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# Buddhism as Philosophy

## An Introduction

**Mark Siderits**

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MARK SIDERITS
*Illinois State University, USA*

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# Preface

In this book I have tried to make clear the theories and arguments of the Buddhist philosophical tradition. If I have attained any measure of success, it is due to the help of many others. And so there is a long list of people to whom I must express my appreciation and thanks. First and foremost are the students who have taken PHI 208 through the years. Their comments and questions have helped me discern the underlying logic of the Indian philosophical debates, and have shown me connections between disparate topics that I would otherwise not have seen. I am glad to have had the opportunity to learn from them.

Much of the material in Chapter 10 was first presented when I gave the Matilal lectures in Indian philosophy at King's College London. I wish to thank Professor Richard Sorabji for making this possible. And a heartfelt thanks is due to all the students who showed up for late Friday afternoon lectures at the Strand.

Much of what follows reflects things I have learned over the years from colleagues and friends in philosophy and Buddhology. I have had the great good fortune to work in an analytically oriented philosophy department whose members are willing to entertain the possibility that Buddhist philosophers might have important contributions to make to the discipline. I have especially profited from my many cross-corridor discussions with Kenton Machina and David Anderson. I have learned much about Buddhist and Indian philosophy from conversing with Arindam Chakrabarti, Amita Chatterji, Georges Dreyfus, Jonardon Ganeri, Katsura Shoryu, J.N. Mohanty, Roy Perrett and Tom Tillemans. Thanks are also due to Chris Bartley and Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad for their advice and encouragement. And I owe a special debt of gratitude to Will Rassmussen, whose *upāya* resulted in a much improved final draft. I also found useful the comments of several anonymous readers.

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Finally, I want to express my thanks to Esther for sharing her book at a crucial moment many years ago, an act of generosity the ramifications of which are still unfolding. And of course I owe a special debt of gratitude to Muji for keyboarding assistance.

# Abbreviations and Translation Sources

AKBh: *Abhidharmakośābhāṣyam of Vasubandhu*, ed. Prahlad Pradhan (Patna: Jayaswal Research Institute, 1975).
BCA: *The Bodhicāryāvatāra of Śāntideva with the Commentary Pañjika of Prajñākaramati*, ed. P.L. Vaidya (Dharbanga: Mithila Institute, 1960).
BSB: *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, ed. Nalinaksha Dutt, Tibetan Sanskrit Works, Vol. VII (Patna, 1966), pp. 30–32.
M: *Majjhima Nikāya*, ed. V. Trenckner (London: Pali Text Society, 1948–60).
MMK: *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, ed. Raghunath Pandeya as: *The Madhyamakaśāstram of Nāgārjuna*, with the Commentaries *Akutobhayā* by Nāgārjuna, *Madhyamakavṛtti* by Buddhapālita, *Prajñāpradīpavṛtti* by Bhāvaviveka, and *Prasannapadā* by Candrakīrti (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988).
MP: *Milindapañho*, ed. R.D. Vadekar (Bombay: Bombay University Publications 1972).
MPS (*Mahāprajñāparāmitā Śāstra*): Lamotte, Étienne, translator, *Le Traité de la grande vertu de sagesse de Nāgārjuna (Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra)* (Louvain, 1944–80).
NS, NSB, NSV: *Nyāyadarśanam of Gotama, with Vātsyayana's Bhāṣya, Uddyotakara's Vārttika, Vācaspati Miśra's Tātparyatika, and Viśvanātha's Vṛtti*, ed. Taranath Nyaya Tarkatirtha and Amarendramohan Tarkatirtha (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2003).
PV, PVBh: *The Pramāṇavārttikam of Dharmakīrti*, ed. Ram Chandra Pandeya (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1989).
S: *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, ed. M. Leon Feer in 5 vols (London: Pali Text Society, 1884–98).
TB: *Bauddha Tarkabhāṣā of Mokṣākaragupta*, ed. and trans. B.N. Singh (Varanasi: Asha Prakashan, 1985).
TS: *Tattvasaṅgraha of Sāntaraṣkita*, edited with the *Pañjikā* (=TSP) by Embar Krishnamacharya. Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1984.
VM: *Visuddhimagga of Buddhaghosâcariya*, ed. Henry Clarke Warren, rev. by Dharmananda Kosambi (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950).
VMS: *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi: deux traites de Vasubandhu*, ed. Sylvain Levi (Louvain: 1925).
VV: *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, edited and translated in: *The dialectical method of Nagarjuna: (Vigrahavyavartini)*, eds E.H. Johnston and Arnold Kunst, trans. Kamaleswar Bhattacharya (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1978).

CHAPTER ONE

# Buddhism as Philosophy?

The purpose of this book is, as the title suggests, to examine Buddhism as philosophy. Before we actually start doing that though, it might be good to first get a bit clearer about what each of these two things – Buddhism and philosophy – is. That will help us see what might be distinctive about studying Buddhism as a form of philosophy. And it is important to be clear about this, since there are some preconceptions about these matters that might get in the way of fully grasping how the philosophical study of Buddhism works.

## 1.1

When people first encounter philosophy, they want to know what it is about. Other disciplines have their own subject matter: biology is the study of life processes, sociology is the study of human societies, astronomy looks at planets and stars, etc. So what is philosophy about? Those who are not new to the study of philosophy know that what makes philosophy a separate discipline is not its special subject matter. True, there are questions that we naturally think of as 'philosophical' in some sense. Questions such as, 'How should I live my life?', and 'How do we know anything?', and 'How did all this come to be?'. But the first question is also addressed by literature, the second by cognitive science, and the third by astrophysics. What distinguishes philosophy from other disciplines?

The answer has more to do with method than with content. What sets philosophy apart as a discipline is more its concern with how to answer questions than with the answers themselves. To study philosophy is to learn to think carefully and critically about complex issues. It is not necessarily to learn 'the answers' that the discipline has arrived at. This can make the study of philosophy frustrating for some. When we first study a subject, we expect to learn the body of knowledge that has been developed by that discipline. When we study chemistry we learn the atomic weights of the elements, when we study history we learn the causes of the First World War, etc. Only later, if at all, does one start looking into the methods the discipline uses within its field of knowledge. The study of philosophy is not like that. True, one might find out in an introductory philosophy course that Plato thought the soul must be immortal, or that Descartes held the one thing that can't be doubted is that the 'I' exists. But one also learns that not all philosophers agree with Plato or Descartes on these claims. Some students find this frustrating. Where, they want to know, are the facts that philosophy has established? In all the centuries that philosophy has existed, has it made any progress, come up with any answers?

One response to this question is that indeed philosophy has established something quite significant – that the truth turns out to be very complicated. None of the simple answers to the questions that philosophy examines is correct. This is an important (and unsettling) result. The questions that philosophers ask often seem like they should have simple and straightforward answers. Take, for instance, the question how the mind and the body interact. The state of my stomach causes me to have a desire, and then the resulting state of my mind brings about bodily motion in the direction of the refrigerator. How do these things happen? One thing that philosophical investigation of this question has shown is that we still don't know the answer. Even more detailed scientific study of the brain won't succeed (at least by itself) in explaining how this works. Yet we rely on the mind and the body working together in everything we do. So perhaps philosophy has established something after all – that under the surface of seemingly simple matters lurks surprising complexity. Getting to the bottom of things turns out to be devilishly hard work.

But there is another way to answer the complaint that philosophy hasn't established any facts. Someone who says this might be wondering, What is the point of studying philosophy? And the way the challenge is posed suggests that they think the point of studying some subject is to acquire a body of knowledge, that is, to add new facts to the facts they already know. So one response to the challenge might be to question this assumption. Perhaps the point (or at least a point) of studying philosophy is to acquire a set of skills. Specifically the study of philosophy might turn out to be one of the best ways to learn some critical argumentation skills: defining one's terms carefully, constructing good arguments in support of one's views, critically evaluating arguments (one's own and others'), responding to objections, and the like.[1] And these skills turn out to play a crucial role in many different areas of life. They are, for instance, extremely important to the practice of law. This would explain why the study of philosophy is recognized as one of the best ways to prepare for legal practice (something that was known in ancient Greece and in medieval India). Of course the issues that philosophers grapple with can be intrinsically interesting to anyone who is at all thoughtful and reflective. But on this way of thinking about philosophy, the benefit of grappling with them is not so much that one gets the 'right' answer, as that one learns to think more carefully and critically about complex matters in general.

To say this is not to say that the questions that philosophers ask are unimportant.

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[1] A note about the word 'argument'. As philosophers uses this term, an argument is just a presentation of evidence that is meant to support some conclusion. An argument always consists of two or more statements: a conclusion and one or more premises. The conclusion is the statement that the author of the argument is trying to get others (the audience) to accept. The premises are statements that the author thinks the audience is likely to already accept, and that the author thinks will show that the conclusion is more likely to be true. Giving an argument is one way of trying to persuade others of something. It differs from other forms of persuasion in that when it is properly done it engages the rationality of the audience – it leaves it up to them to determine whether or not this argument gives good reasons to accept the conclusion.

It's because people find these to be pressing questions that they pursue the difficult task of trying to answer them – and thereby develop their logical and analytic skills. So something more should be said at this point about what sorts of questions these are. Philosophical inquiry can be sorted into several broad areas. One such domain is ethics. This has to do with the general question of how we should live our lives. So it includes not just questions about the nature of morality (which is concerned with what constitutes right and wrong in the treatment of others). It also deals with questions about what sort of life might be the best life for persons. Now it is sometimes thought that questions of ethics and morality are questions for religion. And it is true that most religions have a great deal to say on these matters. But when people think of questions of right and wrong, good and bad, as matters for religion, they often have in mind the idea that a religion simply tells us how we ought to behave. So they are thinking of ethics and morality as a set of rules or commandments. This is not what philosophers mean by ethics, though. As they use the term, ethics involves critical examination of competing views about how we ought to conduct ourselves. And this is something that one can do regardless of what (if any) religious beliefs one has. The medieval Christian thinker Thomas Aquinas was doing ethics in this sense when he tried to determine what conclusions we can draw about being virtuous from a certain view of human nature. But so was the nineteenth-century German atheist Friedrich Nietzsche when he asked how we should live our lives given that God is dead. What makes both their discussions of ethical matters philosophical is that both involve the critical examination of arguments.

Metaphysics is another major area of philosophy. The word 'metaphysics' gets used in several different ways. For instance, in bookstores the 'metaphysics' section is usually filled with books on astrology and the occult. But as it is used in philosophy, it simply refers to the disciplined investigation of the most basic features of reality. Where ethics concerns the question how things ought to be, metaphysics concerns the question how things fundamentally are, or what reality is basically like. Now we might think that questions about how things are, or what reality is like, should be left to the sciences. And it is true that if, for instance, we wanted to know what a certain chemical compound is like we should turn to chemistry. But metaphysical questions are much more basic or fundamental than those that science can answer. Chemistry can tell us what effects might be caused by mixing two chemicals. But it is a metaphysical question what the general nature of the relation between cause and effect is. Likewise the sciences tell us a great deal about the nature of the physical world. But it is a metaphysical question whether everything that exists is physical; this is not a question that scientists can or should try to answer using the methods of science. Some other examples of metaphysical questions include: What is the nature of time? Are there, in addition to particulars such as individual cows, universals such as a single *cowness* that exists in all of them simultaneously? Does there exist an all-perfect, eternal creator of the universe? Is there a self, and if so what might it be like? The pursuit of metaphysical questions like these has often led philosophers to related but separate questions in the philosophy of language, such as how it is that words and sentences have meaning, and what it means for a statement to be true.

Another important area of philosophy is epistemology or the theory of knowledge. Here the basic question is how we can know what things are like and what should be done. Inquiry in epistemology has often taken the form of asking just what it means to say that someone knows something or other. For instance, can someone be said to know something if they haven't ruled out all the ways in which they could be mistaken (even when they're not mistaken)? But epistemological inquiry may also take the form of asking what are the means or methods of knowledge. Sense-perception and inference (or reasoning) are popular candidates for reliable ways to acquire knowledge, but what about authority (taking the word of some trustworthy person), or reasoning by analogy? And if there are different means of knowledge, how are they related to one another? Does each have its own distinctive sphere, or do they all serve equally well to give us knowledge about the same objects? Does any one means of knowledge have precedence over others?

As you might have guessed given what was said earlier about the nature of philosophy, philosophers have developed a number of different theories in each different branch. And there is no general consensus as to which theories in metaphysics, epistemology and ethics are correct. There is general agreement that the simplest answers are wrong. Take, for instance, the ethical theory of subject-based ethical relativism. This is the view that whether an action is morally permissible or morally wrong depends on whether or not one sincerely believes that doing that action is wrong. All philosophers today would agree that this theory is false. But when it comes to more sophisticated theories in these areas, agreement breaks down. For every theory that has been proposed in metaphysics, epistemology and ethics, there are serious criticisms that have been developed by philosophers. Much of the practice of philosophy involves looking at these objections to a given view and seeing if it's possible to answer them. (It is through this process that philosophical theories have grown so sophisticated.) But in doing so one frequently discovers that there are important connections between the view one holds in one area of philosophy and the positions one takes in other areas. A particular theory in ethics might for instance turn out to be unworkable unless one holds a certain position on some metaphysical issue. Learning to see these sorts of connections is another important benefit of studying philosophy.

