

Comparative Conceptions of the Self

Evan Thompson

Lecture 3

The five aggregates

1. Forms: anything corporeal or physical [bodily experience]
2. Feelings [sensations of pleasure, pain, or indifference; hedonic valences of experience]
3. Perceptions [those mental events whereby one grasps the recognizable characteristic of something and thereby can name it]
4. Habitual traits [dispositions to mental and bodily action].
5. Consciousness [the fact of being aware]

The five aggregates

- | | |
|--------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Forms | A lump of foam |
| 2. Feelings | A water bubble |
| 3. Perceptions | A shimmering mirage |
| 4. Habitual traits | A plantain tree |
| 5. Consciousness | A magician's illusion |

What do we mean by “self”

The **essence** of the person or individual sentient being.

Essence = the one part whose continued existence is required for the person or individual sentient being to continue to exist (to be one and the same person/being over time).

What do we mean by “self”?

To say that there is a self (in this precise sense) is to say that there is some one part of the person that accounts for the identity of that person over time.

The person continues to exist as long as that self continues to exist.

What do we mean by “self”?

The same person if and only if the same self.

“Same” here means numerically the same—one and the same thing.

What do we mean by “self”?

In one sense, the word “I” just means the person or individual being.

But if there is a self—an essence of the person—then that is what the word “I” really names or refers to, namely, that one part that is necessary for the continued existence of one and the same person.

That one part would be “me,” whereas the other parts would be “mine.”

What is “mine” may qualitatively change, but the “me” stays numerically the same.

What do we mean by “self”?

What is “mine” may qualitatively change—and this includes “my” experiences, which come and go.

But “I” am the **owner** of these experiences; they are experiences had by one and the same (numerically identical) “me.”

So the self as the essence of the person is also the **owner** of its experiences—its changing mental and bodily states.

No-self (*anattā/anātman*)

The Buddha denies that there is a self, that is, that there is an essence of the person (and that owns one's experiences).

The individual person/sentient being is said to lack an essence (to be empty of self).

We use the word "I" in everyday speech to pick out an individual being (the one speaking), but there is no essence "I" or "me," and hence **no real owner** of what we call "mine."

No-self (*anattā/anātman*)

One of the principal ways the Buddha expounds and argues for not-self is via the analytical device of the “five aggregates.”

The five aggregates

The Buddha's claim is that the five aggregates give us an exhaustive account of everything that makes up a person.

But the five aggregates are constantly changing.

Hence there is no unchanging essence of the person to be found anywhere among the five aggregates.

Hence the five aggregates are not-self (or are empty of self).

Two arguments for no-self

1. The aggregates are **impermanent**, hence they are not-self (there is no unchanging essence of the person).
2. The aggregates are **not subject to control**, hence they are not-self (there is no inner controller).

The argument from impermanence

1. If there were a self, it would be permanent.
2. None of the five aggregates is permanent.
3. Therefore, they are not-self.

The argument from impermanence

1. Form is impermanent.
2. Feeling is impermanent.
3. Perception is impermanent.
4. Habitual traits are impermanent.
5. Consciousness is impermanent.
6. If there were a self, it would be permanent.
7. Therefore, the five aggregates are not-self.
8. There is no more to the person than the five aggregates.
9. Therefore, the person is without self (empty of self).

Relation to ātman

The Buddha denies the Vedic-Upanishadic notion of ātman.

Ātman

The unchanging spiritual essence of the person, identified with the unchanging **consciousness** or awareness that “travels” through (or underlies) waking, dreaming, and dreamless sleep, and “travels” from one lifetime to the next.

One and the same inner spiritual **consciousness** present through the changing states of this life and from one life to the next.

“The Greater Discourse on the Destruction of Craving”
<https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.038.than.html>

Buddha’s dialogue with Sati:

[Sati the Fisherman’s son:] “As I understand the dhamma as taught by the Buddha, it is this same consciousness that runs and wanders through the round of rebirths, not another.”

[Buddha:] “What is that consciousness, Sati?”

[Sati:] “It is that which speaks and feels and experiences here and there as the result of good and bad actions.”

[Buddha:] “Misguided man, to whom have you ever known me to teach the dhamma in that way? Misguided man, in many discourses have I not stated **consciousness to arise upon conditions, since without a condition there is no origination of consciousness?**...

