

Mūlamadhyamakakārikā (MMK) by Nāgārjuna

Chapter 18 - An Analysis of the Self (and Dharmas)

These notes are a loose record of a 2021 group discussion of Chapter 18, informed by the translations of Siderits and Katsura 2013, and by Garfield 1995. In their commentary on the text, Siderits and Katsura worked from the early commentaries of Candrakīrti, Bhāviveka, Buddhapālita and the anonymous author of the Autbhayā. Garfield's commentary was informed by the current Tibetan tradition, which is itself informed by those early commentaries. We are indebted to all these translators and commentators, and hope that these notes are viewed as respectful citation of their extraordinary work.

Most Buddhist schools agree there is no basis for the sense of “I” or “mine”. So what is this reality that falsely appears as if it included a self? Abhidhammikas thought reality is constructed out of dhammas (simple elements of reality) that each have an intrinsic nature (svābhava). Nāgārjuna thought the intrinsic nature view was false, and that it underlies the false belief in a self. Chapter 18 examines the consequences of the view, that there is no self, for our understanding of reality.

Trans. Siderits & Katsura¹

Trans. Garfield²

1. Refutation of the self (brief indication of the content of each verse as given by Siderits and Katsura)

If the self were the skandhas, it would participate in coming to be and passing away.

If it were something other than the skandhas, it would be sharing the defining characteristic of a non-skandha.

If the self were the aggregates, it would have arising and ceasing (as properties).

If it were different from the aggregates, it would not have the characteristics of the aggregates.

According to Hinduism and Jainism, living beings possess a ‘divine spark’: an eternal soul or metaphysical self (ātman). This belief means that mental events, be they perceptions of ‘external’ things or of inward mental states, must have some sort of underlying continuity over extended time. This quality of continuity is denied in early Buddhism, where it is considered that all events, including mental events (or more idealistically, the mental awareness that is part and parcel of all events), to always be momentary (kṣāṇika) and impermanent (anicca). It is a feature of the keynote Buddhist teaching of Dependent Origination (pratītya-samutpāda) that things die away as soon as they are produced, to be immediately replaced with another, associated dependent arising. Thus, there is never anything in existence that is sufficiently continuous to

be a soul-like self, even if there is sufficient regularity in a person's habitual reactions to be recognisable as a psychological self – a 'personality'.

Nāgārjuna argues that the concept of a self is not found in the list of five khandha (Pali) or skandha (Sanskrit). Like the eighteen dharmadhatu³ that make up the 'All' (Sabba) that constitutes existence, early Buddhism considered the five skandha to be a comprehensive list of all possible entities, subdivided into awareness of form (external things and the human body), feeling, perception, volitional formations and mental events. Only later was this list restricted to refer exclusively to the psycho-physical person: rather than every material thing, only the body of the person is then indicated by 'form' (rūpa). Nāgārjuna is probably early enough to have the wider meaning in mind.

If the self were found in the skandha, it would arise and cease. If the self is not a skandha, what else could it be? The self does not explicitly appear in Vasubandhu's (later) list of 75 dharmas (elements of existence), and is unlikely to be one of the three non-created elements: space, extinction through intellectual power, and extinction through lack of a productive cause. So it is hard to see how a self could be part of the skandha (which are impermanent), and equally difficult to see how it could be a non-skandha (since the early interpretation of the skandha includes all of existence).

The only other possibility is if there is some type of skandha that defies the keynote Buddhist teaching of impermanence by not arising and passing away. There is a reference in the collection of the Buddha's teachings which might be interpreted in this way, Aṅguttara-Nikāya 1.10, where there is mention of 'luminous' or 'brightly-shining mind' (pabhassara citta). Although there is no reason why this sort of mental event should not be as impermanent and momentary as any other, it has been equated with the Abhidharma attempt to explain the inexplicable passage of personhood from one lifetime to another, by positing some form of underlying mental continuity (bhavaṅga). Such endurance across lifetimes might possess the continuity-characteristic that is so essential to the concept of a soul-like self,⁴ but to equate bhavaṅga with pabhassara citta is to confuse one concept (bhavaṅga) which is largely grounded in supposition, with another concept that is largely grounded in experience, since awareness of a (metaphorically) luminous quality to mental events is a commonplace observation for anyone who has moments in meditation that are free from greed, aversion or confusion. There is no clear evidence, 'inside' or 'outside' experience,⁵ that pabhassara citta has continuity over time, rather than being momentary and impermanent, like all else.