Not every culture developed its own philosophical tradition. But ancient Greece did, and this is the source of modern Western philosophy. And so did classical India. In each case the original impetus seems to have come from a concern to answer ethical questions. Out of dissatisfaction with the received view of how people should live their lives, there arose efforts at thinking systematically about these matters. But in both cases these inquiries soon led to major developments in metaphysics and epistemology. For philosophers became aware that if we are to determine how we ought to live, we need to be clearer about the nature of the world and our place in it. And this in turn requires greater clarity about what constitutes knowledge and what processes lead to it. People sometimes wonder if it could be just a coincidence that and feeling. This is the dichotomy between reason and faith, with reason seen as a matter of the head and faith a matter of the heart. Along with this dichotomy there is a related one between 'facts', seen as the sort of thing that the sciences discover, and 'values', seen as private, subjective commitments that are not open to rational investigation and scrutiny. Suppose we agree that using our reason involves thinking about things in a cool, careful, detached and deliberate way. Now it is probably true that some matters should not be decided entirely on the basis of calm, cool consideration of reasons. One's choice of life-partner, for instance, should probably involve considerable input from the 'heart' side. But it is not at all clear that 'head' and 'heart' constitute a strict dichotomy. And in any event, it is not obvious that the matters we consider religious (or 'spiritual') necessarily belong on the 'faith' side of any such divide.

One thing that all the theisms (monotheisms and polytheisms) have in common is that they each try to articulate some vision of the ideal state for humans. This ideal state is usually depicted as being quite different from the way that people would live their lives if left to their own devices. The latter 'mundane' (or 'worldly') state is depicted as inherently unsatisfactory, as fallen away from how we ought to be. And the ideal state is represented as a sort of salvation from this fallen state. When we think of a religion as dealing with 'spiritual' matters, it is this concern with attaining salvation, of escaping from an unsatisfactory way of being, that we have in mind. The concerns of religion are, in a word, soteriological. (A soteriology is a doctrine of salvation.) Now to think of religion as a faith is to suppose that soteriological concerns can only be addressed through a form of emotional commitment. It is to hold that reason and logical investigation are of little or no use in seeking salvation. Many people in our culture believe this. But this was not the view of classical Indian culture. (Nor was it held by the ancient Greeks, or by the philosophers of medieval Islam.) To many people in ancient India, including the Buddha, it made perfectly good sense to use our rational faculties in the pursuit of salvation. Of course this was not the only path that Indians recognized. The *Bhagavad Gītā*, a major Hindu text, teaches that there are four different paths; which path one should take depends on one's talents and predilections. But all four paths culminate in salvation, for they all instill knowledge of our true identity. The Buddhist tradition generally teaches that there is just one path to liberation, not four. But that path consists in the combined practice of philosophical reasoning and meditation. Indian Buddhists, like others in ancient India, thought that salvation from our unsatisfactory state was to be had through coming to know the truth about who we are and where we fit in the universe. And they thought that attaining such insights required the use of philosophical rationality.[2]

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[2] This is not to say that Buddhism is a philosophy and not a religion. To say that would be to assume that it must be one or the other. It would be to assume that there is a strict dichotomy between reason and faith. Buddhists would be likely to reject that assumption. Their attitude toward soteriological matters might be usefully compared to one we often take today toward scientific matters. Most of us who are not scientists tend to take the more advanced theories of a science like physics on trust. But we know that if we were to receive proper training we would be able to assess for ourselves the evidence in support of those theories.

people this denial is tantamount to atheism. So if we are to count Buddhism as a religion, it will have to make sense to say there can be atheistic religions.

Of course the Buddha and classical Indian Buddhists acknowledged the existence of a multiplicity of gods. Should we then think of Buddhism as polytheistic, in the same sense in which many forms of Hinduism are polytheistic?[5] Perhaps we might if we wanted Buddhism to fit under a nice tidy definition of 'religion' that required some form of theism. But this would be somewhat beside the point as far as Buddhism is concerned. The gods that ancient Indian Buddhists believed in were (like the gods of ancient Greece and all the rest of pre-Christian Europe) finite beings, rather like human beings, only longer-lived and more powerful. More importantly, they play no role whatever in the quest for nirvāna. Perhaps worship and sacrifice to the right gods might win one various mundane benefits, such as timely rainfall to make the crops grow, or the health of one's loved ones. But the gods cannot bestow nirvāna on us. Indeed the fact that they also undergo rebirth (they may live extremely long lives, but they are still impermanent) is taken to show that they are no more enlightened than we humans are. Even an enlightened human being like a Buddha or an *arhat* (someone who has attained nirvāna by following the teachings of the Buddha) cannot bestow nirvāna on others. That is something that one can only attain for oneself; enlightened beings can only help others by giving them pointers along the way. And the point, for Buddhism, is to attain nirvāna, to bring suffering to an end. So for this spiritual tradition, the question whether there are any gods turns out to be largely irrelevant.

The doctrine of karma and rebirth is another matter. Classical Indian Buddhism accepted this doctrine. These Buddhists believed that death is ordinarily not the end of our existence, that after we die we are reborn, either as humans or as some other form of sentient being (including non-human animals, gods, and the inhabitants of various hells). Which sort of rebirth one attains depends on one's karma, which has to do with the moral quality of the actions one has engaged in. If those acts were primarily morally good, one may be reborn as a human in fortunate life circumstances, or even as a god. If one's life was full of acts done out of evil intentions, however, one might end up as a *preta* or so-called 'hungry ghost'. (These beings are so-called because they are only able to eat feces, and to drink urine, pus and blood.) Now this may sound like just the sort of thing that other more familiar religions offer: a promise of life after death, and a doctrine of retribution for one's sins. So is Buddhism really all that different from those other spiritual traditions? Is it really the case that it only expects us to believe those things for which there is objective evidence?

This is a good question. It may turn out that not everything Buddhists have traditionally believed can be rationally supported. This outcome is one of the possibilities that opens up when we examine Buddhism as philosophy. But before saying any more about that, I should clear up some possible confusions about the doctrine of karma and rebirth. The first point to make is that as Buddhists understand it, karma is not divine retribution for one's sins. The laws of karma basically have to do with receiving pleasant results for acting out of morally good motives, and receiving painful results for acting with evil intentions. This prompts some to ask who determines what is good and what is evil. For Buddhists the answer is that no one does. Karma is not a set of rules that are decreed by a cosmic ruler and enforced by the cosmic moral police. Karma is understood instead as a set of impersonal causal laws that simply describe how the world happens to work. In this respect the karmic laws are just like the so-called natural laws that science investigates. It is a causal law that when I let go of a rock while standing on a bridge, it will fall toward the water below with a certain acceleration. No one passed this law, and no one enforces it. The laws of physics are not like the laws passed by legislative bodies. There are no gravity police. And if something were to behave contrary to what we take to be the law of gravity, that would be evidence that we were wrong to think it was a law. A true causal law has no exceptions. Likewise, the laws of karma are understood not as rules that can be either obeyed or broken, but as exceptionless generalizations about what always follows what. If we could keep track of enough persons over enough successive lives, we could find out what the laws of karma are in the same way that science discovers what the laws of nature are: our observations would disclose the patterns of regular succession that show causation at work.[6]

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[5] Indeed many of the same gods that we find in classical Hindu texts show up in the Indian Buddhist tradition as well. See A.K. Warder, *Indian Buddhism* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidars, 1970, pp. 152–56).

A second point to make about the Buddhist attitude toward karma and rebirth is that belief in rebirth does not serve the same function that belief in an afterlife serves in many other religious traditions. The fact that after I die I will be reborn is not taken to be a source of relief or consolation. And the point of Buddhist practice is not to do those things that will help ensure a pleasant next life and prevent a painful one. The truth is just the opposite. As we will see in more detail in the next chapter, the Buddha claims that continued rebirth is just what we need liberation from. (The reason, briefly, is that rebirth entails redeath.) One could set about trying to use knowledge of karmic causal laws to try to guarantee that one continues to exist in relatively comfortable circumstances. But on the Buddhist analysis that would just reveal one's ignorance about how things really are. And because such behavior was based on ignorance, it would inevitably lead to more of the suffering that Buddhism is meant to cure. The doctrine of karma and rebirth is not meant to make us feel better about the fact that we will all die. For those Buddhists who accept it, it is part of the problem, not part of the solution.

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[6] It is widely held not just by Buddhists but by other classical Indian schools as well that the practice of meditation or *yoga* leads to the development of a number of extraordinary powers. One that is frequently mentioned is the ability to recall past lives, first of oneself and then of others. Someone who had such powers could tell us what the karmic causal laws actually are. For they would be able to observe which deeds in one life were regularly followed by pleasant rebirths, which by painful rebirths. Of course since every intentional act has some karmic effect, the patterns would be quite complex and difficult to discern. But it could at least in principle be done.

A third point about the doctrine of karma and rebirth is that this was not a view that was peculiar to Buddhism. Instead it seems to have been commonly accepted by spiritual teachers from before the time of the Buddha, and to have been part of the common-sense conception of the world for most Indians for most of the time that Buddhism existed in India. So when Indian Buddhists claimed that we undergo rebirth in accordance with karma, they were not making claims that would have struck their audience as novel or strange. Now when we think of a religion as something that makes claims that must be taken on faith, we have in mind claims that are not already part of common sense. So the fact that Buddhists accepted the doctrine of karma and rebirth does not show that Buddhism is a religion in the sense of a creed, a set of doctrines for which there is no evidence and that are to be accepted on faith. Perhaps Indians accepted this doctrine without good evidence. But if so, it was not because they were required to as practicing Buddhists.

The doctrine of karma and rebirth is not a part of our common-sense world-view. So it would be reasonable for us to ask what evidence there is that this doctrine is true. It would be reasonable, that is, if we are investigating Buddhism as philosophy. For in studying philosophy we are interested in finding out what the truth is. (We may not always find it, but that's our aim.) Things might be different if we were studying Buddhism as an historical artifact, as part of the study of the history of religions. Perhaps then we would simply note that Indian Buddhists believed in karma and rebirth, and set aside the question whether they were justified in their belief. Instead we might simply explore how this belief affected other aspects of Buddhism: their ethical teachings, for instance, or their artistic representations. There is a great deal we can learn by studying Buddhism and other religions in this way. By simply setting aside the question whether the teachings are true or false, and focusing on how different elements of the tradition might be related to one another, we can learn to see the inner logic of the system, how it hangs together as a system. This can help us see things we might otherwise miss. But it cannot tell us whether its teachings are reasonable. And this is something we might want to know when we study a religion like Buddhism. Buddhists claim that those of their teachings that run counter to common sense can be supported by rational arguments. Are they right about this? And if it turns out that some claim of theirs that strikes us as strange cannot be given rational support, how much damage does that do to the overall system? These are the sorts of questions that philosophical examination involves.

And this is how we will proceed with the doctrine of karma and rebirth. We will ask (among other things) if there are good reasons to believe it. If there are not, we will go on to see whether other important teachings of Buddhism would also have to go if this doctrine were thrown overboard. This might come as a shock, particularly if you think of a person's religion as something sacrosanct that others shouldn't question. How can we criticize beliefs that might turn out to be central to another person's whole way of life? But someone who asks this is forgetting something: Buddhist philosophers thought that their most important claims should be subjected to rational scrutiny. This is what made them philosophers. They certainly criticized the views of other Buddhist philosophers. And there was a great deal of rational criticism exchanged between the Buddhists and other Indian philosophers. So perhaps it would actually be dishonoring Buddhism not to subject its doctrines to rational scrutiny. To study it as no more than an item of historical interest, and not ask how much truth there is in its core teachings, might mean failing to take it seriously as an important human creation.

## 1.3

We have said enough for now about what philosophy is and what Buddhism is. And we have already begun to discuss what it might mean to study Buddhism as philosophy. There are a number of other things that need to be said on that score. One is that this study will be selective. Like any other religious tradition, Buddhism is an immensely complicated phenomenon. To study Buddhism as philosophy means primarily studying texts. Specifically it means studying those Buddhist texts that present philosophical theories and arguments. But this means leaving out of consideration many other sorts of Buddhist writings, such as those that specify the rules that monks and nuns must follow when they enter the Buddhist monastic order (the *saṃgha*), and those popular writings designed to present simple moral teachings to an audience of lay followers. Moreover, there is much more to Buddhism than its literature. And our focus on texts means these other areas will go largely untouched. We will not be examining the many different kinds of Buddhist artistic expression to be found in such fields as sculpture, architecture, painting, devotional poetry and drama. We will have very little to say about Buddhist institutions, their organization and history. We will say very little about the Buddhist practice of meditation, and nothing at all about such lay Buddhist devotional practices as stūpa worship. All of these aspects of Buddhism have been dealt with elsewhere, and there is no need to duplicate that scholarship here.[7]

There are, though, other studies of Buddhism that focus on many of the same topics that we will be examining. These are works that try to introduce Buddhism through a historical survey of its chief schools and their principal doctrines. Now we will try to trace a historical progression as well. But there will be less concern here than in the typical doctrinal history to say who influenced whom, what influenced what, in the development of key Buddhist teachings. Indeed at several points we will take things out of their historical order. This will happen where understanding conceptual connections takes precedence over working out the historical order in which ideas developed. But the most important difference between this work and histories of Buddhist doctrine is that the latter are more likely to present just the conclusions of the Buddhist philosophers. Our job will be to look not only at their today look at ancient philosophers, we tend to set to one side the details of their views about how the natural world works. For it usually turns out that even when these details are simply wrong, this has little or no effect on their views in the core philosophical areas of metaphysics, epistemology and ethics. This is how we will treat the Buddhist philosophers as well.

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[7] An excellent resource that discusses many of these topics with respect to Indian Buddhism from its origins to its destruction in the late twelfth century CE is Warder's *Indian Buddhism*.

There is another element in the texts we will study that we shall also want to set off to one side. We will be examining texts in which Buddhists give arguments for their key claims in metaphysics, epistemology and ethics. But in some cases the reason given is basically an appeal to the authority of the Buddha. This sort of thing happens when there is a dispute between two different schools of Buddhist philosophy over some doctrine. One school may then point to some passage in the sūtras (the discourses of Gautama and his chief disciples) as grounds for accepting their position. Now this might count as a good reason to accept the view in question if you already thought that the Buddha's teachings were authoritative. But for those of us who do not automatically accept the authority of the Buddha, this cannot count as a good reason. So we will simply set such passages aside.

