

Three Ways of Denying the Self

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Abstract

Buddhist philosophers have tried to work out the implications of the Buddha's teaching of non-self (*anattā*). I characterise the teaching of non-self in the Pāli discourses, noting that, although the Buddha denied the existence of a 'metaphysical' self, he did not completely deny the 'everyday' self but presupposed the 'I' as a continuously identical moral agent. I go on to explain three attempts to explain the Buddha's teaching. (1) Nāgasena in the *Milindapañha* uses the chariot argument to show that the self, like a chariot, is a conventional designation for a functional arrangement of parts. (2) The Yogācāra philosopher Vasubandhu argues that the self is a cognitive mistake and that in reality there is only non-dual awareness. (3) The Madhyamaka philosopher Candrakīrti argues that there is the appearance of a self but it does not exist in the way that it appears. I conclude that these ways of denying the self are distinct and that Candrakīrti's way seems closest to the Buddha's as recorded in the Pāli canon.

Introduction

In this article I propose to present three different ways in which Buddhist philosophers in India tried to work out the implications of the Buddha's teaching of *anattā*, or non-self. This teaching is not quite a doctrine in the sense of a statement about reality to be accepted as such; it is more like an invitation to investigate experience with the help of doctrinal formulations. In the Dhammapada, for instance, the third of three stanzas on the three 'characteristics' (*lakkaṇas*) reads:

'All experiences are without self' –
seeing this with understanding
one turns away from suffering.
This is the path to purity.¹

The sentence 'all experiences are without self' is set off here by the quotative particle *ti* to signify a formulation to be born in mind and used in the context of insight meditation, for the sake of escaping suffering (*dukkha*) and finding liberation.

But to use this formulation successfully one needs to understand what it means. To say that 'experiences are without self (*anattā*)', to speak of 'non-self' (*anattā*), is to deny something, namely, a self (*attan* in Pāli, *ātman* in Sanskrit). To 'deny' is to refuse to admit the truth or

¹ Dhammapada v.279: *sabbe dhammā anattā'ti | yadā paññāya passati | atha nibbindati dukkhe | esa maggo visuddhiyā*. (All translations from Pāli and Sanskrit are by the author).

existence of something, to say ‘no’ (from Latin *denegare*). In this article I will investigate three ways Buddhist thinkers have clarified what it means to deny the self, each of which relies on a different conception of what it is that is being denied. Firstly, in the *Questions of King Milinda*, the monk Nāgasena denies the self using the ‘Chariot Argument’. This argument involves the comparison of the self or person to a chariot. Just as a chariot is an assembly of parts, such that ‘chariot’ is merely a name for the assembly of parts, so by analogy the human being is made up of the *skandhas* or constituents, and the ‘self’ is merely a name for those constituents. With the help of Candrakīrti, a Mādhyamika or follower of the ‘middle way’, I will argue that this argument denies a non-existent *metaphysical* self and that this denial leaves the everyday sense of self untouched. Next, I will turn to the later Vasubandhu, an exponent of Yogācāra, and present his sophisticated argument from the *Trimśikā*, or Thirty Verses, that denies the ordinary, everyday *experiential* self by showing it to be a cognitive error based on the transformations of consciousness. Finally, I return to Candrakīrti, and his argument that, when Buddhists deny the self, they are not saying that the experiential self does not exist, nor that it is a cognitive error, but that the self does not exist in the way that it appears to exist (that is to say, as existing independently or separately), but that it is dependently-arisen. My conclusion will be that I think Candrakīrti has got it right, since his account makes most sense of what early Buddhist texts say about non-self.²

Non-Self in the Buddha’s Teaching

One reason that later Buddhists disagreed about what it means to deny the self is that it is not entirely clear what the Buddha meant when he did so. As the philosopher Nāgārjuna later put it:

‘Self’ has been made known and ‘non-self’ has been taught.

‘Nothing about a self nor a non-self’ has also been taught by the Buddhas.³

That is to say, the early Buddhist texts appear to record the Buddha affirming that there is a self, denying that there is a self, and also saying nothing about whether or not there is a self. The contradictions here are, however, apparent more than real, since the Buddha is reported to have taught according to person and circumstance. Let us begin our review of early Buddhist teachings with the Buddha’s saying nothing.

In the discourse entitled ‘To Ānanda’, a wanderer called Vacchagotta approaches the Buddha to ask him a question:

‘Mr Gotama, is there a self (*attā*)?’

When this was said, the Blessed One remained silent.

‘Mr Gotama, is there not a self?’

² Indian Buddhists denied the self in other ways besides these three. Most notably, the Abhidharmikas denied the self by systematically analysing experience into momentary real qualities called *dharmas*, leaving no room for either a metaphysical or an experiential self. There were also the Pudgalavādins or ‘Personalists’ who denied a permanent, unchanging *ātman*, but affirmed a *pudgala* or person who was more than the flux of changing constituents (studied by Priestley, 1999).

³ Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, 18.6: *ātmety api prajñāpitam anātmety api deśitam | buddhair nātmā na cānātmā kaścid ity api deśitam ||* (see also Siderits and Katsura, 2013).

A second time the Blessed One remained silent, and Vacchagotta the wanderer got up and left. Then, not long after Vacchagotta the wanderer had left, Venerable Ānanda said this to the Blessed One:

‘Why, lord, did you not answer the wanderer Vacchagotta’s questions?’

‘Ānanda, had I, being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer, “is there a self?”, answered that the self exists, that would have been to agree with those ascetics and brahmanas who are eternalists. Ānanda, had I, being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer, “is there not a self?”, answered that the self does not exist, that would have been to agree with those ascetics and brahmanas who are annihilationists.

‘Ānanda, had I, being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer, “is there a self?”, answered that the self does exist, would that be consonant with the arising of the knowledge that “all experiences (*dhammas*) are without self” (*anattā*)?’

‘Certainly not, lord.’

‘Ānanda, had I, being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer, “is there not a self?”, answered that the self does not exist, wouldn’t the bewildered wanderer Vacchagotta be even more confused, thinking, “I used to have a self, but now it doesn’t exist”?’⁴

This delightful exchange, which surely must have always produced a smile, shows the Buddha explaining to Ānanda that his reason for neither affirming nor denying the existence of a self was not to mislead Vacchagotta into thinking that he taught a speculative or theoretical view regarding the existence or non-existence of the self – that is, concerning a *metaphysical self*, a self considered as existing as the object of a concept of the self – or not.

