteristics of being (*aniccatā*, *dhukkhatā*, and *anattatā*). This knowledge is said to bring about a radical transformation in the personality of the knower acquired by insight meditation (*bhāvanāmayapaññā*). This is knowledge beyond Hume’s five senses. In contrast, the Buddhist looks at all kinds of knowledge humans must acquire by their own efforts since Buddhists denied a God who created all things. Therefore, we must use our pure knowledge in developing our physical and mental abilities and potentials. If we can develop these, we will understand everything as it really is.