

Class Three - The Buddhist Theory of No-Self, and the Two Truths in Early Indian Buddhism

Appearance and Reality - Ryan Simonelli

March 25, 2024

1 Some Context and Background on Buddhism

- **The Story of the Buddha:** Siddhartha Gautama, lived sometime around the 5th or 6th century BCE. According to the standard story:
 - He was a prince from the Śākya clan, growing up in a palace, as a prince does, enjoying all of the luxuries and comforts of a life of royalty.
 - At the age of 29, he ventures into town and encounters, for the first time, an old person, a sick person, and a corpse. This prompts him to leave his palace and live the life of a wandering ascetic, mastering meditation techniques with the aim understanding how to free oneself from pain and suffering.
 - After six years, he meditated under a fig tree and achieved “awakening,” becoming aware of the cause of and way to alleviate suffering.
 - * Buddha, comes from the Sanskrit word *budh*, the root of the verb *bodhati*, which means “to wake up.” So, a Buddha, is simply one who has woken up.
 - Most Buddhist traditions actually acknowledge the existence of many Buddhas, not just Siddhartha Gautama.
- **Buddhism and Buddhist Philosophy:** Buddhism began as the Buddha went around giving sermons and gathering followers. The Buddha didn’t write anything himself (as far as we know), but his teachings were compiled in various texts known as the Buddhist *suttas* (Pali) or *sūtras* (Sanskrit), which were then developed and systematized in different ways by different Buddhist philosophers.
 - **Theravāda Buddhism:** Literally “School of the Elders.” Based on a set of early Pāli suttas, known as the “Pāli Canon,” thought to be the definitive teaching of the Buddha.
 - **Mahāyāna Buddhism:** A branch of Buddhism that, in addition to accepting the scriptures of Theravāda Buddhism, also accepts further scriptures (the Mahāyāna sūtras) as authoritative. These, include, for instance:
 - * The Prajñāpāramitā (perfection of wisdom) sūtras.
 - Central to the Madhyamaka tradition we’ll look at in two weeks.
 - * The Laṅkāvatāra sūtra and the Saṃdhinirmocana sūtra.
 - Central to the Cittamātra tradition we’ll look at in four weeks.
 - **Note:** Whether certain spellings are used (e.g. Dhamma vs. Dharma) depends on whether the text is Pāli or Sanskrit.

With the exception of today, where we’re looking at early Pāli texts, most of the philosophers we’re reading belong to the Mahāyāna tradition.

- **Basic Buddhist Doctrine:** The most basic Buddhist doctrine is the *four noble truths* (or, perhaps more accurately, four truths of the nobles), laid out in the *Dhammacakkappavattana sutta* (Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion), supposedly the Buddha’s first sermon:
 - **First Noble Truth:** There is suffering or, more generally, unsatisfactoriness.

- **Second Noble Truth:** The cause of suffering is the fact that we're attached to things.
- **Third Noble Truth:** It's possible to end suffering through letting go of attachment.
- **Fourth Noble Truth:** There's a particular path (the noble eightfold path), taught by the Buddha, through which the cessation of suffering can be achieved.
- **Question:** What are we really attached to that is ultimately causing our suffering?
 - **Answer:** Well, lots of things, but most fundamentally a conception of our *selves*, these things that each of us calls "I" and clings to as essentially our own.
 - * If there is no "me," then there is no "mine," and so there is nothing I can cling to as such.

2 The Argument of the Anatta-lakkhaṇa Sutta

- **Some Context:** Purportedly the second sermon that the Buddha gave.
- **The Basic Argument:** There is a single argument form of the text that is first executed for material form (*rūpa*), and then repeated again for feeling, perception, thoughts, and consciousness. Here's the statement of the argument:

Material form, monks, is not-Self. Now were this material form Self, it would not lead to affliction, and one would be able to effectively say, 'Let my material form be like this, or not like this.' But inasmuch as material form is not-Self, therefore it leads to affliction, and one cannot effectively say, 'Let my material form be like this, or not like this.'

- **Spelling it Out:** We can put the basic argument in premise/conclusion form as follows:
 1. If something was the self, then we would have absolute agency over it, and thus, it would not afflict us, since we could simply will it to be such a way that it will not afflict us.
 2. Everything with which we might possibly try to identify the self is such that it can afflict us and so not something over which we have absolute agency.
 3. So, there is nothing which which we could possibly identify the self.