It is instructive to notice that the reason the Buddha gives for not affirming nor denying a metaphysical self is not that such a self is an *illusion*, but that to affirm or deny it would be to take up eternalist or annihilationist views. Thinking more analytically, the Buddha did not *affirm* the metaphysical self for the reason that, like the son of a barren woman or the horns of a hare, the metaphysical self is non-existent. Elsewhere the Buddha argues that views like that of the metaphysical self are the thoughts that arise on condition of feeling (*vedanā*) and craving (*taṇhā*) but whose content, being merely overstimulated speculation, does not refer to anything.⁵ And the reason the Buddha did not *deny* the metaphysical self is that to do so would plunge the unwary into confused and unhelpful views, such as annihilationism.⁶

Not only is the Buddha reported as *not* denying the self, but the self is implicitly or explicitly *affirmed* in much of his teaching. This self is not the supposed object of metaphysical views, but is the ordinary, everyday self or ‘person’ (*puggala*), a first-person perspective on personal identity through time, a person who acts and experiences the consequences of actions. Hence the Buddha is said to have recommended that all his followers reflect frequently as follows:

⁴ ‘To Ānanda’, *Samyutta Nikāya* (S) 44: 10 PTS iv.400–1; also translated by Bodhi (2000, pp.1393–4).

⁵ ‘Brahma’s Net’, *Dīgha Nikāya* (D) 1 PTS i.40; also translated by Walshe (1987 pp.87–90).

⁶ This interpretation is also rehearsed in Vasubandhu’s discussion of the same *sūtra* in his ‘Refutation of the Theory of the Self’ (*Ātmavādapraṭiṣedha*), an appendix to his ‘Treasury of Abhidharma’ (*Abhidharmakośa*), and translated by Duerlinger (2003, pp.90–1) and by Kapstein (2001, pp.363–4).

‘I am the owner of my actions, heir to my actions, born of my actions, related to my actions, and actions are my refuge; whatever actions I might do, good or bad, of these I will be the heir.’⁷

Further, the Buddha taught the person as a continuing identity not only for the sake of ethical responsibility but also for the sake of making progress on the Buddhist path. For instance:

‘Monks, for one who is virtuous and flourishing in virtue, the precondition of freedom from remorse is fulfilled. When there is freedom from remorse, for one of flourishing freedom from remorse, the precondition of joy is fulfilled...’⁸

And so on, through the factors of the path, to liberation and knowledge of liberation. Hence, the Buddhist tradition from the beginning has clearly taught that persons are social agents enduring through time, who can develop towards awakening. Not only are persons social agents, but they are represented as having narratives, that is to say, stories which give meaning to an existence through time, narratives which change in the course of Buddhist training without being entirely destroyed. Even Buddhas have narratives, stories traced back over lifetimes, albeit rather impersonal ones.

But Buddhist persons are enjoined to consider the non-self characteristic of experience. The Buddha’s teaching of non-self has a specific place in the methodology of Buddhist training for liberating insight. This methodology consists of a investigation of actual experience, and the non-self teaching is prescriptive guidance for what to observe. In the historical context of ancient India, some ascetics contemplated a homology or deep identity of the self in its proposed metaphysical essence with the cosmos, as taught in certain Upaniṣads;⁹ but the Buddha is recorded as deriding the presuppositions involved:

‘But, monks, if the self and what belongs to a self is in actual fact not to be found, the following point of view: “The self and the world are the same, and after death I will be permanent, stable, eternal, of a nature not to change, and I will remain just so for ever” – is this not completely and utterly the doctrine of fools?’¹⁰

As well as completely denying there is any point of looking for a permanent, unchanging self, the Buddha is recorded as teaching a method for observing how all experience is non-self in the following way:

‘Therefore, monks, whatever physical form [or feeling-tone, or perception, or formations, or consciousness] there is – past, future or presently arisen, internal or external, coarse or subtle, inferior or excellent, far away or nearby – all that physical form [and so on] should be seen

⁷ ‘Topics for Frequent Recollection’ *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (A) 5: 57 PTS iii.71–5: *kammasakomhi kammadāyādo kammayoni kammabandhū kammaṭṭharaṇo yaṃ kammaṃ karissāmi kalyāṇaṃ vā pāpakaṃ vā tassa dāyādo bhavissāmi*; also translated by Bodhi (2012, p.686).

⁸ ‘Preconditions’ (*Upaniṣā Sutta*)’ A 10: 3 PTS v.4–5: *sīlavato bhikkhave sīlasampannassa upanisasampanno hoti avipparisāro. avipparisāre sati avipparisārasampannassa upanisasampannaṃ hoti pāmojjaṃ*; also translated by Bodhi (2012 p.1342). A parallel version of this discourse in the Mādhyama-Āgama (MĀ 46) survives in Chinese translation (Taishō 26 486a–b), translated in Bingenheimer, Anālayo, and Bucknell (2013, pp.324–5).

⁹ See Norman (1991) for details of this historical reconstruction.

¹⁰ ‘The Simile of the Water-Snake’ *Majjhima Nikāya* (M) 22 PTS i.138: *attani ca, bhikkhave, attaniye ca saccato thetato anupalabbhamāne, yampi taṃ diṭṭhiṭṭhānaṃ ‘so loko so attā, so pecca bhavissāmi nicco dhuvo sassato avipariṇāmadhammo, sassatisamaṃ tatheva ṭhassāmi’ ti nanāyaṃ, bhikkhave, kevalo paripūro bālādhammo ’ti*; also translated by Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi (1995, p.232).

with right understanding as it actually is in this way: “this is not mine, I am not this, this is not my self”.¹¹

This teaching is presented in what is traditionally regarded as the Buddha’s third discourse, given to his first disciples, and resulting in their gaining of awakening, suggesting the centrality of this method of contemplation for the Buddhist path. This method is not just one of observation, but of analysis, through which the disciple rehearses arguments to reach conclusions that result in further insight, such as the argument that if (by hypothesis) there was a permanent self (as taught by certain ascetics), then one should be able to control one’s experiences, but (by observation) one cannot, therefore (one reasons) there is no such self.¹²

The Buddha’s attention in these arguments to ‘me’, ‘mine’ and ‘my self’ is to the *experiential self*, our ordinary everyday sense of self as we experience it. The arguments are not strictly rational disproofs, but invitations to investigate experience directly, and to reproduce a train of thought that leads on to liberation. In other discourses, the constituents, meaning the psycho-physical processes of unawakened beings, are described as ‘masses of appropriation’ (*upādāna-khandhā*). Clinging or appropriation (*upādāna*) is the ‘making one’s own’ of the psycho-physical processes which make up the entirety of experience, which the Buddha describes as arising dependent on beginningless ignorance (*avijjā*) and craving. The most important feature of appropriation is the belief in the self, that is, the belief that the experiential self is real (*sakkāya-ditṭhi*). The appearance in awareness of this self is the sense of ‘I am’, as well as thoughts about past and future, that arise through the process of proliferation (*papañca*): “‘I am’ is a proliferation, ‘I am this’ is a proliferation”, “‘I shall be is a proliferation’”.¹³ The process underlying the proliferation of these thoughts is ego-identification (*ahaṃkāra*), which arises dependent on the underlying tendencies (*anusaya*) of the mind to ignorance, sense-pleasures, craving and views. The aim of the Buddhist life is hence the calming of proliferation and the giving up of appropriation, which comes about through a gradual training and the development of insight.