“The Greater Discourse on the Destruction of Craving”
<https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.038.than.html>

“Monks, consciousness is reckoned by the particular condition dependent upon which it arises. When consciousness arises dependent on eye and forms, it is reckoned as eye-consciousness; when consciousness arises dependent on the ear and sounds, it is reckoned as ear-consciousness; when consciousness arises dependent on the nose and odours, it is reckoned as nose-consciousness; when consciousness arises dependent on the tongue and flavours, it is reckoned as tongue-consciousness; when consciousness arises dependent on the body and tangibles, it is reckoned as body-consciousness; when consciousness arises dependent on the mind and mind-objects, it is reckoned as mind-consciousness.

“The Greater Discourse on the Destruction of Craving”
<https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.038.than.html>

“Just as fire is reckoned by the particular condition on which it burns... as a log-fire... as a grass-fire... as a cow-dung fire... so too, consciousness is reckoned by the particular condition dependent on which it arises.”

Consciousness

“And what is consciousness? ... There are these six classes of consciousness: eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, nose-consciousness, tongue-consciousness, body-consciousness, mind-consciousness. This is called consciousness.”

Consciousness

Internal Sense Bases	External Sense Bases	Types of Consciousness Arisen from the Sense Bases
eye	visual forms	eye-consciousness
ear	sounds	ear-consciousness
nose	smells	nose-consciousness
tongue	tastes	tongue-consciousness
body	tactile objects	body-consciousness
mind	mental phenomena	mind-consciousness

The argument from impermanence

1. Form is impermanent.
2. Feeling is impermanent.
3. Perception is impermanent.
4. Volition is impermanent.
5. Consciousness is impermanent.
6. If there were a self, it would be permanent.
7. Therefore, the five aggregates are not-self.
8. There is no more to the person than the five aggregates.
9. Therefore, the person is without self (empty of self).

But what about rebirth?

How can there be rebirth, without there being something that is reborn from one life to the next?

But what about rebirth?

“Rebirth” does not mean that one and the same thing is born again into a new life.

It means that the series of mental events carries on from this life to another one, and that the last mental event in the series (at death) conditions (contributes to bringing about) another birth (and hence another life, death, birth, and so on).

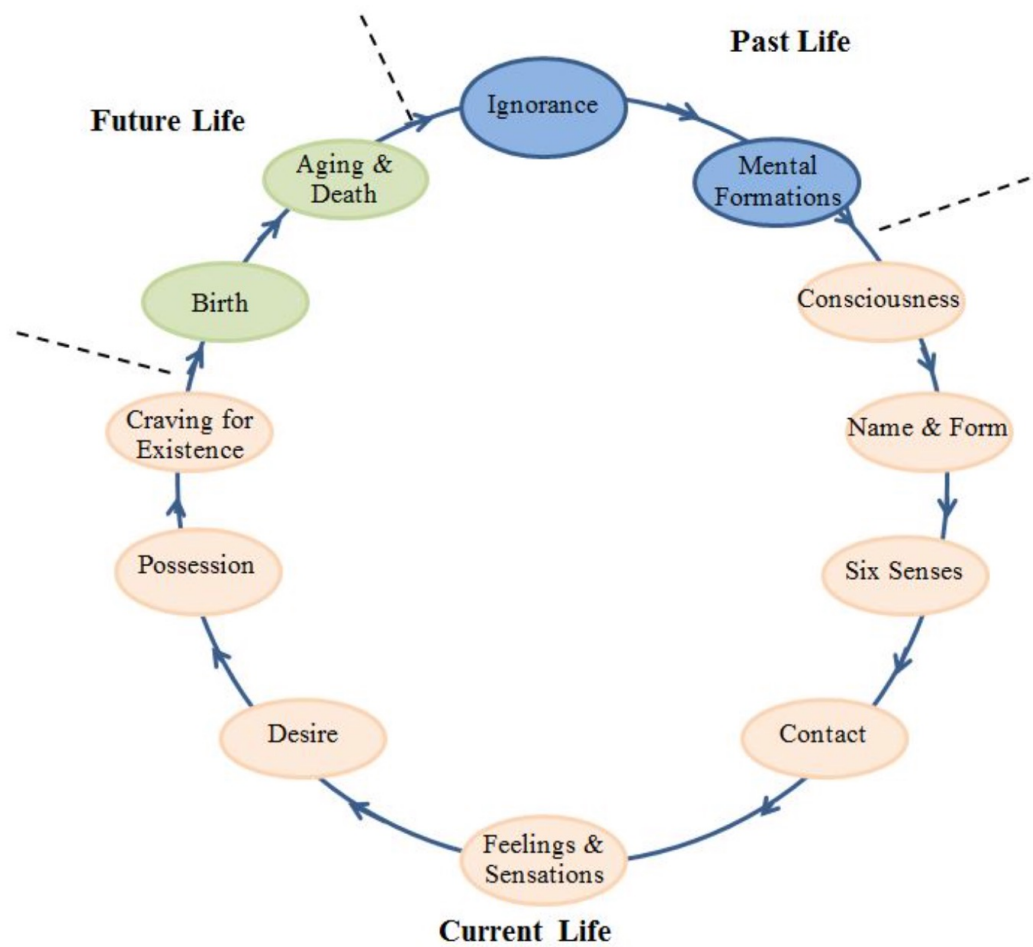
This happens according to the causal regularity of **dependent arising**.