This consideration, of whether or not pabhassara citta constitutes a sort of self, may seem like a digression, but belief in anything like a self is precisely the sort of conceptual error that Nāgārjuna seeks to undermine in the first verse of Chapter 18, and in the simplest possible manner: the skandhas lack sufficient endurance over time to constitute a self, yet there is nothing outside the skandhas remotely like a self, therefore a self is not found.

His argument is devastating against the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharmikas of his time, who advance the view that all dharmas exist by virtue of their possession of an intrinsic (self)-nature. It is also devastating against the later Pugdalavadins, who argue for the existence of a self-like person over and above the skandhas.⁶ This verse is also corrective against the possibility that the later idea of inherent Buddha-nature (tathāgatagarbha) equates to an enduring soul-like self. These examples are all cases of the unfortunate tendency to reify (prapañca): to make an unsupported assumption that concepts are accurate in their reference to things. In the case of the concept of a 'self', this sort of reification has been a continual problem throughout Buddhist history. It represents a downfall from Buddhist orthodoxy into the prevailing Hinduism of the area of Indian religious influence. It is an example of the ubiquitous human desire for the solace of permanence in the face of the evident impermanence (anicca) of the world.

2. (Refutation of what belongs to the self)

The self not existing, how will there be "what belongs to the self"?
There is no "mine" and no "I" because of the cessation of the self and that which pertains to the self.

If there were no self,
Where would the self's (properties) be?
From the pacification of the self and what belongs to it,
One abstains from grasping onto "I" and "mine".

If there is no self, then there is nothing to take on the unfortunate task of possession or 'appropriation' (upādāna) that underlies the concept of 'mine': the sense of ownership. For the purposes of human society, lack of a self does not negate the legal definition of ownership of chattels and property, since ownership is ascribed both to individual embodied persons and to utterly disembodied institutions, whether or not either possess a soul-like self. But the teachings of impermanence and not-self serve to weaken the charms of ownership for anyone committed to practice on the Buddhist path. With a few exceptions, such as some items of clothing, what is the point of things, other than to share them for the benefit of all beings?

3. (Refutation of the person)

And who is without “mine” and “I”-sense, he is not found.	One who does not grasp onto “I” and “mine” That one does not exist.
One who sees that which is without “mine” and “I”-sense does not see.	One who does not grasp onto “I” and “mine” He does not perceive.

This verse is difficult, since it appears to be the answer to an objection that is not stated here. According to Siderits and Katsura, the gist of this objection seems to be that the Buddhist not-self theory must be false since it requires a self to be aware of the absence of a self. The answer is that it is defective vision (i.e. ignorance) that leads someone to see a self in the skandhas, if such a self is not there to be seen.

Garfield’s comment to this verse is comprehensive:

These are correlative. When one stops grasping the aggregates and the self as independent entities or as the possessions of independent entities, one recognises one’s own lack of inherent existence. One also recognises the lack of inherent existence of the aggregates, as in the case of perception. This is not to say that one ceases conventionally to exist or that one goes blind - rather it is that one comes to understand one’s own existence and that of other entities in the context of emptiness and, hence, to regard that existence as necessarily relational and conventional.