This training results in a radical alteration in the ordinary and familiar sense of self, and its replacement by a direction awareness of causation or dependent-arising (*paṭicca-samuppāda*) as the basic way in which experience works. Something of the flavour of this change is suggested by the following short discourse:

‘Monks, a practitioner’s consideration of six good consequences will quite suffice to establish in them the generalised perception of non-self in all the constituents of experience. What six?’

- [1] I will not identify with anything in the world.
- [2] All my ego-identification (*ahaṃkāra*) will cease.
- [3] All my identification with me and mine (*mamaṃ-kāra*) will cease.
- [4] I will gain unique knowledge.
- [5] I will have seen causation (*hetu*) well

¹¹ ‘The Not-Self Characteristic’ S 22: 59 PTS iii.68: *tasmātiha, bhikkhave, yaṃ kiñci rūpaṃ atītānāgatapaccuppannaṃ ajjhattaṃ vā bahiddhā vā oḷārikaṃ vā sukhumam vā hīnaṃ vā pañītaṃ vā yaṃ dūre santike vā, sabbam rūpaṃ ‘netam mama, nesohamasmī, na meso attā’ti evametaṃ yathābhūtaṃ sammappaññāya daṭṭhabbam*; also translated in Bodhi (2000 p.902).

¹² Earlier in ‘The Not-Self Characteristic’ S 22: 59 PTS iii.66, in Bodhi (2000 pp.901–2).

¹³ ‘The Sheaf of Barley’, S 35: 248 PTS iv.203: *‘asmī’ti, bhikkhave, papañcitam etaṃ, ‘ayam aham asmī’ti papañcitam etaṃ, ‘bhavissan’ti papañcitam etaṃ*. Also translated by Bodhi (2000 p.1259).

[6] and causally-arisen phenomena.’¹⁴

The perception of non-self (*anatta-saññā*) is described here not in terms of the *denial* of the self, or in terms of the self being an *illusion*, but rather in terms of a different kind of experience, one that is no longer characterised by appropriation or the proliferation of thoughts concerning ‘I’ or ‘me’ or ‘my self’. In this way the early Buddhist texts negotiate the relationship of the non-self teaching to the ongoing narrative life of the person.

Moreover, awakened beings appear to continue to inhabit a first-person perspective on the world, distinguishing themselves from others just like everybody else, and continuing to use personal pronouns and linguistic expressions referring to themselves. However, this use of language is said to be an unconfused employment of conventional communication. Hence the arahant or Worthy One is described as follows:

‘That wise one has overcome the belief in their own thoughts:
they might say, “I say such-and-such”,
they might say, “They said this to me” –
they are experts in the ordinary, they know the common tongue;
they might use such words, but to communicate, not more.’¹⁵

Here is the deep difficulty in presenting the non-self teaching in early Buddhism. The teaching implies that the metaphysical self is non-existent, and the teaching evidently involves giving up ego-identification through insight into the non-self character of experience, a deep transformation of the experiential self; yet this insight does not mean that awakened beings do not refer to ‘I’ and ‘me’. This teaching is difficult to understand and easy to misunderstand, and for this reason the Buddha is said to have been reticent when talking about it to those, like Vacchagotta, who were not his disciples. Later Buddhists, seeking to engage in debate in the religious culture of India, developed new ways to explain the Buddha’s teaching of non-self, and consequently of the precise meaning of denying the self.

The Chariot Argument for the non-existence of the self

The first way of denying the self I will consider is through what I will call the ‘Chariot Argument’, as found in the *Milindapañhā*, or ‘Questions of King Milinda’, an anonymous post-canonical work of Buddhist literature preserved in Pāli. This work presents the conversations of a monk called Nāgasena with a certain King Milinda, who is based on the historical figure of king Menander, who reigned over a Bactrian Greek kingdom during the 2nd. c. BCE.¹⁶ King Milinda approaches Nāgasena, and asks who he is. The monk replies that he is called Nāgasena, but that this is a conventional expression, a verbal designation, a customary usage, since: ‘here, a person (*puggala*)

¹⁴ ‘Not Identifying’, A 6: 104 PTS iii.444: *cha, bhikkhave, ānisaṃse sampassamānena alam eva bhikkhunā sabbadhammesu anodhiṃ karitvā anattasaññāṃ upaṭṭhāpetuṃ. katame cha? sabbaloke ca atammayo bhavissāmi, ahaṅkāraṃ ca me uparujjhissanti, mamaṅkāraṃ ca me uparujjhissanti, asādhāraṇena ca ñāṇena samannāgato bhavissāmi, hetu ca me sudiṭṭho bhavissati, hetusamuppannā ca dhammā*. Also translated by Bodhi (2012 p.984).

¹⁵ ‘The Worthy One’, S 1: 25 PTS i.14: *sa vītivatto maññataṃ sumedho | ahaṃ vadāmī’ti pi so vadeyya | mamaṃ vadantī’ti pi so vadeyya | loke samaññaṃ kusalo viditvā | vohāramattena so vohareyya*. Also translated by Bodhi (2000 p.102).

¹⁶ Details in Norman (1983, p.110).

is not to be found'.¹⁷ Nāgasena's claim then, for which he will argue, is that the self or person is merely a name; he denies that self is anything other than a verbal designation.

The king, meanwhile, mounts an argument that denies the consequence of Nāgasena's claim. He asks Nāgasena who it is who practises ethics or not, and who experiences the results of karma, if no person is to be found; questions which the early Buddhist texts answered in terms of an implicit 'person'. He asks Nāgasena whether the hair is Nāgasena, whether the nails, teeth, bones and the other parts of the body are Nāgasena, whether physical form, feeling-tone, perception, habits or consciousness is Nāgasena. The monk denies that any of these constituents is Nāgasena; nor that together they are Nāgasena; nor that there is Nāgasena apart from the constituents; and the king concludes provocatively that the monk has lied: 'Who here is Nāgasena? Good sir, you utter false speech, a lie. There is no Nāgasena.'¹⁸ Since this is untrue, the king implies, Nāgasena's denial of the self must be false. But the king's argument has assumed that the self must either be identified with one or more of its components, or exist apart from them. This, it will turn out, involves the subtle mistake of thinking of the self as existing in the same kind of way as its parts, and then discovering that such a self does not exist.¹⁹

Nāgasena now asks the king whether the chariot on which he arrived is the pole, or the axle, or the wheels, the frame, or the flagstaff. King Milinda says no, it is none of those things separately. But nor is it all these things together. But nor is there a chariot apart from all these. Therefore, concludes Nāgasena, 'chariot' is just a sound and the king is lying, for no chariot can be found. The king now understands the mistake in his argument, and says this to Nāgasena:

'Nāgasena, good sir, I do not speak falsely. That which is called a chariot exists as a conventional expression (*samaññā*), a verbal designation (*paññatti*), a customary usage (*voḥāra*), a mere name (*nāma-matta*), dependent on a pole, an axle, wheels, a frame and flagpole.'

