



From Emptiness to Nothingness: Translating Buddhist Non-Self and the Western Construction of Nihilism

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Abstract

The Buddhist principle of non-self (anattā) is sometimes depicted in Western academic circles as a kind of nihilism; nevertheless, this connection is influenced as much by the history of translation and cultural exchange as by the theory itself. Current academic discourse has predominantly regarded anattā and śūnyatā as definitive philosophical stances, neglecting their translation and intercultural dialogue, thereby raising the issue of how English interpretations of these terms especially the transition from “emptiness” to “nothingness” influenced the Western perception of Buddhism as a philosophy centred on negation. This essay examines how translation decisions and European philosophical frameworks have redefined Buddhist non-self as a concept linked to nihilism. The study examines the evolution from early Jesuit and Victorian interpretations of Buddhism to Nietzschean comparisons and modern philosophical discussions using comparative textual analysis, translation-focused close reading, and reception/discourse analysis. It contends that equating Buddhist emptiness with nothingness is indicative of a historical process of translation and interpretation, rather than an authentic representation of the doctrine, and that reinstating the differentiation between conventional identity and an enduring metaphysical self-elucidates the true assertion of non-self. The study enhances translation studies, cross-cultural discourse analysis, and comparative philosophy by demonstrating that language mediation, rather than doctrine alone, generated the nihilistic interpretation of Buddhism in the West.

Keywords: Buddhist translation; Western reception; non-self (anattā); emptiness (śūnyatā); nihilism; cross-cultural discourse; comparative philosophy; cultural interpretation

1. Introduction

The Buddhist teaching of non-self is one of the most persistently mistranslated ideas in the cross-cultural transmission of Buddhism into Western languages and thought. Its central claim that all phenomena, including the human person, are composite and without a permanent essence has repeatedly been rendered in English and other European languages in ways that invite a nihilistic reading (Verhoeven, 2006). This is not simply a matter of philosophical disagreement. It is, this article argues, a problem of translation: the terms chosen by early missionaries, colonial administrators, and Victorian Orientalists to render *anattā* and *śūnyatā* into European languages carried metaphysical assumptions that the source terms did not require, and those choices have shaped Buddhist studies and popular understanding of Buddhism ever since. This paper explores not if Buddhism “is” nihilistic, but how it has come to be represented as such and what the history of translation and reception tells us about that portrayal.

The article is divided into four sections. Section 1 defines the key Buddhist terminology *anattā*/*anātman*, dependent origination, *svabhāva*, and *śūnyatā* and considers how each has been translated into English. Section 2 traces the history of Western reception of Buddhism, from early Jesuit accounts through Victorian scholarship to Nietzschean comparative philosophy, demonstrating how European intellectual categories shaped representations of Buddhist doctrine. Section 3 provides a comparative textual analysis of the terminology at stake self/non-self, emptiness/nothingness, and existence/non existence, conventional/absolute to demonstrate how shifts in translation diverted philosophical meaning. Section 4 concludes by arguing that nihilistic readings of Buddhism came substantially through conceptual and linguistic transformation in translation and reception, rather than through the doctrine of non-self itself.

1.1 Research Gap

There has been considerable work on *anattā* and *śūnyatā* as philosophical positions produced by Buddhist studies and comparative philosophy (Garfield & Van Norden, 2023; Westerhoff, 2022), and postcolonial scholarship has separately addressed how Western scholarship constructed Buddhism as an object of study (Almond, 1988; Clarke, 1997; Lopez, 1995). What is still missing is the link between these two bodies of work: an extended account of how specific choices in translation rendering *śūnyatā* as “nothingness” rather than “emptiness,” or treating *anattā* as a claim of non-existence rather than non-substantiality functioned as the mechanism through which Western reception constructed Buddhism as nihilistic. This paper seeks to fill this gap by integrating translation-oriented textual analysis with the history of Western reception.

1.2 Research Aim and Question

The purpose of this study is to investigate how translation and Western intellectual discourse converted the Buddhist theory of non-self and emptiness into a concept linked with nihilism. The guiding question is whether specific English renderings of *anattā* and *śūnyatā*, produced within specific historical and intellectual contexts, generated the nihilistic reading of Buddhism that has persisted in Western thought, and what recovery of the original semantic range of these terms reveals about that reading.

1.3 Methodology

The article employs three complementary methodologies. First, comparative textual analysis places Buddhist source terms (*anattā*, *anātman*, *śūnyatā*, *svabhāva*) alongside their principal English renderings to identify where meaning shifts occur. Second, translation-oriented close reading examines specific passages from the Pāli canon and their English translations to show how word choice shapes philosophical implication. Third, reception and discourse analysis situates key moments in the Western encounter with Buddhism Jesuit missionary accounts, Victorian Orientalist scholarship, and Nietzsche-era comparative philosophy within their historical context, drawing on postcolonial and translation-studies scholarship on the construction of Buddhism as an object of Western knowledge.