There is a technical problem of circularity with this sort of commentary, in that rather than relying solely on the words on the page, following the argument on a path towards conclusions, there is a ‘circular’ assumption of the eventual conclusion that Nāgārjuna is working towards: the emptiness (śūnyatā) of all things (dharmas) in the sense that they lack ‘inherent existence’ or ‘intrinsic nature’ (svābhava). But here Nāgārjuna is still in the process of using rational argument to demonstrate that things do indeed lack any intrinsic nature (such as a ‘self’).

4. (Consequence of nonself is liberation)

The senses of “mine” and “I” based on the outer and inner being lost, appropriation is extinguished; because of losing that, there is the cessation of birth.	When views of “I” and “mine” are extinguished, Whether with respect to internal or external, The appropriator ceases. This having ceased, birth ceases.
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Once all sense of having a self, which claims ownership of other things, is abandoned, then there is ‘cessation of birth’, or liberation from suffering. ‘Appropriation’ here means attachment, clinging or grasping (upādāna) as a result of craving or desire (taṇhā).

Siderits and Katsura comment that ‘outer’ refers to whatever is appropriated by the (spurious) self, and ‘inner’ is whatever is taken to be the ‘core’, ‘essence’ or intrinsic nature of the person – both are activities based on ignorance. They also comment that these two lines are a standard Buddhist description of the process of enlightenment.

5. *(Liberation requires realization of emptiness)*

Liberation is attained through the destruction of actions and defilements; actions and defilements arise because of falsifying conceptualizations; those arise from hypostatization; but hypostatization is extinguished in emptiness.

Action and misery having ceased, there is nirvāṇa,
Action and misery come from conceptual thought.
This comes from mental fabrication.
Fabrication ceases through emptiness.

This verse sets out several steps in the path of practice and meditation that is aimed towards extinguishing appropriation and realizing liberation: firstly, the practice of not-doing anything that might generate harmful consequences; secondly, the letting go of false conceptual thought; thirdly, paying attention to the way those thoughts continually arise in conditioned response to each and every perception; fourthly, accepting that personal existence is inextricably embedded in lack of intrinsic nature: outside the experience of utterly dependent origination, there is no other ‘ultimate’ reality to be found.

Accepting the causal conditioning that is the mark of dependent origination, therefore, is much more than just acquiescence to an intellectual idea: it requires practice, relinquishment, concentration, and an extraordinary level of disengagement, for ‘extinguishing...hypostatization’ means living without enslavement to the ‘dichotomies’ normally used in language to navigate around our conventional view of reality: woman and man, profit and loss, praise and blame, etc.⁷

Here is a relatively ‘new’ emphasis in Buddhism⁸: that liberation follows on from the emptiness of all things, meaning the realization that all things are empty of inherent or intrinsic nature, precisely because they always originate (arise) in

utter dependence on all other things. The rest of Chapter 18 defends the proposition that the idea of emptiness, which is a rigorous re-expression of the doctrine of dependent origination and its logical consequences, is in line with the Buddha's teachings.

6. (6-11 = *Madhyamaka expression of the Buddha's teachings: 6-7 = Buddha's graded teachings on the self, with cessation of hypostatization [conceptual constructions] as the final step*)

"The self" is conveyed and "nonself" is taught by Buddhas;
it is taught as well that neither self nor nonself is the case.

That there is self has been taught,
And the doctrine of no-self,
By the buddhas, as well as the
Doctrine of neither self nor nonself.

Wherever the Buddha uses the concept of self, it is assumed to be case of 'skilful means' (upāya). Siderits and Katsura give the example of teaching the self to those who require the consolation of belief in rebirth; a consolation that is easier to accept if it is thought that there is some sort of self that is capable of transmigration between lifetimes. But this is a worrying interpretation of the Buddha's intention; firstly, as a teaching it is false; secondly, it is unrealistic to imagine that someone who accepts such a consolation would subsequently come to understand the teaching of nonself. But Siderits and Katsura go on to point out that that the 'neither self nor non-self' formula is a teaching in accordance with the 'middle way'. This description is so frequently applied to Buddhist doctrine that, rather than just a metaphor, it becomes a rule, whether or not it is explicitly justified. That said, the equivocal 'self/nonself' formula avoids advancing a view that relies on a dichotomy, since the concept of nonself is only meaningful in relation to the opposite concept of a self.