'Excellent, your majesty; you understand a chariot. Likewise, your majesty, in my case, that which is called Nāgasena exists as a conventional expression, a verbal designation, a customary usage, a mere name, dependent on hair, blood, and so on, up to, dependent on the brain in the head, and dependent on physical form, feeling-tone, perception, determining factors and consciousness. In this respect, a person in the ultimate sense (*param-attha*) is not to be found. Your majesty, Vajirā the nun said this in the presence of the Blessed One:

"Just as, from an arrangement of parts,
There is that for which we have the word 'chariot',
Likewise when the constituents exist,
There is what we call a 'person'."

¹⁷ *Milindapañhā* (Miln) 2.1 PTS 25: *na h'ettha puggalo upalabbhatī'ti*. Also translated by Horner (1963 p.34). This section of Miln is also translated by Peter Harvey with a philosophical commentary in Edelglass and Garfield (2009, pp.272–4).

¹⁸ Miln 2.1 PTS 26: *ko paṇ'ettha nāgaseno, alikaṃ tvam, bhante, bhāsasi musāvādaṃ, natthi nāgaseno'ti*. Also translated by Horner 1963 p.36.

¹⁹ The argument is discussed by Garfield (2015 p.107), who nicely characterises it as a 'parody of an Abhidharma reductive analysis'.

‘Extraordinary, Nāgasena, good sir; marvellous, Nāgasena, good sir! You have answered the questions put to you brilliantly. If the Buddha were here, he would applaud you. Excellent, excellent, Nāgasena. You have answered the questions put to you brilliantly.’²⁰

We could summarise this conclusion as follows. The self or person does not *really* exist (‘in the ultimate sense’), but the self or person exists as a convention or linguistic fiction dependent on the arrangement of parts upon which causal basis this conventional self arises.²¹

But how brilliantly has Nāgasena really answered the king? How, for instance, does this way of denying the self help us understand ethical responsibility? Let us rehearse the argument:

Premise 1: What is called a chariot is made up of parts.

Premise 2: Something made up of parts is merely a name for the sum of its parts.

Conclusion 1: Therefore, ‘chariot’ is merely the name for an assembly of parts.

And by analogy:

Premise 3: What is called a person is made up of parts.

Conclusion 2: Therefore, ‘person’ is merely the name for an assembly of parts. No person in the ultimate sense exists.

The Chariot Argument has an appealing formal validity. The conclusion that no person in the ultimate sense exists should be taken to mean that no person exists *apart from* the fictional person who is dependent on an assembly of parts, and this conclusion *logically follows* from the premises.

But when we look at the canonical verses that Nāgasena quotes, we might begin to doubt the argument on *methodological* grounds. In context, Vajirā the nun is said to utter these verses in response to Māra, who asked her some hair-raising existential questions about her origin and destiny while she was meditating alone.²² Such a spiritual practitioner had evidently already established the perception of non-self in her awareness, and the argument for the merely nominal, non-ultimate, existence of the person was a reminder of the non-existence of the *metaphysical* self rather than a rehearsal of the method required to perceive the not-self characteristic of experience.

The English bhikkhu, Ñāṇavīra, evokes the problem with Nāgasena’s argument nicely by noticing that, should one accept the argument and suppose that one understands the non-self teaching, then: ‘The unwary thinker comes to believe that he understands what, in fact, he does not understand, and thereby effectively blocks his own progress’ (Ñāṇavīra 2010, p.40). The thinker may believe that they understand the non-self teaching, but in fact they only understand the non-existence of the metaphysical self, and not the experiential self, which is what one actually needs to understand to make progress. The Buddhist philosopher Candrakīrti had in fact made a similar point about Nāgasena’s argument some centuries before Ñāṇavīra. He argues that, while one may indeed understand the non-existence of the metaphysical self once one has come to understand the non-self characteristic of experience, that metaphysical self was never the basis of the ego-identification, which is a proliferative appropriation, which is the problem with the experiential self. He appears to allude ironically to Nāgasena, whom king Milinda had said had argued brilliantly (*aticitra*):

When there is an understanding of non-self, a permanent self is rejected,

²⁰ Miln 2.1 27–8. Also translated by Horner (1963, p.37–8).

²¹ This argument is discussed in Garfield (2015, p.108).

²² ‘Vajirā the Nun’, S 5: 10 PTS i.134–5: *athā hi aṅgasambhārā | hoti saddo ratho iti | evaṃ khandhesu santesu | hoti satto’ti sammuti*. Also translated by Bodhi (2000 p.230).

but we do not accept that this [permanent self] is the basis of ego-identification. If someone says that they have uprooted [ego-identification] from their own philosophical view

by knowing the non-existence of the [permanent] self – that is very brilliantly said.²³

Candrakīrti goes on to make a comparison, which nicely illustrates the problem that Nāṇavīra had observed in Nāgasena’s chariot argument:

[To suppose that] seeing a snake which has gone into a hole in one’s own home one could remove one’s terror by saying, ‘there’s no elephant in there!’, and also abandon the fear that is because of the snake – well, so much for [our] opponent’s so-called sincerity.²⁴

His point is that, just as one might prove logically that there is no elephant in the room, Nāgasena might have managed to convince king Milinda that the metaphysical self is non-existent, but it is surely naive to suppose that disproving the existence of the elephant will help anyone allay the very real difficulties of having a snake living in one’s living room, that is, the unsatisfactoriness that comes from the appropriative and proliferative tendencies of the experiential self.

It turns out, therefore, that Nāgasena’s chariot argument fails properly to distinguish the metaphysical from the experiential self, that is, an idea about the self from the actual experience of being a self, and obscures the real significance of investigating the non-self characteristic in favour of scoring a cheap victory over the non-existent metaphysical self.²⁵ Perhaps there is some value in this, but most contemporary westerners do not believe in a metaphysical self of the sort that Brahmanical traditions in India teach.

Indeed, contemporary western thinking tends more towards annihilationist views. In the next two sections of my essay I turn to the very different approaches to denying the self found in two Indian Buddhist philosophers, Vasubandhu and Candrakīrti. The approach is my own version of an argument made by contemporary philosopher Evan Thompson (2015, pp.356–66). He is concerned among other things, to correct a contemporary annihilationist view that he calls ‘neuro-nihilism’: the opinion of certain neuroscientists that, since there is no way the neural structures of the brain can support a self, conceived as independently existing, there is no person or subject at all (Thompson, 2015, p.322).²⁶ This is much like disproving the existence of the elephant, in Candrakīrti’s simile. Let us try to grasp the snake.