Most chapters in this book contain extracts, sometimes quite long ones, from primary sources in Buddhist philosophy, as well as extensive discussion. This means we will be reading passages from a variety of different Buddhist philosophical texts, beginning with the sūtras (the Buddha's own teachings), and ending with texts written some 1500 years later. Reading and understanding these texts will pose some real challenges. Because most of these were written for other ancient Indian philosophers, it is not always easy to see what the argument is, and how the author responds to objections. But we will start slowly, and you will have plenty of help on this. The point here is for you to learn to read and understand these texts on your own. That way, if you want to look more deeply into some topic in Buddhist philosophy, you will be able to do so without having to rely on anyone else's interpretations. Then you'll be better equipped to try to find out what the truth is for yourself.

One final point before we begin our study of Buddhism as philosophy. Some people might take the title of this book to mean that it will tell them what the Buddhist philosophy is. But as you may have guessed by now, there is no such thing as *the* Buddhist philosophy. At least not in the sense in which we are using 'philosophy' here. Given what the discipline of philosophy is, it should not be surprising that Buddhist philosophers disagree among themselves. By the same token, there is no such thing as the Christian philosophy, or the Jewish philosophy. There are philosophers who use the tools of philosophy to try to articulate what they take to be the basic truths of Christianity and of Judaism. But Aquinas and Kierkegaard disagree profoundly in their understandings of Christian teachings, and Maimonides and Spinoza likewise differ in how they approach the philosophical expression of Judaism. Things are no different when we come to Buddhism. While there are certain fundamentals on which all Buddhist philosophers agree, there are important issues over which they disagree. Sometimes these differences can make things quite complicated. So to help us keep track of things, it would be useful to have a basic

CHAPTER TWO

# Early Buddhism: Basic Teachings

In this chapter we will explore the basic teachings of early Buddhism, the teachings of the Buddha and his immediate disciples. This will serve to introduce a set of core principles that all Buddhist philosophers accept. In later chapters we will examine how various Buddhist philosophers developed these core teachings in different ways. But before we get to those basic ideas that are common to all schools of Buddhism, it might be useful to say a few words about the life of the Buddha.

## 2.1

Apart from his career as a teacher, there is little that is known with much confidence about the details of Gautama's life. Until recently, scholars were fairly certain that he lived from 566 to 486 BCE. But recent research suggests that his death may have been as late as 404 BCE. So if we accept the traditional claim that he lived for 80 years, then perhaps his life was lived wholly within the fifth century BCE. He was born in the city-state of Kapilavastu, the home of the Śākyas,[1] in what is now the western part of Nepal, near the Indian border. He grew up in relatively comfortable circumstances. But in early adulthood he chose to abandon the settled life of a householder and became a wandering renunciant or *śramaṇa*, someone whose life is dedicated to finding answers to certain spiritual questions.

The *śramaṇas* of sixth and fifth century BCE India represented a new phenomenon in Indian religious life. They rejected key elements of the prevailing Brahmanical orthodoxy as inadequate to their spiritual concerns. The Vedic religion that they challenged was centered on a set of texts, the *Vedas*, that the Brahmin priests considered supernatural in origin and authoritative. These texts enjoin performance of various rituals and sacrifices, both to uphold the cosmic order and to obtain various benefits for the person in whose name the ritual or sacrifice is carried out. But the new set of ideas associated with the notions of karma and rebirth made these older religious practices seem unsatisfying. If after I die I shall just be born into some new life, what point is there in trying to make my present situation more comfortable? Shouldn't I be more concerned with the lives to come after this one? Indeed what exactly is the point of going on to life after life? Is that cycle to go on forever? The Vedic religion seemed satisfactory as long as people held on to conventional views of human life and human happiness. If we each have just this one life on earth (and perhaps an afterlife thereafter), then it might make sense to devote it to things like sensual pleasure, wealth and power, and the social standing of a virtuous person.[2] But with the advent of new ideas about the nature of human life, the old answers no longer seemed to work. And so the *śramaṇas* sought a new account of human happiness and how to attain it.

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[1] Hence the epithet he later acquired, 'Śākyamuni' or 'sage of the Śākyas'.

Among the many *śramaṇas*, there were some who claimed to have found a solution to the problem of human existence, and offered to teach it to others. Their answers differed, but most shared the idea that true happiness could only be found by overcoming our ignorance about our true nature. And most also agreed that the truly ideal state for us must involve liberation (*mokṣa*) from the cycle of rebirths. The *śramaṇas* also explored a wide variety of techniques for attaining this ideal state they sought. These included various ascetic practices – performing austerities such as fasting, remaining utterly motionless for long periods, abstaining from sleep, and the like. They also included various meditational or yogic practices: learning to calm the mind and focus it in one-pointed concentration, exploring a variety of altered states of consciousness, and the like.[3]

Like other new renunciants, after abandoning his life as a householder Gautama sought to find a suitable *śramaṇa* teacher. According to our oldest accounts, he studied with several, and mastered the theories and techniques they taught, but found these inadequate. He then struck out on his own. Coming across an isolated forest grove, he resolved to devote a full night of concentrated effort to solving the problem of human suffering. Employing a variety of yogic techniques, he entered into four successive stages of meditation, and thereby acquired three sorts of knowledge: recollection of his own past lives, understanding of the general laws of karma, and knowledge of what would come to be called the four noble truths. This knowledge signaled his enlightenment (*bodhi*), his attainment of nirvāna or liberation from rebirth. Having thus attained his goal, he considered whether or not to teach his discovery to others. At first he is said to have been deterred by the difficulty and subtlety of the truths he had discovered. But he eventually concluded that there were some who could grasp these truths and thereby profit from his discovery. So he embarked on the career of a Buddha, one who has solved the problem of human suffering through their own efforts (without reliance on the teachings of others) and imparts that knowledge to others out of compassion.

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[2] While the *Vedas* did not teach rebirth, they were not entirely clear on the question of an afterlife. Brahmanical culture of the time also recognized three possible goals in life: sensual pleasure (*kāma*), material wealth and power *(artha)*, and virtue and social repute (*dharma*). For each of these goals there was thought to be a special science concerning methods for obtaining it. And a literature developed around each of these sciences. So the *Kāma Sātra*, for instance, is the foundational text for the traditional science of obtaining sensual pleasure.

[3] While the *śramaṇa* movement may have started as a protest against Brahmanical orthodoxy, the Vedic tradition eventually responded to this challenge by developing a number of its own systems for attaining liberation or *mokṣa*. These included such philosophical schools as Sāṃkhya, Nyāya and Advaita Vedānta. These schools are referred to as 'orthodox' because they accept the authority of the *Vedas*. In this they differ from Buddhism and the other 'heterodox' schools (such as Jainism), which deny that the *Vedas* have any special authoritative status. Through the orthodox schools the Brahmanical tradition was in effect countenancing *mokṣa* as a fourth possible goal in life, in addition to the original three of *kāma*, *artha* and *dharma*.

There is another, far more elaborate account of Gautama's life before his enlightenment. On that account, Gautama is a prince, his father, Śuddhodana, being a powerful and wealthy king. Gautama's conception is immaculate, and he is born not in the normal way but by emerging from his mother's side without breaking her skin or otherwise causing her pain. Immediately after birth he takes seven steps in each of the four cardinal directions; the world roars in response, and blossoms spring up under his feet. A seer tells Śuddhodana that the infant will grow up to be either a Buddha or a world monarch. He will become a Buddha if he sees four things in his youth: an old person, a sick person, a corpse, and a wandering renunciant. If he does not see all four he will become a world monarch. Śuddhodana wishes to ensure that his first-born son becomes a mighty king, so he has Gautama raised in a luxurious palace surrounded by only young, healthy and attractive people. Gautama grows up in these surroundings, marries and has a son. Yet on four successive days while out hunting he sees each of the four sights. He then resolves to become a *śramaṇa*, and makes his escape from the palace at night. He spends several years with a succession of teachers, but only after striking out on his own does he succeed in attaining the goal of liberation. Upon attaining enlightenment, it is Māra, the evil god of death, who tries to persuade him not to convey his discoveries to the world. Other gods then intercede to protect him from Māra's powers and ensure that there is a Buddha in the world.

This more elaborate account of Gautama's early life is the basis of popular depictions of the Buddha in Buddhist art and literature. But this version of the story only emerges several centuries after the Buddha's death. And it clearly reflects the common process whereby the life of a sect's founder comes to be draped in legend. We know, for instance, that Gautama cannot have been a prince nor his father a king, since Kapilavastu was not a monarchy in his day. Likewise the Buddha was quite insistent on the point that he was no more than an ordinary human being. This would seem to explain why the tales of miracles surrounding his birth and enlightenment are absent from the earliest accounts of Gautama's life. Only much later did some of his followers, perhaps out of missionary zeal, transform the story of his early life into a hagiography. Still there are things we can learn from these legendary accretions to his biography. Consider the tale of the four sights, for instance. Why might those who shaped the legend have chosen an old person, a sick person, a corpse, and a *śramaṇa* as the sights that would spur a pampered prince to renounce his life of luxury? Clearly because the first three signify the fact of human mortality, and the existential crisis that results from this fact, while the fourth represents the possibility of averting the crisis. This point will prove useful when we try to understand the Buddha's teachings on suffering.

## 2.2

While there is not much we know with certainty about Gautama's life before his enlightenment, we know a great deal about his career as a teacher after enlightenment. For instance, we know that he first taught his new insights when he encountered five former companion renunciants at Sārnāth, near Vārānasī.[4] We will examine the record of that encounter later, but it might be helpful to begin with an overview. It seems that these renunciants followed a path of extreme asceticism, but when Gautama left them and struck out on his own he abandoned such practices. So they now suspect him of having lapsed into a dissolute life. He thus begins by describing the path he has discovered as a 'middle path' between the two extremes of asceticism and the life of sensual pleasure. He then describes this path as a 'noble eightfold path', listing its eight component practices: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right exertion, right self-possession and right concentration. This leads naturally to the enumeration of the four noble truths, since the claim that there is such a path is the fourth of the four truths. The four are, in summary form:

1. There is suffering.
2. There is the origination of suffering: suffering comes into existence in dependence on causes.
3. There is the cessation of suffering: all future suffering can be prevented.
4. There is a path to the cessation of suffering.

Now the second truth is later elaborated in terms of a twelve-linked chain of causes and effects, the first of which is ignorance. And the ignorance in question will be explained as failure to know three characteristics of reality: impermanence, suffering and non-self. It is thus significant that the Buddha goes on to teach the five renunciants the doctrine of non-self, and moreover that he argues for non-self on the grounds that all the constituents of the person are impermanent. Finally, according to the sūtra that recounts this first teaching, it ended with all five *śramaṇas* attaining enlightenment.

To summarize, in this early episode in the Buddha's teaching career we find reference to the following doctrines and ideas:

- the Dharma as a middle path,
- the eight-fold path,
- the four noble truths,
- the twelve-linked chain of dependent origination,
- the three characteristics of existence.

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[4] The Buddha's teachings are referred to collectively as the Dharma. (This use of the word is often translated as 'law'; we will encounter other uses of the same Sanskrit term.) The Buddhist tradition refers to the encounter at Sārnāth as 'the first turning of the wheel of the Dharma'.

need to say something about the first two ways in which they claim we experience suffering.

The first includes all those experiences that we would ordinarily classify as painful: being cut, burnt or struck, having a toothache or headache, losing a prized possession, not getting the job we'd set our hearts on, and the like. Note that even with such simple cases as a toothache there are actually two levels to the negative nature of the experience. First there is the feeling of pain itself, the immediate sensation of hurting. But there is also the worry that we commonly experience when we have something like a toothache: what does this painful feeling say about who I am and where I am going? Even when we don't put it to ourselves in so many words, this sense of 'dis-ease', of not being at home with ourselves, can permeate our lives when we have some nagging pain, undermining even our enjoyment of ordinary pleasures.[5]

The second form of suffering includes all negative experiences deriving from impermanence. This has much wider scope than one might suspect. As we will later see in more detail, Buddhists claim that everything that originates in dependence on causes must also cease to exist. And since all those things we ordinarily care about are dependent on causes, it follows that they are all impermanent. Now the pain of a toothache could be counted among the experiences that derive from impermanence. We get toothaches because healthy teeth are impermanent. But it is not just getting something we don't want, like a toothache, that is included here. Getting something we do want also comes under the category of suffering as impermanence. Of course it seems counter-intuitive to classify getting what you desire – a car, a job, a child, the esteem of people you care about, happiness for a friend – as a negative experience. But this is why Buddhists call this kind of suffering more subtle than the first. There is suffering in getting what one wants because the desired object is impermanent. So the happiness we feel is always tinged with anxiety about losing it. Indeed the feeling of happiness we derive from getting what we want is itself impermanent. When the novelty wears off, so does the feeling of happiness. Which is why we seem to always be in pursuit of something new. This explains the pattern we follow: always formulating some new goal, some new object of desire, when we get what we previously wanted (or give it up as unattainable). And when we begin to notice this pattern in our behavior, the happiness we feel on obtaining something new begins to drain away.

The last point leads naturally to the third level of suffering, suffering due to conditions. By 'conditions' here is meant the factors that are said to be responsible for rebirth (namely the intentions or volitions that motivate actions and cause karmic fruit). So suffering due to conditions refers to the suffering that results from rebirth. But to revert to the question we asked earlier, why should the mere fact of rebirth analysis of suffering, but we would be seeing those facts in a different light. The Buddhist would claim, though, that our assessment of the facts would be unrealistic. Taking the pill would simply re-instill the illusion that conventional happiness is attainable in the long run. And this, they would hold, is no alternative to facing the facts squarely and taking the appropriate action: seeking nirvāna.[6] It is an interesting question whether the assumption they would then be making is true.[7]

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[5] 'Dis-ease' might be a better translation of the Sanskrit term we are discussing here, *duḥkha,* than is 'suffering'. This term is formed from the prefix *duḥ*, which is related to the English 'dis', plus the noun *kha*, which came to mean 'happiness' or 'ease'.