'Neither self nor nonself' may indeed be a less problematic linguistic formulation than either 'self' or 'non-self', and a more skilful 'graded teaching', but the idea that, because of extenuating circumstances, the Buddha taught what is false instead of what is true, smacks of sophistry or 'eel-wriggling'. On the contrary, it seems that both the Buddha and Nāgārjuna argue for non-self far more often than not. It might be better to accept that explanatory language always involves the use of concepts that are partially, although not entirely, defined in relation to their opposites. The extent to which dichotomous concepts are true (accurate, useful and meaningful descriptions of reality) is a far more important matter.

As Garfield (in effect) points out: words cannot be entirely accurate precisely because they too are empty of intrinsic nature. Words not only depend on their

opposites, but on what we take them to mean: the things they represent, by convention, exist in a world that is conventional in the sense that we humans have evolved and/or decided, for the efficiency of our own purposes, how to separately perceive and then label aspects of reality. The logical consequence is that if everything is empty of intrinsic nature (inherent existence 'from its own side'), that must also include words like 'self' and 'notself'. Even the word 'empty' is empty of intrinsic nature: a pointer towards Nāgārjuna's famous conclusion of the 'emptiness of emptiness'.

7.

The domain of objects of consciousness having ceased, what is to be named is ceased.

The nature of things is to be, like nirvana, without origination or cessation.

What language expresses is nonexistent.
The sphere of thought is nonexistent.
Unarisen and unceased, like nirvāṇa
Is the nature of things.

Once it is realised that objects are just assumed: they are our imputations or conventions about the way in which reality is arranged, rather than accurate representations of the real nature of existence, then the temptation to apply dichotomising language falls away. Things are no longer seen as ultimately real, but as real by convention. The way things really are (yathā-bhūtam), like nirvāṇa, lies beyond characterisation in language.

But whether it is established that reality is 'unarisen' and 'unceased' depends on the effectiveness of arguments deployed elsewhere in the MMK, such as Chapter 1 on 'Conditions'.

The content of verse 7 bears comparison with the Buddha's characterisation of the meditative attainment of cessation, which is said to be 'empty (suññato), signless (animitto) and undirected (appaṇihito)' and 'void of selfhood' (suññatā cetovimmutti).⁹

8. (8-9 Buddha's graded teachings on reality, with realization that reality lacks an ultimate nature as the final step)

All is real, or all is unreal, all is both real and unreal,
all is neither unreal nor real; this is the graded teaching of the Buddha.

Everything is real and is not real,
Both real and not real,
Neither real nor not real.
This is the Lord Buddha's teaching.

To say that something is real means that it exists and that its nature is properly understood. The four possibilities given in this verse (real, unreal, both real and unreal, neither unreal nor real) are asserted to be ‘graded teachings’, meaning examples of ‘skilful means’ (upāya) to suit the capacities of a particular audience. Siderits and Katsura point out that a teaching is ‘graded’ if it can be placed in a hierarchy from false to true. The first example (all is real) is conventionally true. The second (all is unreal) is (ultimately) false. The third (all is both real and unreal) is both conventionally true and ultimately false. The fourth (neither real nor unreal) is an enlightened insight: the realisation that nothing certain can be said about the nature of reality. They also point out that this is not so much a hierarchy of truth, but of increasing usefulness on the path towards nirvāṇa.

Garfield points out that, in this verse, Nāgārjuna is ‘...mov[ing] towards his famous and surprising identification of nirvāṇa with saṃsāra, and of emptiness with conventional reality’.

9.

Not to be attained by means of another, free [from intrinsic nature], not populated by hypostatization, devoid of falsifying conceptualization, not having many separate meanings – this is the nature of reality.