Vasubandhu’s argument that the self is a mistake

Vasubandhu (4th c. CE), author of the *Abhidharmakośa*, or ‘Treasury of Abhidharma’, is said to have converted to Mahāyāna under his brother Asaṅga’s influence, and then to have composed some dense and poetic texts which set out the Yogācāra viewpoint in its essence, such as the

²³ Candrakīrti, *Madhyamakāvātāra* (MA), 6.140, trans. from the re-discovered Sanskrit text ed. Xuezhong 2015: *nity ātmā ca kṣipyate ’nātmabodhe nāhaṃkārasyaśrayaś cāyam iṣṭaḥ | ātmābhāvajñena kiṃ tat svadrṣṭer utkhātaś cety ucyate ’tīva citram* ||. The phrase *ati eva citram* echoes the *Milindapañha*’s *aticitra*.

²⁴ MA 6.141: *paśyann ahiṃ chidragataṃ svagehe gajo ’tra nāstīti nirastaśaṅkaḥ | jahāti sarpād api nāma bhūtim aho hi nāmārjavatā parasya* ||.

²⁵ Collins (1982, pp.182–5) argues that the *Milindapañha*’s argument makes the self a ‘linguistic taboo’, and non-self a dogmatic assertion, a sociological parallel to Candrakīrti’s and Nāṇavīra’s soteriological concern.

²⁶ The argument of the following two parts of this essay, focussing on Vasubandhu and Candrakīrti, were suggested by Thompson (2015, pp.356–66).

Triṃśika, or ‘Thirty Verses’.²⁷ A basic tenet of this viewpoint is that of *vijñapti-mātra* or ‘cognition-only’,²⁸ the view that the appearance to consciousness of mind-independent external objects is fundamentally an appearance of duality within a real but non-dual awareness in which appear cognitive representations such as objects and the self. This not the denial of external objects, but the argument that their appearance depends on consciousness. In the Thirty Verses, Vasubandhu employs this view to show that the experiential self is a cognitive error, and that what we take to be the self is really something else. Although this sounds like reductionism, it is a ‘soft’, indeed very positive, kind of reductionism, since the real causal basis to which the erroneous appearance of the self is reduced is the completely perfected nature of non-dual awareness.

The approach Vasubandhu takes to the self is comparable to Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology.²⁹ Husserl characterises the everyday viewpoint of the average person as the ‘natural attitude’, a kind of naive realism based on the unreflective assumption of the existence of an external world which is perceived by a conscious subject or self who is identical through time. We could think of the Buddhist term *sakkāya-diṭṭhi* as meaning such a naive realist view of the self.³⁰ To gain a truly philosophical knowledge of reality, according to Husserl, one needs to carry out the ‘phenomenological reduction’. This means deciding to bracket or suspend one’s usual assumptions and to commit oneself to a radical enquiry into the conditions for experience, upon which basis any knowledge is possible.

For phenomenology, as for the Yogācāra thinkers, the first discovery one makes when one questions one’s assumptions in this way, a discovery which changes everything from that moment onwards, is that everything in experience is an appearance *to* consciousness and *in* consciousness. By ‘consciousness’ here we do not mean the power of thought conceived as dependent on the brain, capable of various operations like remembering, imagining, and so on, but rather the quality of awareness, which is to say, the presence of phenomena, without which experience would be completely unthinkable. On the basis of this fundamental appreciation of the reality of non-dual awareness, Vasubandhu develops a way of conceptualising the coming into being of self and world as we ordinarily know it.

The Thirty Verses begin with a setting out of basic terms:

The figurative expressions ‘self’ and ‘phenomena’ which function in various ways are the transformations of consciousness.³¹ (1)

That is to say, what we experience as ‘subjectivity’ or the self (*ātman*), and the objective world with its objects (*dharma*) are transformations (*pariṇāma*) of that consciousness (*vijñāna*) which as awareness (*jñāna*) is non-dual. These transformations have three aspects. Firstly, consciousness manifests a transformation into the store-consciousness (*ālaya-vijñāna*), a repository of past actions which are unconsciously appropriated. That is to say that past actions, in the form of traces or

²⁷ Introductions to Vasubandhu’s Yogācāra and translations of the *Triṃśika* in Kochumuttom (1982, pp.127–63); Anacker (1984, pp.181–90); Lusthaus (2002, pp.274–350).

²⁸ Also known as *citta-mātra*, ‘mind-only’, and *vijñāna-vāda*, ‘theory of consciousness’; I will call the viewpoint ‘cognition-only’ as this is the term used in the Thirty Verses.

²⁹ See e.g. Husserl (1964, lecture 1).

³⁰ The term *sakkāya* is usually translated ‘personality’ or ‘identity’, but this is makeshift. Gombrich (2003) argues that *sakkāya* means ‘category (*kāya*) of existence (*sat*)’, and that the background reference is to the Vedāntic ontology of really existing ultimates. In western terms, *sakkāya* means ‘naive realism’.

³¹ *Triṃśika* (trans. from the critical ed. by Hartmut Buescher available via GRETIL) (1): *ātma-dharma-upacāro hi vividho yaḥ pravartate | vijñāna-pariṇāmo ’sau pariṇāmaḥ sa ca tridhā |*.

impressions are represented in the store as ‘mine’ – one experiences this root-consciousness as one’s own. The store-consciousness simply is the ongoing individualised stream of cognitive representations that make up the appearances of my self and the world around me. It is attended by the universal mental events that go along with all manifestations of consciousness: contact, attention, feeling-tone, perception and intention. (2–4)

Based on this store-consciousness, the second transformation of consciousness manifests, the mind (*manas*), which is based on the store and has the characteristic of thinking. There is a phenomenological appeal here to our ordinary experience of being conscious. In ordinary unawakened experience, we tend to identify with our thoughts. To the extent that this thinking activity is based on the unconscious appropriation of past actions which are continually ripening into new content, this thinking is experienced as one’s own and constitutes the content of our sense of self. Indeed, this thinking, which is afflicted by its unconscious basis, continually manifests as self-view, self-delusion, self-conceit and self-love. This mind, called the afflicted-mind-consciousness by the Yogācārins, is not a permanent aspect of experience, but may cease during deep meditative states. (5–7)

The third transformation of the non-dual perfected nature of awareness is the six sense-consciousnesses. In the encounter of consciousness with the world, and based on the store-consciousness as well as the afflicted mind, arise the three feeling-tones (pleasant, painful and neither) and the various wholesome and unwholesome mental states which which we may be familiar from the Abhidharma traditions (8–14). It is not as though the transformation of consciousness into, for instance, heedlessness around food, or faith towards the Buddha, is unreal. But rather it is an appearance, that arises on conditions and cannot be separated from those conditions:

The five consciousnesses come into existence according to causes, either together or not, upon the root-consciousness like waves upon water.³² (15)

The metaphor of water (the store-consciousness) and the waves upon it (sense-consciousness), which are not separate, though they may appear so, is taken from earlier Mahāyāna sūtras.³³

Let us now characterise the appearance of the everyday or experiential self, according to this Yogācāra analysis. Firstly, the word ‘self’ (*ātman*) is a metaphorical expression (*upacāra*), that is, a way of naming a certain kind of appearance in consciousness. What appears is the sense of the ‘mineness’ of conscious experience based on the background unconscious appropriation (*upādi*) of past actions in the store (*ālaya*). Supported by the constant stream of ripenings of action there is a thinking mind (*manas*) which, unbeknown to its own thinking and prior to paying conscious attention, takes for granted a sense of self belonging to the appropriative activity of the store. On the basis of this sense of self based on appropriation, the mind proliferates the inner content of our representation of a self, in terms of self-view (*ātma-dṛṣṭi*), self-delusion (*ātma-moha*), self-conceit (*ātma-māna*) and self-love (*ātma-sneha*). The five senses plus the mind-sense continue to experience a world of objects and thoughts which appear to the self constituted by the mind and the store.