## 2.3

While the first of the four noble truths points out the existence of suffering, the second is meant to explain how it originates. The underlying idea at work here is that by learning the cause of some phenomenon we may become able to exercise control over it. So the Buddha gives a detailed account of the factors he claims are the conditions in dependence on which suffering arises. This account, the twelve-linked chain of dependent origination, is traditionally understood as describing a sequence that takes place over three successive lives. In one life there occurs (1) ignorance (namely ignorance of the fact that all sentient existence is characterized by impermanence, suffering and non-self), and because of its occurrence there occur (2) volitions (*saṃskāra*), understood as the active forces in karma. It is in dependence on these volitions in the one life that there occurs (3) consciousness in the next life. That is, rebirth (in the form of the first moment of consciousness in a new life) occurs because of the desires that led to the performance of actions in the past life. On this consciousness in turn depends the occurrence of (4) a sentient body. That is, it is due to that first moment of rebirth consciousness that the organized matter of the fetal body comes to be a sentient being. On the existence of the sentient body in turn depend (5) the six organs of sense (the organs of the five external senses plus an 'inner sense' that is aware of inner states such as pain). On these depend (6) contact or sensory stimulation. And given sensory stimulation there arises (7) feeling, that is, the hedonic states of pleasure, pain and indifference. Feeling in turn causes (8) desire, and desire leads to (9) appropriation (*upādāna*), the attitude whereby one takes certain things as being 'me' or 'mine'. In dependence on appropriation there originates (10) becoming. This consists of the volitions that bring about the next rebirth, as well as the psychophysical elements making up the sentient body in that rebirth. In dependence on this there is (11) birth, that is, rebirth into the third life. And in dependence on birth there is (12) old age and death, here standing for all existential suffering.

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[6] This is not to deny that anti-depressants can be genuinely helpful for those suffering from clinical depression. The Buddhist claims that the happiness-seeking project cannot be sustained in the long run. While this might seem like a depressing analysis, remember that they also claim there is a better alternative to that project, namely nirvāna. And they think we should make the effort to seek that better alternative. Someone who is clinically depressed might not be capable of making such an effort. Their sense of the futility of it all might render them unable to do anything to better their situation. A Buddhist might then say that anti-depressants would be useful in their case.

[7] Assume that by taking a pill one could permanently prevent the subtle sense of suffering from arising. Assume as well that the Buddha's analysis is correct, that the happiness-seeking project really is an endless treadmill. Would it actually be better to not take the pill, face up to the facts, and seek nirvāna? The Buddhist claims it would be, but why? What assumption would their answer seem to be based on? And is that assumption correct?

There are obviously some difficulties in this list. For instance the tenth condition, becoming, seems to involve a repetition of the second, volition, and the fourth, sentient body. It also seems odd that birth into the third life should be listed as a separate condition, while birth into the second life is not. There is another version of the list that omits the six organs of sense, and instead has the sentient body serve as the condition for consciousness. Since consciousness has already been said to be the condition for sentient body, this has the effect of making consciousness both the cause and the effect of sentient body.[8] And there are versions of the list with only ten links, omitting the first two conditions altogether. These and other problems have led some scholars to suggest that our list of twelve results from the fusion of what were originally two or more separate lists.

But let us put such questions to one side, and look instead at the basic logic underlying the list that we have. The idea seems to be this. One is born into this life because in the last life one acted on the basis of volitions that were formed in ignorance of the facts about our existence. Having been born with a body, senses and mind, one comes in contact with sense objects, and this cognitive contact brings about feelings of pleasure, pain and indifference. These feelings trigger desires, and desires that are conditioned by ignorance lead to the stance known as appropriation: taking certain things (including things that no longer exist or do not yet exist) as 'me', and other things as 'mine' or my possessions. It is this stance that fuels rebirth, and this produces the suffering that is associated with all sentient existence.

How, one might wonder, could the first condition, ignorance, occur without there already being a sentient being (something that is not found until the fourth link in the series)? Doesn't ignorance require someone whose ignorance it is? When we wonder this, we are taking this list as an account of the very beginning of the series of lives. But the list should not be taken this way. What is here treated as the first life in a sequence of three is itself the effect of prior conditions that occurred in some yet earlier life.[9] So it is not saying that ignorance occurred before there were mind and body. Ignorance comes first on the list because of its key role in producing suffering. In effect what we have in this theory is an account of how ignorance, by bringing about suffering, reinforces and thus perpetuates itself. When the chain of dependent origination is seen in this way, it is even possible to separate it from the doctrine of karma and rebirth. What it then amounts to is basically just the claim that the ignorance occurring at any one point in one's life causes one to act in certain ways that set the stage for both later suffering and continued ignorance.

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[8] It is this version of the list that will later lead some Abhidharma philosophers to hold that two simultaneously existing things can be both cause and effect of one another. This notion of reciprocal causation will become the center of some Abhidharma controversies.

[9] The Buddha says that we cannot discern the very first life in the series of lives we have lived. In the later tradition this is often taken to mean that the series of lives (and so our ignorance as well) is beginningless. But the Buddha's statement might be interpreted another way: while there might have been a very first life in the series, we could never tell which one that is. For it's always possible that although there were earlier lives, we simply can't remember any. Given this difficulty, it is pointless to speculate about whether there is or is not a first life in the series, and what might explain this. Suffering exists in the present life, and such speculation won't help solve that problem.

The third truth, that there is the cessation of suffering, follows directly from the second truth. Ignorance is a remediable condition. Since it is possible to cure our ignorance, it is possible to put an end to the feedback loop that results in suffering. The fourth truth then spells out a set of eight practices that are designed to bring about this cure. They are: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right exertion, right self-possession and right concentration. These eight are said to fall into three basic kinds: the first two represent wisdom, the next three are the factors of morality, and the final three are the practices that make up meditation. The factors are listed in a way that might suggest a sequential order: start with right view, follow the rules of right conduct, proceed to concentration, then attain nirvāna. But in actual practice the different factors are said to mutually reinforce one another, so that the mastery of each will involve contributions from the others. For instance, one might begin by acquiring a rudimentary grasp of the basic teachings of the Buddha (right view), on that basis form the (right) intention to seek nirvāna, and then set about trying to obey the moral rules set out for lay followers, such as not lying (right speech), not stealing (right action) and not working as a butcher (right livelihood). But when following these moral rules becomes habitual, this has the effect of clearing the mind of certain passions that can interfere with attaining wisdom. So this can lead to a deeper appreciation of the Buddha's teachings (right view), followed by the (right) intention to become a monk or nun. Entrance into the order of Buddhist monks and nuns (the *saṃgha*) brings with it a new set of moral virtues one must acquire. Practice in accordance with these virtues, along with the newly deepened understanding of the Dharma, helps one then begin to engage in meditation. But meditating also makes it easier to attain the required moral virtues. And meditation likewise produces insights into the nature of the mind that further strengthen one's appreciation of the Dharma. And so on.

For our purposes the reciprocal relation between wisdom and meditation is particularly significant. In the context of the Buddhist path, 'wisdom' means the practice of philosophy: analyzing concepts, investigating arguments, considering objections, and the like. So the content of this 'wisdom' is just the Buddhist philosophy that we are examining here. Now we already know that Buddhists claim ignorance is ultimately responsible for our suffering. And wisdom looks like the antidote to ignorance. So it makes sense that Buddhism should claim doing philosophy is necessary for attaining enlightenment. But will doing philosophy be sufficient? Buddhists generally say no. And it's not too difficult to guess why this is. For we also know something about what this ignorance supposedly consists in: the failure to recognize the three characteristics, the facts of impermanence, suffering and non-self. This failure is exhibited in some fundamental assumptions we make about our lives: that we and the things we want can continue to exist indefinitely, that we can attain happiness by pursuing conventional goals, and that there is a true 'me' for whom this life can have meaning and value. Since almost everything we do is based on these assumptions, we are constantly in the business of reinforcing them. So even if our philosophical practice tells us they are false, it may not be so easy to uproot them. The situation here is like the case of a smoker. They may know perfectly well that smoking shortens their life. But each cigarette smoked reinforces their addiction, making it harder to act on that knowledge. So, the Buddhist says, meditation is needed in order to break the cycle and bring home the knowledge gained through philosophy.

To learn to meditate is to learn to control the mind. That control is then used to examine various mental processes, and to counteract those processes that perpetuate ignorance and suffering. So through meditation one can supposedly confirm that there is no self, by observing how impermanent mental states actually do all the work that we imagine could only be done by an enduring self. We can also see how certain mental states, such as anger and hatred, can reinforce belief in a self and thus perpetuate ignorance. And through meditation we can learn to counteract such states. In the case of anger and hatred, for instance, the adept is taught to cultivate feelings of kindness and sympathetic joy toward ever larger circles of beings, starting with friends and loved ones and eventually extending to those toward whom they feel anger and enmity. So meditation serves as a necessary supplement to philosophy in Buddhist practice. (This is why, even if the Buddhist philosophers are right about things, studying Buddhist philosophy wouldn't bring about liberation by itself.)

At the same time, doing philosophy is said to be necessary if the practice of meditation is to be effective. For one thing, many meditational attainments involve altered states of consciousness. What one is aware of in these states is very different from what goes on in our ordinary experience. This means that we need a conceptual framework to help us sort out our experiences in meditation and figure out their significance. Otherwise we would be confronted with what could only seem like a buzzing, whirring mass of confusion. Doing philosophy is said to help us acquire the conceptual tools we need to make sense of what we encounter in meditation. So, for instance, mastery of the philosophical arguments for the non-existence of a self will make it easier to appreciate the significance of the complex causal connections we find when we closely observe our mental processes. That there are these causal connections will then be seen to confirm that there is no self standing behind the scenes directing our mental lives. And this will bring home the truth of non-self as it applies to our own case. So while meditation is meant to help the practitioner apply the knowledge they acquire through philosophy, philosophy in turn plays an important role in facilitating meditational practice.

Just as there are interesting relationships among the components of the eight-fold path, so it is worthwhile to examine how the three characteristics are related to one shown that while there are the experiences that make up a lifetime, those experiences have no owner. There is no 'me' whose experiences they are. In that case the conviction that my life should have uniquely special significance to me would turn out to be based on a mistake. For experiences in my life to have meaning, there must be more than just the experiences, there must be something separate from them for which they have good or bad meanings. Without belief in a separate self, existential suffering would no longer arise. Such suffering requires belief in something whose demand for meaning and significance is violated. It requires belief in a self. Impermanence also plays a role here. It is the fact of impermanence that first awakens us to suffering. And the fact that everything is impermanent will play a major role in the arguments for non-self. But it is non-self that plays the central role. And it is our false belief in a self that Buddhists identify as the core of our ignorance.

## 2.4

What might it be like to be enlightened? The Buddha claims that at the end of his path lies the cessation of suffering. And we've just had a glimpse of how following the path might bring that about. But even if we can make some sense of his path as a cure for suffering, this only tells us what being enlightened is not like. Being enlightened would mean being without existential suffering. Is there anything positive to be said about it? Is it pleasant? Is the enlightened person happy? Or is it just that because it's devoid of suffering, it's the best we can hope for? This would be a reasonable question to ask for someone considering whether or not to follow the Buddha's advice. The 'live for the moment' idea that was just rejected as an interpretation of the three characteristics did at least give an answer to this question. For then the enlightened person would appreciate their present experiences without any concern about what will come in the future. And perhaps this would enhance the enjoyment of any good experiences while diminishing the anxiety that normally accompanies bad experiences. So perhaps on that interpretation being enlightened would be pleasant. But since that is not what Buddhist enlightenment is like, this does not answer our question.

Here is another place where the doctrine of karma and rebirth has a role to play. To become enlightened is to enter into the state of nirvāna. The Sanskrit term *nirvāṇa* literally means 'extinction' or 'going out' (as when a fire is said to go out). What gets extinguished is, of course, suffering. But Buddhists sometimes equate this extinction with another sort, namely the end of the series of rebirths. What would that be like? Well, if there is no self, then to say I won't be reborn is to say I will cease to exist. Is this what nirvāna is, utter and complete annihilation? If so, then our question is answered in the negative: enlightenment would have no positive result, only the purely negative one of escape from all further suffering. And since this escape looks like a state of pure non-being, an utter blank, it also seems singularly unappealing.

That there is something wrong with this understanding of nirvāna is suggested by nirvāna. Suppose that, as the *Bhagavad Gītā* says, 'desire is here the enemy' (III.37). That is, what keeps us bound to the wheel of *saṃsāra* (the state of perpetual rebirth and consequently suffering) is our desire for things like sensual pleasure, wealth and power, and virtue and repute. Desire for these things is thought problematic because it is based on the false assumption that I am something that could be made better off by having them. Further, suppose that were it not for such desires, and the ignorance about our identity that they both presuppose and reinforce, we would be in a state that is intrinsically valuable. Suppose, that is, that to be liberated from *saṃsāra* is to enjoy true happiness, perhaps even true bliss. There then arises what we could call the paradox of liberation. This paradox involves the following propositions, each of which seems true to the orthodox Indian philosophers:

1 Liberation is inherently desirable.
2 Selfish desires prevent us from attaining liberation.
3 In order to attain liberation one must train oneself to live without selfish desires.
4 One does not engage in deliberate action unless one desires the foreseen result of the action.

Taken together, propositions (3) and (4) tell us that no one will set about trying to attain liberation unless they desire it. And proposition (2) tells us that no one will attain liberation unless they seek it. Liberation isn't something people just fall into through dumb luck: you have to make an effort to overcome ignorance, otherwise it will just perpetuate your bondage in *saṃsāra*. Putting these things together, we get the result that you have to desire liberation to obtain it. And (1) tells us that it's reasonable to desire liberation. The trouble is, (2) also tells us that if we desire liberation we won't get it. So although it's reasonable to want liberation, it's impossible to get it, so it isn't reasonable to want it after all. This is a paradox.