Not dependent on another, peaceful and Not Fabricated by mental fabrication, Not thought, without distinctions, That is the character of reality (that-ness).

Siderits and Katsura comment that, while verse 8 fails to fully characterise the ultimate nature of reality, that is achieved in verse 9, but only by means of negations, rather than by affirmative statements. The discussion group was impressed by the significance of this verse, which amounts to a summary of Nāgārjuna’s (negating) argument.

The first (negative) point made in this verse is that reality cannot be ‘passed on’ or taught by another.¹⁰

The second point is that nothing has an intrinsic nature because everything appears in causal dependence on other things.

The third point is that reality is not populated by the discrete ‘things’ or objects’ that can be properly delineated by the conventions of words and language.

The third point is that reality-in-itself lacks the many dichotomous meanings we place upon it: reality is just thus.¹¹ Although entirely apt, it is not clear if Garfield’s indicative and affirmative ‘that-ness’ (thusness) is derived from Nāgārjuna’s Sanskrit text.

10. (*How emptiness establishes the Buddha's middle path between eternalism and annihilationism*)

When something exists dependent on something [as its cause], that is not on the one hand identical with that [cause]. but neither is it different; therefore that [cause] is neither destroyed nor eternal.

Whatever comes into being dependent on another
Is not identical to that thing.
Nor is it different from it.
Therefore it is neither nonexistent in time nor permanent.

Referring back to the discussion of causation in Chapter 1, Nāgārjuna seeks to avoid the charge of lapsing into eternalism or annihilationism. This is important because the Buddhist path is said to be a 'middle way' between these two categories in the Kaccānagota Sutta, on which the MMK is ostensibly an extended commentary. But does Nāgārjuna succeed? Apart from the logic implied here, which is found in earlier chapters, the terms used: identity and difference, eternity and annihilation, are all dichotomous, referring to the human convention of defining reality by mean of opposites. But there is meaning here, even if that meaning is negative and only conventional, so it is not certain that Nāgārjuna succeeds in either presenting or negating a meaningful theory of causation.

11. (*The Buddha's teachings are themselves characterized by emptiness*)

Not having a single goal, not having many goals, not destroyed, not eternal:
This is the nectar of the teachings of the buddhas, lords of the world.

By the buddhas, patrons of the world,
This immortal truth is taught:
Without identity, without distinction;
Non-existent in time, not permanent.

Again, this verse is a summary of work done in previous chapters, on identity and difference, and in Chapter 19 on time. Those chapters need close attention to determine the validity of his logical operations. There is a paradox here in that however successful are Nāgārjuna's arguments, they can only be conventionally true. But, according to Garfield, that is the point of this verse: that his words, and the Buddha's teaching, are empty of intrinsic nature, therefore the path to understanding reality is not through teaching but through meditation. But for most people that path cannot be followed without the initial guidance of a conventional, intellectual explanation. Hence the next verse, which clarifies that, for a precious few, enlightenment remains possible without the guidance of explanation.

12. (*The significance of pratyekabuddhas to the correct understanding of the Buddha's teachings*)

Though the completely enlightened ones do not arise and the śrāvakas disappear, the knowledge of the pratyekabuddhas arises independently.

When the fully enlightened ones do not appear,
And when the disciples have disappeared,
The wisdom of the self-enlightened ones
Will arise completely without a teacher.

It is surprising that Garfield considers verse 11 to be the final verse of the chapter, yet he also translates verse 12. Perhaps he does this because the meaning of this verse is uncontroversial, and because pratyekabuddhas are thought to be somewhat selfish, in that they lack the compassionate motivation to lead others towards enlightenment by teaching. Despite that demerit, Nāgārjuna used the pratyekabuddha concept to emphasise the point, made in the Kaccānagotta Sutta, that ultimately enlightenment cannot be taught: it arises 'not from another', but as an independent realisation.

¹ Siderits, Mark and Katsura, Shōryū, 2013, *Nāgārjuna's Middle Way: Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, (Somerville, Wisdom).

