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Expos: Unit 2

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Non-Self as Conventional Truth

The early and Mahayana Buddhist scriptures have clear textual contradictions. While early Buddhist thought subscribes to the notion of non-self, Mahayana Buddhists believe in the notion of Buddha-nature, an eternal and unchanging element within each sentient being. In trying to rectify these contradictory views, different thinkers rely upon different explanations. Siderits, in explaining early Buddhist thought, relies upon a distinction between conventional truth – useful language used in our daily lives – and ultimate truth – accurate and factual statements of reality (Siderits 56). Williams and Grosnick resort to the Buddha's skillfulness in teaching – that the Buddha caters specific messages to different audiences so that they may best achieve enlightenment. Specifically, Williams and Grosnick believe that the Buddha-nature is meant to inspire individuals, but that it is not true (Grosnick 92) (Williams 108). Interpreting early and Mahayana Buddhist sutras through the lens of conventional and ultimate truth, however, suggests that Williams and Grosnick could be mistaken. It instead allows the possibility of the doctrine of not-self's being only a conventional truth. Although Williams and Grosnick accept the doctrine of non-self as ultimate truth and explain the idea of Buddha-nature as an example of the Buddha's cleverness in teaching, a closer examination of the Tathagatagarbha through Siderits' lens of distinction between conventional and ultimate truth substantially

modifies the early-Buddhist doctrine of non-self such that it becomes only a conventionally true notion on the path to enlightenment.

While Williams accounts for the contradictions between Mahayana and early Buddhist thoughts by explaining the Buddha's "skill-in-means" (Williams 108) in teaching, further analysis reveals that his explanation corresponds to Siderits' distinction between conventional and ultimate truth. Siderits defines ultimate truth and conventional truth as follows:

> A statement is **conventionally true** if and only if it is acceptable to common sense and consistently leads to successful practice.
>
> A statement is **ultimately true** if and only if it corresponds to the facts and neither asserts nor presupposes the existence of any conceptual fictions. (Siderits 56).

Because of this difference, early Buddhists can argue that if two teachings seem to contradict each other, such as that of non-self and karma, one is only conventionally true while the other is ultimately true. Similarly, Williams notes that the Mahayana Buddhist teaching of self does not contradict that of non-self because it "is not false but the Buddha's skill-in-means, his cleverness in applying helpful stratagems. Here the Buddha-nature is really not-Self, but it is said to be a Self in a manner of speaking" (Williams 108). Williams' argument suggests that the Buddha taught in a way that is helpful and corresponds to common manners of speaking. Williams' explanation matches the second half of Siderits' definition of conventional truth: that the Buddha's skillful teachings, being conventionally true, lead one closer to achieving enlightenment. While the Buddha relies upon conventional truths to convey his message and attract followers, those teachings, still, should not be confused with ultimately true doctrines of Buddhism. In

fact, Siderits also notes the Buddha's skill-in-means, "[using different levels of truths] is said to be a manifestation of the Buddha's pedagogical skill" (Siderits 58). Williams' explanation of Buddhist contradictions, then, can be taken to rely upon the same distinction as that of Siderits'.

Siderits and Williams, along with Grosnick, do not, however, provide a comprehensive method to determine which Buddhist teachings are conventionally true and which are ultimately true. Because of this omission, either the Mahayana doctrine that the Buddha-nature is the self or the early Buddhist doctrine of non-self could be interpreted to be only conventionally true. At first, it may seem obvious that the doctrine of non-self is ultimately true while the Buddha-nature as the basis of a person is conventionally true. This is the position that Grosnick supports. Grosnick believes that "the concept of the Tathagatagarbha is promulgated primarily to inspire beings with the confidence…despite their poverty, suffering, and bondage to passion…to attain…perfect enlightenment" (Grosnick 92), and Williams notes that "the Buddha-nature…is said to be a Self in a manner of speaking" but that it is "really not-Self" (Williams 108). The Tathagatagarbha Sutra projects the universality of enlightenment because it is useful; it encourages everyone, regardless of their status or degree of suffering, to strive for enlightenment. Because identifying a person with that Buddha-nature leads to more successful practices of attaining enlightenment, individual Buddha-natures can be conventionally spoken of as the essence of individual persons. Still, the early Buddhist thinkers would be correct to assume that, in the realm of ultimate truth, there are not

persons or selves. Both Grosnick and Williams imply that the Tathagatagarbha Sutra serves as a motivator for attaining enlightenment while not being ultimately true.

But that the not-self teaching is conventionally true while the Tathagatagarbha is ultimately true could also be correct. Williams presents another way of resolving the contradiction between Buddha-nature and non-self: "the Tathagatagarbha is the basis of aspiration towards nirvana because it is the Tathagatagarbha which experiences suffering…from an enlightened perspective the same thing can be spoken of as a True or Transcendent Self" (Williams 106-7). He also notes that "the Mahaparinirvana Sutra asserts in a particularly direct way that the Buddha-essence…is nothing other than the Self…the Buddha taught the not-Self doctrine in order to overcome the egoistic Self which is the basis for attachment and grasping" (Williams 108). These perspectives on the Tathagatagarbha propose the opposite view as that of the early Buddhists. The Buddha-nature is the unifying thread that ties together the chain of skandhas; it is the essence that remembers and unites the dreaded experience of suffering. It also explains why the five skandhas, especially our consciousness and our volition, have a desire to achieve nirvana: because we already have a perfectly enlightened core which we naturally aspire to purify. Furthermore, in this view, the Buddha's underlying motivation to preach not-self arises because unenlightened individuals focus solely on the egoistic Self rather than the Tathagata core; it would be better to forego the self all together to remove attachment and grasping than to try and immediately achieve the enlightened understanding of the "True" and "Transcendent Self" (Williams 107). In defending the

Tathagatagarbha Sutra, it is possible, perhaps even simple, to see how the doctrine of not-self, rather than the doctrine of Buddha-nature, is the one that is conventionally true.