There are different strategies we might use to try to resolve this paradox. We might deny (1), though that would then raise the question why anyone should be interested in attaining liberation. Or we might claim that the desire for liberation is not a selfish desire. But this seems implausible if (1) is true. If liberation is such a good thing, then surely my wanting to attain it would count as a selfish desire – a desire to benefit myself. Perhaps, though, not all such desires are selfish in the sense that's relevant for (2) to apply. Remember that the trouble with desires is that they reinforce the wrong view about who we really are. What if liberation were joyful in a way that didn't conflict with the facts about who we really are? The difficulty is that even if this were true, those of us who have not experienced this bliss would have trouble thinking of it in anything other than conventional terms. When told that liberation is a state of bliss, we would imagine it to be like sensual pleasure, or the thrill that can come from gaining great wealth and power. We would then end up desiring liberation in just the wrong way – the way that (2) says prevents our attaining it. But this suggests a possible strategy: deny (1) not because it is false but because it is misleading for those with conventional views about what is desirable. For such people what should be emphasized is not what is positively good about liberation, but the point that to be liberated is to be forever free of pain and suffering. Then they might attain the bliss of liberation without having aimed at it. Their desire would just have been to rid themselves of pain and suffering.

There are situations where this sort of indirect strategy works. Consider the warm feeling we get when we act benevolently, doing something good for someone else. We get this feeling of gratification when our aim is to help others instead of ourselves. But suppose the only reason I ever helped others were because I wanted to have this warm feeling. Then I would never succeed. If my helping someone else were part of a calculated strategy whose ultimate purpose was to benefit myself, I wouldn't get the warm feeling at all. I can't get the feeling by aiming at it. I only get the feeling when I aim at something else – benefitting another person. Does this mean there is a paradox of benevolence? No, we can and do sometimes act benevolently, and thereby get the warm feeling. The best advice to give someone who wants to feel good in this way is that they should become genuinely concerned about the welfare of others. And this is something we can learn to do. We can get the warm feeling indirectly – not by aiming at it but by aiming at something else. There is no paradox of benevolence.

Could something like this be what's going on in the case of those orthodox Indian schools that denied liberation is pleasant or happy? Perhaps they are simply tailoring their advice to the understanding of their audience. Perhaps because their audience would misunderstand the happiness that comes with liberation, and then want it in a way that would prevent their ever getting it, these schools advise their audience to aim at something else, the cessation of suffering. And perhaps we should understand what early Buddhism says about nirvāna in a similar way. On this interpretation, the fact that nirvāna is depicted primarily negatively, as just the permanent cessation of suffering, and the fact that virtually nothing positive is ever said about cessation with remainder, represent strategic choices. They do not necessarily reflect the nature of nirvāna. Perhaps cessation with remainder is a state of true happiness, though this is importantly different from what is ordinarily taken for happiness.

Something like this interpretation may be necessary if the Buddha's path is going to make sense to those who don't accept the doctrine of karma and rebirth. If there is no rebirth, but the Buddha is right that there is no self, then after I die there won't be any suffering regardless of whether or not I attain enlightenment. So telling me that cessation without remainder is devoid of suffering won't motivate me to try to attain enlightenment. I'll only be motivated by facts about cessation with remainder, the state of being enlightened but still alive. And it isn't clear that being told this state is devoid of all existential suffering would be enough. If that were all I thought I'd get out of enlightenment, I might calculate the odds and decide that I'd do better to pursue conventional happiness. It might be that only a positive portrayal of enlightenment as true happiness would motivate me to seek it. And then there is the question whether my desire for enlightenment would get in the way of my ever attaining it. But this is a question to which we will have to return. For we have not yet considered what it might be like to come to believe that we do not have selves. And coming to believe this is an important component of being enlightened. The Buddhist doctrine of non-self will be the subject of our next chapter. Then in Chapter 4 we will come back to this question of what it might be like to be enlightened.

## *Further Reading*

For more on the details of the Buddha's life and teaching career see Chapters 3 and 4 of A.K.Warder, *Indian Buddhism* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1970).

The account of the Buddha's first expounding of his path (S IV.420–4) may be found at *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha,* trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2000), pp. 1843–47.

For a more detailed account of the reciprocal relationships among the different parts of the eightfold path, see David Burton, *Buddhism, Knowledge and Liberation* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 62–75.

For a very different account of the nature of cessation with remainder see Paul Griffiths, *On Being Buddha* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994).

For a discussion of the debate among Hindu schools concerning whether liberation is desirable, see Arindam Chakrabarti, 'Is liberation (*mokṣa*) pleasant?'. *Philosophy East and West*, 33 (1983), pp. 167–82.

The alleged paradox of benevolence, and its resolution, were formulated by the eighteenth-century British philosopher and theologian Joseph Butler. For a discussion of Butler's work see Terence Penelhum, *Butler* (London: Routledge, 1986).

CHAPTER THREE

# Non-Self: Empty Persons

The Buddha holds that we experience the suffering of *saṃsāra* because of our ignorance of the three characteristics: impermanence, suffering and non-self. Of these three, it is the characteristic of non-self that plays the central role in his diagnosis. According to early Buddhism, there is no self, and persons are not ultimately real. This may be put somewhat cryptically as: we are empty persons, persons who are empty of selves. In this chapter we will investigate this claim. We will look at some of the arguments found in early Buddhist texts for the claim that there is no self. And we shall try to determine what it means to say that persons are not ultimately real. But before we can do either of these things we need to determine what it would mean to say that there is a self. The word 'self' gets used in several different ways, only one of which is relevant to the philosophical question the Buddha is trying to answer. We can avoid much confusion about what Buddhists mean by their doctrine of non-self if we begin by getting clear concerning what they mean when they speak of a self.

## 3.1

By 'the self' what Buddhists mean is the essence of a person – the one part whose continued existence is required for that person to continue to exist. This is the definition of 'self' that we will use. But what does it mean? It might be helpful to think of the view that there is a self as one possible answer to the question what it is that the word 'I' refers to. I am a person. And persons are made up of a variety of constituents: parts making up the body, such as limbs and organs, and parts making up the mind, such as feelings and desires. Now persons are things that continue to exist for some time – at least a lifetime, if not longer. But not all the parts of a person must continue to exist in order for that person to continue to exist. I could survive the loss of a finger or toe. And I might lose my desire for coffee without ceasing to exist. So apparently not all the parts of a person are necessary to the continued existence of a person. To say there is a self is to say that there is some one part that is necessary. This one part would then be what the word 'I' really named. The other parts would more properly be called 'mine'; only that one essential part would count as the true 'me'. The alternative to this would be to say that 'I' refers to all the parts collectively. Let us call this alternative the view that 'I' is the name of the person, where by 'person' we mean the whole that consists of all the parts that make up my body and mind over the duration of my existence. So either 'I' is the name of some one essential part of the person or else it refers to the person as a whole. (Of course this applies to the other words we use to refer to persons as well, such as names.)

most important or valuable. So someone might say that they have come to realize their identity isn't tied up with physical appearance but with less superficial things like artistic talent or communication skills. Discoveries like this are probably important to personal growth. But they have nothing to do with what the Buddhists mean by a self. We can see this from the fact that even if there is no self, we can still ask which of a person's characteristics are most important to that person's happiness. To speak of a self is to speak of some one part of the person, the part that must always exist as long as the person exists. To speak of an 'identity' that can be 'found' is to speak of characteristics or properties, of what a person is like. There might very well be no single part of the person that must continue to exist in order for that person to continue to exist. (This is exactly what the Buddha is going to argue for.) But it might still be true that some characteristics of a person play a more important role in their life than others. Otherwise it wouldn't make sense to say that a person has 'lost their identity'. Perhaps my life would be less meaningful if I were to lose those traits that now have great importance to me. But it would still be my life. I could survive that qualitative change. I might be a very different kind of person. But I would still be me.

There is another misinterpretation that arises in connection with the idea that the self is what gives me my 'identity'. It is common to think that someone's identity is what sets that person apart from all others. Add to this the idea that one's identity consists in what one is like, one's characteristics or properties. The result is the notion that a self would be what makes one different from everyone else. Now the word 'different' is ambiguous in the same way that 'same' is: there is numerical difference or distinctness, and there is qualitative difference. If it's numerical distinctness that is meant, then it's true that the self would be what makes one different from others. If we have selves, then my self and yours must be two distinct things, not one. But it's not true if what's meant by 'different' is qualitative difference. It is not true that if we had selves, each would have to be unique in the sense of being unlike every other. Two selves could be perfectly alike, like two peas in a pod, and still serve to make one person numerically distinct from another.

The difficulty with the idea that the self must be qualitatively unique is that it once again confuses the notion of the self with the notion of what one is like, one's properties or characteristics. And properties may be shared between two things, whereas numerical identity may not. The leaf on this branch of this tree today might be exactly like the leaf that was here last year – same color, same shape, same pattern of veins, etc. But they are numerically distinct leaves all the same. Perhaps no two persons are ever exactly qualitatively alike. Even twins who share DNA patterns have physical differences, such as different fingerprints. Still there is no contradiction involved in supposing that there might be two persons who are exactly qualitatively alike. Imagine for instance that each of us has lived countless lives in the past. Given the innumerably many beings there may be in the universe, it does not seem unlikely that someone somewhere might once have lived a life just like the one I am now living. Yet that would have been someone else, not me. So if what makes me the

- Feeling: sensations of pleasure, pain and indifference;
- Perception: those mental events whereby one grasps the sensible characteristics of a perceptible object; e.g., the seeing of a patch of blue color, the hearing of the sound of thunder;
- Volition: the mental forces responsible for bodily and mental activity, for example, hunger, attentiveness, and
- Consciousness: the awareness of physical and mental states.

A word of caution is necessary concerning these categories. Their names are here being used as technical terms, with precise definitions. Do not confuse these with the ordinary meanings of these words. For instance, the second *skandha*, feeling, refers only to the three kinds of hedonic sensation: pleasure, pain and indifference (neither pleasure nor pain). It does not include most of the things that are often called 'feelings', such as the emotions of anger and jealousy. Those emotions go under the very different *skandha* of volition. Likewise by 'consciousness' is here meant just the awareness itself, and not what it is that one is aware of. So when I am conscious of a pain sensation, there are two *skandhas* involved: the pain, which goes under feeling *skandha*, and the consciousness that is aware of it, which goes under consciousness *skandha*. Again, we sometimes use the word 'perception' to refer to our beliefs about and attitude toward something. So someone might say, 'My perception of the new government is that it is weak and will soon fall.' This is not the sort of thing that would go under perception *skandha*. This is a complex mental state, whereas an instance of perception *skandha* is a simple mental event. A perception in this technical sense is just the occurrence of a sensory content to the mind: the simple thought of a patch of blue or the smell of lemon.

The five *skandhas* are sometimes referred to collectively as *nāma-rūpa* (sometimes translated as 'name and form'). Here *nāma* refers to the four *skandhas* other than *rūpa*. The literal meaning of *nāma* is 'name', but here it means 'that which can only be named'. The idea is that while *rūpa* can be perceived by the external senses, the members of the four other categories cannot be seen or touched. Because they are not publicly observable, we cannot explain what they are by pointing; we can only communicate about them through the names we have learned to use for these private states. What this tells us is that the doctrine of the five *skandhas* expresses a kind of mind-body dualism. The Buddha is claiming that in addition to those parts of the person that we can see and touch – the parts of the body – there are other constituents that are not themselves physical. Some philosophers today hold the view called 'physicalism', according to which all that exists is physical. On this view there is no more to a person than the physical constituents, their body and brain. What we think of as mental events, such as thoughts and emotions, are really just complex brain events. When the Buddha says that in addition to *rūpa skandha* there are the four *nāma skandhas*, he is in effect denying that physicalism is true. On his account, mental events are separate non-physical kinds of things. We will be looking at this claim more carefully later on.

The Buddha uses the doctrine of the five *skandhas* as a tool in his search for a self. He goes through each *skandha* in turn and tries to show that nothing included in that category could count as a self. But this raises a new question: would this really show that there is no self? Isn't it possible that the self exists elsewhere than among the five *skandhas*? In order for the Buddha's strategy to work, he will have to show that the doctrine of the five *skandhas* gives an exhaustive analysis of the parts of the person. We will call this the 'exhaustiveness claim'.

The exhaustiveness claim is this: every constituent of persons is included in one or more of the five *skandhas*.

In the following passage, the later commentator Buddhaghosa argues in support of this claim.

> The basis for the figment of a self or of anything related to a self, is afforded only by these, namely *rūpa* and the rest. For it has been said as follows:
>
> > When there is *rūpa*, O monks, then through attachment to *rūpa*, through engrossment in *rūpa*, the persuasion arises, 'This is mine; this am I; this is my self.'
> >
> > When there is feeling … when there is perception … when there are volitions … when there is consciousness, O monks, then through attachment to consciousness, through engrossment in consciousness, the persuasion arises, 'This is mine; this am I; this is my self.'
>
> Accordingly he laid down only five skandhas, because it is only these that can afford a basis for the figment of a self or of anything related to a self.
>
> As to other groups which he lays down, such as the five of conduct and the rest, these are included, for they are comprised in volition skandha. Accordingly he laid down only five skandhas, because these include all other classifications. After this manner, therefore, is the conclusion reached that there are no less and no more. [VM xiv.218]

This at least makes clear that Buddhists recognize the need to support the exhaustiveness claim. But it is not clear how good an argument this is. The idea seems to be that these are the only things we are aware of when we are aware of persons and so come to believe that persons have selves. Is this true? And if it were true, would it show that the exhaustiveness claim is true? We will return to this question.

## 3.3

Let us now look at how the Buddha formulates his arguments for non-self. In the following passage the Buddha is addressing his five former companion *śramanas*, in the episode we discussed in Chapter 2. It contains two distinct arguments. The first is what we will call the argument from impermanence, since it is based on the claim that all five *skandhas* are impermanent or transitory. But there is also a second argument here.