Dependent arising

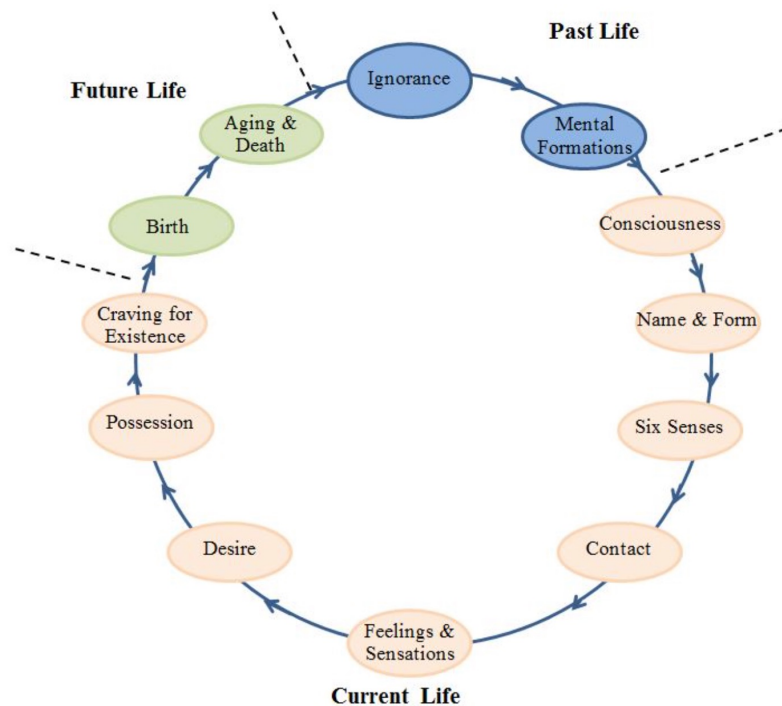
An account of the factors that explain how suffering arises, and how life, death, rebirth, and re-death happen without there being a persisting or enduring self.

Traditionally described as a sequence, consisting of 12 links (factors) in a chain, over the course of three successive lives.

