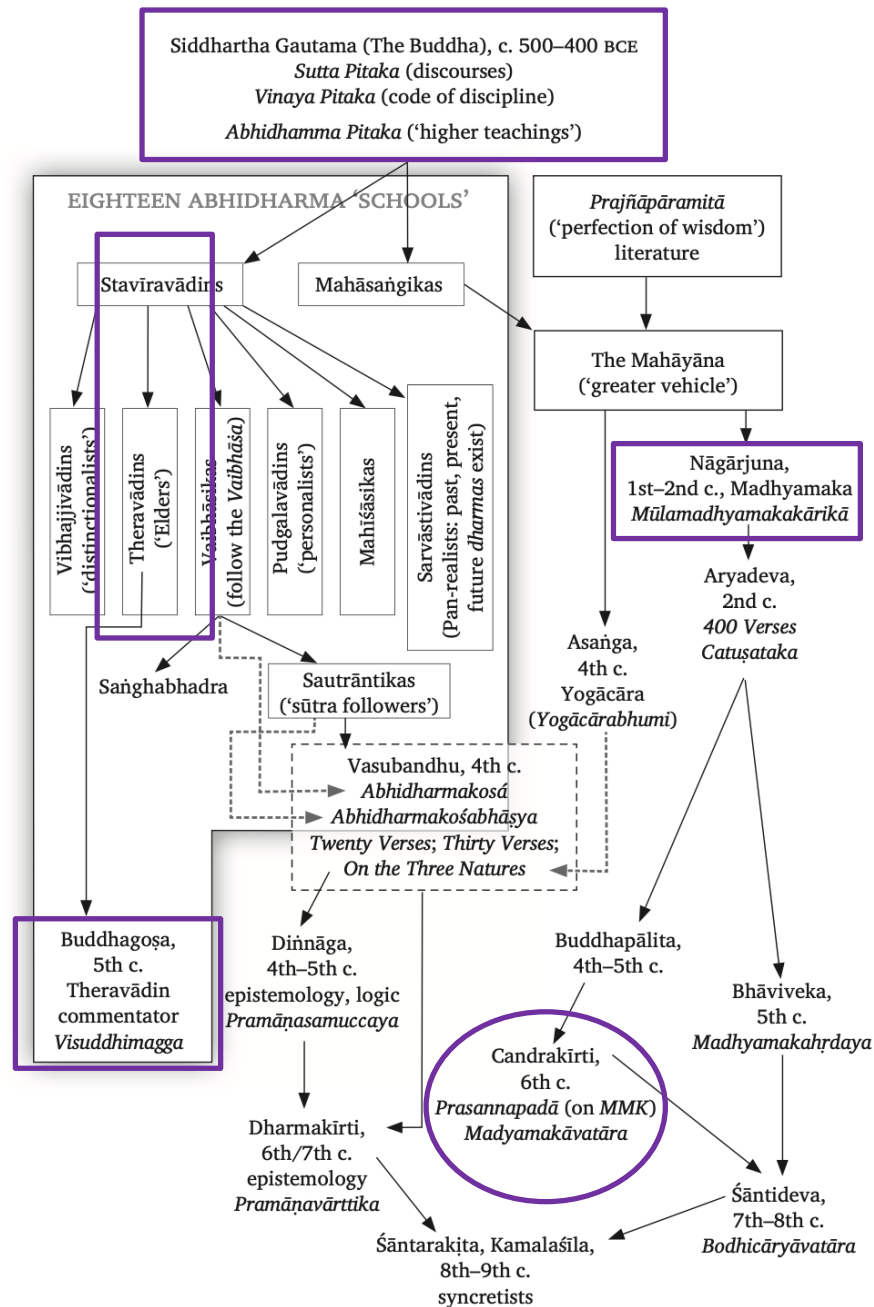


# Comparative Conceptions of the Self

## Evan Thompson

Lecture 4

## Development of Buddhist thought in India



# Buddhist philosophical arguments for no-self

Vajirā in “Verses of Sister Vajirā”

Nāgasena in *The Questions of King Milinda* (c. 100 BCE-200 CE) [“Why a Person is Like a Chariot”]

Nāgārjuna in *Fundamental Stanzas of the Middle Way* (c. 150 CE) with Tsong Khapa’s (1357-1419) commentary [“What Am I”]

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## Verses of Sister Vajirā (*Vajirā Sutta*)<sup>6</sup>

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1. At one time, the Exalted One was dwelling at Sāvatti in the Jeta Grove in Anāthapiṇḍika's park. Then the *bhikkhunī* (nun) Vajirā dressed herself early in the morning and, taking her bowl and robe, entered Sāvatti for alms. She then walked about Sāvatti for alms. After her midday meal, she

<sup>6</sup> Saṃyutta Nikāya 1.296–297 (older editions: 134–135).

returned from her almsround and went to the Dark Forest<sup>7</sup> for her afternoon rest. Having entered the Dark Forest, she sat down at the foot of a tree for her afternoon rest.