3 The Negative Point of the Milindapañha

- **Some Context:** The Milindapañha, "Questions of King Milinda," is a classic Abidharma text.
 - **Abidharma:** Early Indian Buddhist philosophy which aimed to systematize the teachings of the Buddha.
 - **Nāgasena:** A Buddhist monk who (purportedly) lived around 150BC
 - **King Milinda:** Menander I, in Greek: an Indo-Greek king (reigning over modern day Afghanistan, Pakistan and northwestern India), who engaged in dialogue with Buddhists in India and (purportedly) converted to
 - **The Thought:** There are lots of things that we can pinpoint upon reflection or observation, for instance, particular mental states or events, arms, legs, fingers, and so on. The "self" is not identical with any of these things nor with some collection of them, but, rather, is said to *possess* all of them.
- **Negative Point: The Unfindability of Self:** The King investigates all of the things that are findable in Nāgasena, and can't find Nāgasena. There are four possibilities:
 - **Identical to Physical Stuff:** It seems that there's no part of the body that one can identify with Nāgasena (not the hair, teeth, skin, flesh, etc) nor all of these things combined.

- **Identical to Mental Stuff:** It seems that there's no particular mental state (perception, volition, etc) or event that one can identify with Nāgasena, nor all of these things combined (for the reason below).
- **Combination of Physical and Mental Stuff:** Is Nāgasena the combination of all the physical stuff and all the mental stuff? Nāgasena says "No."
 - * **Quick Argument:** Intuitively, it seems that one could have different physical properties or different mental states and still be the person that one is. So one can't be identical to the total collection of physical and mental states.
- **Something Other than the Physical and Mental Stuff:** Clearly, there *is* nothing else than the physical and mental stuff that can be found. So Nāgasena can't be anything other than the physical and mental stuff.

Conclusion: The King concludes that there is no such individual as Nāgasena: "Nāgasena is only a sound."

- **The Negative Point, Summed Up by Candrakīrti:** Candrakīrti sums up this negative point as follows (read "aggregates" as "mental and/or physical stuff"):

"Therefore, the basis of self-grasping is not an entity.
It is neither identical to nor different from the aggregates."

4 The Positive Point of the Milindapañha, and the Two Truths

- **Is Nāgasena a Liar?:** Upon accepting the negative point, King Milinda accuses Nāgasena of *lying* when he says, for instance "I am known as Nāgasena."

"Though I, venerable sir, am asking you repeatedly, I do not see this Nāgasena. Nāgasena is only a sound, venerable sir. For who here is Nāgasena? You, venerable sir, are speaking an untruth, a lying word."
- **The Chariot Analogy:** Nāgasena asks the king if he came on foot or in a chariot. The king answers "in a chariot." Nāgasena then runs the same argument to show that there is no chariot (it's neither identical to its parts nor distinct from them), and accuses the king of lying right back!
- **The Point:** Words like "chariot" and names like "Nāgasena" aren't *meaningless*—they conventionally designate things. It's just that these things they designate exist only conventionally—they don't hold up under philosophical analysis.
- **The Positive Point, Summed Up by Vasubandhu:**

"We do not deny a self that exists through designation, a self that is only a name given to the aggregates. But far from us is the thought that the aggregates pass into another world! They are momentary and incapable of transmigrating."
- **The Positive Point, Summed Up by Candrakīrti:**

"We maintain that [the self (and the chariot, for that matter)] exists insofar as it is not analyzed, within the framework of conventional truth [...] we say that the self is merely designated on the basis of the aggregates in the context of mundane convention. That is, the self is seen only in the context of convention."
- **Vasubandhu's Characterization:** Vasubandhu provides the following characterization of the traditional Abhidharma distinction between conventional and ultimate:

"An entity, the cognition of which does not arise when it is destroyed [i.e. broken down] and mentally divided, conventionally exists, like a pot and water. Ultimate existence is otherwise."
- **Spelling this Out:** Thakchoe identifies three features of conventional existents and three opposite features of ultimate existents:
 - **Conventional Existents:**

- * **Reducible:** They “disintegrate,” both physically and mentally, when subject to physical/mental destruction/decomposition.
- * **Derivative/Dependent:** Their nature is not intrinsic but inherited from their parts.
- * **Constructed:** They are a “a product of mental constructions, which give composite things an appearance of singularity and give reducible things an appearance of irreducibility,” (29).
- **Ultimate Existents:**
 - * **Irreducible:** They are physical and mental “simples,” immune to physical/mental destruction/decomposition.
 - * **Independent:** They don’t inherit their nature from anything else; it is intrinsic to them.
 - * **Unconstructed:** They are not the product of mental constructions.
- **The Basic Distinction, Summed Up:**
 - **Conventional Reality:** The realm of apparent existents which do not survive mental decomposition and whose apparent existence as independent entities is a product of conceptual and linguistic construction or reification.
 - **Ultimate Reality:** The realm of real existents consisting in whatever ultimately resists physical and mental decomposition, the basic set of simples out of which all composite things are composed.