Dependent arising

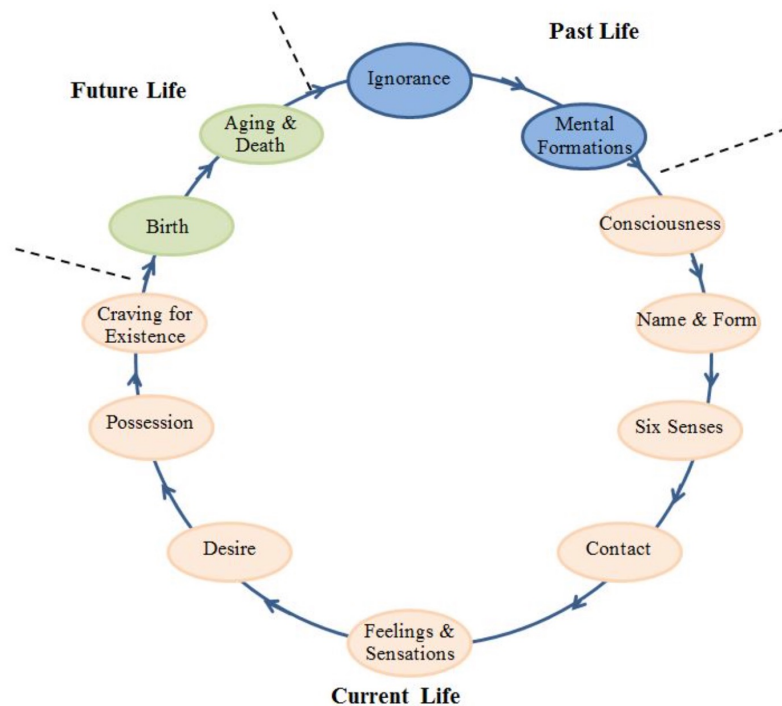


Dependent arising



- Life 2 (rebirth)
 3. Consciousness (at conception) →
 4. A sentient body (name and form) →
 5. 6 sense organs →
 6. Contact (sensory stimulation) →
 7. Feelings →
 8. Desire →
 9. Appropriation (possession) →
 10. Becoming (craving for existence) →

Dependent origination



- Life 3 (rebirth)
 - 11. Birth (rebirth into 3rd life) →
 - 12. Old age and death (all existential suffering) →
- Life 4
 - 1. Ignorance →

Dependent arising

Basic logic:

- One is born into this life because in the last life one acted on the basis of volitions that were formed in ignorance.
- Being born with a body means that one comes into contact with sense objects.
- This brings about feelings of pleasure, pain and indifference.
- These feelings trigger desires.
- Desires conditioned by ignorance lead to appropriation: taking certain things as “me” or “mine.”
- And this fuels rebirth and produces suffering.

Dependent arising

The key point is that this sequence occurs without any core persisting self.

Each element individually is not-self.

Collectively they are also not-self.

Thus, the sequence explains how the illusory sense of self arises through the causal workings of impersonally linked mental and physical factors.

Two arguments for no-self

1. The aggregates are **impermanent**, hence they are non-self (no unchanging essence of the person).
2. The aggregates are **not subject to control**, hence they are non-self (no inner controller).

The argument from lack of control

1. If there were a self, it would be the inner controller, the part of the person that performs the control function.
2. None of the five aggregates is the inner controller.
3. Therefore the five aggregates are not-self.

The argument from lack of control

1. There is no ultimate control over form.
2. There is no ultimate control over feeling.
3. There is no ultimate control over perception.
4. There is no ultimate control over habitual traits.
5. There is no ultimate control over consciousness.
6. If there were a self, it would be the inner controller (such that the five aggregates would be ultimately controllable).
7. Therefore, the five aggregates are not-self.
8. There is no more to the person than the five aggregates.
9. Therefore, the person is without self (empty of self).

The argument from lack of control

“The body [form], *bhikkhus*, is not the permanent Self. Were the body the permanent Self, then this body would not lead to affliction. And it would be possible in regard to the body to say: ‘Let me body be thus, let my body not be thus.’”
[Ditto for feeling, perception, habitual traits, and consciousness.]

The argument from lack of control

In other words, we often dislike and seek to change form, feeling, perception, habitual traits, and consciousness, and this shows we do not have complete control over them.

If there were an inner controller, it would have complete control over them (or much more control than there actually is).

Hence the five aggregates are selfless (lack an inner controller).

The argument from lack of control

In short, the five aggregates are not-self, because they have no inner controller, leader, or guide.

Question

But how is this argument reconcilable with the Buddha's emphasis on right intention, right action, and right effort (and the rest of the Noble Eightfold Path)?

Don't they (and the rest of the Path) require control?

Answer

The Buddha does not say there is no control over the aggregates.

He says there is no control of the sort there would be if there were an inner controller.

Instead, there is a relative, conditioned control, whereby one part of the person (e.g., an intention) influences another part (e.g., a perception).

Answer

For the Buddha, control is a matter of impermanent and “shifting coalitions” of control factors (belonging principally to the fourth aggregate), and not of an inner controller (which would also be the essence of the person).