But the appearance of self and world are the results of the transformations of consciousness. In truth:

³² *Triṃśika* (15): *pañcānām mūlavijñāne yathāpratyaḥ | vijñānānām saha na vā taraṅgānām yathā jale |*.

³³ Especially the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra (trans. Suzuki 1932, p.40 etc.).

This [threefold] transformation of consciousness is the imagination of duality. What is imagined by it does not exist. Therefore all this is cognition-only.³⁴ (17)

The second half of the Thirty Verses consists in the explanation of appearances, from the point of view of non-dual awareness (*jñāna*). This is not phenomenology so much as a way of formulating the Dharma. It is simply how it is that, from beginningless time, as a matter of fact, consciousness is characterised by its underlying tendency towards a duality of distinguishing grasping (*graha*) and grasped (*grāhya*):

While consciousness does not [yet] remain in the state of cognition-only, the underlying tendency towards the two-fold grasping does not cease to function.³⁵ (26)

But while the imagination of duality is the normal state, it is possible through meditation and study to rest in a state in which there is no grasping or grasped:

But when awareness no longer perceives an object, then it rests in being cognition-only: since if there is no graspable there is no grasping of it.³⁶ (28)

Vasubandhu emphasises that such a resting in appearances is not the result of merely understanding the idea of ‘cognition-only’, but is rather the result of the practice of the Buddhist path as a whole:

This supramundane awareness is without intentional thought or perception. It is the revolution of the basis, the removal of the two-fold badness [namely, the veil of afflictions and the veil of views].³⁷ (29)

Indeed, this resting in cognition-only is not anything other than the Dharmakāya (30).

We can now use Vasubandhu’s the distinction of three ‘natures’ (*svabhāvas*) to fully explain what it is to experience a self (20–25). The ‘completely imagined nature’ (*parikalpita-svabhāva*) is the way that the self appears as a first-person subject who is distinct and separate from objects and subject to affliction. The ‘other-dependent nature’ (*paratantra-svabhāva*) is the way that the self appears as arisen on conditions, namely, as the pre-attentive mind’s thinking based on the unconscious appropriation of the traces of past actions in the store. The ‘completely perfected nature’ is the way that the figurative expression ‘self’ lacks any nature of its own, being entirely dependent on conditions, and as otherwise completely imagined.

In his ‘Treatise on the Three Natures’, Vasubandhu illustrates his analysis of these three natures with the example of a illusory elephant:

It is as if [something] made by magic from the power of mantra appears in the form of an elephant.

³⁴ *Triṃśika* (17): *vijñānapariṇāmo ’yaṃ vikalpo yad vikalpyate | tena tan nāsti tenedaṃ sarvaṃ vijñāptimātrakam |*

³⁵ *Triṃśika* (26): *yāvad vijñaptimātratve vijñānaṃ nāvatiṣṭhate | grāhadvayasyānuśayas tāvan na vinivartate |*

³⁶ *Triṃśika* (28): *yadā tv ālambanaṃ jñānaṃ naivopalabhate tadā | sthitaṃ vijñaptimātratve grāhyābhāve tadagrahāt |*

³⁷ *Triṃśika* (29): *acitto ’nupalambho ’sau jñānaṃ lokottarañ ca tat | āśrayasya parāvṛttir dvidhādauṣṭhulyahānitah |*

It is only an appearance and there is no elephant at all.³⁸ (27)

It is interesting to consider what we are doing when we imagine an illusory elephant. We are using our power of imagination, the innate nature of consciousness, to imagine an elephant that is conjured up by a spell out of some planks of wood. We are being asked to compare our own immediate experience of being a self with this imagined illusory elephant:

The imagined nature is the elephant; the other-dependent [nature] is its appearance.

The completely perfected [nature] is the non-existence of the elephant there.³⁹ (28)

We might say that our ordinary experience of being a self is right there, perhaps big and rough. But, following our philosophical analysis, we appreciate that it is an appearance, which arises dependent on causes and conditions, such as ignorance, appropriation and proliferation, those underlying tendencies of the mind to literalise what appears. We have learned from Vasubandhu, however, that the basic reality of consciousness is a store or stream of personalised arisings, taken at face value and imagined to be a self by the thinking mind:

Thus, the imagination of the unreal appears in the form of a duality because of the root-mind. There is absolutely no duality there. There is only its appearance.⁴⁰ (29)

The root-consciousness is like the mantra. Thusness is understood as like the wood.

The imagination of duality should be considered like the appearance of the elephant. Duality is like the elephant.⁴¹ (30)

The experiential self is connected to our tendency to believe in what is arising from the store, which can be compared to a kind of spell. Under the influence of this spell, what is actually there, the stuff of consciousness that is comparable to something impersonal like wood, appears in the form of a big beast, which is ‘me’. This self is the assumption that the duality of subject and object is as real as an illusory elephant.

According to Vasubandhu, therefore, the experiential self is a mistake, an erroneous imagining of a person on the subjective side of the subject-object duality. This mistake is both convincing and inevitable, given the underlying tendency of consciousness to undergo transformation into the store, the mind, and the six sense-consciousnesses. There is no question of undoing such a mistake through philosophical argument alone, though the reasoning involved may be sufficient disenchantment to prompt the revolution of the basis through deep meditation.

Candrakīrti’s dialectical denial of the self

One can admire the subtlety with which Vasubandhu has constructed a sophisticated explanation of the process by which the ordinary experience of being a self operates, and also shown how it can be seen as a mistake. But if we think about Vasubandhu’s method, we might begin to see that it

³⁸ *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa* (TSN), (trans. from the ed. by Anacker on GRETIL) (27): *māyākṛtaṃ mantravaśāt khyāti hastyātmanā yathā | ākāramātraṃ tatra asti hastī nāsti tu sarvathā |*.

³⁹ TSN (28): *svabhāvaḥ kalpito hastī paratantrastadākṛtiḥ | yas tatra hastyabhāvo ’sau pariniṣpanna iṣyate |*.