> Then The Blessed One addressed the band of five *śramanas*:
>
> '*Rūpa*, O monks, is not a self. For if now, O monks, this *rūpa* were a self, then this *rūpa* would not tend towards destruction, and it would be possible to say of *rūpa*, "Let my *rūpa* be this way; let not my *rūpa* be that way!" But inasmuch, O monks, as *rūpa* is not a self, therefore does *rūpa* tend towards destruction, and it is not possible to say of *rūpa*, "Let my *rūpa* be this way; let not my *rūpaa* be that way!"
>
> 'Feeling … perception … volitions … consciousness, is not a self. For if now, O monks, this consciousness were a self, then would not this consciousness tend towards destruction, and it would be possible to say of consciousness, "Let my consciousness be this way; let not my consciousness be that way!" But inasmuch, O monks, as consciousness is not a self, therefore does consciousness tend towards destruction, and it is not possible to say of consciousness, "Let my consciousness be this way; let not my consciousness be that way!"
>
> 'What do you think, O monks? Is *rūpa* permanent, or transitory?'
>
> 'It is transitory, Reverend Sir.'
>
> 'And that which is transitory – is it painful, or is it pleasant?'
>
> 'It is painful, Reverend Sir.'
>
> 'And that which is transitory, painful, and liable to change – is it possible to say of it: "This is mine; this am I; this is my self"?'
>
> 'Certainly not, Reverend Sir.'
>
> 'Is feeling … perception … volition … consciousness, permanent, or transitory?'
>
> 'It is transitory, Reverend Sir.'
>
> 'And that which is transitory – is it painful, or is it pleasant? '
>
> 'It is painful, Reverend Sir.'
>
> 'And that which is transitory, painful, and liable to change – is it possible to say of it: "This is mine; this am I; this is my self"?'
>
> 'Certainly not, Reverend Sir.'
>
> 'Accordingly, O monks, as respects all *rūpa* whatsoever, past, future, or present, be it subjective or existing outside, gross or subtle, mean or exalted, far or near, the correct view in the light of the highest knowledge is as follows: "This is not mine; this am I not; this is not my self."
>
> 'As respects all feeling whatsoever … as respects all perception whatsoever . . . as respects all volitions whatsoever … as respects all consciousness whatsoever, past, future, or present, be it subjective or existing outside, gross or subtle, mean or exalted, far or near, the correct view in the light of the highest knowledge is as follows: "This is not mine; this am I not; this is not my self."
>
> 'Perceiving this, O monks, the learned and noble disciple conceives an aversion for *rūpa*, conceives an aversion for feeling, conceives an aversion for perception, conceives an aversion for volitions, conceives an aversion for consciousness. And in conceiving this aversion he becomes divested of passion, and by the absence of passion he becomes free, and when he is free he becomes aware

> that he is free; and he knows that rebirth is exhausted, that he has lived the holy life, that he has done what it behooved him to do, and that he is no more for this world.'
>
> Thus spoke The Blessed One, and the delighted band of five *śramanas* applauded the speech of The Blessed One. Now while this exposition was being delivered, the minds of the five *śramanas* became free from attachment and delivered from the depravities. [S III.66–68]

Here the Buddha cites two different sorts of reasons why the *skandhas* are not the self: they are impermanent ('subject to destruction', 'transitory'), and they are not under one's control ('painful', 'it is not possible to say of $x$, "Let my $x$ be this way…"'). To separate out the argument from impermanence from the second argument, let's ignore the claims about the five *skandhas* not being under one's control (we'll discuss this in §4), and focus on the claims about their being subject to destruction and transitory. If we add the exhaustiveness claim as an implicit premise,[3] the argument is then:

1 *Rūpa* is impermanent.
2 Sensation is impermanent.
3 Perception is impermanent.
4 Volition is impermanent.
5 Consciousness is impermanent.
6 If there were a self it would be permanent.
IP [There is no more to the person than the five *skandhas*.]
C Therefore there is no self.

This argument is valid or logically good. That is, if the premises are all true, then the conclusion will also be true. So our job now will be to determine if the premises really are all true. But before we can do that, there is one major point that needs clarifying: just what do 'permanent' and 'impermanent' mean here? Once again the doctrine of karma and rebirth becomes relevant. For those like the Buddha and his audience who accepted the doctrine, 'permanent' would mean eternal, and 'impermanent' would mean anything less than eternal. This is because if we believe it is the self that undergoes rebirth, and we also believe that liberation from rebirth is possible, then we will hold as well that the self is something that continues to exist over many lives, and can even exist independently of any form of corporeal life. This is probably what the Buddha had in mind with premise (6). And in that case, all that would be needed to show that something is not a self is to establish that it does not last forever – even if it did last a long time. So if, for instance, the *rūpa* that is my body does not last forever, in examining arguments will be to first look at what reason there might be to think that the premises are true, and then to evaluate the argument overall. How might someone defend the remaining premises, (2)–(5)? These are not affected by the question of karma and rebirth in the way that premise (1) is. For regardless of whether we interpret 'permanent' to mean eternal, or just to mean lasting a single lifetime, the four *nāma skandhas* will all count as impermanent. This is the point the Buddha makes in the following passage:

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[3] An implicit premise is an unstated premise that must be supplied for an argument to work, and that the author of the argument did not state because they thought it would be redundant – typically because it seemed to the author to be common knowledge that the author and the audience shared. We will follow the practice of putting implicit premises in square brackets.

> It would be better, O monks, if the uninstructed worldling regarded the body which is composed of the four elements as a self, rather than the mind. And why do I say so? Because it is evident, O monks, that this body which is composed of the four elements lasts one year, lasts two years, lasts three years, lasts four years, lasts five years, lasts ten years, lasts twenty years, lasts thirty years, lasts forty years, lasts fifty years, lasts a hundred years, and even more. But that, O monks, which is called mind, intellect, consciousness, keeps up an incessant round by day and by night of perishing as one thing and springing up as another.
>
> Here the learned and noble disciple, O monks, attentively considers dependent origination: 'this exists when that exists, this originates from the origination of that; this does not exist when that does not exist, this ceases from the cessation of that'. O monks, a pleasant feeling originates in dependence on contact with pleasant objects; but when that contact with pleasant objects ceases, the feeling sprung from that contact, the pleasant feeling that originated in dependence on contact with pleasant objects ceases and comes to an end. O monks, an unpleasant feeling … an indifferent feeling originates in dependence on contact with indifferent objects; but when that contact with indifferent objects ceases, the feeling sprung from that contact, the indifferent feeling that originated in dependence on contact with indifferent objects ceases and comes to an end.
>
> Just as, O monks, heat comes into existence and flame into being from the friction and concussion of two sticks of wood, but on the separation and parting of these two sticks of wood the heat sprung from those two sticks of wood ceases and comes to an end; in exactly the same way, O monks, a pleasant feeling originates in dependence on contact with pleasant objects; but when that contact with pleasant objects ceases, the feeling sprung from that contact, the pleasant feeling that originated in dependence on contact with pleasant objects, ceases and comes to an end. An unpleasant feeling … an indifferent feeling originates in dependence on contact with indifferent objects; but when that contact with indifferent objects ceases, the feeling sprung from that contact, the indifferent feeling that originated in dependence on contact with indifferent objects ceases and comes to an end. [S II.96f]

Of course the Buddha knows that reflective people are more likely to consider the mind the self than the body. In the Western philosophical tradition this is just what Descartes did. He concluded that the true 'I' is not the body but the mind – a substance that thinks (that is, is conscious), endures at least a lifetime, and is immaterial in nature. Many Indian philosophers reached somewhat similar conclusions. The Buddha's point is that the conclusion that the mind endures at least such as my desire for coffee. To this it could be replied that this is an acquired volition, one that I did not always have and might very well get rid of. So the opponent must look for volitions that seem to endure a whole lifetime. They might suggest what are sometimes called 'instinctual desires', such as the desire to escape life-threatening situations. Might this not be a volition that is permanent in the relevant sense? The Buddha will reply that what we are then describing is not one enduring volition, but rather a pattern of recurring volitions, each lasting only a brief while before ceasing. This is shown by the fact that I am only aware of a desire to escape danger when I perceive a threatening situation. The desire thus originates in dependence on a specific sense-object contact event, and ceases to exist when that event ceases. The opponent will then want to know what explains the pattern of recurring volitions. What the opponent suspects is that this pattern can only be explained by supposing that there is one enduring volition, a permanent desire to escape life-threatening situations, that is always present in me. My perception of a life-threatening situation brings the volition out into the part of my mind that is illuminated by consciousness, but it persists even when I am not aware of it.

Since we have no evidence that the Buddha was ever presented with this line of objection, we don't know how he would have responded. But later Buddhist philosophers do show us how it might be answered. What we have here is a certain phenomenon – a pattern of recurring desires over the course of a person's lifetime – and two competing theories as to how to explain the phenomenon. Call the opponent's theory the 'in-the-closet' theory, since it claims that some desires continue to exist hidden away in a dark corner of the mind when not observed. It explains the phenomenon by claiming that it is a single continuously existing volition that manifests itself at different times as the desire to duck a falling safe, the desire to dodge a runaway car, etc. The Buddhist dependent origination theory, by contrast, claims that these are many numerically distinct desires. It explains the pattern by appealing to the ways in which the parts of a person's body are arranged. Consider the thermostat that controls the heat in a house. It is because of the way in which the parts of the thermostat are put together that whenever the temperature goes below a certain threshold, the thermostat signals the furnace to go on. It is not as if the signal for the furnace to go on waits in the thermostat's closet until the room gets too cold. By the same token, the Buddhist would say, it is because of the way that the human body is organized that a danger stimulus causes a danger-escaping volition.[4] Now this seems like a plausible explanation. It makes sense to suppose that, for instance, it is because of the way in which certain neurons in the brain are arranged that we have this desire to escape whenever we sense danger. But the in-the-closet theory also seems plausible to many people, so which should we choose?

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[4] No Buddhist text actually says this. This represents an extrapolation from what members of the Sautrāntika school of Abhidharma say about continuity of karmic seeds during meditational states in which there is no consciousness. Their approach to that problem is dictated by their overall aversion to talk of dispositions or powers as real things.

There is a principle that governs cases like this. It is known in the West as Ockham's Razor, but Indian philosophers call it the Principle of Lightness, for it dictates that we choose the 'lighter' of two competing theories. The Principle of Lightness may be stated as follows: given two competing theories, each of which is equally good at explaining and predicting the relevant phenomena, choose the lighter theory, that is, the theory that posits the least number of unobservable entities.

To posit an unobservable entity is to say that something exists even though we never directly observe that thing. Now you might think that positing an unobservable entity is always a bad idea. Why believe something exists when no one can see or feel it? But modern physics tells us that there are subatomic particles like electrons and protons, and no one has ever seen or felt such things. Does that make modern physics an irrational theory? No. What the Principle of Lightness tells us is that we should only posit unobservable entities when we have to, when there is no other way to explain what we observe. We accept the theory that says there are subatomic particles because no other theory does as good a job of explaining the phenomena. In the case of the phenomenon of recurring desires, though, things are different. We said that the in-the-closet theory and the Buddhist dependent origination theory give equally good explanations of this phenomenon. But the in-the-closet theory posits an unobservable entity that the dependent origination theory does not. The former theory says that volitions continue to exist in our minds even when we are not aware of them. The latter theory speaks instead of patterns of neurons in the brain – something that can be observed. This makes the latter theory lighter, and so it is the theory that we ought to choose.

The Principle of Lightness would help the Buddhist answer the objection about seemingly permanent volitions. It can also be used in defense of premise (5), the premise that says consciousness is impermanent. In the following passage the Buddha claims that consciousness also originates in dependence on sense-object contact:

> Just as, O monks, fire is named from that in dependence on which it burns. The fire which burns in dependence on logs of wood is called a log-fire. The fire which burns in dependence on chips is called a chip-fire. The fire which burns in dependence on grass is called a grass-fire. The fire which burns in dependence on cow-dung is called a cow-dung fire. The fire which burns in dependence on husks is called a husk-fire. The fire which burns in dependence on rubbish is called a rubbish-fire. In exactly the same way, O monks, consciousness is named from that in dependence on which it comes into being. The consciousness which comes into being in respect of color-and-shape in dependence on the eye is called eye-consciousness. The consciousness which comes into being in respect of sounds in dependence on the ear is called ear -consciousness. The consciousness which comes into being in respect of odors in dependence on the nose is called nose-consciousness. The consciousness which comes into being in respect of tastes in dependence on the tongue is called tongue-consciousness. The consciousness which comes into being in respect of things tangible in dependence on the body is called body-consciousness. The consciousness which comes into

> being in respect of *dharmas* in dependence on the mind is called mind-consciousness. [M I.259–60)]

To this someone might object that we experience consciousness as some one thing that endures. That when I first see and then take a bite of ice cream, it is one and the same consciousness that is first aware of the color of the ice cream and is then aware of the taste of the ice cream. The Buddhist would respond by pointing out that there are periods in a person's life when there seems to be no consciousness at all occurring. If the opponent were to claim that consciousness continues to exist even then – only in the closet – the Buddhist could reply that their theory of dependent origination gives a lighter explanation of the apparent continuity of consciousness.[5]

But the Principle of Lightness would also help the Buddhist defend their claim that the mind is an invented fiction. As both the Buddha and Hume point out, we are never actually aware of the mind as something standing behind such mental events as feeling, perceiving and willing. We are just aware of the feelings, perceptions and volitions themselves. So the mind is unobservable. And it is the causal relations among these mental events that the Buddha says explain all the facts about our mental lives. So the mind becomes an unnecessary, unobservable posit.[6]

Why, though, should we accept the Principle of Lightness? The idea behind this principle is that what makes some statement true has to be objective: the truth of a statement is not determined by such subjective factors as our interests, or limitations in our cognitive capacities, but rather just by facts that are independent of our interests and limitations. The thought is that when it comes to finding out what the facts are, we should let the world outside our mind dictate what it is that we believe. To think that factors in my mind could determine what the facts are would be to indulge in magical thinking. By the same token, we could say that positing unobservable entities is inherently suspect. Why believe that something exists when no one could possibly observe it? Because saying so makes it easier for us to explain what we do observe? This is letting what seems to us like a good explanation determine what we say the mind-independent facts are. This is letting our cognitive limitations determine what statements we believe are true. Magical thinking. The Principle of Lightness says we should resort to positing unobservable entities only when the world tells us we have no alternative.