2. Then Māra, the Evil One, approached the *bhikkhunī* Vajirā, desiring to produce fear, paralyzing terror, and horror in her, and thereby disrupt her concentration. When he had approached her, he addressed her with this verse:

“By whom was this person<sup>8</sup> created?  
Where is a person’s maker?  
From where has a person arisen?  
Where does a person cease?”

3. Then Vajirā had this thought: “Who is it that recites this verse? Is it a human being or a nonhuman being?” Then this thought occurred to her: “Māra, the Evil One, has recited this verse, desiring to produce fear, paralyzing terror, and horror in me, and thereby disrupt my concentration.”

4. Then Vajirā, having realized that “This is Māra, the Evil One,” replied to him with these verses:

“Why do you assume ‘a person’?  
Māra, you have adopted a wrong speculative view.  
This is only a heap of processes  
There is no person to be found here.”<sup>9</sup>

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“Just as the word ‘chariot’  
Refers to an assemblage of parts,  
So, ‘person’ is a convention  
Used when the aggregates are present.

“Only suffering arises  
And suffering remains and disappears  
Nothing other than suffering arises  
Nothing other than suffering ceases.”

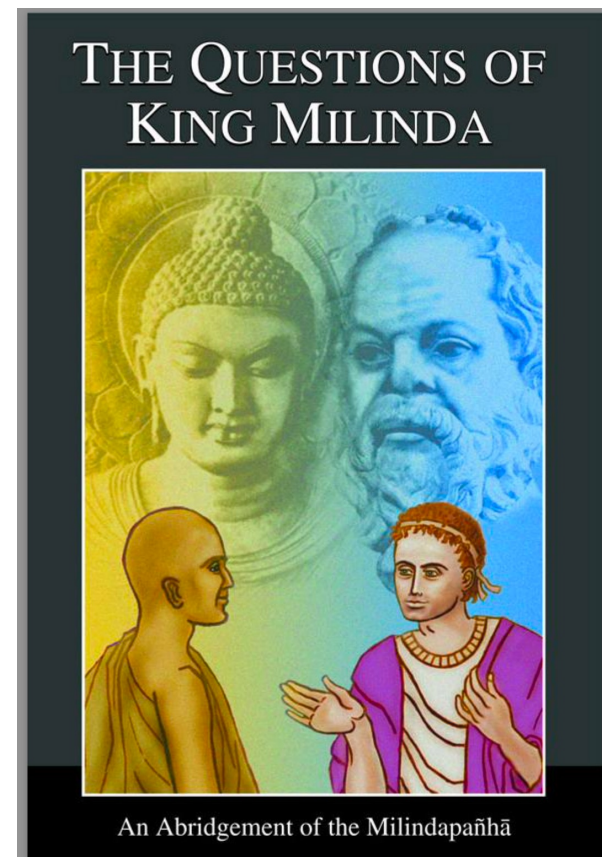
5. At that point, realizing that “the *bhikkhunī* Vajirā knows me,” Māra was miserable and unhappy, and so he vanished right there.

# “Why a Person is Like a Chariot”

Dates from c. 100 BCE-200 CE.

The text survives only in Pāli.

Records a dialogue between the Indian Buddhist monk Nāgasena and the Bactrian king Milinda (Menander).



## The argument from complex wholes (the chariot argument)

1. The chariot (or any complex whole) is either (i) identical to one or the other of its parts, (ii) or identical to all of its parts together, (iii) or something distinct from its parts.
2. It is not the case that the chariot (or any complex whole) is identical to one or the other of its parts, (ii) or identical to all of its parts together, (iii) or something distinct from its parts.
3. It is not the case that the chariot has no existence whatsoever (that it is absolutely nonexistent).
4. The chariot has only a conventional existence (“chariot” is a conventional designation; the chariot has “conventional reality”).



# The argument from complex wholes (the chariot argument)

1. The chariot (or any complex whole) is either (i) identical to one or the other of its parts, (ii) or identical to all of its parts together, (iii) or something distinct from its parts. Exhaustive set of possibilities for the relation between parts and whole.

## The argument from complex wholes (the chariot argument)

2. It is not the case that the chariot (or any complex whole) is (i) identical to one or the other of its parts.

There is no part with which a complex whole is identical.

# The argument from complex wholes (the chariot argument)

2. It is not the case that the chariot (or any complex whole) is (ii) identical to all of its parts together.
  - The chariot is not identical to the parts strewn about. So the parts need to be organized in the right way, but:
  - The chariot cannot be identical to every single part (e.g., all the particles that make it up).
  - If it's identical to some subset of these, we need a principle for saying which subset.
  - The parts, taken collectively are many, but the chariot is one, and what is one cannot be many.
  - The parts can change without the whole changing.