1.4 Related Scholarship

Recent work in analytic and comparative philosophy continues to debate the metaphysical status of *anattā*, generally treating it as a philosophical position to be assessed on its own terms (Garfield & Van Norden, 2023; Westerhoff, 2022). A separate and older tradition of scholarship, beginning with Edward Said’s account of Orientalism (Said, 1978) has examined how European scholarship constructed “the East” as an object of study. Philip Almond’s history of the Victorian encounter with Buddhism shows that Buddhism only emerged as a distinct religious category in the Western mind during the nineteenth century, assembled

largely from texts rather than lived practice. (Almond, 1988). Donald Lopez's edited volume extends this postcolonial critique specifically to the discipline of Buddhist studies, arguing that many of its foundational assumptions were shaped by the colonial contexts in which the discipline formed, (Lopez, 1995). While J. J. Clarke traces the broader pattern of selective Western appropriation of Asian thought across two centuries (Clarke, 1997). This article draws these two strands of scholarship together, using the philosophical precision of the first to identify what is lost or added in translation, and the historical account of the second to explain why those particular losses and additions occurred.

2. Buddhist Non-Self and Key Terminology

Buddhist teaching holds that all phenomena, including the human person, are composite and lack a permanent, independent essence. The Buddha's doctrine of anattā (Pali; anātman in Sanskrit), literally "non-self" or "not-self," states that no phenomenon possesses svabhāva an intrinsic, self-existing nature of its own. This claim is closely linked to pratītyasamutpāda, or dependent origination: because all phenomena arise interdependently, none exists independently, and in this specific sense each is "empty," or śūnyatā ("emptiness"), most fully developed by Nāgārjuna, generalises this claim beyond the person to all phenomena.

These four terms are related but not interchangeable. Anattā/anātman denies a permanent self specifically; svabhāva names the intrinsic, independent existence that is being denied; pratītyasamutpāda supplies the positive account of how phenomena do exist, namely dependently; and śūnyatā is the resulting characterisation of phenomena as empty of independent existence. Treating these as synonyms, as earlier accounts of this argument have tended to do, obscures the distinct philosophical work each term performs and makes the doctrine easier to collapse into a single undifferentiated claim of "nothing exists."

2.1 Translating "Self" and "Non-Self"

English translators have rendered anattā as "no-self," "non-self," or "not-self." The choice is not neutral. The phrase "no-self" is most typically used to refer to no self at all, which is an ontological claim. "Not-self" is a statement concerning identification, not existence, which says that certain occurrences are not to be identified with the self. Between the two is "non-self," the typical English translation, which has been ambiguous enough to allow the two readings to coexist in Western critique. The essay addresses the possibility of a nihilistic misinterpretation arising from the absence of a single language in English to convey the Pali concept of anattā as the negation of a certain kind of selfhood (a fixed, independent, enduring self) rather than the negation of selfhood itself.

2.2 Translating "Emptiness" and "Nothingness"

The paper covers the essential question of translation, which is the contrast between "emptiness" and "nothingness." Śūnyatā signifies that a phenomena is bereft of autonomous, permanent selfhood, it lacks svabhāva, not that the phenomenon does not exist at all. "Empty of independent selfhood" and "nothing exists" are logically different claims: the former is consistent with ordinary, dependent life; the latter rejects existence tout court. However, from the seventeenth century onwards, Western writers often translated śūnyatā as "nothingness," which flattens this difference and imports an ontological assertion not made by the Buddhist original word. Reiterated over centuries of academia, this one translation decision accomplished much of the job to make Buddhism nihilistic in the perception of the West.

The Buddha's own instruction to Ananda is an exact exemplification of the Pāli use. When asked why it is claimed that 'empty is the world', the Buddha responds it is because the universe is empty 'of self and what pertains to self' (Samyutta Nikaya, 35:85) The emptiness referred to is not a universal emptiness of existence, but a specific emptiness of self. Read with subsequent translations that generalised this into unqualified "nothingness," the paragraph illustrates how a specific, defined remark was converted into a vast philosophical one via the accumulation of translation choices over time.

3. Western Reception of Buddhism

"Nihilism" entered European philosophical vocabulary in the eighteenth century and was developed across the nineteenth, most influentially by Nietzsche, who defined it as the radical repudiation of value and meaning, the devaluation of the highest values, and the absence of any answer to the question "why?" (Nietzsche, 1968) It was against this already-formed European concept that early Western accounts of Buddhism were measured, rather than the reverse.