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[5] The Buddha's argument in the passage we just looked at is slightly different. It depends on the claim that there are six distinct kinds of consciousness, corresponding to the six senses and their respective objects. These twelve items (vision and the visible, hearing and the audible, etc.) are collectively referred to as the *āyatanas*.

[6] Remember, though, that early Buddhism is dualist. One can deny the existence of the mind and still be a dualist. The most familiar form of dualism is substance dualism, the view that there are two kinds of substance, physical substance and mental substance. Descartes was a substance dualist. Buddhists deny the existence of the mind. But they affirm the existence of mental events, such as feeling and perception, as things that are distinct from the physical (*rūpa*). While early Buddhism denies substance dualism, it affirms what could be called event dualism.

We are now done with our review of the explicit premises in the argument from impermanence. There still remains the one implicit premise, the exhaustiveness claim. If we accept this, then it seems we must say the argument from impermanence succeeds in establishing that there is no self. There is one important objection to the exhaustiveness claim. Many find this claim unacceptable because it leaves unexplained the sense we have that there is an 'I' that has a body and various mental states. If the exhaustiveness claim were true, then while there would be a body and various mental states such as feelings and desires, these would not be the body and mental states of anyone or anything. They would be ownerless states without a subject. And this strikes many as absurd. Is this a valid objection to the exhaustiveness claim, and so to the argument from impermanence? We will defer this question. We turn instead to the second argument contained in the passage we have been investigating, the argument from control. This argument also relies on the exhaustiveness claim. Examining this argument will help us better frame the important objection to the exhaustiveness claim. We will then be better positioned to determine whether we should accept this claim, and with it the arguments that turn on it.

## 3.4

The argument from impermanence starts from one way in which we use the word 'I'. The argument from control starts from another. We often say things like, 'I felt okay about my hair today, but my nails look pretty ratty; I need to do something about them.' This tells us that we think of the 'I' as something that evaluates the states of the person and seeks to change those it finds unsatisfactory. Let us call this the executive function. Then if there is a self, the self would be that part of the person that performs the executive function. Recall that in the passage we looked at earlier, the Buddha says of each *skandha* that it cannot be the self because it is sometimes other than we want it to be. This makes it sound as if he is assuming that we would have complete control over the self, so it would always be perfect in our own eyes. And why would this be? If the self performs the executive function then it tries to control the other parts of the person. But why must it have complete control over anything? And isn't there something odd about supposing that it exercises control over itself? Isn't the point of the executive function to exert control over other things? So far the argument does not look very promising.

But there is a different way of understanding the argument. Consider the Anti-Reflexivity Principle: an entity cannot operate on itself. This principle is widely accepted among Indian philosophers. As supporting evidence they point to the knife that can cut other things but not itself, the finger that can point at other things but not at itself, etc. Are there counter-examples to this principle, cases that show it not to be universally valid? What about a doctor who treats herself? The difficulty with this case is that when the doctor removes her ingrown toenail, it is not the ingrown toenail very argument we have premises stating 'I sometimes dislike and seek to change…' To say that I dislike and seek to change something is to say that I perform the executive function. Yet according to the conclusion of the argument, there is nothing that performs the executive function. If there really were no one in charge, then wouldn't the evidence that is being used to show that no one is in charge really be bogus? Doesn't the evidence presented in the premises actually require that the conclusion be false?

This suspicion can be developed into a very powerful challenge to the exhaustiveness claim. Here is how it goes. Suppose that the five *skandhas* contain all the parts of the person that we ever observe. We agree that we sometimes dislike and seek to change each of the *skandhas*. And we also agree that whatever is performing this executive function cannot perform it on itself. The conclusion then seems inescapable that there must be more to the person than just the observable parts, the five *skandhas*. And this 'something else' must be the self, the part that performs the executive function. This would explain how it is possible to exercise control over all the observable parts of the person without violating the anti-reflexivity principle. The controller is itself unobservable. This would also explain why Hume and the Buddha were unable to find a self when they 'looked within'. The self is the observer, and by the anti-reflexivity principle, it cannot observe itself. It can only observe the other parts of the person, the five *skandhas*. The exhaustiveness claim is false: there is more to the person than the five *skandhas*. Not only do the Buddha's two arguments not succeed in proving there is no self. The evidence they present actually turns out to support the view that there is a self.

This is by far the most serious objection we have encountered to the Buddhist arguments for non-self. Can the Buddhists mount a successful response? They will begin by pointing out an error in the opponent's characterization of the situation. In spelling out their objection to the controller argument, the opponent said that the argument's conclusion is that there is nothing that performs the executive function. But this is not what the conclusion of the argument says. It says there is no self that performs the executive function. This leaves it open that there might be something else performing that function. Or rather, that there might be several somethings performing that function. What the Buddhist has in mind is that on one occasion one part of the person might perform the executive function, on another occasion another part might do so. This would make it possible for every part to be subject to control without there being any part that always fills the role of controller (and so is the self). On some occasions a given part might fall on the controller side, while on other occasions it might fall on the side of the controlled. This would explain how it's possible for us to seek to change any of the *skandhas* while there is nothing more to us than just those *skandhas*.

Consider this analogy. In a monarchy, there is the monarch, and there are his or her subjects. A monarch is not their own subject; a ruler rules over others, not themselves. Now in the case of Great Britain, it is true that every living British citizen has been the subject of a British monarch. But it is also true that Queen Elizabeth II is impermanence and the argument from control. Both arguments relied on the exhaustiveness claim, which says there is no more to the person than just the five *skandhas*. This claim was crucial to both arguments, since they both proceed by showing that there is some property of a self that all the *skandhas* lack. Showing this would not show there is no self if there could be more to the person than just these *skandhas*. The opponent objects that the exhaustiveness claim cannot be true if it is true that we can exercise some degree of control over all five *skandhas*. Indeed the opponent takes this fact to show that there must be more to the person than the five *skandhas*. The first Buddhist response is to point out that if the *skandhas* took turns performing the executive function, then all five could be subject to control without violating the anti-reflexivity principle. To this the opponent objects that in that case there would be not one controller but many. The second Buddhist response will be that there is a single controller, the person, but the person is only conventionally real. We now turn to an examination of just what this might mean.

## 3.5

The text we are about to examine comes from a work called *Milindapañha* or *The Questions of King Milinda*. It is a dialogue between a king, Milinda, and a Buddhist monk named Nāgasena. Milinda is an historical figure. He lived in the second century BCE, was of Greek ancestry (his Greek name was Menandros), and was a ruler in Bactria (in present-day Pakistan) after its conquest by Alexander the Great. Milinda probably did discuss Buddhist teachings with Buddhist monks, but we don't know if there was a Nāgasena among them. The work was composed early in the first century CE, and it is probably not the transcription of an actual conversation. More importantly, it is not an early Buddhist work; it does not record the teachings of the Buddha and his immediate disciples. It is still useful for our purposes, though. For it is recognized as authoritative by a number of different Abhidharma schools. So its views represent a consensus position among a wide variety of commentarial traditions on the teachings of the Buddha.

The passage we are going to look at represents the first meeting of Nāgasena and Milinda. Notice how the conventional practice of exchanging names leads right to a substantive philosophical dispute.

> Then King Milinda drew near to where the venerable Nāgasena was; and having drawn near, he greeted the venerable Nāgasena; and having passed the compliments of friendship and civility, he sat down respectfully at one side. And the venerable Nāgasena returned the greeting; by which, verily, he won the heart of King Milinda.
>
> And King Milinda spoke to the venerable Nāgasena as follows: 'How is your reverence called? Sir, what is your name?'
>
> 'Your majesty, I am called Nāgasena; my fellow-monks, your majesty, address me as Nāgasena: but whether parents give one the name Nāgasena, or

> Sūrasena, or Vīrasena, or Sīhasena, it is, nevertheless, your majesty, just a counter, an expression, a convenient designator, a mere name, this Nāgasena; for there is no person here to be found.'

Notice that his point here is not that his parents could have given him any of those other names instead. While this is true, it's not philosophically significant. His point is rather that whatever name he was given is just a useful way of labeling something that is not actually a person:

> Then said King Milinda, 'Listen to me, my lords, you five hundred Yonakas, and you eighty thousand monks! Nāgasena here says thus: 'There is no person here to be found.' Is it possible, pray, for me to assent to what he says?'
> And King Milinda spoke to the venerable Nāgasena as follows: 'Nāgasena, if there is no person to be found, who is it then that furnishes you monks with the priestly requisites – robes, food, bedding, and medicine, the needs of the sick? who is it that makes use of the same? who is it that keeps the precepts? who is it that applies himself to meditation? who is it that realizes the Paths, the Fruits, and nirvāna? who is it that destroys life? who is it that takes what is not given him? who is it that commits immorality? who is it that tells lies? who is it that drinks intoxicating liquor? who is it that commits the five crimes that constitute "proximate karma"? In that case, there is no merit; there is no demerit; there is no one who does or has done meritorious or demeritorious deeds; neither good nor evil deeds can have any fruit or result. Nāgasena, neither is he a murderer who kills a monk, nor can you monks, Nāgasena, have any teacher, preceptor, or ordination.'

If there are no persons, there can be no one who gives alms to monks, nor can there be monks who embark on the path to nirvāna. Likewise there can be none who commit evil deeds. These and other absurdities are what Milinda thinks follow from Nāgasena's claim:

> When you say, 'My fellow-monks, your majesty, address me as Nāgasena,' what then is this Nāgasena? Pray, sir, is the hair of the head Nāgasena?'
> 'Indeed not, your majesty.'
> 'Is the hair of the body Nāgasena?'
> 'Indeed not, your majesty.'
> 'Are nails … teeth … skin … flesh … sinews … bones … marrow of the bones … kidneys … heart … liver … pleura … spleen … lungs … intestines … mesentery … stomach … faeces … bile … phlegm … pus … blood … sweat … fat … tears … lymph … saliva … snot … synovial fluid … urine … brain of the head Nāgasena?'
> 'Indeed not, your majesty.'
> 'Is now, sir, *rūpa* Nāgasena?'
> 'Indeed not, your majesty.'
> 'Is feeling Nāgasena?'
> 'Indeed not, your majesty.'

> 'Is perception Nāgasena?'
> 'Indeed not, your majesty.'
> 'Is volition Nāgasena?'
> 'Indeed not, your majesty.'
> 'Is consciousness Nāgasena?'
> 'Indeed not, your majesty.'
> 'Are, then, sir, *rūpa*, feeling, perception, the volition, and consciousness unitedly Nāgasena?'
> 'Indeed not, your majesty.'
> 'Is it, then, sir, something besides *rūpa*, feeling, perception, volition, and consciousness, which is Nāgasena?'
> 'Indeed not, your majesty.
> 'Sir, although I question you very closely, I fail to discover any Nāgasena. Verily, now, sir, Nāgasena is a mere empty sound. What Nāgasena is there here? Sir you speak a falsehood, a lie: there is no Nāgasena.'

Notice that Milinda goes through each of the different parts of the body first, before coming to *rūpa*, or the body as a whole; in each case he asks if this is what 'Nāgasena' is the name of. He next asks about the four *nāma skandhas*. Nāgasena says 'no' in each case, though he doesn't say why. We can imagine that he has the same reasons as those the Buddha gave in his two arguments for non-self. The next possibility Milinda suggests is the five *skandhas* taken collectively. It is noteworthy that Nāgasena denies this as well. The last possibility is that it is something distinct from all five *skandhas*. Nāgasena's denial is tantamount to the exhaustiveness claim: there isn't anything else. Finally, note that Milinda takes this all to mean that 'Nāgasena' is a 'mere empty sound', a meaningless bit of nonsense. This is not what Nāgasena said the name is. He called it a 'convenient designator'. These two views about what the name is have very different consequences. If Milinda is right that 'Nāgasena' is a mere empty sound, then all the absurd consequences Milinda mentioned will follow. As we'll see in a bit, though, they don't follow if Nāgasena is right and the name is a convenient designator.

Nāgasena now tries to get Milinda to see the difference between a name's being a mere empty sound and its being a convenient designator. He does this by turning Milinda's own reasoning back on him, applying it to the word 'chariot'. This reasoning leads Milinda into absurdities. Milinda will then realize that the way out of those absurdities involves distinguishing between a word's being a mere empty sound, and its being a convenient designator. The absurdities don't follow if we think of the word as a convenient designator:

> Then the venerable Nāgasena spoke to King Milinda as follows: 'Your majesty, you are a delicate prince, an exceedingly delicate prince; and if, your majesty, you walk in the middle of the day on hot sandy ground, and you tread on rough grit, gravel, and sand, your feet become sore, your body tired, the mind is oppressed, and the body-consciousness suffers. Pray, did you come on foot, or riding?'