It is slightly more difficult, however, to account for early Buddhists' potential responses to this view. Reading earlier Buddhist sutras through the modifications of the Tathagatagarbha Sutra shows the potential shortcomings of Siderits' interpretation of Buddhist passages and his defense of the doctrine of non-self.

> "the…disciple conceives an aversion for rupa … feeling … perception … volitions … 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 that he is no more for this world" (Siderits 38).

This paragraph, part of the Buddha's address to his companions, comes at the end of a passage that Siderits cites. Focusing on the previous paragraphs of this passage, Siderits shows that if an implicit premise that the five skandhas are an exhaustive list of humans is assumed, there is no permanent self (Siderits 39). The Tathagatagarbha Sutra clearly brings this implicit premise into question because it asserts that "tathagatagarbhas of all beings are eternal and unchanging" (Grosnick 96). While Siderits does not try to defend the exhaustiveness claim in his explanation for non-self, neither does the passage he cites. If the implicit premise that Siderits presents is taken to be a conventional truth in order to help followers of the Buddha overcome the egoistic Self, it can be possible that the eternal and unchanging tathagatagarbha as self is ultimately real. Through this lens, the process of becoming divested of passion in the early Buddhist teachings seems extremely similar to the Tathagatagarbha Sutra's push to dispose of the "klesas of greed, anger, lust, confusion" (Grosnick 98). Furthermore, when the Blessed One tells the monks to realize "this is not mine; this am I not; this is not my self" (Siderits 38) in regards to the five

skandhas, it does not ever directly teach that there is no self, simply that the five skandhas are not the self. It appears that ridding an individual of their egoistic self and the five skandhas allows an individual to get what is "hidden within the klesas" – the tathagatagarbha (Grosnick 96). While Siderits does present the logical possibility of non-Self, he does not ever claim that it is ultimately true because it requires faith in an implicit premise. Later Buddhist sutras assert this premise to be inaccurate. Reading the early Buddhist passages through the lens of the Mahayana Buddhist tradition shows that the non-self doctrine could be taken as conventionally true and the self doctrine, in which the Buddha-nature is the self, could be taken as ultimately true. Buddhist teachings, then, could either be interpreted to take the person as conventional and the not-self as ultimate or the self as ultimate and the not-self as conventional.

Neither the Tathagatagarbha Sutra nor early Buddhist sutras provides a comprehensive method for determining the legitimacy of either of these views. As a result, the Tathagatagarbha Sutra modifies the early Buddhist teachings by reminding us that the notion of no-self is equally as conventional as the notion of persons or the self. Williams, while remaining fairly neutral towards the superiority of either the Mahayana or early Buddhist schools, notes the possibility that the definition and discussion of the self do not, ultimately, have a place in the path to enlightenment. Williams provides an interpretation of a Mahayana sutra, "What exactly that Self is…is not determined beyond its being that within each sentient being which enables him or her to become a Buddha…Whether this is called the Real, True, Transcendental Self or not is as such immaterial…" (Williams 108-9). To argue that "there is no-self" is an ultimately true

Buddhist doctrine is incorrect. Instead, the point would be to recognize that, even for an early-Buddhist thinker, the self, questions of the self, and the meanings of non-self should not arise in a discussion of ultimate truth. Examining Siderits' analysis of the dialogue between Nagasena and King Milinda suggests that he would agree with this. "To call [something] ultimately false is to be committed to the ultimate truth of the statement that is its negation" (Siderits 57). Thus to say that "there is a self" is ultimately false would require the belief that "there is not a self" to be ultimately true. This conclusion would not align with the early-Buddhist sutras. "[A] position…is a thicket … wilderness … contortion … writhing … fetter of views … and it does not lead to full Awakening…A 'position,' Vaccha, is something that a Tathagata has done away with" (Allen 6). The Buddha, when asked if the self exists, is silent. Similarly, when he is asked if the self does not exist, also, remains silent. Each of these statements is a conventional truth that is interpreted from a thicket of ultimate truths. Perhaps neither of these views is ultimately true or ultimately false, but rather equally useful – and, consequently, equally useless – once enlightened. Analyzing the Tathagatagarbha Sutra in relation to early-Buddhist thinkers reminds us of this possibility.

The Tathagatagarbha Sutra presents a notion of the Buddha-nature resting within each sentient being that seems to directly contradict earlier Buddhist teachings. While Grosnick and Williams resolve this contradiction by denoting the tathagatagarbha as conventional truth, further analysis suggests that neither the doctrine of self nor the doctrine of non-self is conclusively the accurate Buddhist doctrine. Instead, both of these views could be conventional truths that can help us achieve enlightenment, but that do

not have a place in ultimate truth. By putting the Tathagatagarbha Sutra and Mahayana philosophy in conversation with early Buddhist thinkers, it, perhaps, explains why the Buddha chooses the middle path. The Buddha advocates for something that cannot be categorized under the two views: the Buddha wants "the ending, fading out, cessation, renunciation, and relinquishment of all construings, all excogitations, all I-making and mine-making and obsession with conceit" (Allen 6).

Works Cited

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