One of the earliest influential accounts came from the Jesuit-derived compilation of Jean-Baptiste Du Halde, whose 1735 description of Chinese religion characterized Buddhist teaching as holding that a “Vacuum or Nothing” is the first principle from which all things arise and to which they return, and that practitioners cultivate this state by learning “to desire nothing, to perceive nothing, to think on nothing”(Du Halde,1736) Writing without access to Buddhist source texts and working through missionary intermediaries, Du Halde’s account already frames *sūnyatā*-adjacent ideas in terms of European vacuum and nothingness rather than in terms the tradition itself would use.

This framing persisted into Victorian scholarship. As Philip Almond has shown, Buddhism only became a distinct object of Western knowledge during the nineteenth century, constructed largely from translated texts read by scholars who had rarely encountered Buddhist practice directly (Almond, 1988). Max Müller’s widely read studies made the association between Buddhism and negation a recurring theme (Muller, 1893) and Benjamin Elman’s history of the comparison between Nietzsche and Buddhism documents how European scholars repeatedly characterized Buddhism as nihilistic and pessimistic on this basis. (Elman,1983) Arthur Danto affirmed an element of nihilism in Buddhist thought but nonetheless insisted that Nietzschean nihilism must be distinguished from what he called the Buddhist “nihilism of emptiness”(Danto,1965), an early acknowledgement that the Buddhist and European concepts were not simply identical.

3.1 Historical Translation Context

There were several reasons for the early translation of Buddhist emptiness as nothingness. Missionary and colonial translators did not have the linguistic and philological resources which were subsequently created by academics and they very often used secondary reports rather than direct access to the Pāli or Sanskrit sources .European readers also lacked a ready conceptual equivalent for *sūnyatā* and reached for the nearest available term “nothing” or “void” which carried the full weight of the European philosophical tradition’s association between negation and nihilism. Donald Lopez’s account of Buddhist studies under colonialism situates this pattern within the broader institutional conditions of the discipline’s formation, in which European categories of religion, doctrine, and metaphysics were applied to Buddhist material largely on European terms (Lopez, 1995). The equation of emptiness with nothingness was, on this account, less a discovery about Buddhist doctrine than an artefact of the conditions under which that doctrine was first translated and studied.

4. Translating Emptiness: From Buddhist Non-Self to Western Nihilism

Nagarjuna’s Mādhyamaka school, whose central doctrine of *sūnyatā* has been described by critics as the most nihilistic strand of Buddhist thought, offers the clearest case of how translation altered meaning (Elman,1983) *Śūnyatā*, now generally translated as “emptiness,” was rendered by earlier Western commentators as “nothingness.” Once the term is restored to “emptiness,” the claim that Buddhist non-self implies nihilism becomes considerably harder to sustain, since emptiness of independent existence is compatible with conventional existence in a way that nothingness is not.

4.1 Comparative Textual Analysis

Four paired terms recur across this material and each pairing marks a site where translation can shift meaning: self/non-self, where the ambiguity of “non-self” in English allows both an identification-claim and an existence-claim to be read into the same word; emptiness/nothingness, where the former is a qualified claim about independent existence and the latter an unqualified claim about existence as such; existence/non-existence, a binary the doctrine of dependent origination is specifically designed to avoid, since phenomena are said to arise dependently rather than to simply exist or not exist; and conventional/absolute, the distinction between how things function at the level of everyday experience and language and how they are characterized at the level of ultimate analysis. Reading Buddhist source material without attention to this last distinction is what allows conventional statements about persons to be mistaken for absolute denials of existence, and vice versa.

4.2 Conventional Self and Permanent Self

The doctrine of non-self is best understood not as requiring a prior assumption of an actually existing metaphysical self, but as operating at two distinct levels: the conventional level, at which persons refer to

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themselves and are referred to using ordinary self-language, and the level of ultimate analysis, at which no permanent, independent, unchanging self is found. The Buddha's own instruction to his disciples to "be islands to yourselves, be a refuge to yourselves" (Cakkavatti-Sihananda Sutta) uses ordinary self-language at the conventional level without thereby affirming a permanent metaphysical self. Once the levels are distinguished, the two are not in tension. This reinterpretation is not to say that non-self logically requires a real self in the metaphysical sense. What non-self implies is just the conventional, functional notion of selfhood ingrained in common language and experience, not the permanent essence the theory rejects.