> 'Sir, I do not go on foot. I came in a chariot.'
> 'Your majesty, if you came in a chariot, tell me what the chariot is. Pray, your majesty, is the pole the chariot?'
> 'Indeed not, sir.'
> 'Is the axle the chariot?'
> 'Indeed not, sir.'
> 'Are the wheels the chariot?'
> 'Indeed not, sir.'
> 'Is the chariot-body the chariot?'
> 'Indeed not, sir.'
> 'Is the banner-staff the chariot?'
> 'Indeed not, sir.'
> 'Is the yoke the chariot?'
> 'Indeed not, sir.'
> 'Are the reins the chariot ?'
> 'Indeed not, sir.'
> 'Is the goading-stick the chariot ?'
> 'Indeed not, sir.'
> 'Pray, your majesty, are pole, axle, wheels, chariot-body, banner-staff, yoke, reins, and goad unitedly the chariot?'
> 'Indeed not, sir.'
> 'Is it, then, your majesty, something else besides pole, axle, wheels, chariot-body, bannerstaff, yoke, reins, and goad which is the chariot?'
> 'Indeed not, sir.'
> 'Your majesty, although I question you very closely, I fail to discover any chariot. Verily now, your majesty, the word chariot is a mere empty sound. What chariot is there here? Your majesty, you speak a falsehood, a lie: there is no chariot. Your majesty, you are the chief king in all the continent of India; of whom are you afraid that you speak a lie? Listen to me, my lords, you five hundred Yonakas, and you eighty thousand monks! King Milinda here says thus: "I came in a chariot;"' and being requested, "Your majesty, if you came in a chariot, tell me what the chariot is," he fails to produce any chariot. Is it possible, pray, for me to assent to what he says ?'

When Nāgasena accuses Milinda of telling a lie, he is just driving home to Milinda the consequences of following Milinda's reasoning about the name 'Nāgasena' when that reasoning is applied to the case of the word 'chariot'. Nāgasena is being a skillful teacher. He wants Milinda himself to come up with the resolution of the difficulty. This is just what happens next:

> When he had thus spoken, the five hundred Yonakas applauded the venerable Nāgasena and spoke to King Milinda as follows: 'Now, your majesty, answer, if you can.'
> Then King Milinda spoke to the venerable Nāgasena as follows: 'Nāgasena, I speak no lie: the word "chariot" functions as just a counter, an expression, a convenient designator, a mere name for pole, axle, wheels, chariot-body, and banner-staff.'

thing, we'd think what we had then was just a bunch of parts in a pile. No, the difference in our ontological attitude (thinking of them as one thing in the one case but as many things in the other) stems from the fact that we have a single word for the parts in the first case but not in the second. And why do we have this single word in the one case? Because we have an interest in the parts when they are arranged in that way. When the set of parts is arranged in the assembled-chariot way, they serve our need for a means of transportation 'across the hot sandy ground'.

At this point you might be thinking, 'Well, of course. We only have a single word for the parts when they are put together in a way that serves our interests. This is no doubt why Nāgasena calls the word "chariot" a convenient designator. Because it's convenient for us to have a way to designate the parts when they're assembled in that way. That configuration is one we're likely to encounter frequently (if we live in a society that uses chariots). And it's one we're likely to want to be able to refer to. It's much easier to tell your servant to fetch a chariot than to ask that they bring a rim attached to some spokes attached to a felly attached to … By contrast it's much less likely that we'll ever need to refer to the set of parts when it's arranged in the strewn-across-the-battlefield way. And there are only so many words we can learn to use before our brains begin to clog up. If we had to learn a different word for every possible arrangement of those parts our minds would melt. So we only have a single word in the case that serves our convenience. This all makes good sense. But why is it supposed to show that the chariot isn't really real?'

The answer is that our ontological attitude should not be dictated by our interests. Common sense says that the chariot is a real thing. Suppose we simply followed common sense. We would then be thinking of the chariot as one thing, but the same parts arranged in some different way as many things, because it was more convenient for us to think that way. We would be letting our interests dictate what we take reality to be like, and we know where that can lead. Assessing your finances that way can lead to disaster. This is why strictly speaking the chariot is not a real thing. It is just what Abhidharma will call a 'conceptual fiction': something not ultimately real that is nonetheless accepted as real by common sense because of our use of a convenient designator. Here are some other examples of conceptual fictions: a house, a lute, an army, a city, a tree, a forest and a column of ants. The list could be extended indefinitely. Our common-sense ontology is full of things that we think are real, but are also wholes made of parts. The early Buddhist view is that strictly speaking none of these things is really real.

Notice, though, that the word 'chariot' is not a 'mere empty sound'. Nāgasena sees a difference between that status and a word's being a convenient designator. To call a word a mere empty sound is to say it has no meaning. And in this context that would mean that there is nothing that it refers to. So if chariots are not really real, why isn't the word 'chariot' a mere empty sound? We already gave the answer, but it is worth repeating and elaborating on. 'Chariot' does refer to something, but not to what it appears to refer to. Its reference is misleading, for it seems to be the name of a single thing, a chariot, and there really is no such thing. It is, though, a useful way of talking statement, 'There's a soft-drink machine in the lobby.' You might think that what the statement says corresponds to the facts. But even if there is a sense in which that is correct, still it asserts the existence of a conceptual fiction, the soft-drink machine. Does that mean the statement is ultimately false? No. To call it ultimately false is to be committed to the ultimate truth of the statement that is its negation, 'There is no soft-drink machine in the lobby.' And for that statement to be true it would have to be true that there are or at least could be such things as soft-drink machines. It presupposes the existence of a conceptual fiction. No statement that uses the concept of a soft-drink machine could be ultimately true. Our statement is conventionally true though. Any speaker of English who was informed about the building would agree to it, so it is acceptable to common sense. And its acceptance consistently leads to satisfaction of our desires, such as my craving for a diet soda.

So any statement that uses convenient designators can only be conventionally true. It cannot be ultimately true, or ultimately false either. From the ultimate perspective such a statement is simply without meaning, and so not the sort of thing that could be either true or false. The Sanskrit word (*saṃvṛti*) that we are translating as 'conventional' literally means 'concealing'. And Buddhist commentators explain their use of this term by saying that convenient designators conceal the nature of reality. Words like 'chariot' are misleading because they seem to refer to a single thing when they actually refer to a plurality. If we want a complete description of how things actually objectively are, we should avoid using them. Of course that objectivity would come at a steep price. If we could never use convenient designators in describing the world, then when we wanted to ride over the hot sandy ground we would have to list all the parts that make up the chariot and describe how each is related to the others. That would take a long time. So inevitably we lapse back into using conventional truth.

This is not necessarily a problem though. After all, not just any statement using convenient designators will be conventionally true. The definition said such statements must consistently lead to successful practice.[10] The statement about the soft-drink machine might, but no statement about there being a teletransportation machine in the lobby will. There is no such thing as a teletransportation machine. Isn't it also true that there really aren't any soft-drink machines either? Why should the belief in those non-existent things lead to successful practice? The answer, of course, is that there are all the suitably arranged parts that make up what we call a soft-drink machine. It's because of their interactions that my desire for a cold dose of artificially sweetened carbonated flavored water gets satisfied. And if we wanted to we could probably spell this all out. Usually, though, we don't want to. We just use our shorthand description of the situation: 'There's a soft-drink machine in the lobby.' It's worth remembering, though, that standing behind every conventionally true statement is some (much longer) ultimately true statement that explains why accepting the conventionally true statement leads to successful practice. This connection between conventional truth and ultimate truth plays an important role in what follows.

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[10] The definition also mentioned being acceptable to common sense. And some statements that were once acceptable to common sense no longer are. People once believed that the world is flat, but no one does now. But the statement that the world is flat was never conventionally true. Remember that a statement must also consistently lead to successful practice to be conventionally true. The belief that the world is flat leads to the belief that if you sail far enough in the same direction you will reach the edge. But since the world is round, you can never succeed in reaching the edge of the world. Most (though not all) statements that are acceptable to common sense are so because they consistently lead to successful practice.

## 3.7

The distinction between conventional truth and ultimate truth was developed by commentators on the early Buddhist texts in order to solve an exegetical problem. The problem is that the Buddha's teachings seem inconsistent. On some occasions he teaches that there is no self and that what we think of as a person is really just a causal series of impermanent, impersonal states. On other occasions he says nothing of this and instead teaches a morality based on the doctrine of karma and rebirth. The inconsistency stems from the fact that the latter teaching appears to involve the idea that it is one and the same person who performs a deed in this life and reaps the karmic fruit in the next life. So the Buddha seems to affirm in those teachings what he elsewhere denies when he teaches the unreality of the person. Of course we could simply agree that the Buddha contradicted himself and leave it at that. But the commentators saw a way around attributing such a major error to the founder of their tradition: the first sort of teaching represents the full and final truth, whereas the second represents what ordinary people need to know in order to progress toward being able to grasp the full and final truth.[11] Using this distinction, commentators came to say that some sūtras have meanings that are 'fully drawn out' (*nītārtha*), while others have meanings requiring explication (*neyārtha*). The former came to be considered statements of the ultimate truth, the latter were said to be couched in terms of conventional truth.

The original point of the distinction between the two truths was, then, to clarify the early Buddhist view on the person. It was not to help us see that chariots are not ultimately real. It isn't too hard to see that chariots don't belong in our final ontology, and that we think they are fully real only because of the way in which we talk.[12] It is much more difficult to believe these things about persons. As the following passage from *Milindapañha* makes clear, much work is needed before we can see how this might be true. Nāgasena and Milinda have now been discussing the Buddha's teachings for a while:

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[11] This is said to be a manifestation of the Buddha's pedagogical skill (*upāyakauśala*), his ability to fashion his teaching to the capacities of his audience. Presumably the second sort of teaching is given to an audience that has not yet fully grasped the consequences of rebirth. They thus engage in immoral conduct, which only binds them more firmly to the cycle of rebirth. By teaching them a karmically based morality the Buddha hopes to make them less prone to conduct that reinforces their ignorance. Then they will be better able to appreciate the full and final truth about persons. It is an interesting question whether this practice represents deception on the Buddha's part.

> 'Nāgasena,' said the king, 'is the one who is born that very person, or is it someone else?'
>
> 'He is neither that person,' said the elder, 'nor is he someone else.'
>
> 'Give an illustration.'
>
> 'What do you say to this, your majesty? When you were a young, tender, weakly infant lying on your back, was that you, the person who is now king?'
>
> 'Indeed not, sir. The young, tender, weakly infant lying on its back was one person, and the grownup me is another person.'

Milinda's question is whether it is one and the same person who is born and then goes on to become an adult. Two things are worth noting. First, Nāgasena's answer is decidedly odd. How can the adult me and the infant me be neither the same person nor distinct persons?[13] Doesn't one or the other of these two possibilities have to be the case? Second, Milinda's answer is not what we would expect from someone whose views are supposed to represent common sense. Common sense says that adult and infant are the same person. Milinda says they are distinct persons. Here it's useful to bear in mind that Milinda has now been talking to Nāgasena for some time. One thing Milinda has learned is that all the *skandhas* are impermanent and that there is no self. He has concluded that a Buddhist should thus say adult and infant are distinct persons. Nāgasena will now show him why this common misinterpretation of non-self is wrong:

> 'If that is the case, your majesty, there can be no such thing as a mother, or a father, or a teacher, or an educated man, or a righteous man, or a wise man. Pray, your majesty, is the mother of the zygote one person, the mother of the embryo another person, the mother of the fetus another person, the mother of the newborn another person, the mother of the little child another person, and the mother of the grownup man another person? Is it one person who is a student, and another

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[12] A 'final ontology' is an ontology that makes no concessions to our interests and limitations, and accurately reflects the objective nature of reality. In early Buddhist terms it would be an ontology that contains no mere conceptual fictions.

[13] It would not be odd if what Nāgasena said was that while adult and infant are not the same qualitatively, neither are they numerically different persons. In fact, most people would say that's true. That baby and I are one and the same (numerically identical) person; but the baby had qualities I now lack, such as cuteness, so we are qualitatively different. This interpretation of 'neither the same nor different' is only possible, though, if we translate what Nāgasena says using the ambiguous English 'same' and 'different'. That ambiguity is not present in the original. It is numerical identity and numerical distinctness that he is denying.

> person who has finished his education? Is it one person who commits a crime, and another person whose hands and feet are cut off [in punishment]?'
>
> 'Indeed not, sir. But what, sir, would you reply to these questions?'
>
> Said the elder, 'It was I, your majesty, who was a young, tender, weakly infant lying on my back, and it is I who am now grown up. In dependence on this very body all these different elements are collected together.'
>
> 'Give an illustration.'
>
> 'It is as if, your majesty, someone were to light a lamp; would it shine all night?'
>
> 'Certainly, sir, it would shine all night.'
>
> 'But now, your majesty, is the flame of the first watch the same flame as the flame of the middle watch?'
>
> 'Indeed not, sir.'
>
> 'Is the flame of the middle watch the same flame as the flame of the last watch?'
>
> 'Indeed not, sir.'
>
> 'But then, your majesty, was there one light in the first watch, another light in the middle watch, and a third light in the last watch?'
>
> 'Indeed not, sir. In dependence on that first flame there was one light that shone all night.'
>
> 'In exactly the same way, your majesty, is the series of psychophysical elements (*dharmas*) connected together: one element perishes, another arises, seamlessly united as though without before and after. Therefore neither as the same nor as a distinct person does this latest aggregation of consciousness connect up with earlier consciousness.'
>
> 'Give another illustration.'
>
> 'It is as if, your majesty, new milk were to change in process of time into sour cream, and from sour cream into fresh butter, and from fresh butter into clarified butter. And if any one, your majesty, were to say that the sour cream, the fresh butter, and the clarified butter were each of them the very milk itself – now would he say well, if he were to say so?'
>
> 'Indeed not, sir. They came into being in dependence on that milk.'
>
> 'In exactly the same way, your majesty, is the series of psychophysical elements (*dharmas*) connected together: one element perishes, another arises, seamlessly united as though without before and after. Therefore neither as the same nor as a distinct person does this latest aggregation of consciousness connect up with earlier consciousness.' [MP 41f]

The overall point of the passage is clear enough: the ultimate truth about what are conventionally called persons is just that there is a causal series of impermanent *skandhas*. But there are a number of puzzling features that require close attention. First there is Nāgasena's examples of the mother, the student and the criminal. What point is he trying to make with these? Remember that Milinda thought the infant and the adult must be distinct persons. He thought this because he realized that the *skandhas* making up the infant are numerically distinct from those making up the adult. So he reasoned that in the absence of a self existing over and above the

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