⁴⁰ TSN (29): *asatkalpas tathā khyāti mūlacittād dvayātmanā | dvayam atyantato nāsti tatrāstyākṛtimātrakam |*.

⁴¹ TSN (30): *mantravan mūlavijñānaṃ kāṣṭhavad tathatā matā | hastyākāravat eṣṭavyo vikalpo hastivad dvayam ||*.

involves two logically distinct claims.⁴² One (set out in the first half of the Thirty Verses) is a descriptive phenomenology of the transformations of consciousness, which provides a vivid account of how a minimal sense of self arises and persists. The other (in the second half) is an explanation of these transformations in terms of a soteriological appeal to non-dual awareness, accessible perhaps through meditation or insight. The denial of the self in terms of its being an error depends on taking these two claims together. But if we separate the phenomenology from the soteriology there are two separate claims:

- (1) The experiential self has a phenomenology which shows how speaking of the separate appearance of ‘I’ and ‘me’ distinct from the world of objects is metaphorical.
- (2) The experiential self is the transformation of non-dual awareness, which is real.

Separating the two claims like this shows up how the Yogācāra approach involves a metaphysical commitment. It has been said in its favour that the Yogācāra affirmation of the reality of mind avoids the sense of nothingness that the Madhyamaka can engender in the temperamentally nihilistic. But let us test our mettle in emptiness.

We turn to Candrakīrti’s denial of the self, to be found in his *Madhyamakāvatāra*, or ‘Introduction to the Middle Way’, a general introduction to Nāgārjuna’s ‘middle way’ (*madhyamaka*) approach.⁴³ In his denial of the self in the *Madhyamakāvatāra*, Candrakīrti (6th c. CE) does not rely on any kind of metaphysical models or beliefs about pure awareness, such as we find in Vasubandhu’s Yogācāra. He simply accepts commonly-accepted Buddhist doctrines, drawing out their consequences to invoke in his reader an appreciation of the middle way.

What Candrakīrti, following Nāgārjuna, calls the ‘middle way’ is *pratītya-samutpāda* or dependent arising, the meaning of which they take for granted since they are addressing other followers of the Buddha, who taught it. They also assume a distinction between conventional (*samvṛti*) and ultimate (*paramārtha*) truth (*satya*), a distinction which, though implicit in the early Buddhist texts, was only fully drawn out by the Abhidharmikas, who claimed that their lists of *dharma*s were existent in an ultimate sense, while much of the content of the *sūtra*s contained teachings about people and events having a merely conventional existence. The Mādhyamikas maintained this distinction. To quote Nāgārjuna’s *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* or ‘Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way’:

The Dharma-teaching of the Buddhas is based on two truths:

The conventional truth of the world and that which is ultimate.⁴⁴

But they thought it through in a radical way that both goes back to the Buddha and states it anew. Conventionally, phenomena arise from causes and conditions; they exist as dependently-arisen; their nature (*svabhāva*) is dependent on other phenomena. Ultimately, phenomena do not exist apart from causes and conditions; their nature is empty of anything independent. The secret of Madhyamaka is understanding the subtle interplay between the conventional and the ultimate:

We declare that dependent arising is emptiness,

⁴² I here develop the argument made by Thompson (2015, p.359), citing Ganeri (2012 ch.8).

⁴³ Candrakīrti originated what came to be known as *prāsaṅgika-madhyamaka*, ‘consequentialist middle way’. A *prāsaṅga* is a logical consequence, and the *prāsaṅgikas* presented their middle way philosophy entirely by drawing out the logical consequences of their interlocutors, which generally led to what they considered absurdities.

⁴⁴ *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (MMK) 24.8: *dve satye samupāśritya buddhānāṃ dharmadeśanā / lokasamvṛtisatyam ca satyam ca paramārthataḥ* |. Also translated by Siderits and Katsura (2013, p.272).

which we use as a verbal convention. It is indeed the middle way.⁴⁵

The Mādhyamikas use emptiness as a verbal convention, in the sense that emptiness is not a concept that exists apart from the way everything in ordinary experience arises and ceases based on causes and conditions and hence lacks independent existence. Hence:

The ultimate is not taught without recourse to the customary.

Without understanding the ultimate, nirvāna is not achieved.⁴⁶

Indeed, since the ultimate truth is emptiness, which is a way of speaking that depends on the absence of independent existence of dependently-arisen phenomena, one can only make any sense of the ultimate by recourse to the study of the conventional, whose ultimate truth is its being empty.

If one can accept dependent arising and the distinction between conventional and ultimate truths, which constitute a sort of minimalist metaphysical commitment, one can begin to follow Candrakīrti's dialectical approach. It is the aim of his investigation to assist the reader in seeing through the problems caused by believing in the reality of the self:

Through wisdom clearly seeing both defilements and faults
that are wholly produced from the view that the self is real,
and understanding the object of this [view] as being the self,
the meditator makes a refutation of the self.⁴⁷

Discussing the Chariot Argument above, I quoted Candrakīrti in relation to the non-existence of what I called a 'metaphysical' self, which is the idea of a permanent self that exists apart from ordinary experience. His argument was that disproving such a self merely showed that it did not exist, while leaving untouched the self of ordinary experience, which the Buddha diagnosed in terms of appropriation and proliferation.

Hence Candrakīrti turns to our ordinary experience of being a person identical through time, with a past and future, and a present first-person point of view, and asks how this person, me, relates to its constituents. This is merely to ask how the person relates to the accepted Buddhist analysis of what constitutes the person, namely, physical form, feeling-tone, perceptions, formations and consciousness; which are what all Buddhists agree as a matter of convention to be what constitutes the person. Candrakīrti again takes up the example of the chariot for the sake of what he calls 'the sevenfold analysis', which is not a logical argument but a method of investigating experience:⁴⁸

It is not valid [to say] that a chariot is [1] other than its parts
[2] nor not other [3] nor does it possess them;
[4] neither is it in its parts [5] nor are its parts in it

⁴⁵ MMK 24.18: *yaḥ pratītyasamutpādaḥ sūnyatām tām pracakṣmahe / sā prajñaptir upādāya pratipat saiva madhyamā* /. Also translated by Siderits and Katsura (2013, p.277).

⁴⁶ MMK 24.10: *vyavahāram anāsritya paramārtho na deśyate / paramārtham anāgamya nirvāṇam nādhigamyate* /. Also translated by Siderits and Katsura (2013, p.273).

⁴⁷ MA 6.120: *satkāyadṛṣṭiprabhavān aśeṣān kleśāṃś ca doṣāṃś ca dhiyā vipaśyan / ātmānam asyā viṣayaṃ ca buddhvā yogī karoty ātmaniṣedham eva* /. Also translated by Duerlinger (2013, p.55), and by Huntington and Wangchen (1989, p.171).