² Garfield, Jay, L., 1995, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, (Oxford, O.U.P.)

³ The 18 dhammadhatu are: six objects of the six senses (including mental events), six sensory faculties (with mind as the sixth sense), and six consciousnesses arising from contact between the sense and their objects. Thus, Buddhism describes everything in terms of the relationship between persons and their world, without bothering to make any separation between the two. It is, therefore, fairly (but not always entirely) neutral with respect to idealism (the idea that mental events are everything) and realism (the idea that everything is as it seems).

⁴ See:

Harvey, Peter, 1995, *The Selfless Mind: Personality, Consciousness and Nirvana in Early Buddhism*, (London, Curzon), pp. 155-179.

Bodhi, Bhikkhu, 2012, *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha, a translation of the Aṅguttara-Nikaya*, (Boston, Wisdom), AN 1.10, p. 97.

Bhikkhu Bodhi argues:

However, the *bhavaṅga* is not a persistent state of consciousness, a soul-like self. It is a series of momentary acts of mind that alternate with active cognitive processes (*cittavīthi*), sequences of cognition when the mind consciously apprehends an object...

⁵ The containment metaphors of inside and outside do not make sense with respect to experience, although agreement about empirical observations could be considered to be outside individual experience. Note that, from a Buddhist perspective, thinking of the world as 'outside' and mental events as somehow 'inside', is part and parcel of being unenlightened. See also the use of these oppositional metaphors in verse 4. For a critique of the inside/outside metaphor in relation to the mind see:

Wittgenstein, L., 1992, *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology, Vol.2, The Inner and the Outer 1949-1951*, (eds.) G.H. Wright and H.Nyman, (trans.) C.G. Luckhardt and M.A.E. Aue, (Oxford, Blackwell), pp. 61-88.

⁶ By the 5th century, at least a quarter of the Buddhist monks in India were Pugdalavadins. Their views were comprehensively refuted by Vasubandhu in the *Abhidharmakośakārikā*.

⁷ I am especially indebted to Siderits and Katsura (2013) for the ideas in this paragraph. Their emphasis on relinquishing dichotomous thought is sourced from Candrakirti's commentary on the MMK.

⁸ It is the emphasis that Nāgārjuna places on emptiness that is new, not the idea in itself, for emptiness appears in the Sanskrit version of the Buddha's recorded sayings (the *Āgamas*), usually as a synonym for dependent origination. See: Choong Mun-keat, 1995 (1999), *The Notion of Emptiness in Early Buddhism*, (Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass).

⁹ Pali spelling is used here since the reference is to the Buddha's recorded sayings in the Pali Canon. See the *Kāmaṅghī* section of the *Cittasāmyutta*, *Sāmyutta Nikāya* IV, 41, 6 (Bodhi, 2000, p. 1324). See also the 'deliverance of mind' section of the *Mahāvedalla Sutta*, *Majjhima Nikāya* 5, 43 (Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995, p. 394 note 450, p. 1239).

But note also that the very idea of meditative attainment of cessation is criticised in Griffiths, Paul J., 1986, *On Being Mindless: Buddhist meditation and the mind-body problem*, (Delhi, Sri Satguru).

¹⁰ It is interesting that a similar idea motivated Wittgenstein to write his 'Philosophical Investigations: a realisation, against the view of Augustine, that what is meant by words and language are only indicative, therefore people have to find out for themselves by observation.

See:

Burnyeat, M. F., 1999, Wittgenstein and Augustine *De Magistro*, *The Augustinian Tradition*, (ed.) G.B. Mathews (Berkeley, University of California Press), p. 286.

Wittgenstein, 2001 (1953), *Philosophical Investigations*, (trans.) G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford, Blackwell), p. 2 [P.I.:1].

¹¹ It seems that the many meanings we load upon the *just thusness* of reality, being themselves part of reality, and are also themselves *just thus*.