# The argument from complex wholes (the chariot argument)

2. It is not the case that the chariot (or any complex whole) is (iii) something distinct from its parts.
  - The chariot is not distinct from the axles, wheels, frame poles, etc.
  - How could there be a chariot that is quite distinct from its chariot-parts but that nonetheless can never occur without them?

## The argument from complex wholes (the chariot argument)

3. It is not the case that the chariot has no existence whatsoever (that it is absolutely nonexistent).
  - The word “chariot” exists as a designation and the parts serve as the basis for the designation.

## The argument from complex wholes (the chariot argument)

4. The chariot has only a conventional existence.  
“Chariot” is a conventional designation; the chariot has “conventional reality.”
  - i. There are chariot-parts.
  - ii. There is a shared practice of using the word “chariot” to pick out such groups of parts.
  - iii. This practice is useful for our purposes.

# The two truths (“Ways of Talking About This”)

Conventional truth (*saṃvṛtisat*)

Ultimate truth (*paramārthasat*)

# The two truths

## Conventional truth:

A statement is conventionally true if and only if it is acceptable to common sense and consistently leads to successful practice.

## Ultimate truth:

A statement is ultimately true if and only if it corresponds to the facts and neither asserts nor presupposes the existence of any conventional realities.



## The chariot (complex whole) principle

Whatever has constituents depends upon these constituents for its existence, and depends upon our conceiving this “many” as a “one” for its unity, and so does not exist ultimately, but only (at best) conventionally.

## Application to the self

Whatever has constituents depends upon these constituents for its existence, and depends upon our conceiving this “many” as a “one” for its unity, and so does not exist ultimately, but only (at best) conventionally.

- The “self” depends on the five aggregates.
- It depends upon our conceiving these aggregates as a unity.
- It therefore does not exist ultimately, but only conventionally.
- “Self” is a conventional designation.

## General implication

- Nothing complex (made up of a plurality) can be ultimately real, because it depends on its constituents, and therefore does not exist inherently.
- Instead, it exists only conventionally.

# Candrakīrti's sevenfold reasoning

Candrakīrti in *Introduction to the Middle Way* (c. 6<sup>th</sup> century CE) [“Another Ride in the Chariot”]

## Sevenfold reasoning of the chariot (p. 117)

A chariot is neither identical to its parts,  
nor different from its parts, nor does it  
possess its parts.

It is not in its parts, nor are its parts in it.  
Nor is it a collection of its parts, nor is it  
identical to the parts arranged in some  
way.

If the chariot were simply the collection of  
parts, it would exist even when it is taken  
apart.

Since without a possessor of parts there are  
not parts, it doesn't make sense to say that  
arranged parts are the chariot, either.

Even though the chariot does not exist in  
any of the seven possible ways, either in  
ultimate reality or in the ordinary world,

Following ordinary convention, we design-  
ate the chariot in dependence on its  
parts, and with no analysis.

## Sevenfold reasoning of the chariot (p. 117)

1. There is no chariot that is other than its parts.
2. There is no chariot that is the same as its parts.
3. There is no chariot that possesses its parts.
4. There is no chariot in its parts.
5. There is no chariot in which its parts are.
6. There is no chariot that is the mere collection of its parts.
7. There is no chariot that is the parts arranged in some way.

Likewise there is no self that can be found among or separate from its bases of designation, namely, the mental and physical aggregates, when that self is searched for by means of the sevenfold reasoning.

## Ascertaining the object to be negated

An **inherently existent self**, either corresponding to the innate feeling of self, or an artificial conception based on an intellectually acquired theory about the nature of phenomena.

Such a self would exist objectively, independently of thought (it would not be merely mentally imputed).

The object of negation is **not** the conventionally existent person, which exists only nominally, mentally imputed on the basis of the five aggregates.

# The sevenfold reasoning

The seven ways reduce to two:

Either (1) the self is identical to the aggregates, or (2) the self is different from the aggregates.

In other words: either (1) the self is the same as its bases of imputation, or (2) it is different from its bases of imputation.



## The sevenfold reasoning

Neither alternative makes sense (compare with the chariot), so the self does not exist inherently but is only mentally imputed.

## The sevenfold reasoning

The analysis is meant to be practiced as an “analytical meditation” applied to object of negation (an inherently existing self) so as to uproot the innate feeling of self.

This leads to an “inferential cognition” of the emptiness of persons (the person exists conventionally and is empty of an inherent self).

# Madhyamaka

According to Candrakīrti's philosophical system (Madhyamaka/Middle Way), which follows Nāgārjuna (1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> century CE), the same reasoning applies to all phenomena: all phenomena are empty of inherent existence and exist only conventionally.

# Madhyamaka

The direct (not merely inferential) cognition of the emptiness of phenomena is liberation (awakening).

# Buddhist philosophical arguments for no-self

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Nāgārjuna + Tsong Khapa apply a type of reasoning similar to Candrakīrti's.