4.3 The Limits of Nihilistic and Eternalist Readings

Buddhist tradition itself indicates eternalism and nihilism as the two extremes the teaching is designed to avoid. A passage in the Udāna describing Nirvāṇa denies that the state in question can be identified with any of the standard elements, spheres of consciousness, or worlds, and denies equally that it involves "coming or going, enduring, death or birth," instead describing it simply as "the end of suffering" (Udana, 8:3). The paragraph is hard to describe in terms of simple existence or simple non-existence, which is compatible with a theory that is in between eternalism and nihilism rather than falling into either (Sharma, 2000). Later interpreters who say that in the depths of the self-one "can find nothing" (Dilworth, 1987) are, on this reading, describing an experienced lack of a stable self-referent, rather than making the metaphysical argument that nothing exists (Oosterling, 2012).

4.4 Dependent Origination as a Response to Nihilism

This makes the idea of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) the greatest internal argument against a nihilistic interpretation. The teaching that "whoever sees dependent origination sees the Dharma" (Majjhima Nikaya, 1:28) presents reality as a collection of interdependent, ongoing processes rather than as a collection of independent beings or as nothing at all. Suffering arises specifically from the ignorance that treats the aggregates (*skandhas*) as belonging to a fixed self, not from the aggregates' lack of independent existence itself (Sopa, 1986). This locates the theory in the position of an analysis of the way things exist dependently, rather than as a denial that they exist.

4.5 Kalupahana on Self-Feeling and Contextual Identity

David Kalupahana's influential reading offers the clearest philosophical statement of this distinction. He observes that the Buddha spoke readily of 'I,' 'myself,' and 'the self' at the conventional level, recognising "the feeling of individuality" as real and contextual rather than as "a static entity to which everything belongs" (Kalupahana, 1987). For Kalupahana, the Buddha discouraged 'I-making' and 'mine-making' the solidification of this contextual feeling into an absolute, unchanging 'pure ego' without denying the feeling of self-reference itself. This is precisely the conventional/absolute distinction developed above: the self-feeling is "dependently arisen, and, is therefore contextual, not absolute" (Kalupahana, 1987). Used analytically rather than as free-standing evidence, Kalupahana's account supports reading non-self as a claim about the contextual, non-absolute status of selfhood rather than a denial that persons exist in any sense.

4.6 Cultural Studies Dimension

The pattern traced in this section is not simply a series of individual translation errors but a broader mode of cultural representation. Nineteenth-century European scholarship tended to read non-Western religious and philosophical systems through categories theism, atheism, nihilism, pessimism developed within European intellectual history, and to judge those systems by how well they mapped onto those categories. (Said, 1978). Buddhism's repeated characterisation as nihilistic reflects this broader pattern of representation: a non-theistic tradition that denied a permanent soul was read, within a European framework organised around theism and its negation, as a religion of negation as such. Understanding the nihilism debate as a problem of cultural representation, and not only of doctrinal content, connects it to the wider history of how Buddhism was received, classified, and popularised in the West.

4.7 Comparative Discourse Dimension

Framed comparatively, the Buddhist and European philosophical traditions can be understood as two discursive traditions addressing related questions the status of the self, the nature of existence, the source of meaning through different conceptual vocabularies, rather than as one tradition offering the correct answer and the other a mistaken one. Nietzschean nihilism, arising from a post-theistic European crisis of value

following what Nietzsche described as the death of God, and Buddhist non-self, arising from a soteriological analysis of suffering and its causes, address different problems even where their vocabularies of “emptiness” and “nothing” appear to overlap (Danto, 1965). Treating them as discursive traditions in dialogue, rather than as commensurable claims to be judged by a single standard, better accounts for both the genuine points of contact between them and the points at which translation has produced false equivalence.

5. Conclusion

This article has argued that the widespread characterization of Buddhist non-self as a form of nihilism is substantially a product of translation and reception history rather than an accurate account of the doctrine. From Du Halde’s eighteenth-century description of a Buddhist “Vacuum or Nothing” to Victorian scholarship’s association of Buddhism with negation and pessimism, the recurring translation of *śūnyatā* as “nothingness” rather than “emptiness,” and of *anattā* as an unqualified denial of selfhood rather than a denial of permanent, independent selfhood, did much of the work of constructing Buddhism as nihilistic in the Western mind. (Du Halde, 1736; Elman, 1983; Müller, 1893; Almond, 1988)

Restoring the distinctions this article has traced between emptiness and nothingness, between conventional and absolute selfhood, and between dependent existence and non-existence — does not settle every philosophical question the comparison between Buddhism and nihilism raises. It does, however, relocate the source of the nihilistic reading from the doctrine itself to the specific historical conditions under which that doctrine was translated and received. Recognizing this translation history contributes to translation studies and cross-cultural discourse analysis by showing how conceptual transformation across languages can produce, and sustain across centuries of scholarship, a philosophical characterization the source tradition does not itself support.

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