⁴⁸ A practical meditative application of the 'sevenfold analysis' is described in Burbea (2014, pp.224–35).

[6] nor is it merely their collection [7] nor their configuration.⁴⁹

Likewise one can investigate one's experience to confirm whether it true that:

[1] The self is not other than the constituents (as one cannot conceive of being a person without the existence of the constituents; such a self is totally non-existent).⁵⁰

[2] The self is not the same as the constituents (as the constituents are plural and impermanent whereas the self is not like this; and nor is it a continuity like them).⁵¹

[3] The self does not possess the constituents (since to do so it must be the same as or different from its constituents, as one 'possesses a cow' or 'possesses a body').⁵²

[4] The self is not in the constituents,

[5] nor are the constituents in the self (since these relationships presume that the self and constituents are different, like curd in a bowl).⁵³

[6] The self is not the collection of the constituents (as simply putting together a collection of constituents does not make a self, which depends on the constituents).⁵⁴

[7] the self is not the configuration or arrangement of the constituents (like the parts of a chariot can be configured, as only physical form can be configured).⁵⁵

This method of analysis, when it is successful, may be dramatic in its results:

Like those towering peaks are these
long-enduring and immovable views that the self is real.
The self is torn apart by the thunderbolt of awakening to selflessness.
The mountain of philosophical views goes to oblivion too.⁵⁶

Let us review the method of denying the self involved here. Candrakīrti in no way doubts the way that in ordinary experience the self appears, though he attributes this appearance to confusion:

The self is that which continually manifests to people,
in which there is always the conviction of ego-identification,
and that in which its comprehension of identifying with what is mine
arises through confusion and from a lack of intelligent investigation.⁵⁷

⁴⁹ MA 6.151: *svāṅgebhya iṣṭo na ratho yathānyo na cāpy ananyo na ca nāma tadvān | nāṅgeṣu nāṅgāny api tatra nāpi saṅghātamātraṃ na ca sanniveśaḥ* |. Also translated by Duerlinger (2013, p.79), and by Huntington and Wangchen (1989, p.176).

⁵⁰ Discussed in MA 6.124–5.

⁵¹ Discussed in MA 6.126–33.

⁵² Discussed in MA 6.143.

⁵³ This and the previous analysis are discussed in MA 6.142.

⁵⁴ Discussed in MA 6.134–5.

⁵⁵ Discussed in MA 6.136.

⁵⁶ MA 6.145: *etāni tāni śikharāṇi samudgatāni satkāyadr̥ṣṭivipulācalasamsthitāni | nairātmyabodhakuliśena vidāritātmā bhedaṃ prayāti saha tair api dr̥ṣṭiśailaḥ* |. Also translated in Duerlinger (2013, p.88); Huntington and Wangchen (1989, p.175).

⁵⁷ MA 6.164: *ayaṃ sa ātmā jagatāṃ pravṛttā yasmin ahaṃkāramatiḥ sadaiva | yat tasya tasmin mamakārabuddhir udeti mohād avicārabuddhyā* |. Also translated in Duerlinger (2013, p.76); Huntington and Wangchen (1989, p.177).

This manifestation of the self, this conviction of an ‘I’ who identifies with consciousness, the body, and so on, appears in my awareness of myself to exist in itself. But when I investigate the basis for this conventional existence, relaxing the unquestioning ego-identification of ordinary life, I find that ultimately this self does not exist by itself, either ultimately or conventionally.

Nevertheless, Candrakīrti stresses that talking in terms of the self is unavoidable, since most people take the appearance of the self at face value, and since this is the basis of our ability to communicate with each other. Comparing self with a chariot:

‘It has parts, it has components, it is a [grammatical] agent – just that is a chariot’ – this is human communication.

It is what has proven to be an appropriate usage among people.

One should not destroy the world’s proven conventions.⁵⁸

An awakened person should use of the proven conventions of worldly communication to make themselves understood and to relate to people, even though they no longer themselves take for granted any views about the self, but know that it does not exist.

There is no need, on this account, to explain the appearance of the self by reducing it to something more deeply or truly real, from which it is supposed to arise, as does the Yogācāra account of the self’s arising out of the transformations of consciousness. While the self considered apart from ordinary experience is ultimately non-existent, the everyday self appears to exist. What is denied in Candrakīrti’s analysis is just that this ordinary sense of self exists in the manner in which it appears to exist, which is to say, as existing apart from what it depends on. One may learn to distinguish, at least in meditation, *what* appears as my self from *how* I appear. *What* appears is my experiential self that appears to exist independently, but *how* this self appears is dependent on ego-identification and the appropriation of the constituents. As one relaxes ego-identification and appropriation through such methods as the sevenfold analysis, one no longer takes how the self appears to be as what it appears to be. One lets go of the belief that I exist as I think I do.

Why I think Candrakīrti has got it right

While the Chariot Argument to show that no self can be found has a rhetorical appeal, being based on a clearly presented logical argument by analogy, it fails to fully convince. In Candrakīrti’s terms, it manages to show the non-existence of the idea of a self existing by itself – but this metaphorical self was never our problem. This analysis showed the difficulty in presenting a denial of the self, even when ‘establishing a general perception of non-self’ was a well-known way of putting the liberating Dharma. Vasubandhu’s denial of the self worked through the elucidation of an elaborate phenomenological analysis, which was then back-lit, so to speak, by the light of non-dual awareness, to allow him reduce the self to a beginningless self-sustaining mistake, made in the depths of the self-appropriating mind. But this account does not really allow us to sense why the Buddha is said to have continued to be able to use conventional expressions, to say ‘I’ and ‘me’ and ‘my self’, just like everyone else, but without being fooled by them. If the Buddha’s mind had undergone a revolution at its basis, he must have been faking his use of personal pronouns.

⁵⁸ MA 6.159: *aṅgī sa evāvayavī sa kartā rathaḥ sa eveti jane niruktiḥ | siddho ’py upādāṭṭayā janānāṃ mā samvṛtiṃ nāśaya lokasiddhām* |. Also translated in Duerlinger (2013, p.83); Huntington and Wangchen (1989, p.177).

But Candrakīrti’s approach denies the self only in the sense of denying that it exists in the manner that it appears to exist. While you and I may experience ourselves as robust subjective points of view, attached to our narratives, and identified with our egos, the rigorous dialectical examination of this appearance reveals its appearance to be dependent on what is other than the self. These relations of dependence are themselves discernable only in the ongoing ordinary experience of being who we are. While this amounts to a perception of non-self, ordinary experience is no less a matter of using pronouns that refer to ‘I’, ‘me’ and ‘my self’. Candrakīrti, therefore, makes much more intelligible how the Buddha ‘expresses himself in ordinary speech without taking it literally’.⁵⁹

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⁵⁹ ‘Discourse to Long Nails’, M 74 PTS i.500: *yañ ca loke vuttaṃ tena voharati aparāmasan*. Also translated by Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi (1995, p.606).

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